

From Bloody Beginnings: Richard Beasley's Upper Canada By
David Richard Beasley

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Book Reviews

Autumn 2009

From Bloody Beginnings: Richard Beasley's Upper Canada

By David Richard Beasley

Simcoe, Ontario: Davus Publishing, 2008. 388 pages. \$15.95 soft-cover. ISBN 978-0-915317-24-0 (www.kwic.com/davus)

In this work of what the author calls “creative non-fiction,” David Richard Beasley has attempted to tell the story of the life of his ancestor Richard Beasley (1761-1842, called ‘Richard’ in this review), and of the events which touched it. The author has used documents associated with his great-great-great-grandfather and supplemented it with information from other sources. *From Bloody Beginnings* is creative in the sense that he includes extensive dialogue which he believes represents what various historical characters might have said at the time, based on the material he has gathered, and includes information on characters that his ancestor might or might not have known. The author generally writes well, but needed a ruthless editor. He cannot be faulted for lack of research, for he has consulted a wide range of sources. However, he has attempted to do far too much.

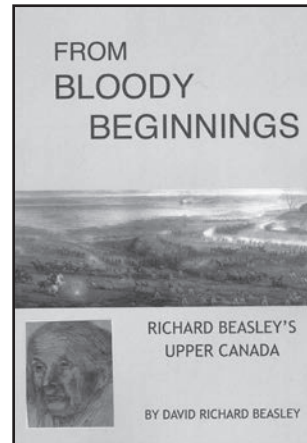
Close to half of *From Bloody Beginnings* relates to the American Revolutionary War in New York State and Pennsylvania, with a few references to what was later Upper Canada. In this section, Richard appears very briefly about three times. Instead of focussing on his experiences, the book deals with his family and with a large array of other characters, some of whom appear and disappear so quickly that it is difficult to remember who they were. It is as if the author, in this section and in much of the book, said to himself, “that is such a good story; I have to find

a way to include it.” A sizeable

portion of this part of the book deals with the activities of Joseph Brant and Butler’s Rangers, whose Revolutionary War exploits only tangentially touch Richard’s life.

Once the focus shifts to Upper Canada (formerly Quebec), Richard is much more in the picture. Rather than focus exclusively on him though, the author shifts back and forth from very specific information on Richard’s life, to what is going on elsewhere in the colony. While Richard was involved in the War of 1812, for instance, we are given a history of the entire war, in about seventy pages—a real exercise in compression given that numerous books have been written on the War.

When the author focuses on Richard he provides a considerable amount of interesting information about his ancestor’s life and involvement in business, native affairs, military matters and politics. Richard was a fur trader operating out of the Niagara area in his early career, but this blossomed into a long business life, leading to appointments as a magistrate and as a militia commander, centred around his home on Burlington Heights overlooking Burlington Bay. In later life, Richard became a critic of the oligarchy that ran Upper Canada and of the lack of true democracy. He faced powerful enemies, some the result of his political views and some the result of the struggle for dominance in his own



area, a natural occurrence in a small colonial society. He associated with many of the important early inhabitants of the colony, from Joseph Brant to powerful merchants such as Robert Hamilton and Richard Cartwright (Richard's cousin), as well opponents such as John Beverley Robinson and Allan MacNab.

Had the author concentrated on Richard's life and struggles, *From Bloody Beginnings* would have provided valuable additional insights into Upper Canada's history. By trying to do so much more—in effect to give a partial history of the American Revolution in Upstate New York and Pennsylvania, and of Upper Canada until 1841, and to provide a portion of the information in imagined dialogue—he distracts from what would have been a more effective work. The dialogue adds little, and is sometimes stilted. The additional information is at times so compressed that it requires a second reading to take it all in.

When Richard is discussing the politics of Upper Canada, it would have been helpful for the author to point out that this description was Richard's view of the situation, and that not everyone agreed with him. Without that explanation, the results of some of the elections do not make sense, as those who shared Richard's reform views

did not win. At times, too, the story seems like one from another era. The Butlers, of Butler's Rangers, for instance, show little of the ferocity which recent scholarship would attribute to them. Trying to cover so much ground also makes it more likely that small errors will creep in. Benedict Arnold was not a Major General in 1776, and did not command the attack on Quebec in 1775. William von Moll Berczy's men did not start the clearing of Yonge Street, which was then finished by the Queen's Rangers, nor was it a wide boulevard. William Warren Baldwin did not agree to be part of a new executive after a successful rebellion in Upper Canada. Tecumseh was not skinned after the battle at Moraviantown, or at least we do not know that he was, as his body was not found by the triumphant Americans. There is much to recommend *From Bloody Beginnings*, but the author seems to have been carried away by his enthusiasm, and tried to do too much.

Ronald Stagg, Ryerson University

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Lines Drawn upon the Water: First Nations and the Great Lakes Borders and Borderlands

Edited by Karl S. Hele

Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008. xxiii + 351 pages. \$85.00
hardcover. ISBN 978-1-55458-004-0 (wlu.press.wlu.ca)

This collection of twelve essays stemmed from a 2005 conference at which scholars shared their ideas on how colonial and national boundaries influenced aboriginal communities in the Great Lakes region. Throughout the book 'borderlands' describes territory—the land—rather than political divisions of state or province. Drawing from

personal experience growing up in Sault Ste Marie and from established theory, Hele contends that borderlands exist as regions within themselves. Most selections relate to Ontario and to the province's Chippewa, Ojibwa and Potawatomi First Nations, collectively known as the Anishinabeg.

The first two essays examine the bor-