

SIR WILLIAM JOHNSON

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SIR WILLIAM JOHNSON.

HON. JEREMIAH KECK.

MR. PRESIDENT, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN.— We live in a fast age. Yes, and what a common remark it is: “This is an age of wonders,” but those wonders would be an impossibility without their much overlooked foundation. It is like the dizzy sky-scrapers of New York, some of which reach twenty-five stories, but how long would they stand, unsupported by that immense masonry which is hidden from sight and bedded on the solid rock. So is it with the present age, and would it not be well to pause occasionally amid the rush of modern progress and look at the foundation upon which it rests? Here we find the true value of history, which teaches us that the iron will of our ancestors, their patient industry, their suffering and their battles with the elements, and also with the savages, were the foundation for that progress whose benefits we so richly enjoy. Most of this noble class of pioneers have gone to oblivion, but a few names are preserved to claim our honor, and chief among the number stands that of Sir William Johnson.

On the banks of the Mohawk river, two miles west of Amsterdam, there stands a massive stone building destitute of ornament and only marked by strength. It faces a railroad on which two hundred and fifty trains pass daily, and daily transport 20,000 passengers. When that stone edifice was erected, 160 years ago, there was not even a highway in the Mohawk valley, and rarely a vehicle. Letters were carried by messengers, and now and then a wagoner made a weary journey to and from Albany through the wilderness. And the question may be asked, had not that antique mansion been erected, and others of similar character, would that great railroad now be in operation?

As we contemplate that distinguished pioneer whose name I have mentioned, we first behold the youth, born and reared in Ireland, ready for a field of adventure, and here also is a British admiral who has a land grant in the American wilderness. This admiral is Sir Peter Warren, and as the youth is his nephew, how natural that the former should offer the latter an agency. Here, then, we see this young William Johnson sailing for his new field of service. He reaches New York and finds it a city only in name, with 5,000 inhabitants who are in constant fear of the Indians — some of whom still live in the upper part of Manhattan island. This so-called city was defended by a Wall (the original Wall street), and the gates were closed at night for protection. The young land agent tarries not, but takes a sloop voyage up the Hudson, and it is a rapid vessel that makes it in less than five days. He reaches Albany, also a so-called city, but really a village of about 500 population, with a fort for defense in case of an attack. Then comes a ride to Schenectada, a much smaller village, which is slowly recovering from destruction by the Indians. The Mohawk is crossed, and then the western journey is continued until at last the young agent reaches his destination, and what a desolate scene opens before him! A few log cabins occupied by German immigrants, and also a few Indian wigwams. And are these to be his society, and is this to be his home? Some would have recoiled from such a fate and returned to civilization, but the young agent was made of other stuff. He accepted the situation; he endured the rude hospitality of the immigrants; he opened a land office and then cultivated the good will of both immigrant and Indian. In the latter, indeed, he became deeply interested and soon won a confidence which never was abused. The young land agent began to study the character of the Indian which then was not an exhausted force, as it is at present. No, the red man then held unbroken dominion over the entire continent west of the Hudson. Johnson saw the importance of their friendship and sought acquaintance with their warriors and their chiefs, and he was the first Englishman that entered into the spirit of their wild and nomadic life. He visited their "castles" and saw how valuable they would be as allies,

and they in turn recognized the power of the new pale face and made him a chief with the title of Warrohaha. William Johnson was the first Englishman to hold this distinction, and he marched to Albany on one occasion in Indian costume at the head of the tribe, all of whom were mounted, and their reception was one to draw them into closer alliance, a consummation which he long had at heart.

The government soon recognized the influence of this young land agent, and hence made him a colonel, but he must create his own forces and he proceeded at once to organize both Indians and settlers into a military power. These duties led him to extended journeys through the wilderness. Little Falls was then known as the "carrying place" (as the Indians carried their canoe round the rapids, and near this spot was an important "castle" which he soon controlled. To increase his influence he made his way to the salt springs, now Syracuse, and thence to Buffalo. What must have been his feelings as he viewed this vast territory, then held by the red man in alliance with the French, for which reason they were a fearful danger to the settlers. Could they be won by friendship and that alliance changed from France to England? His life work now opened before him, and as he saw the possible accomplishment of this idea, it brought a sense of duty which held unbroken strength till the last moment. Yes, and although the French had been the first to obtain a hold on the red men, he would transfer that hold to Britain, and as his devotion to this grand purpose was apparent to the government, the latter made him superintendent of Indian affairs, an immense field to which he was so admirably adapted. What a striking progress for this William Johnson, who, only eight years previously, opened his land office in the woods. The newly appointed colonel was expected to raise his own army, and he did not shrink from his duty. This, in addition to the office of superintendent, gave Col. Johnson that autocratic power which he never abused. It was at such a time that he attended the Colonial Congress held at Albany in 1754, where he met Franklin, the Pennsylvania delegate. Franklin, later on, was a quartermaster under Braddock, and when in after years he contrasted

the failures of his commander with Johnson's military success, he, no doubt, recalled their meeting on the above-mentioned occasion. These two men were the chief philanthropists of their time. Franklin is all famous, and yet Johnson was really the most efficient, for he not only opened schools, but also promoted Christianity, whose importance Franklin overlooked.

It could not be possible for such a man to rise in public service without awakening jealousy; and hence, one is hardly surprised at the enmity shown by Governor Shirley of Massachusetts. Col. Johnson, however, held his way onward and never allowed the shafts of jealousy to change or abate his earnest purpose.

And, now, we come to that peculiar mark of respect which the Indians displayed to their beloved Warrohaha. It was considered by them necessary that such a chief should be a landed proprietor, and hence, they gave him a tract extending from the East to the West Canada creeks, and including the sites of Herkimer and Little Falls, the area being 69,000 acres. Colonel Johnson accepted this estate, but as a mark of courtesy he asked the king to confirm it and it is still called the "Royal Grant."

God, however, had given him a far higher grant — the duty and the power to preserve the country from the fire brand and the scalping knife — and, by his personal influence, this wonderful man saved the colonists from scenes like the massacre of Wyoming. He had conquered the Indians by kindness, which is the strongest power in the world. Pursuing this two-fold policy, with the sword in one hand and the olive branch in the other, he made every effort to obtain settlers, and as a natural result this increased civilization added to his labors. He obtained a preacher for Queen Anne's chapel at Fort Hunter, also a school-master, and for this purpose was in correspondence with the clergy of New York, where he even employed a printer to make books for education, and it is said that very recently there has been found a copy of the Common Prayer Book in the Mohawk language — this being one of Sir William's efforts for the improvement of those of whom he felt himself the guardian.

And thus we see the former land agent transformed into the great representative of the British Empire — the man on whom the eyes of America were centered. Impelled by duty he makes long and painful journeys to the west — to Onondaga and even Buffalo, holding councils with the Indians, and thus extending his effort to win them from the French and confirm them in their alliance with Britain.

Colonel Johnson, indeed, may be styled the “great son of the forest,” for his life was chiefly passed in the woods. Instead of taking a palace car for the west, as in our day, it was following a trail through the wilderness and camping out at night; and here you have a picture of travel in the early frontier life. He is also in the field as a military leader, and captures Fort Niagara which had long been a French stronghold. War, indeed, was imminent all the time, and even Johnson Hall had its brick fort, which is still in existence, while the jail at Johnstown was built to also serve for defense. And now, we behold him in the fulness of an intense activity. He took no vacation, no respite from anxiety, and the thirty-six years of his American life were years of incessant toil and care, yes, one long and tremendous struggle, and as hard a life as ever an American endured before the days of Washington. Governor Tryon, indeed, in speaking of his arduous efforts in behalf of the Indians, called him the “slave of the savages,” and this was really the truth. But was not Tryon’s utterance a noble tribute to his worth?

Here is a brief picture of the toils and privations which he endured, which I find in a letter to the Governor dated May, 1748, only eight years after his arrival in America, showing how quickly he was pressed into the public service: “I am to acquaint you of my return from Onondaga after the most troublesome and fatiguing journey I ever undertook. I would have written sooner, but when the people heard of my return, my house was constantly full and continues so still, so that I have scarce a minute’s time to do anything; and then, the news of war with the French and an army coming against us, and the people flocking to me, and the women crying and begging for shelter, so that I have a most miserable life of it. I have received your order to employ

men to scour the woods, but they grumble at six pence a day and I have promised a shilling a day. I ask of your Excellency to forbid any more selling rum or spirituous liquors to the Indians under pain of a year's imprisonment." (Our temperance friends will learn from the above that Sir William was the first prohibitionist.) And this request was repeated in another letter to the Governor, in which he says: "Your honor must perceive that this selling rum to the Indians has ever been attended by fatal results, and at this juncture it is still worse. I do in the most earnest manner request your honor to urge the Assembly to pass a law with pains and penalties against the sale of rum to the Indians."

In another letter to the Governor he says: "I have now eleven hundred Indians with me. I made a speech and a very long one, in which I persuaded them by various arguments to comply with our requests. I am privately working with the sachems from morn till night, and the fatigue I have undergone has been too much for me. I am scarce able to support it, and I am in distress where to get food for such a number. They have consumed every green thing on my estate and have destroyed my meadows, but I must humor them at this critical juncture."

Again he writes: "I have invited the nations to a general meeting at my house, and am in hopes I shall be able to bring them heartily into our interests, but I fear I shall be distressed for want of provisions unless you can inform me where it can be bought."

A few weeks later he writes the Governor: "I have just got rid of all the Indians except one who stays to be cured of a bad leg. I had a prodigious trouble with them, but, thank God, the worry is over for a time. I have agreed with a blacksmith to go to the Senecas for six months for seventy pounds."

To illustrate Col. Johnson's conscientious discharge of his duties, I add the following extract from one of his letters to the Board of Trade: "I have endeavored to do my duty in the situation in which I am placed to the utmost of my abilities. I have neither spared myself day nor night, and have, indeed, greatly injured my health. I shall, however, rejoice if my con-

duct meets with your approval." Again he writes to the same board: "From the time I engaged in public service I wholly gave up my private business and my personal interests. I now devote my time and labor wholly to Indian affairs. At all meetings at my house those who attend are entertained at my expense, and when the meeting is at Oswego or Onondaga, the expense is increased as the journey is long and very fatiguing. One thousand pounds a year will not make up for what I sacrificed by assuming public business."

In another letter he writes: "Permit me to assure your lordship that I acted with uprightness of heart and with all the economy and diligence of my abilities to retrieve and extend his majesty's interest. I am sorry my efforts have not been as successful as I could have desired, but I do not think the Indians so culpable as some people do, but if I have erred in judgment, I have not been wanting in ardor for his majesty's success."

His desire to Christianize the Indians is shown by the following letter to the same board, dated only eight years after his arrival: "It will be necessary to provide every castle with a minister of the Gospel. Persons of unblemished character might be sent as chaplains of the garrison, and at the same time serve as missionaries to the Indians. How much may be done in that way may be gathered from the success the Gospel has had among the Mohawks. The Rev. Mr. Ogilvie, missionary to the Indians, has done everything in his power for the promotion of true religion, and as his salary is very small, some encouragement by addition to it would be of service. At this critical juncture the utmost attention should be paid to our Indian alliance, and I humbly propose a steady and uniform conduct. A religious regard to our engagements with them, a tender care to protect them and their lands, is the only effectual method to attach them firmly to the British interest."

In 1759, three years later, he wrote as follows: "I recommend an equitable, open and well-regulated trade with the Indians which will be the most natural and efficient means to extend his majesty's interest. The Indians ought to be compensated for the lands wrongfully taken from them. Missionaries of approved

abilities and zeal would be of unspeakable advantage to promote our interest among them. The Mohawks have had missionaries from the days of Queen Anne till within a few years, and now they are without any. I humbly recommend the King to give an allowance to so good a work. I have taken a great deal of pains to bring about a peace between the Delaware and Shawnees Indians, and I hope it is in a fair way of being accomplished."

Although it was not my purpose to treat of Sir William's military service, that having been ably done by others, I feel that justice requires a brief reference. In the midst of all his efforts for civilization, the French army is invading the very locality in which this audience is assembled, and under the pressure of necessity Col. Johnson is summoned to take chief command. Thus, he is now General Johnson, commander-in-chief of the British forces in the province of New York. And this, mark you, is the first time such a commission was issued by the British in the above-mentioned territory, and General Johnson was the first officer of that rank to be wounded in action.

Another important point is the fact that it was Braddock, the supreme military power in America, who made Col. Johnson a general and ordered him to fight at Lake George, while he (Braddock) should strike the enemy on the Pennsylvania frontier. Braddock is an educated soldier, but he is defeated and slain, while Johnson, who had no military education, triumphed. Braddock's defeat occurred in July, while Johnson conquered at Lake George in the following September. General Jackson, too, had no military education, but he always conquered. Some men are born to conquer. But how strange it seems that only seventeen years have elapsed since the obscure adventurer first entered the forest, and here he is at the head of an army.

The new general's war policy is evident from the following letter to the Governor: "I think our artillery too small and four more field pieces will be necessary, also four eighteen-pounders. Speedy reinforcements will be needful and I hope they will be sent. Our ammunition is rather short and our arms but indifferent, and we have many natural obstacles to meet. I now propose building a fortification for safe retreat in case we

find the enemy too strong; I think my troops animated with resolution and courage, and I hope they will prove themselves worthy of their country's confidence. I shall endeavor to the utmost to fulfill the duties of my station, and if we should not be so happy as to gratify the expectation of all, I hope we shall not deserve the reproach of any. Success is very precarious to the greatest human abilities, and is determined by that power which no mortal hand can resist. I hope the government will consider the naked state of the soldiers' families who will stand in need of clothes and bedding. Surely they deserve consideration and relief, and the colony needs no arguments to stimulate that. We are engaged in a righteous and glorious cause." And how remarkable it seems that this new general should be so rapidly rewarded by victory, one of whose results was the change in the name of the beautiful lake on whose banks that victory was won, as he says in his report: "The lake which the French call St. Sacrament I have given the name of Lake George in honor of his majesty and to establish his dominion here."

An interesting incident in this war is the fact that a number of patriotic women sent a large quantity of delicacies for the benefit of the soldiers, to which General Johnson thus replied: "Your generous humanity is gratefully applauded by all, and we pray that your benevolence may be returned to you by the Great Shepherd a hundred fold, and may those amiable housewives long continue to shine in their useful and endearing stations."

One reason for giving you the above incident is because it is the first instance of the kind I have found in American history, and also because the same sympathy and generosity was displayed by the patriotic ladies during the Civil War, in cheering the Union army with supplies of a similar character — and as one of that army I can bear witness to the gratitude of many a soldier, like that expressed by the hero of Lake George.

General Johnson's victory was rewarded by a baronetcy with the title of Sir William and a grant of £5,000, which hardly compensated for his losses in public service.

Peace generally permits the soldier to return to domestic life, but to Sir William Johnson it only brought additional work, and

the severity of its labors may be inferred from the following report of one of his journeys, written only five years before his death: "I left home June twenty-sixth, and after many delays, reached Onondaga in fourteen days, where I found the chiefs with others who were in great want of corn from the failure of the crops, and I gave them a supply. On returning from a private conference with the chiefs my canoe upset, and on ascending the bank I was severely injured by a fall on my wounded leg, which almost disabled me; but getting on a little better, I held a congress with them for two days. I next went to Seneca where I had summoned the chiefs of that nation, and was met by about 2,000 Indians. During my stay at Onondaga I met Indians from different nations, and after having settled matters I took leave and arrived home much indisposed; nor am I yet recovered from the hurt I received at Onondaga."

One of Sir William's greatest efforts, however, was to conciliate the Michigan Indians, for which purpose he journeyed to Detroit and held an important council. Modern tourists make the same distance and also return in less than three days, but Sir William found it a six-weeks' journey each way, and a hard one at that. While there, he became interested in the mineral wealth of that region, as is shown by the following extract from a letter to the Governor: "I have long since been well aware that there is not only a large quantity of copper ore on Lake Superior, but that it is extraordinary good and rich. I likewise made an estimate of transporting it, and it can be done with proper vessels." Sir William was thus the first to see the importance of what has since become so immense a feature of our national wealth.

We thus see that his daily life was one of unceasing labor, unrelieved by any recreation. All his distinction brings but increased bondage, every promotion brings added care. Now come the building of schools and churches, and great agricultural developments. The unceasing pressure of progress finally wears out this servant of the public, and he sinks beneath its burdens.

Much has been said of his fish house on the Sacandaga, some miles northeast of the city of Johnstown, but that I think is

entirely a myth. He had no time for fishing or any other amusement, and, indeed, had such been his desire, he would have found the Mohawk far more convenient and attractive. What he did build at Sacandaga was a fort for the protection of settlers, which he called "Castle Cumberland." It was destroyed during the Revolution, and then the new coming settlers invented the myth of the fish house.

Let us now look for a moment at the founding of Johnstown, which dates 1762, its inception being a baronial hall which was the grandest residence then in America. His purpose probably was, that his son, Sir John, who succeeded him at Mount Johnson, should be his lieutenant in the valley, while he himself established power in a new locality. At that time the entire territory west of the Hudson was Albany county, and he saw that the growth of population required a new county. He decided to make one, to be named after Governor Tryon, and planned Johnstown for its capital.

The jail and court house, both erected in 1772, are still monuments of Sir William, and like the hall, are still in service. St. John's church, which was another monument, was destroyed by fire in 1836, but there are some still living who can remember the sound of its bell, and also the ancient interior, with the wide door for the Indians, and its two stately pews, each with a canopy — one on each side of the pulpit — one for the king, and the other for the lord of the manor. Beneath this church was the family vault of which Sir William's remains were the sole occupant.

Let us now take a view of the two houses which Sir William erected, for, when a man builds a house it is often an indication of his character. The first house dates 1745, eight years after the arrival of the once obscure adventurer. This mansion which he sometimes called "Mount Johnson," and sometimes "Fort Johnson," was evidently intended for defense. The walls are of solid stone masonry and the windows could be used for musketry, while from the dormer windows in the roof a plunging fire could be maintained. It was, when erected, the only British fort in the State west of Albany except Oswego, and it now stands as

strong as when finished 157 years ago. There is not, indeed, a flaw in its massive walls, and its builder evidently planned it "not for a day, but for all time." Yes, and, if kept in repair, it will stand for ages, as a monument to the solid character of its founder.

The hall at Johnstown, on the other hand, was built during peace. The once obscure adventurer had become a baronet and the lord of a manor; hence its style is of a lordly character. It was not built for defense, as the two adjacent forts that flanked it were considered sufficient. It was located at a sufficient distance from the village to be surrounded by a park, and it was in reality the grandest baronial establishment in America, thus illustrating that high-toned character which marked Sir William in his latter days. I am happy to add that the present owner has a full consciousness of its historic value, and hence, welcomes all visitors, and the grand colonial mansion is enriched with many relics "of the times that tried men's souls."

Sir William's labors by this time had become so great as to awaken the fears of his friends, as is shown by the following extract from a letter written by Col. Duncan in 1770: "Sir William is sore failed. He is every now and then in a bad way. Wherefore is thought he can not last many years, which would be a great loss to mankind."

The war-worn baronet, however, had four additional years, but they were years of exhausting labor, and, conscious of the approaching end, he made his will, but still kept at work to the very last. And the end of this noble life came in the midst of an important service. An Indian council had been appointed at the hall and 600 were in attendance. Three days were devoted to hearing the complaints of the red men, and then Sir William replied in a long and comprehensive address, delivered at a time of such extreme heat that it proved a fatal effort, and he sank in a collapse which ended in death on the 11th day of July, 1774. He was really worn out in public service, dying, at last, in harness. The self-sacrificing devotion, indeed, with which he gave himself to the public weal, has no parallel except in Washington, and in each instance this devotion was the great object of existence.

Washington became the greatest of American citizens *after* the Revolution, but Sir William was the greatest of American citizens *before* it; and if Washington were "the father of his country," Sir William was certainly the father of that province which became the Empire State.

While thus portraying this wonderful man, we are aware of his errors, which can only be excused as belonging to the age in which he lived; and here we feel the power of that touching appeal with which Gray closes his immortal elegy, and which forbids us to "draw his frailties from their dread abode," but let them "in trembling hope repose" within "the bosom of his Father and his God." Coleridge uttered a similar prayer, and at the close of his life he craves forgiveness rather than fame. Sir William expresses his true feelings in his will, where he says: "I resign my soul to the great and merciful God who made it in hopes through the alone merits of my blessed Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, to have a joyful resurrection to life eternal."

The funeral was held on the 13th of July, 1774, and was the most imposing which had ever occurred in America. The remains were followed from the hall to the church by a great procession of true mourners, including the Indians, and were laid to rest in the family vault. In 1862, they were resurrected, and, being placed in a stone sarcophagus, were again interred, and the spot it still marked by a mound, but a more appropriate monument is expected, and the State of New York should be its donor.

Permit me, before closing, to draw a parallel between Sir William and a contemporary conqueror, Robert Clive, a youth who left Great Britain, but made India his field, while Johnson came to America. Clive was noted for his success, but also for his rapacity, and instead of building up India, he made it a field for plunder. He rose to supreme power, and also immense wealth, and then returned to London, a peer of the realm, but covered by the curses of a plundered nation; and, amid all this wicked success, came the horrors of conscience, and the knowledge that public opinion uttered its condemnation. Wealth and rank failed to compensate for a life of crime; and the same year Sir

William passed away amid the love and honor of his country, Lord Clive committed suicide in London.

This contrast has never been presented before, but it is too instructive to be lost. The one gratified a selfish ambition and the lust of gold, by tyranny and bloodshed, while the other so lived for his country and mankind, that, dying in their service, he recalls the words of the poet: "And like the sun, seems largest at his setting."