



Sir William Johnson: Interpreter of the Iroquois

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SIR WILLIAM JOHNSON:
INTERPRETER OF THE IROQUOIS*

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Your program committee has provided me with a unique opportunity to speak on Sir William Johnson and the Iroquois. Rarely does a speaker have an audience so well briefed on his subject as you have been by your tour of the Mohawk Valley, Fort Johnson and Johnson Hall. Several times, I am sure, you have been given an outline of the career of Sir William Johnson, you have been regaled with his exploits and no doubt illuminated by the visual and audio representations of his career. You have stood on historic ground and, even without the benefit of these aids, with your background of ethnohistory you have recreated in your minds the locale or milieu in which he moved in the 18th century. All of this has rendered it unnecessary for me to emphasize the more obvious aspects of his career or to go into any special pleading for my hero.

Knowing your interests, I may anticipate some of the comments that may have been made today. In the beautiful houses, so well restored and so tastefully furnished, you may fail to recognize the stereotype of Sir William as a "squaw man," a "frontiersman," a "blood-brother" of the savage, or as one hostile commentator was wont to call him "the Mormon of the

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Mohawks." Some visitors, brought up on Robert W. Chambers, or with their principal knowledge of Sir William from the modern novelist, have felt that we have overplayed the social graces of Johnson Hall, or that we have unduly emphasized the cultural side of Johnson's career. I assure you that we have not, and that if we had the resources to assemble in Johnson Hall even all the known existing possessions of that house and to rebuild his library as we know it to have been, you would recognize that fact. Sir William in his later days, at least, was a man of culture and taste, who preferred fine living while he kept up his interests in the Indians, and in the promotion of the advancing frontier. My purpose tonight then, is to illustrate once more a facet of his mind, and an important and interesting phase of his wide influence.

Not only did Johnson come to know and to lead the Iroquois of his day, he was a leading source of information for scientists and writers of his time when they wrote on America. In other words, he was one of those 18th century gentlemen whose wealth and position enabled him to cultivate the arts, dabble in science, participate in political and religious debate, and correspond with interesting and important people in the English world. Had he been less active in business, trade, politics and military affairs; had he lived in a coastal town, rather than on the frontier, these interests might have flourished further and been more highly developed.

To interpret a people, one must first know them, so our first inquiry must be as to how well Johnson knew the Indians. In the first year of his residence on the Mohawk River, as a developer of the land of his uncle Sir Peter Warren, he set up a store or trading post, and he remarked about the value of the Indian trade. Other traders commented on the great amounts to be gained by the traffic in pelts and were content to make a fast buck — a profit of 300 to 500 per cent — and then to make

their get-away. Johnson was different in that he recognized the value of a continuing commerce. Hence he cultivated, rather than exploited, the Indian trade. By dealing fairly with Indians he encouraged their return, their confidence in him, and a trust which was his strong hold upon these natives. It was really good business. In a short time he was engrossing much of the trade which came down the Mohawk Valley. This activity, the development of Warrensborough, the estate of Sir Peter, and the expansion of his own interests gave him no time to spend as a visitor among the tribes. Unlike Conrad Weiser, a Mohawk by adoption and for many years Pennsylvania's ambassador to the Six Nations, and Daniel Claus, deputy Indian agent at Montreal, Johnson did not take up residence in an Indian Castle in order to learn the language. But he was well educated, had a quick and alert mind, and it was to his advantage to communicate as well as possible with the Indians. Most interpreters of the time were crude, unlettered frontiersmen, who could not express themselves too well in any language. Thus Johnson learned to go it alone, and thus within a few years probably became fluent in Mohawk.

The Indians liked Johnson, made him a sachem and gave him the name Warraghiyagey, variously translated as 'He who does much business,' 'Doer of great things,' or popularly as 'Chief Big Business.' Claus, who knew the Mohawk tongue well, said it was given in recognition of Johnson's great industry in clearing the forest and establishing his place in a short time. The title sachem was an honorary one, recognizing his rôle as advisor and wise man. I find no evidence that Johnson was ever made a "blood brother," or was adopted with elaborate ceremony. James T. Flexner in *Mohawk Baronet* depicts him being initiated in a ceremony, the description of which is taken from the account of an Indian captive who was

made a member of the tribe.¹ Johnson was never a captive of Indians, was not forced into any relationship, and I find this comparison quite unwarranted. He never lived among the Indians as a member of a tribe.

Shortly after he acquired a commanding position as a trader, Johnson was given the task of supplying the Oswego garrison, a duty which he performed with significant success, but with temporary financial loss, since the assembly refused to honor his accounts. In the warfare of the 1740's he thus was in the most important position as a principal trader, agent of the government and friend of the Indians. When the provincial authorities sought to bring the Indians to Albany for a conference, he was the one man best able to bring them down. Thus he suddenly came to the attention of the public as a leader of Indians.

Cadwallader Colden, lieutenant-governor of New York, and known for his *History of the Five Nations* was the chronicler of the conference held in 1746, an account of which appeared in the revised edition of his *History* published the next year. Colden's notice of the conference has been quoted by every biographer of Johnson:

While the Interpreter was at the More distant Indian Castles. Mr. William Johnson was indefatigable among the Mohawks; he dressed himself after the Indian Manner, made frequent Dances, according to their Custom when they incite to War, and used all the means he could think of, at a considerable Expence (which his Excellency has promised to repay him) in order to engage them heartily in the War against Canada...²

Johnson's success in bringing down the Mohawks so aroused the opposition of the other tribes, Colden writes, that they refused to follow. While Johnson and the Mohawks went down on one side of the Hudson River, the other nations marched on the other side.

When the Indians came near the Town of Albany on the 8th of August, Mr. Johnson put himself at the Head of the Mohawks, dressed and painted after the Manner of an Indian War-Captain; and the Indians who followed him were likewise dressed and painted, as is usual with them when they set out in War. The Indians saluted the Governor as they passed the Fort, by a running Fire; which his Excellency ordered to be answered by a Discharge of some Cannon from the Fort; He afterward received the Sachems in the Fort Hall, bid them Welcome, and treated them with a Glass of Wine.³

Now the good Dr. Colden did not tell this story as a shocker. In fact, he was not only impressed by Johnson's success, but a trifle envious of his influence. He went on to add that twenty years previously he, Colden, had been taken into the Tortoise clan, and that he was able therefore to influence the Chief of that clan, who had not been reached by Johnson.

Yet subsequent writers and biographers have gloried in this episode as though Johnson had greatly demeaned himself, lost caste, or gone native. As a matter of fact it was not uncommon for the White negotiator to unbend, add a little paint and a few feathers, as he joined the natives in a common enterprise. Even the good Jesuit missionary, Father Simon Le Moyne, in 1654, tells how he impressed the Onondagas by adopting their forms of oratory, their manner of speaking, and even the stage business of strutting up and down as he delivered his harangue.⁴ One had to be adaptable. Subsequently Johnson was to lead Indians on scouts and into war, and he did those things which his knowledge and his instinct told him would bring results. He did not, however, become a child of the forest, he kept his positions of trust and responsibility and added to them. Presently the Governor of New York made him Colonel of the Six Nations, commander of militia, and finally a member of the Governor's Council.

It was not long after this, that Colden was host to the Swedish naturalist, Professor Peter Kalm, as the latter was

about to set out on a memorable tour. Kalm's observations, later embodied in his book of travels, were of tremendous importance both for their scientific lore and for the detailed recording of social and economic conditions. He had a wide range of interests, and insatiable curiosity, and a viewpoint detached, if not wholly unprejudiced. As Kalm proposed to journey through the Mohawk Valley to Niagara Falls and to Canada, Colden gave him a letter of introduction to William Johnson. Never was such a recommendation more productive and satisfactory to all concerned. At Mount Johnson Kalm was given every hospitality and his gratitude, as he said, was greater than he could express. Not only did Johnson meet his every need for aid and for information; he provided him with the best possible guide and interpreter, William Printup, whom Johnson said spoke the Indian tongue the best of anyone in the country. He also commended "ye Swede" to John Lindsay at Oswego, who duplicated Johnson's hospitality, and collected seeds to be sent to the naturalist later. From Oswego Kalm promised that Johnson's help would be recognized by the world.

I shall another time have a better opportunity to let the world know your great qualities, and when I have only said the half of them and of your kindness, every body shall find, that they do surpass all others and put mankind in admiration.⁵

Kalm's *Travels*, as published, give but scant mention to Johnson, but in a paper for the Swedish Academy in 1753 he specifically acknowledged Johnson's help. While visiting in Canada Kalm was told by Michel Rolland Barrin, count de la Galissonnière, Governor of Canada, that the Iroquois had a secret cure for syphilis in its worst state, of which there had been repeated proof of its efficacy, but that the French had never been able to obtain the secret.⁶ Later when Kalm visited William Johnson he questioned him, and was told that such a

cure was known by the Indians, was effective, but that it was almost impossible to obtain the secret. Kalm was persistent, for he stated that Johnson had a

high regard for the sciences; he has an ardent passion for them and derives great satisfaction in their advancement.

I explained to him that, since the savages were so highly indebted to him, he was the only one capable of taking the matter up with them. For this service the entire scientific world, as well as others would be indebted to him. Whereupon he assured me that, at any cost, he would do his utmost to learn the remedy.

I then gave him suggestions as to how he might work, in order that he might not be suspected. In instances where more than one woman was expert in the botany of the disease, he might prevail on each and every one of them to show him the herbs used without letting it be known that he questioned others. He was not to be satisfied at seeing the root or leaf but he was to persuade them to show him the entire plant.

At present I will not discuss the trouble, expense, and persuasive arguments used by this gentleman in order to learn the secret. As a result three savage women showed him the same herb and gave him similar accounts of the use of the remedy...⁷

Thereupon Kalm was able to identify the herb, a species of *Lobelia*, describe its preparation, and details of the Indian treatment, and give full accounts of its effects and efficacy.

Kalm's use of this information in his writing was more widely spread by one Dr. Haller, who seems to have connected Sir William's name with it, and the news came back to this country to Dr. Benjamin Gale of Killingworth, Connecticut. He in turn, through Dr. Samuel Johnson, past President of King's College, appealed to Sir William. Again Sir William was generous with detailed information, although he disclaimed any scientific learning. Although Johnson vouched for the efficacy of the cure, as used by the Indians, a few years later he himself was ordering quantities of Keyser's Pills, which

were being touted as a remedy for venereal disease.⁸ With his many physical ailments later in life, Johnson was a great patronizer of the materia medica of his day.

Knowledge of the Iroquois, however, was more often sought as a basis of policy, and most treatises of the day were accompanied by recommendations for dealing with the Indian problem. A thorough acquaintance with native customs, history, language and mythology, was an earnest of one's qualifications to speak with authority. One influential pamphleteer of the day was the New York Collector of Customs, Archibald Kennedy (1685 to 1763). In 1752 he published a treatise called *The Importance of Gaining the Friendship of the Indians to the British Interest Considered*. Kennedy's pamphlet was widely read and its ideas were taken over by Thomas Pownall, Governor of Massachusetts, members of the ministry, and others, largely due to its author's reputation. Yet Dr. Richard Shuckburgh of New York, an intimate friend of Johnson's, wrote to the latter:

I see Nothing new in it being hardly anything but a Repetition of yr Letters, if I remember, of the Present State of the Indians wrote to the Govr. and lay'd by him before the Council of this Province and sent home.⁹

Kennedy wrote another pamphlet on the conditions of the colonies on the eve of the Albany Congress, and he was consulted by Benjamin Franklin on his *Short Hints*, the basis of the Albany Plan of Union.

The Albany Congress of 1754 not only projected William Johnson as the indispensable man in dealing with the Indians, but it introduced him to Thomas Pownall, who was to become famous as a writer and commentator on America. Pownall, to be sure, was a man on the make, and he saw in William Johnson a rising star. He took the initiative in advancing

Johnson's ideas, which included a single administrative officer, obviously to be Johnson, for Indian Affairs. Both Pownall and Johnson wrote "minority reports" on the Congress, and Pownall undertook to have Johnson's Indian treaties published in England.¹⁰ He became a correspondent with Johnson, a channel for his information and influence at court, and actively supported Johnson's campaign against Crown Point. In the midst of these important events Pownall wrote letters to Johnson in which he sought answers to queries about Indian customs, geographic names, and etymology.¹¹ Johnson's answers to these queries are not preserved, but Pownall was compiling data which he was to use later in his *The Administration of the Colonies* (1765), a work of great importance in molding contemporary knowledge of the New World, which went through a number of editions.

As Sir William Johnson, Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the Northern Colonies, Johnson was even more in the public eye as the leading authority on matters relating to the Indians. He was the principal negotiator of Indian treaties, and Johnson Hall, his home after 1763, was the scene of many conferences both large and small. It was not uncommon to find hundreds of Indians camped in the vicinity; for days and weeks sachems and messengers coming on business took advantage of his position and his well-known hospitality to stay with him and to partake of his bounty. This situation frequently gave him little time for business, and almost no privacy or relief from the pressure of his duties. The English traveller Lord Adam Gordon expressed his amazement:

I passed some Days at Sir Wm Johnsons, but no consideration Should tempt me to lead his life. — I suppose custom may in some degree have reconciled him to it, but I know no other man equal to so disagreeable a duty.¹²

Yet he now had some help both in his administration and in disseminating his knowledge of Indian life, language and

culture. Daniel Claus, who had come to Johnson in learning the Mohawk tongue, who became an interpreter, deputy, and then his son-in-law, proved himself in many ways. When Sir William, as a promoter of Anglican missions among the Iroquois, sponsored the printing of a new edition of the Book of Common Prayer in Mohawk, Claus revised and corrected the earlier version for the printer. Claus was his deputy for Canadian Indians after 1763, and made many observations in his journals of the practices of the Northern Indians.

Colonel Guy Johnson, nephew of Sir William, also his secretary and deputy as well as his son-in-law, who came to America in 1756, was likewise a man of some talents. In his own right he acquired considerable knowledge of Indian ways and customs. He was an able draftsman and map maker, and we are indebted to him for some visual representations of life along the Mohawk. His sketch of Fort Johnson with a key to buildings was published in 1759 in the Royal Magazine Office London.¹³ He probably drew the sketch for the small cartouche at the top of Sir William's certificate for presentation to the Indians, an engraving of which is on exhibit in Johnson Hall.¹⁴ Dr. R. W. G. Vail, historian, has referred to it as one of the earliest graphic representations of a peace council published in America.

But best known of Guy Johnson's work is, perhaps, his Map of the Country of the Six Nations, drawn in 1771 and dedicated to Governor Tryon. It has been reproduced many times, but the occasion for its production is generally overlooked. It too grew out of Sir William's authority as a source of information on the Iroquois. The Reverend Charles Inglis, of Trinity Church, New York, was an ardent champion of a plan for Anglican missions among the Indians. To promote his plan he wrote a pamphlet in the form of a Memorial Concerning the Iroquois, in the compilation of which he relied heavily upon

the information supplied by Sir William and Guy Johnson to accompany the tract, which was directed to Lord Hillsborough, Secretary of State for the Colonies. Inglis besought Sir William to provide a map of the Indian Country, "pointing out the different races there Mentioned." The "pamphlet," a fair copy in marbled covers with Guy Johnson's map attached, was never published at the time. But fortunately it was preserved, and later both pamphlet and map were published in *The Documentary History of the State of New-York*.¹⁵

Another writer on the Indians whose work is still well-known today was the Indian trader James Adair (1709-1783), who in 1775 published his *History of the American Indians*. Adair, who was once associated with George Croghan, Pennsylvania trader and Johnson's deputy Indian agent at Fort Pitt, spent most of his life in the south where he knew well the Catawbas, Cherokees, Chickasaws and Choctaws. Hence when he included all American Indians in his book, he needed help on the Iroquois. He visited Johnson Hall in 1769, wrote his gratitude for Sir William's kindness and hospitality, and addressed him as "My great Hybernian Maecenas." This seemed appropriate, for he had asked not only for help in his study of the Indians, but patronage which Sir William was able to bestow. Johnson subscribed for several copies of the book, and was credited for subscriptions received from clergymen of King's College and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. However, he refused to allow Adair to dedicate the work to him. Unfortunately, Johnson did not live to see Adair's book.¹⁶ In it, however, we find the author's testimony as to the aid of Sir William. In a footnote he refers to the "laborious Dr. Colden" as "an utter stranger to the language and customs of the Indians;" in contrast is his reference to the testimony of "the very intelligent Sir William Johnson."¹⁷

By far the most noteworthy contribution to contemporary study of the Indians made by Sir William was in response to an inquiry by Dr. Arthur Lee (1740-1792), who is best remembered in American history as an associate of Benjamin Franklin on the first mission to France in 1776. Thus we tend to forget Lee's brilliant early career. Though born in Virginia, he was educated at Eton, and received his medical degree at Edinburgh. Returning to Virginia to practice medicine in Williamsburg, he was elected a member of the Royal Society. Becoming interested in politics he returned to London to study law at the Inns of Court. There he became an active pamphleteer for the American cause and was in 1770 chosen as the agent of Massachusetts.¹⁸ It was at this time that he directed a letter to Sir William Johnson requesting information on the customs, political organization and language of the Iroquois, as well as answers to some specific questions. Johnson's carefully written and judicious (one might almost say scholarly) reply is dated February 28, 1771. It was presented to the Royal Society by Dr. Lee and printed in their Transactions. Sir William was careful to comment only on the Five Nations, and to note differences which had occurred due to their contact with, or remoteness from, the White man's civilization; he also cites changes in leadership, and in methods of fighting due to the use of guns in hunting and warfare. His comments on language give instances of the use of words and their structure.¹⁹

Lee appears to have followed up his initial query with further questions, and to these Sir William replied on March 28, 1772. This reply we have in an interlined draft which shows the care with which Sir William weighed and formulated his answers. One is struck, too, with his respect for native institutions, and his objectivity in evaluating them. In reply to a remark about the Indian "repugnance to Civilization," he contends that it was not due to want of capacity "as they have a strong Genius

for the arts and uncommon patience." But he felt they were put to school too late, and sent home too soon; and that their political maxims made them discountenance all arts, except that of war. This could not easily be overcome by merely a common school education.²⁰

Whether this letter was ever given to the public by Dr. Lee is not known. The publication in the Royal Society's Transactions, however, caught the attention of the eminent Dr. William Robertson, King's Historiographer for Scotland and principal of the University of Edinburgh. As a result Robertson sent to Governor William Franklin of New Jersey, son of Benjamin Franklin, who had visited the Mohawk Valley and been present at the Treaty of Fort Stanwix of 1768, a series of 30 questions on the North American Indians, which Franklin forwarded to Johnson. Robertson was then writing his History of America, which was published in 1777 and went through many editions. Franklin observed to Johnson that the latter's

much admired account of the Manners and Customs of the Indians lately published in the Philosophical Transactions has occasioned you this Trouble; nor indeed is there any one so well qualified to answer the Doctor's wishes on this Subject as yourself.

Franklin offered to transmit Sir William's answers to Robinson, via the London printer, William Strahan.²¹ However, since the queries came in a letter dated May 25, 1774, only a little more than a month before Sir William's death, they were never answered by him. But Guy Johnson, Sir William's successor as Indian Superintendent, prepared answers which he carried to London after the outbreak of the Revolution in 1776. Whether they reached Robertson is not known. A similar set of answers to the same questions was prepared by George Croghan.²²

Thus by the time of his death in 1774 Sir William was widely recognized by scholars as an authority on the Indians of the

Six Nations. Had he chosen to write his ideas and observations in book form, as Cadwallader Colden had done, Johnson's volume would have been a classic. He had the talent to make such a work interesting, and the scholarly objectivity to render it useful. He was modest about his own attainments, however, and rarely introduced a personal reference in his comments. But he was far too active in politics, diplomacy, Indian relations, church missions, and in the settling and development of the country to settle down and write. Hence his ideas on the Indians may be found far more effectually expressed in his letters and official reports, and in the official Indian Records, than in the few works which I have mentioned.

It is not my purpose here, nor have I the time, to outline even the manifold observations and comments which Sir William made from time to time in interpreting the Iroquois to his contemporaries. I can only suggest to you his significance as an interpreter and point to the sources for your study as ethno-historians. There is indeed much to be learned from him in the published documents of Colonial New York, and especially in the thirteen volumes of the Sir William Johnson Papers.

Notes

1. Flexner, Mohawk Baronet, p. 40.
2. Colden, History, pt. 2, pp. 163-165.
3. Idem.
4. O'Callaghan, comp., Documentary History, vol. 1, pp. 38-39.
5. Johnson Papers, vol. 1, pp. 295-297, 304-306.
6. Benson, ed., Peter Kalm's Travels. Gentleman's Magazine, vol. 27, pp. 405-406.

7. Larson, *Lobelia as a Sure Cure*, vol. 24, pp. 13-22.
8. Johnson Papers, vol. 6, pp. 30-32; vol. 12, pp. 445-448, 610-612, 977.
9. Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 332, 375, 382, 388-391, 455-456.
10. O'Callaghan, ed., *Documents Relative to the Colonial History*, vol. 6, pp. 893-899.
11. Johnson Papers, vol. 1, pp. 582-583, 803-806, 882-883; vol. 2, pp. 266-268; vol. 9, pp. 283-285; vol. 13, pp. 59-61, 62-65.
12. Mereness, *Travels*, pp. 417-418.
13. Johnson Papers, vol. 1, p. 261.
14. Ibid., vol. 10, p. 254.
15. O'Callaghan, comp., *Documentary History*, vol. 4, pp. 453-455, 457-459, 461-466, 467-469, 1089-1117.
16. Ibid., vol. 4, pp. 412-416.
17. Williams, ed., *Adair's History*, p. 55n.
18. Burnett, Arthur Lee, vol. 11, pp. 96-98.
19. O'Callaghan, comp., *Documentary History*, vol. 4, pp. 430-439.
20. Johnson Papers, vol. 12, pp. 950-955.
21. Ibid., vol. 8, pp. 1158-1159.
22. Hamilton, *Guy Johnson's Opinions*, vol. 77, pp. 311-327.

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