

Combat, Memory and Remembrance in Confederation Era Canada: The Hidden History of the Battle of Ridgeway, June 2, 1866

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Title:

Combat, Memory and Remembrance in Confederation Era Canada: The Hidden History of the Battle of Ridgeway, June 2, 1866

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Abstract (summary):

On June 1, 1866, one thousand heavily-armed Irish-American Fenian insurgents invaded Upper Canada across the Niagara River from Buffalo, NY. The next day near the town of Ridgeway, 800 Fenians battled with 850 Canadian volunteer soldiers, including a small company of 28 University of Toronto students who ended up taking the brunt of the attack. The Battle of Ridgeway (or Lime Ridge or Limestone Ridge) ended with a disastrous rout of the Canadians who in their panicked retreat left their dead and wounded on the field. It was the last major incursion into Canada, the last battle in Ontario and the first modern one fought by Canadians, led in the field exclusively by Canadian officers, and significantly fought in Canada. The Fenian Raid mobilized some 22,000 volunteer troops and resulted in the suspension of habeas corpus in the colonial Province of Canada by its Attorney General and Minister of Militia John A. Macdonald, but the battle which climaxed this crisis is only prominent by its obscurity in Canadian historiography. Almost everything known and cited about Ridgeway springs from the same sources—four books and pamphlets—three of them published in the summer of 1866 immediately after the event and the remaining one in 1910. This dissertation argues that the history of the battle was distorted and falsified by these sources and by two military boards of inquiries staged to explicitly cover up the extent of the disaster. This study investigates the relationship between the inquiries and the contemporary author-historians of two of the sources: Alexander Somerville, an investigative journalist in Hamilton, Ontario, a recent immigrant from Britain with a controversial history; and George T. Denison III, a prominent young Toronto attorney, a commander of a troop of volunteer cavalry, a former Confederate secret service agent, author-commentator on Canada's military policy and presiding judge on both boards of inquiry. This study describes the process by which Ridgeway's history was hidden and falsified and its possible scope and significance in Canadian historiography. New archival and published sources are identified, assessed and assembled for a newly restored and authenticated micro-narrative of the battle.

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“Redefining Canadian: A History of Canada and the Origins of the United Nations, 1941-1945”. Bothwell, R. 2003 - 2004. Fairey, Jack. “Religion, Identity, and Intercommunal Relations in the Metropolitanate of Thessaloniki: Orthodoxy and Diversity in an Ottoman City, 1788-1912”. Magocsi, P. 2003 - 2004. “Combat, Memory and Remembrance in Confederation Era Canada: The Hidden History of the Battle of Ridgeway, June 2, 1866”. Bothwell, R. 2011 - 2012. Beaton, Brian. “Everyday Data”. Murphy, M. 2011 - 2012. A framed lithograph of the Battle of Ridgeway hangs over the mantle of the stone fireplace in our cottage on Lake Erie’s Canadian shore. Redcoats take aim at green-clad soldiers; puffs of smoke rise from their rifles. I studied that reproduction for hours as a boy: Combat looks romantic when you’re 12. In 1866, a ragtag assemblage of Irish-American Civil War vets amassed along the border in Buffalo. They got drunk one night and rowed across the Niagara River to invade Canada, intending to conquer it, so they could trade it to Britain for Ireland’s freedom. Recently I called Peter Vronsky, who teaches history at Ryerson University in Toronto, to get the real story. He is the author of *Ridgeway: The American Fenian Invasion and the 1866 Battle That Made Canada*. In this groundbreaking narrative, historian, investigative journalist and filmmaker Peter Vronsky uncovers the hidden history of the Battle of Ridgeway and explores its significance to Canada’s nation-building myths and traditions. On June 1. For Canada which was not involved in the Civil War, the Battle of Ridgeway on June 2, 1866 was their first modern battle, fought without British troops at their side for the first time and a test of Canada’s plans for independence from Britain. (Canada would declare independence the next year in 1867 with British approval.)

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