

Author relives history, literally

By Mark Pavilons

It's not easy to make Canadian history come alive. A King City author lives and breathes it, passing on his insights and extensive research to readers interested in Canada's military past of the late 1700s.

Gavin K. Watt, well respected in his field, recently released *'Poisoned by Lies and Hypocrisy, America's First Attempt to Bring Liberty to Canada, 1775-1776,'* shedding new light on the impact of the Revolutionary war on Canadians.

An avid re-enactor for decades, Watt knows just how to fire a British *'Brown Bess'* musket - what it feels like and smells like. He's worn the uniform of the day, and experienced the mock battlefield.

And that's how his stories of the men and their regiments come to life in his books.

Poisoned by Lies and Hypocrisy, Watt chronicles the first two campaigns of the American Revolution through their impact on Canada. He goes in-depth retelling the story of Governor Guy Carleton, charged with defending Quebec with British regulars, Natives, American loyalists and a motley group of militia.

While the War of 1812 predominates Canada's early battles and conflict with the United States, the campaigns of 1775-1776 were integral in Canada's history and evolution. *'Were it not for the combined valiant efforts of all who served, our very existence today would be quite different.'*

Watt spent roughly 18 months poring through and compiling the pertinent information regarding the loyalist regiments and its soldiers of the time. These early conflicts and actions of the soldiers really founded Ontario, Watt pointed out, noting his research was a real *'eye-opener.'*

American accounts of the history of the day tend to be quite different from our perspective and Watt sheds some light on these Canadian founding fathers. Pulling from his wide network of historians both here and south of the border, his *'gigantic'* personal library and collection of documents, Watt put the pieces together nicely in this easy-to-read account of those early campaigns. Some fascinating tidbits came to light, including the creation of the Quebec Act of 1774 which basically restored French civil law and accepted French Roman Catholicism. This helped stir up our American brethren, and is quite possibly a cause of the Revolution. Another factor that caused American opposition was a discussion of releasing slaves in the United States. Watt said the stamp acts and tea duties were really *'minor stuff'* in the bigger picture. Some saw the Quebec Act as punishment for the Boston Tea Party and other protests.

The Americans had repeatedly promised not to invade, with an attitude, Watt observed, that's very similar to today's *'your with us or against us'* approach. *'As tensions grew, it seemed armed conflict was inevitable.'*

Watt said another fascinating aspect he uncovered was the willing participation of members of the Seven Nations of Canada as well as the Canadiens.

The major campaigns of the time were the occupation of Montreal and the siege of Quebec City. European troops, British regulars, loyalists and French Canadiens fought together to successfully defend our country. These failed attempts by commander Montgomery, Benedict Arnold and Morgan make for interesting military reading.

Watt concentrates on the individual stories of the Canadian officers, French Canadiens and aboriginals, and the roles they all played. Using master rolls, a limited number of post-war records and building on his previous book, *The British Campaign of 1777 Volume Two: The Burgoyne Expedition*, Watt presents a fair, balanced account.

His books appeal to those interested in Canadian history and those who *'get the bug.'* *'Anyone with loyalist ties would also enjoy the historic tales.'*

Watt's interest primarily centres around The Seven Years War and the Revolutionary period. From his re-enactment involvement, he can verify that the conditions of the day were *'awful.'* *'Soldiers at the time had to battle sickness, disease and the cold.'*

He has been involved in re-enactment since the 1970s and has been involved in parades, military events and celebrations both in Ontario and in the U.S. He's been active in three 18th Century recreated units - the 1st and 2nd battalions, King's Royal Regiment of New York and the 1758 New York Provincial Regiment.

'The Colonel's' Company of the 1st battalion Royal Yorkers was founded in 1975 in preparation for the American bicentennial celebrations and was likely the first recreation in Canada of an historic regiment, with the exception of those at government-run historic sites, which at the time portrayed only British and French soldiers. In contrast, the KRR's founding members chose a United Empire Loyalist regiment whose disbanded veterans were amongst Ontario's first English-speaking settlers, (Canadian unit).

In 1984, while heading a shooting club and a reenactment regiment, he republished Ernest Cruikshank's regimental history of the King's Royal Regiment of New York, adding a master roll of the 1,500 men who had served and several images of related artifacts.

A benefit of reenacting was his growing friendship with American historians who were every bit as passionate about their Revolution as he was about their rebellion.

Members take this quite seriously, and the hobby typically involves collections of both authentic period weapons and reproductions. Actually holding a piece of history in one's hand makes it real.

While trying to obtain historic records is a constant challenge, Watt finds the hunt and end result rewarding. His interest hasn't waned one iota.

Currently, he is researching the subject of non-military refugees who came to Canada during the Revolutionary War ? their names, relationships and how and where they were housed and provisioned.

The interest and participation in recreations is a family affair, with Watt's two daughters, son, son-in-law and grand-daughter all taking part. The Watts' family album looks more like a historic text than typical modern vacation photos.

For Watt, history is never dead, but simply waiting to be re-explored.

If you'd like to find out more about his books or his research, visit www.gavinwatt.ca or email him at gk.watt@sympatico.ca.