BROCK AT BURLINGTON HEIGHTS

When Isaac Brock landed at Beasley's Landing on Burlington Bay with some militia troops from the capital of Upper Canada, then called York, on August 6, 1812, he knew that Richard Beasley, the Colonel of the 2nd York and the man who had built up the militia since early days to meet constant threats of American invasion, was in Niagara [now Niagara-on-the-Lake] at Fort George. In early July two weeks after he heard that the United States had declared war on Great Britain and Canada, General Brock had summoned him with other militia colonels and their flank companies of the York and the Lincoln militias, the latter being from the Niagara region, to meet a possible American attack across the Niagara River. Brock's idea to form two flank companies from each militia regiment, comprising the best fighting men, left the less able militiamen, called sedentary militia, to guard communities in the back country. It was the sedentary militia, therefore, that the desperate Brock had to enlist to accompany him to turn back the American invasion from Fort Detroit. Brock enlisted Major Sam Hatt with the sedentary militia of the 2nd York, whom Richard Beasley had ordered to defend the Head-of-the-Lake. He also took James Durand, who lived at the foot of the mountain, with sedentary members of his Lincoln militia.

I say that Richard Beasley was at Fort George at the time, but for the sake of today's ceremonials of my posing as Richard greeting Brock, we could imagine that he returned to Burlington Heights to meet Brock. I suspect, however, that Brock, eager to claim every able-bodied man, would have recruited him to go to Fort Detroit. Brock, of course, spoke with him at Niagara in July and badly needed a man of his experience and authority on the front line. At this time in early August, the militiamen in Niagara were restless and demanded to be allowed to return to their farms. They had been brought to Niagara on the assumption that it was a training exercise of short duration and were unhappy at being kept there for weeks. By the time Brock with 260 militia walked by way of the Mohawk village, today's Brantford, and Simcoe to meet up with 40 men of the 41st Regiment at Long Point and sail to join the British and Indian defenders in Amherstburg to bring about the miraculous surrender of the American forces in Fort Detroit, militiamen were deserting Niagara to harvest their crops. Brock, back in York in late August, to save face, decreed that half of the militia at Niagara could return home. Richard Beasley then would have returned to the Head-of-the-Lake.

Although Brock was popular with his soldiers, he met strong opposition in the Upper Canadian Assembly to his proposal of martial law whereby settlers could be imprisoned on suspicion of consorting with the enemy. Many settlers, under suspicion, abandoned their farms and returned to the states; others refused to serve in the militia; others of loyalist stock but of a liberal mindset became victims of business competitors of anti-democratic opinion who curried favour with the military by implicating those who resisted a military dictatorship as favoring the enemy. Richard Beasley, as an agent for settlement and defender of the merchant, farmer and new settler, came under suspicion by the oligarchy of York back in the 1790s. The Attorney-General of the day called him "a troublemaker." [On a personal note, after I had organized a union of library workers in New York City and received my ten-year pin for my librarian service, my Division Chief, as he presented the pin called me a "troublemaker." So I suspect Richard looked with humor on the epithet as a badge of honor, as I did]. Some of his allies such as Joe Wilcocks, an Irish firebrand in the Assembly, Abraham Markle, a partner with Jean Baptiste Rousseau in Ancaster, and Benjamin Mallory from Burford, convinced they would be imprisoned on false charges, fled to the states and joined the invaders. These names are the most prominent of a great many disaffected settlers. The politics of this period is interesting; I describe them in my narrative of the development of Canada in *From Bloody Beginnings; Richard Beasley's Upper Canada* should you be interested; of course, I trust that everyone would be interested as I consider it essential that we know our country's background.

I brought as well copies of John Richardson's *A Canadian Campaign* which is our first novelist's narration of the War of 1812 in the western region around Detroit when he served as a boy soldier; his description of the Indians under Tecumseh and of his imprisonment in Kentucky after the defeat at the Battle of the Thames is fascinating; it was printed in a London periodical in 1826-27 anonymously. I added his *Recollections of the West Indies*, a graphic description of the planter society and slavery in Barbados and Grenada where he was stationed with the British army in 1817/18. As for settler disaffection in the War of 1812, Richardson wrote a gothic novel *Westbrook, the Outlaw*, about the traitor Andrew Westbrook who led marauding Americans up the Thames River Valley to burn the mills and capture the richer settlers for ransom. I discovered these writings during the years it took to write Richardson's biography. I called the biography, *The Canadian Don Quixote* because like Cervantes' Quixote he was a man of action who broke through convention—a first novelist Canadians can be proud of. His father,

Dr. Robert Richardson, came to Canada with Governor Simcoe and his Queens Rangers and knowing Brock from the old country secured John's promotion to Ensign in Brock's 8th Regiment at Queenston. John, however, remained a Gentleman Volunteer in the west owing to the scarcity of fighters on the western front. Dr. Richardson's family fled Amherstburg to take refuge in the Head-of-the-Lake as did most settlers in the west to avoid the American invaders. Many fled the Niagara region to the Head-of-the-Lake. Not only were they evading American marauders in what was often a no man's land, but also ranks of the British army filled by ex-prisoners who were disposed to crime such as robbery and rape. Moreover, the thousands of Indians encamped along the Niagara Escarpment behind the village and on Burlington Heights caused problems with the settlers when they helped themselves to whatever they wanted as they had no idea of private property. Richard Beasley, as the magistrate for the area, commander of militia, Judge of the Quarter Sessions along with other duties was responsible for protecting this swelling population of the Head-of-the-Lake and maintaining law and order. To be responsible for the defense of the region as well must have added a heavy burden, let alone having to withstand the distrust of British officers who were being misled by his covert enemies.

Early in October Brock, fearing an immediate American invasion from the buildup of American forces across the Niagara River, recalled the militia to Niagara. Beasley marched with his flank companies to Queenston, which they were assigned to defend. Thus his regiment met the American invasion which landed at Queenston rather than Niagara where Brock had kept his British regulars. The flank companies of the 2nd York charged up the Queenston hill with General Brock when Brock was killed. Richard was not with his men on that occasion because Colonel William Claus had sent him back to Burlington Heights.

William Claus of the Indian Department set up to administer to the Indians was his self-declared enemy since 1800 when Richard and Joseph Brant had fought government opposition to bring settlers to Waterloo County on land which Claus and the Indian Department had hoped to get eventually. The long-standing division between American-born-Canadians like Richard Beasley and English-born-Canadians who expected to rule as their birthright became sharper when British regiments spread throughout the settlements during the War of 1812. British regiments regarded the Canadian militia as unreliable and very inferior. In some cases their suspicions were justified, but in most

cases the militia proved steadfast and courageous as were the Indians. Those settlers who wanted preferment ingratiated themselves with the British and informed on the more democratically-minded farmers by working on British fears of subversion. Richard Beasley became one of the victims of this clique but unlike others he was too well-established to be undermined easily. He had been in trade partnership with his cousin Richard Cartwright, a respected force in Kingston, and Robert Hamilton in Queenston. Until he died in 1809, Robert Hamilton was a very powerful figure in Upper Canada, and Richard Beasley as a close friend was greatly advanced by his association with him. Naturally Beasley inherited Hamilton's enemies in high places, which, along with the enemies he had acquired on his own, made up a formidable group. I have no time to touch on the Claus, Simons, Coffin plot to discredit Richard, but it tied in with Richard's support of the Reformer Robert Gourlay after the war when Upper Canada remained in desolation.

Richard Beasley was elected by settlers throughout the province to chair the Friends of Inquiry Convention in York in 1819. Reverend John Strachan was already an enemy of Beasley because Beasley as speaker of the Assembly in 1804 defeated Strachan's attempt to found Anglican schools to establish a privileged class and Anglicanism as the state religion. Strachan sent spies to the Convention, for fear that the reformers would clamor for an end to the clergy reserves which he had been protecting for the benefit of his Church and to the detriment of settlements divided by these wild lands. Strachan as a legislative councillor and political schemer tried to destroy Gourlay and discredit Beasley with the oligarchy in York. His infamous letter at this time to Colonel John Harvey, the hero of the Battle of Stoney Creek during the war, slandered Beasley and maintained that when Brock and his troops came recruiting through Burlington Heights, Beasley refused to let them drink from his well. Since, as I have shown, it was improbable that Beasley was there because he was stationed in command of his regiment at Niagara and very improbable that he would defy his senior commander, General Brock, upon whom the defence of the province depended, Strachan is caught out as a liar. Moreover, Burlington Heights is made of rock through which a well could not be drilled and fresh water streams were plentiful and ran into the pristine Burlington Bay, all of which made a well superfluous. Richard Beasley had a store in the village of the Head-of-the-Lake and possibly had a well near it, but it seems improbable that the troops would have gone that far out of their way when there was plenty of fresh water around them and when other settlers in the village farms would have had wells.

What would Colonel Harvey think on receiving Strachan's letter? Harvey knew Richard Beasley when he was an aide to General Vincent, commanding officer on Burlington Heights and who commandeered Richard Beasley's house on the Heights as army headquarters in 1813. All the disparaging remarks he heard about Beasley from Claus, Simons and that clique of government informers seemed at odds with what he saw of Beasley commanding his regiment on several battlegrounds and although in his fifties fighting hand-to-hand alongside his men. A British officer from a totally different background, conscious of all the privilege his status assumed and ambitious for promotion to high office, which he attained, Harvey, nevertheless, could not have been blind to the machinations of an oligarchy in York clinging to its self-appointed elitism. Strachan eventually met his comeuppance when Richard Beasley fought back and overcame his enemies through his election as a reformer to the Assembly when he secured many of our civil liberties.

It is surprising that very few of his papers survive and almost nothing of a personal nature when one considers how involved he was in every aspect of Upper Canadian activities. I am interested in what he thought of General Isaac Brock who became the quintessential Canadian hero. John Richardson as a boy soldier we know admired Brock immensely and was a great favorite with Tecumseh whom Richardson later immortalized in poetry. Richard Beasley, more familiar with the politics of the day, may have been less enthusiastic about the administrative Brock but certainly supported his aggressive tactics against the Americans. As Lady Edgar, an early biographer of Brock, wrote, "At the time of the surrender [of Fort Detroit] large reinforcements were on their way to General Hull, and had it not been for General Brock's bold and rapid advance, western Canada would undoubtedly have fallen, and perhaps in consequence the rest of the country also. The general well deserved the praise he received. In nineteen days he had met his legislature, settled the public business of the province, had made a troublesome journey of three hundred miles by land and water, and, without the loss of a single man, had won for the British Crown a territory almost equal in size to the province of Upper Canada."

That territory had been defended by Simcoe's Queens Rangers when Richard Beasley was a fur trader at Burlington Heights. That Canadians lacked the population to defend it in later years and that in the War of 1812, Canadians lost it once again was no fault of

Isaac Brock but of the generals who succeeded him. Richard Beasley undoubtedly would have admired him in comparison to them.

I attach Reverend Strachan's letter from which the quotation about Richard Beasley has been taken. The farmers throughout the province who want their grievances addressed after a devastating war that left their lands desolate and neglected by the Upper Canadian government are seen as "incendiaries". Gourlay is described as directing the Convention when he was an observer, although he did suggest a copy of the petition be sent to the incoming conservative Governor-General the Duke of Richmond whom he confused with the liberal-minded Duke who had recently died. Peregrine Maitland, one of Wellington's Generals and fiercely conservative, was the Duke's son-in-law and came with him to Canada to take up the Lieutenant-Governor's post in Upper Canada. Strachan called the sending of a copy of the petition to him "impudent". Strachan's spies watched the Convention to prevent a "serious' outcome, a poor excuse for spying. The transcript of the convention has no attack on Strachan, who was worried about criticisms of his clergy reserve lands.

From *John Strachan Letter Book*, edited by George Spragge

To Lt-Col Harvey York 27 July 1818

The Convention as it was called disappointed the incendiaries. After much intemperate speaking almost entirely by Mr Gourlay who directed them like children the Petition to the Prince Regent was given up chiefly from want of money and a very impudent one proposed to Sir R Peregrine and the Duke of Richmond requiring Parliament to be dissolved and containing several violent attacks on the Royal Prerogative which will be received no doubt as it deserves.
The meetings were watched so that nothing serious could have happened without prompt measure for which we insisted upon being awake.
Mr Gourlay's violent attacks upon me roused my pupils and Friends of whom I believe I have many in the Province and produced in the Eastern District especially and in the Johnston and Midland Districts a violent opposition which destroyed his hopes of raising a commotion by giving him a check which he could not recover. The President of the Convention Col Beasley is not unknown to you. He behaved poorly during the war and is a disagreeable weak Character. When General Brock was going to Detroit he took the Bucket and Chain from his well that the Volunteers of the York Militia marching with the General might not drink. I shall now get Col. Coffin to help me on your location though we think it a lottery.

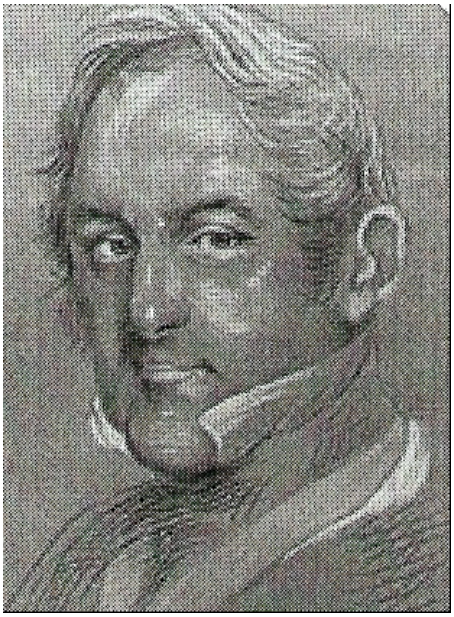
Convention of Friends to Free Inquiry had met at York [Toronto] on July 6 1818.

According to Gourlay, Richard Beasley corresponded with Lord Thomas Erskine, the defender of Thomas Paine and other cases of liberty in the courts of England, who led the Society of Friends of the People Advocating Parliamentary Reform and the Society

of the Friends of Liberty of the Press. The two Reformers seemed to be coordinating their efforts, the one in the Home Country, the other in the colony.

The Convention directed the petition to the Prince Regent because Lord Erskine had been his Attorney-General when he was Prince of Wales and, although forced to relinquish his post because of his liberal actions, Erskine was still a close friend and advisor to the Regent. In 1820 Erskine supported Lord Lansdowne's motion for a committee to inquire into the state of the country similar to Richard Beasley and the York Convention's appeal to Maitland to set up an enquiry into the state of Upper Canada. Maitland's contemptuous objection and draconian reprisals against the reformers, including prominent citizens such as Alexander Hamilton the founder of Hamilton City, created an avid opposition to government eventually leading to rebellion whereas in England an enquiry was conducted that led to "Radicals" controlling the British parliament and their cooperation with Canadian Reformers such as Richard Beasley to legislate civil liberties in the colony. Strachan soon lost his power as advisor to the government. Harvey became Lieutenant-Governor of Nova Scotia.

Reverend John Strachan



Colonel John Harvey