

The Battle of the Windmill Revisited

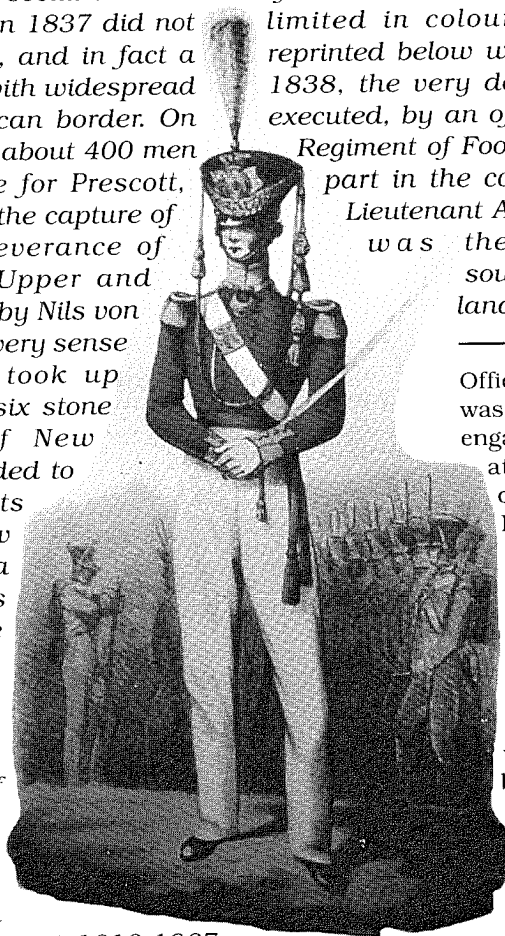
As recounted by Lieutenant Andrew Agnew, 93rd Highland Regiment of Foot, 8 December 1838

Scott A. McLean

The failure of William Lyon McKenzie, Louis Joseph Papineau, and other like-minded reformers to bring about meaningful change in the political, economic, and social structure of Upper and Lower Canada in 1837 did not end to possibility of rebellion, and in fact a greater threat came in 1838, with widespread filibustering along the American border. On 11 November 1838, a force of about 400 men set out from New York State for Prescott, Upper Canada, its goal being the capture of Fort Wellington and the severance of communications between Upper and Lower Canada. The force, led by Nils von Schoultz, a true character in every sense of the word, landed and took up positions in a windmill and six stone houses at the village of New Jerusalem, where they intended to hold out until reinforcements arrived from Ogdensburg, New York, and from Upper Canada itself. The reinforcements never arrived and the 'sympathizers' were left to fight a strong force of British regulars and militia.

Contemporary accounts of the Battle of the Windmill are difficult to find, and are often limited in scope. Several brief accounts have been reprinted in J.A. Morris, *Prescott 1810-1967*

(1967), and accounts of the conflict may also be found in contemporary issues of the *Kingston Chronicle and Gazette*. However, the information remains somewhat cursory and limited in colour and detail. The letter reprinted below was written on 8 December 1838, the very day Nils von Schoultz was executed, by an officer of the 93rd Highland Regiment of Foot who had taken an active part in the conflict. The letter's author, Lieutenant Andrew Agnew of Lochnaw, was the eldest son of one of southern Scotland's prominent landed families.



Officer, 83rd Foot, 1830s. The 83rd was the most numerous and heavily engaged of the regular British units at the battle of the Windmill. A detachment of 45 arrived at Prescott 13th November, reinforced by 4 companies arriving shortly after noon of the 16th November by steamer. Lt. W.S. Johnson (or Johnstone) was killed and about ten other ranks were casualties in the fighting. The uniform was scarlet with yellow collar and cuffs, gold buttons, epaulettes and lace for officers with crimson waist sash. The plume was replaced by a ball tuft from 1836.

Print after E. Hull.
Ph. R. Chartrand

Lieutenant Andrew Agnew had joined the 93rd Highlanders in 1835 at the rank of Ensign, and served in Ireland until the outbreak of rebellion in Upper and Lower Canada induced the British government to bolster their colonial garrison in the spring of 1838. The initial months of service in the Canadas was spent moving from Toronto to Quebec as the need arose. Agnew's correspondence with his father relates the detrimental effects that this

constant state of removal, and the monotony of garrison duty, was having on him and the men of the 93rd. Agnew expresses a strong desire to at last engage the 'sympathizers,' despite the obvious danger such a course of action represented. With tensions along the border mounting, the regiment received orders to embark for Lower Canada where they hoped they might finally see some action.

My dearest father,

Worried, fagged and knocked about as we have been for the last month our journals are filled with details of harassing countermarches and annoyances, which although very unpleasant to undergo as you may fancy and serious at the time, yet present but very little importance in the retrospect particularly [] at a distance; however I will try to make the best of our little adventures although you may probably have read

the worst of them long ago in the papers. My last letter to you was from this very place and I think I left off at our receiving our route back to Montreal. Well off we sailed accordingly on the 8th Nov. Across the lake and arrived next morning at Kingston; here we heard of risings all over the lower province - of several engagements with the militia and of the rebels having taken Napierville, Chateaugay, and Beauharnois where they had captured the Henry Brougham steamer, taken the passengers prisoners, and seized all her loyalists, on Sunday morning the 4th, a day or two only after our going up. Instantly on learning of the lower province being in a complete state of insurrection Sir John Colborne ordered up all troops to Montreal, the brigade of guards 71st Highland Light Infantry, one company of ours left behind and 7th Highland even sent to Napierville and the S.W. under Sir J. Macdonell and the Royals 24th, 73rd and 15th, 66th and 1st Dragoon gds. Moved to the westward. All the militia and yeomanry, 2000 volunteer Glengarry Highlanders are called out - and we even hurried on to Beauharnois where it was expected the most determined resistance would be made. I have neither room in any reasonable limit of a letter, nor memory to give you a general account collectively, of the whole operations of which I do hope that you may get something like a correct statement in England, but must confine myself to the particular movements of the 93rd.

Escorting several condemned state prisoners we left Kingston [by] steamboat immediately and arrived in the course of the night at Prescott. Early next morning 3 companies started in a

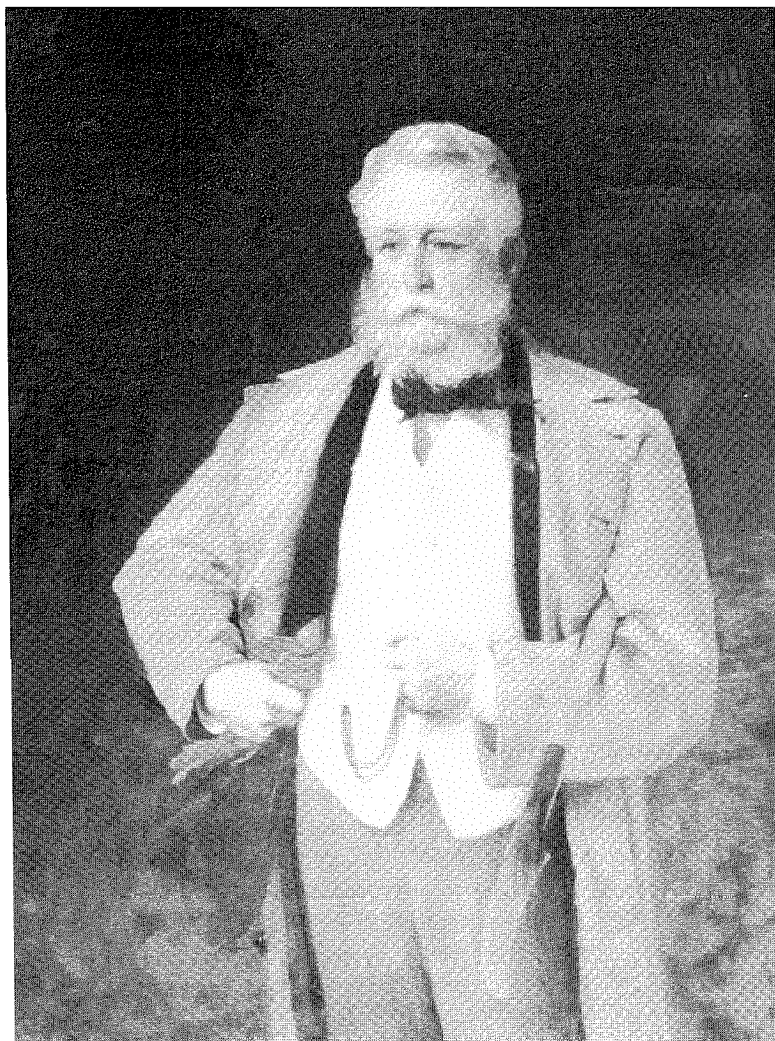
93rd (Sutherland) Highlanders, officers c. 1834. The dress was the same in 1838: scarlet faced yellow, gold epaulettes lace and buttons, crimson sash, government (or Black Watch) tartan. Note the mounted officer in trews.



From R.H. Burgoyne's Historical Records of the 93rd Sutherland Highlanders, 1883. Ph. R. Chartrand

Sir Andrew Agnew, author of the account of the Battle of the Windmill, at age 65.

small steamer to go the whole way down the rapids to Citeau du lac and the flank companies in another to Dickenson's Landing whence we marched to Cornwall. Owing to the great urgency of the dispatches Major Arthur sent on to Cornwall to order our other wing on instantly, without waiting for us which they did, and we arrived late on Saturday night at Cornwall where however we fell on our legs as every one received us with open arms and made us as comfortable as possible for the night. We remained anxiously waiting for conveyance till Sunday afternoon when the steamers arrived for us and took us to Coteau du lac. That night the wind being against us bateaus could not go down the rapids and the roads were in such a state that we could not start until daylight, when we marched 16 miles to Les Pointe Cascades and immediately went on board steamers for Beauharnois; we arrived there at 8 at night. The Glengarry and 71st had driven the rebels out before, only losing 2 men and the town presented a splendid but awful sight in a blaze under which we landed; about half the houses were left standing, we immediately got the men into any houses we could find - the burning houses of the rebels [taking] the place of gas lamps admirably. Then we (the officers) looked out for quarters for ourselves. We made for the best gentleman's house in the place, [looked] in at the windows, opened the door and took possession of it. It had belonged to no less a person than Mr. Ellice, one of Lord Durham's right hand men who has large property in the province and could not be made believe of the existence ever of the rebellious feelings of the "[] Canadians" as he calls them, until he found not only himself a prisoner but his house the headquarters of the rebel generals. They had made it a prison as well. Such a scene as it presented you can hardly imagine; from the best drawing room to the attics every place was strewed with broken glasses, empty bottles, cups, - every sort of furniture knocking about, [] books, pictures, desks broken open, the poor lady of the house!! In her sanctum sanctorum, even champagne bottles with their heads knocked off, silks & muslins [] [], pyroligneous acid opened by mistake, lids on the floor - every sort of confusion.



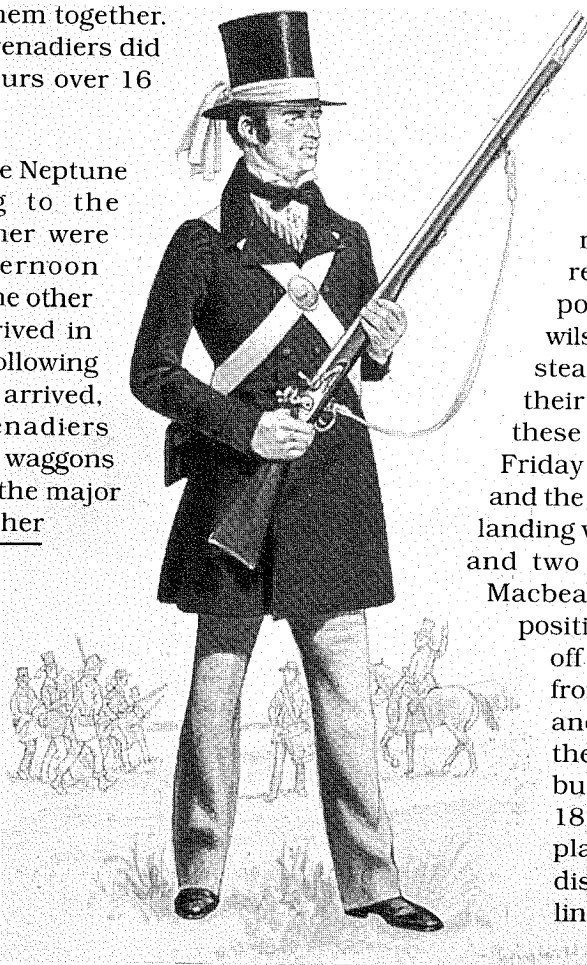
With some trouble we got a sitting room into order, collected plenty of feather beds and got fires lighted, but not one full bottle of wine could we find nor any viands in the larder. Late at night we got our rations of salt pork like the men served out and cooked. The only plunder we came in for in the whole town being a few casks of excellent apples and some jars of butter. However, this was good campaigning, we had capital beds and by dint of stealing some bread and sending our servants to milk the cows in some neighbouring fields we made excellent breakfasts. When to our great disgust we were ordered back to Upper Canada, but every consideration allowed us we were to have three days to rest. Had passes made out for servants to go to Montreal for some warm clothing and a little of our baggage (which we are to this day without). We set about catering and expected to live in clover for a few days, when a dispatch arrives from the westward and with our men still covered with mud, tired, not half fed and on as villainous a forenoon as can be conceived we were ordered instantly under arms and literally to start in ten minutes!!! for Prescott.

The despatch mentioned that 500 American sympathizers (with nine field pieces) had landed there and taken possession of a strong position and thousands were collected on the other side to join them, a party of the 83rd and marines had attacked them without effect - of the two officers one (Johnstone of the 83rd) was killed and the other (Parker of the marines, an old friend) badly wounded and the small force (about 60 men) of regulars were obliged to return with considerable loss.

Of course under the circumstances we were all anxiety to get a rap at them at last and crossed immediately to Cascades where all the carts in the country were pressed. We only had transport for one company at a time and the Grenadiers started that night for Coteau. I have had a little hard work here but that night certainly was the most wretched I ever passed, bitterly cold and so dark as hardly to see a yard ahead. I was from 8 at night till nearly five getting over the ground in a one horse cart and even then found all the men had not arrived it being impossible in the night to keep them together. The last man of the Grenadiers did not arrive till 8-12 hours over 16 miles.

We got on board the Neptune steamer but owing to the badness of the weather were delayed till the afternoon sailing for Cornwall. The other companies, which arrived in the course of the day following us; and next morning arrived, landed and the Grenadiers immediately started in waggons overland for Prescott, the major going with us, the other

Upper Canada militiaman 1837-38. The militiamen called out on short notice rarely had uniforms and mustered in civilian dress to be served with weapons by the authorities. In Kingston, the militia put white scarves around their hats for recognition and this may have been done elsewhere also.

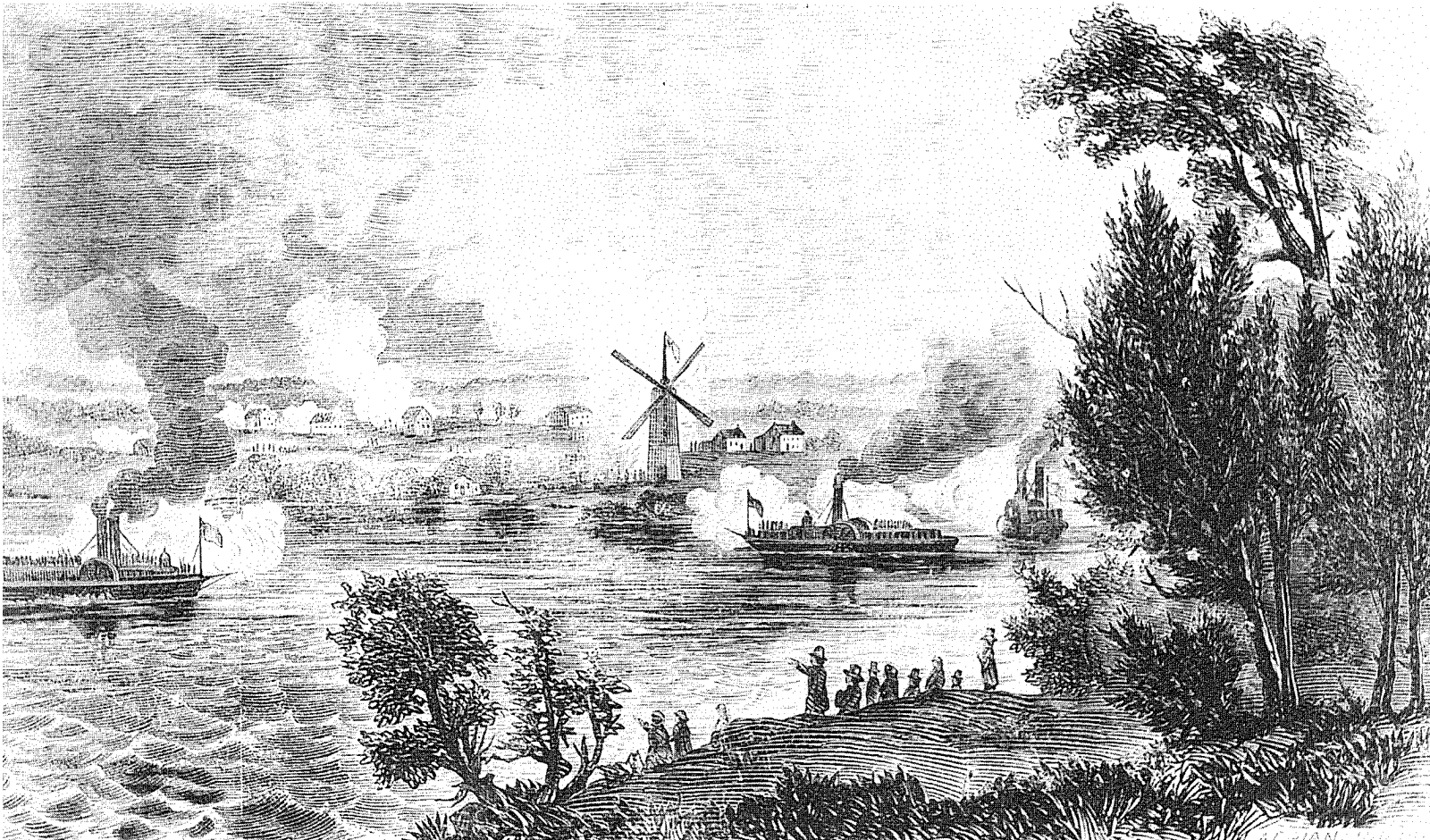


Reconstitution by Douglas Anderson. Parks Canada. Ph. R. Chartrand

companies to follow as fast as possible. We pushed along as well as we could all day and evening and at last were obliged to halt at ten o'clock at Maria town, the horses being dead beat and ourselves two thirds frozen, and at first streak of daylight pushed on and came up to the scene of action about ° past two.

The rebels after the engagement I mentioned before had taken possession of a windmill and six adjacent stone houses. They completely commanded the road and part of the river. The mill was almost impregnable being round and solid masonry many feet thick. Two gun boats and small field pieces making no impression upon it. The numbers of these villains decreased as we came nearer and we actually ascertained that their number was rather under 300 and three field pieces. Round all the houses they had built up the lower windows and got from one to the other by ladders to the other windows which they pulled up after them. They made light breast works of stone and mounted their field pieces at the doors.

Since the action on Tuesday the militia had come in great numbers and surrounded the mill on three sides with guard houses at intervals beyond musket shot and keeping a regular cordon prevented any possibility of escape by land, whilst several government gun and steamboats on the river prevented their sneaking off by water. Here these "Sympathizers" remained till Friday afternoon when we came up and the [] Colonel Dundas of the 83rd landing with 4 companies of his corps and two 18 pounders under Major Macbean. We immediately took up position in front of the mill turning off the high road at long shot from them. We crossed the fields and the 93rd Grenadiers took their place on the Prescott side but almost fronting the mill. The 18 pounders passed us and were placed on our left at 400 yards distance. The 83rd forming in line to their left and an immense



*Battle of the Windmill, 13 November 1838, as seen from Ogdensburg, NY.
 Wood engraving by Adrian Sharp from Charles Lindsey's 1862 biography of William Lyon Mackenzie.
 Archives and Special Collections, University of Guelph*

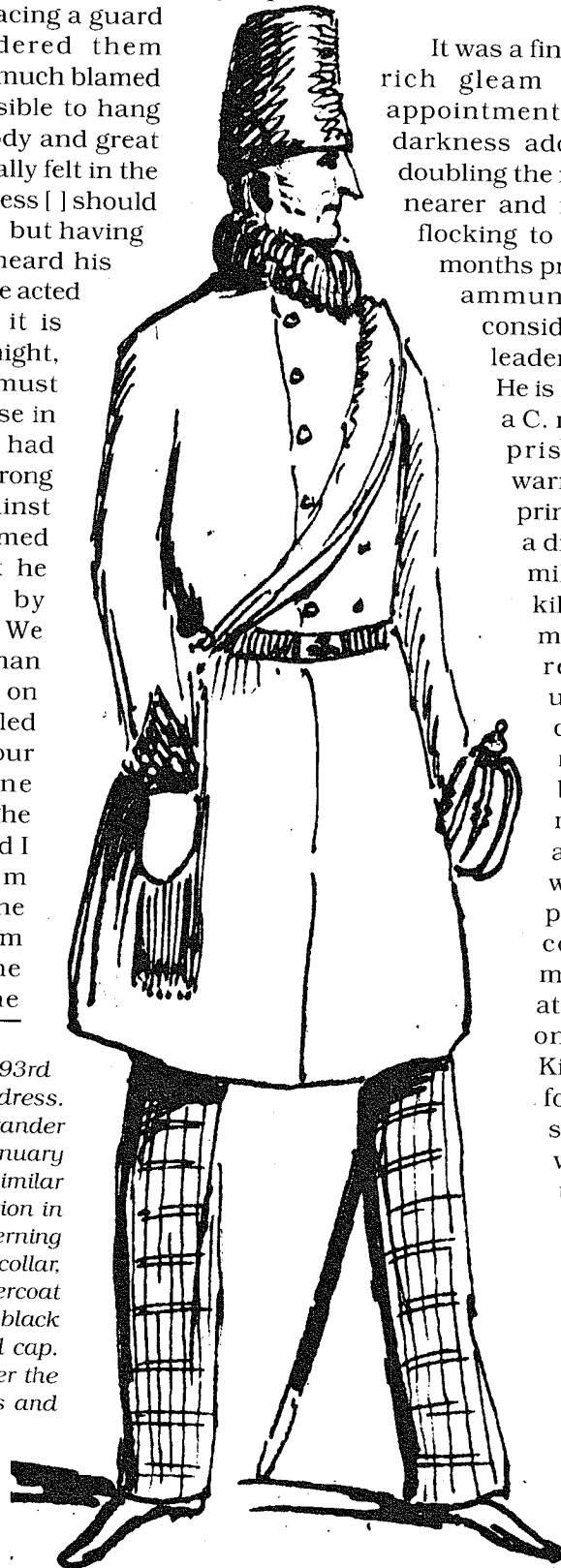
force of militia from the right and left of the regulars extending to the river. An armistice of a few hours was granted in the morning for the purpose of burying the dead as the Prescott people of course were anxious to have the bodies of their friends, the field of battle being too near the mill for them to attempt to approach it; the greatest indignation prevailed owing to the body of [Lieutenant William] Johnstone of the 83rd having been found stuffed and badly mutilated, the 83rd vowed vengeance and the militia swore to a man they would give no quarter. We began the attack at 3 o'clock by firing on one of the 6 stone houses and the first shot (fired by major Macbean) Struck the wall and made a considerable breach in the building, the artillery practice was beautiful, immense charring at every shot which almost invariably told the rascals finding this past a joke, showed a flag of truce from two of the houses, but having tried this trick before and fired upon the officers who came to parley no notice of it was taken, after about 3/4 of an hour firing the 83rd advanced in extended order, the militia remaining as an outer circle and we advanced to about 100 yards of the chief

cluster of houses on the right. Advancing field by field, the rebels now began a short flanking fire, and one of the 83rd being immediately killed and another wounded. Col. Dundas, who was determined to lose as few men as possible sounded the bugle to lie down and the artillery fired on over the heads of the soldiers. Evening was now fast closing in and as the incessant and very random fire of the militia was very nearly as dangerous as the rebels in the dark, a howitzer was brought up and fired at the outermost (on the left hand side) house till set on fire it was immediately stormed and carried by the 83rd who did their work most gallantly, brands were instantly taken and the next house lighted and thus they carried them one after the other and driving the rebels like rats from one to the other at the point of the bayonet and as their wounded of course perished in the flames, their courage began to fail, and coming out in a body begged to surrender, the troops immediately commenced to bayonet when Colonel D. anxious to close the affair offered them if every man came out unarmed and made an unconditional surrender, they should have

present personal security, this they did and the colonel, riding in front with great difficulty kept back the troops and placing a guard round them, considered them prisoners. He has been much blamed for this, as it is impossible to hang wholesale so large a body and great dissatisfaction is naturally felt in the country that such ruthless [] should in any measure escape, but having been on the spot and heard his own arguments I think he acted with discretion when it is considered that it was night, that the tired troops must have remained otherwise in the field all night and had great loss storming so strong a natural position against desperate and well armed men next day. I think he saved much trouble by taking prisoners. We fortunately lost not a man though as we closed up on the right bullets whistled pretty sharply among our bonnets. We had one laughable occurrence. The Major fell into a hole and I marched up to him thinking he was shot, the men nearest him supported him, and he looked round with the

most amusing semi comic face hardly knowing himself whether he should live or not!!!

It was a fine sight, the flames throwing a rich gleam over the bayonets and appointments of the soldiers and the darkness adding much to the effect by doubling the numbers as the troops closed nearer and nearer on the fated rascals flocking to their last hold. They had a months provision, an immense stock of ammunition and arms and were considerably well organized. Their leader (ungrateful dog) was a Pole. He is hanged today at Kingston and a C. martial is sitting on the other prisoners. They had death warrants made out against the principal [] and a prospectus for a division of property and c. The militia behaved very well. Total killed were 2 officers and 13 men. About 40 wounded. Of the rebels the numbers are uncertain as they threw their dead into the river the morning of the armistice. 15 bodies were left on the field, many must have been burned and several died afterwards of wounds. We had about 150 prisoners. Our other companies came up next morning, much disappointed at being too late. We proceeded on two days afterwards to Kingston and next day sailed for Toronto. We had a very severe storm on the lake, and were in imminent danger for two or three hours. I can assure you after crossing the Atlantic I did not at all relish the ignoble idea of being drowned in lake Ontario, however after making very bad weather of it for 6 hours we got into a sheltered bay but had to take the unpleasant alternative of running ashore, which delayed us two days, which was



Officer of the 93rd Highlanders in winter dress. Sketch by Sir J.E. Alexander dated Toronto, 12 January 1843 and showing similar features to the description in the 1838 letter concerning winter dress with fur collar, cuffs and caps. The overcoat was probably grey with black astrakhan fur trim and cap. Crimson sash over the shoulder, trews, mitts and Highland broadsword complete this rather elegant winter dress.

National Archives of Canada, C98761



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*Site of the Battle of the Windmill, Prescott (Ontario).
A watercolour by H.F. Francis (1803-1879) created in April 1839.*

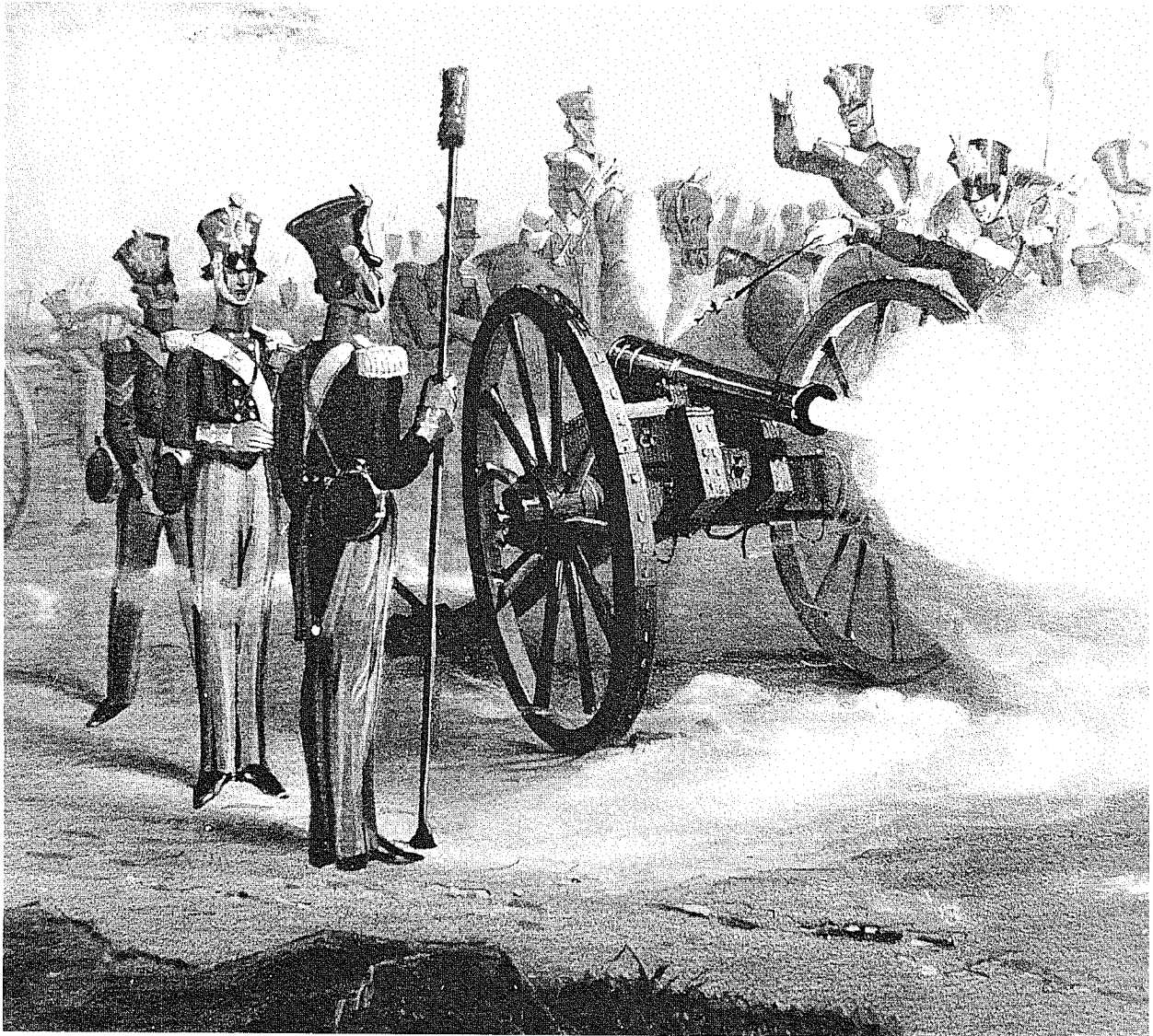
rather unfortunate as our provisions ran out. However, we sent out for and got two lean pigs which kept the men alive. We at last arrived here on the 23rd and on landing were kept very cold and hungry three hours under arms owing to an alarm from the westward, however they sent on the 85th owing to whose kindness we now have their mess but not an article of baggage of our own.

A landing was effected by Americans two days ago beyond Amherstburg, they were repulsed into the woods by the militia. The 73rd were sent up. We are waiting for despatch to know further particulars. This work is getting really disgusting. No approach to comfort can we expect through the winter. Constant moving

and fag and no fighting, except with a thieving cowardly set of [] who give no quarter but by a mistaken kindness often get it. In the uncomfortable state we are in I cannot write you a respectable letter, but hope you will be able to read some of this. We are just getting winter clothing - fur collars, [] cuffs [] caps. Sending our [] 300 miles off to Montreal, a [] [] we shall have. Colonel Spark has arrived to my great joy. I hope you are all well. Best love to my dearest mother. Jack (when you [] to him) and all with you and ever believe me in great haste and confusion.

Your very affectionate son,

Andrew Agnew.



Anne S.K. Brown Collection, Broun University, Ph. R. Chartrand

Royal Artillery field gun being fired c. 1835-40. The Royal Artillery detachment with its two 18 Pdr guns and a howitzer would have had the same general appearance as in this print after H. Martens. The uniform was a blue coat with scarlet collar, cuffs and turnbacks, sky blue pantaloons with a wide red stripe, yellow or gold buttons, epaulettes, lace and shako ornaments.

With the Battle of the Windmill over and tensions along the border decreasing, the 93rd Highlanders settled in to the day-to-day monotony of colonial garrison duty. However, Lieutenant Agnew had the good fortune to receive a reprieve from garrison duty to attend the annual gift-giving ceremony between the colonial government and the native peoples of the Lake Huron basin that took place on Manitoulin Island in 1839. The eight-week-long adventure left Lieutenant Agnew refreshed, yet feeling that he had experienced all there was to enjoy of colonial life. He therefore began thinking of transferring to another regiment

which might allow him to return to Scotland or the Mediterranean. In 1842 he transferred to the 4th Light Dragoons and returned to Scotland, where he died in 1892. The 93rd Highlanders remained in Canada until 1848.

Scott A. McLean teaches at the Queen's International Study Centre at Herstmonceux Castle in East Sussex, England, and has written a variety of works on medieval and modern Scotland. His most recent book is *From Lochnaw to Manitoulin: A Highland Soldier's Tour Through Upper Canada*, published by Natural Heritage.