

CHAPTER VI

SIR WILLIAM'S CHARACTER AND DEATH 1769-1774

AFTER concluding the Fort Stanwix treaty and supervising the running of the boundary line, which was completed in 1769, Sir William passed most of his spare time in reading, and in writing papers on public topics. He had accumulated one of the best private libraries in the colonies; having begun to import books from England as early as 1740, or as soon as he had means of his own to afford it. At the end of his life he had over two thousand volumes, which in those days was an extraordinary private collection.

To indicate generally the character of his selections, I give two orders, selected at random from a number. These orders were sent to London in 1749. They embraced Sir Isaac Newton's complete works; Desagulier's Course of Experimental Philosophy, in two volumes, illustrated; Chambers's Dictionary, two volumes; Battles of Alexander the Great,

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by LeBrun; Rhoderick Random; the Whole Proceedings in the House of Peers Against the Three Condemned Lords; Historical Review of Transactions in Europe from the Commencement of the War with Spain; the Gentleman's Magazine; the Family Magazine; A Large Globe; All Recent Pamphlets on Political or Scientific Subjects; Review of the Services of His Majesty's Navy Since the Accession of William III; Life of the Duke of Marlborough, 3 volumes, by Ledyard; Military History of Prince Eugene and the Duke of Marlborough, 2 volumes, by Campbell; Life of William III, translated from the Dutch of Montanus; Life and Reign of King William III, by Harris; History of France Under the Reign of Louis XIV, translated from the French of de Larrey; Life of Louis XIII, by Howell; Life of Queen Anne, by Oldmixon; An Account of the Conduct of the Duchess of Marlborough, by Hooke; Life of Peter the Great, 3 volumes, by Mottley; Life of the Prophet Mohammed (in Latin), by Gagnier; Translation of the Koran (in Latin), with Notes, Anon.; and lastly, Pictures of Some of the Best Running Horses at New Market.

Besides such special orders, from time to time, he had a standing order with the prin-

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cipal bookseller in London to send to him "all new books on History, Philosophy, and the Lives of Men Worth Reading About," as they came from the press.

His own literary ability can be judged only by his voluminous correspondence. As a sample, I offer some extracts from a long and comprehensive letter written by him to Arthur Lee, at the request of the Royal Philosophical Society, under date of February 28, 1771:

SIR:

JOHNSON HALL, *Feb. 28, 1771.*

. . . I am apprehensive that any account in my power respecting inquiries amongst the unlettered Indians will prove inadequate to the expectation formed in your letter; for, notwithstanding my long residence in this country, the nature of my office and the most diligent inquiries into these various particulars, I find all researches of that sort, for which I shall give reasons presently, involved in such difficulty and uncertainty as to afford but slender satisfaction—at least far short of my inclination to gratify your desires thereon. However, I shall endeavor to make some atonement by giving you some account of these difficulties, together with such other hints as, from the motives of enquiry suggested in your letter, may, I flatter myself, be of some use or amusement to you.

It will be unnecessary to enlarge on the want of laws, government, letters, or such other particu-

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lars as are to be found in most authors who have treated of the American Indians. . . .

I must therefore observe that the customs and manners of the Indians are in several cases liable to changes which have not been thoroughly considered by authors, and therefore the description of them at our particular period must be insufficient; and I must further premise that I mean to confine my observations to those of the Northern Nations, with whom I have the most acquaintance and intercourse.

In all inquiries of this sort we should distinguish between the most remote tribes and those Indians who, from their having been next to our settlements several years, and relying wholly on oral tradition for the support of their ancient usages, have lost a great part of them and have blended some customs amongst ourselves, so as to render it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to trace those customs to their origin or to discover their application. Again those Indians who are a degree farther removed have still a good deal of intercourse with our traders, and having altered their system of politics, though they still retain many ancient customs, they are much at loss to account for them; whilst those who are far removed from any intercourse with the whites (a few traders excepted) are still in possession of the greater part of their primitive usages. Yet these cannot give a satisfactory account of their original signification; and having so blended the whole with fable

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as to render it a matter of great difficulty to separate truth from it. Add to this that above a century ago they had French Jesuits among them who, partly for religious purposes, but chiefly to secure particular ends in the wars they often fomented, introduced some of their own inventions which the present generation [of Indians] confound with their ancient ceremonies. . . .

With respect to your questions concerning the chief magistrate or sachem and how he acquires his authority, I am to acquaint you that there is in every nation a sachem or chief, who appears to have authority over the rest and it is greatest amongst the most distant nations. But in most of those bordering upon our settlements, the chief's authority is hardly discernible, he seldom assuming any power before his people. Indeed, this humility is judged the best policy; for, wanting coercive power, their commands would perhaps occasion assassination, which sometimes happens.

The sachems of each tribe are usually chosen in a public assembly of the chiefs and warriors, when a vacancy happens by death or otherwise. They are generally chosen for their sense and bravery from among the oldest warriors and approved of by all the tribe, on which they are saluted sachems. There are, however, several exceptions; for some families have a kind of heredity in the office, and are called to this station sometimes in infancy.

The chief sachem is so either by inheritance or by a kind of tacit consent, the consequence of his

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superior abilities and influence. The duration of his authority depends on his own wisdom, the number and consequence of his relations and the strength of his particular tribe (if in a Confederacy). But in those cases where the office descends (by inheritance) should the successor appear unequal to the task, some other sachem is sure to possess himself of the powers and duties of the station. I should have observed that military services are the chief recommendation to this rank. And it appears pretty clearly that heretofore the chief of a nation had in some small degree the authority of a sovereign. This is now the fact among the most remote Indians. But, since the introduction of firearms they no longer fight in close bodies, but every man is his own general; and I am inclined to think that this is calculated to lessen the power of a chief. . . .

The chief sachems form the Grand Council and those of each tribe often deliberate apart on the affairs of their particular tribe. All their deliberations are conducted with extraordinary regularity and decorum. They never interrupt him who is speaking or use harsh language, whatever may be their thoughts.

The chiefs assume most authority in the field, but this must be done even there with extreme caution. . . .

They are severe upon those guilty of theft, (a crime indeed uncommon among them); and in cases of murder the relatives are left to take what-

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soever revenge they please. In general they are unwilling to inflict capital punishments.

On their hunts, as on all other occasions, they are strict observers of *meum* and *tuum* and on this pure principle, holding theft in contempt, they are rarely guilty of it though tempted by articles of much value or ardently coveted. Neither do the strong oppress the weak or attempt to seize their prey of the chase or anything else of their property. And I must do them the justice to say that unless heated by liquor or inflamed by revenge, their ideas of right and wrong and their practices in consequence of them would, if more known, do them much honor. . . .

As to your remark on their apparent repugnance to civilization, I must observe that this is not owing to any viciousness of their nature or want of capacity, as they have a strong genius for arts and uncommon patience. I believe they are put in English schools too late in life and sent back too soon to their people, whose political maxim, Spartan-like, is to discountenance all pursuits but war, holding all other knowledge as unworthy the dignity of man and tending to enervate and divert them from that warfare on which they conceive their liberty and happiness depend. Such sentiments constantly instilled into the minds of youth and illustrated by examples drawn from the contemptible state of domesticated tribes, leave lasting impressions that can hardly be eradicated by an ordinary school education. . . .

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With regard to language, there is so remarkable a difference between the tongue of the Iroquois and all the rest, as to afford some ground for inquiry as to their distinct origin. The Indians north of the St. Lawrence and north and west of the Great Lakes and those who live in the Valley of the Ohio, notwithstanding the differences between them in other respects, speak a language radically the same, and can, in general, communicate their wants to each other, while the Iroquois who live in the midst of them are incapable of conveying a single idea to their neighbors; neither can they pronounce a word of their language correctly. There is some difference in dialect among the nations of the Iroquois themselves, but there is little more than may be found in the different provinces of large states in Europe. . . .

I am Sir, your very Humble Servant

WM. JOHNSON.

We have reproduced the foregoing rather as a sample of Sir William's literary style than for the sake of the information it contains. All the facts stated in it are well known now; but they were not so familiar to the reading public in 1771. Only about one-third of the whole letter appears above. It was, in fact, a paper, and was printed as such in the Proceedings of the Philosophical Society. Most modern critics would call the style somewhat involved and, perhaps, ponderous;

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but after all Sir William managed to make his points clear.

Sir William Johnson, though not college-bred, as intimated in the first chapter, was well educated. He was particularly well versed in Latin, and his library was well stocked with the classics of that tongue, and also with more modern works written in it. He often received letters in Latin from French priests in Canada, after the conquest, because they could not write English and he could not read French. It was his habit to make notes of his own and attach them to all important letters when he put them on file; and examination of his manuscripts showed that his notes on the letters in Latin were always in that language. He was an exceptionally good mathematician, and could make and plot a land survey as well and as accurately as any professional surveyor.

Though he never had the slightest military training in his youth, and though his first actual experience in warfare was the command of a considerable force, he "took to the trade" intuitively, and became, by great odds, the ablest and most successful of all the Provincial generals, excepting, perhaps, Sir William Pepperell. In battle he exhibited the most daring bravery, but in the general han-

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dling of his troops, manœuvring, etc., he was cool and cautious, even to the extent—as some of his contemporaries thought—of over-prudence.

On this point, however, he used to say himself that, as he had large responsibilities of command thrust upon him without adequate military experience or training, he was often in doubt; and when so situated, always determined that any error he might commit should be on the safe side! “I was always,” he once said, “on the lookout for an ambush, and was resolved that, whatever else my fate might be, it should not be that of Braddock!” When commanding Indians he always let them fight their own way; never attempting to do anything except encourage them by his presence and example. Leading white troops he observed the tactical methods then in vogue; but in woods-fighting was much more flexible in his generalship than British regular officers usually were.

On this point General Amherst once said to another British officer of high rank—General Gage—“We can all learn something from Johnson in the style of fighting we have to practice here!”

In the ordinary affairs of life he was sociable, free from pretension, easy in manner,

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decorous in speech, and temperate in all things. Singular as his domestic relations were for the greater part of his life, he was always devotedly attached to his home, and exceedingly fond of his Indian companions and of their half-breed children. In business matters he was shrewd, but invariably honest to a penny, and withal a generous creditor. His benevolence was proverbial, and no other man in the colonies during his time gave half as much in charity as he did. Though formally a member of the Church of England, he viewed other creeds with equal favor, and built several chapels for his Lutheran neighbors or tenants, besides mission school-houses for missionaries of other denominations than his own. He was not very strict in his own religious observances, but always insisted that his family—particularly his girls, white and half-breed alike—should be close Conformists in all the rites and ceremonies of the Protestant Episcopal Church.

His favorite pastimes were gunning, fishing, and horse-racing. He was in the habit of inviting the whole countryside either to Mount Johnson or Johnson Hall, several times a year for all kinds of athletic sports, of which his own favorites were boxing and wrestling—at both of which, in his younger

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days, he was exceedingly expert and formidable. On one occasion a militia company in his own regiment, when electing officers, voted a tie for the position of second lieutenant. They appealed to him to decide. "Let them strip," he said, "and box it out. I want the best man to have the commission!"

On the whole and without further analysis, we think it clear that Sir William Johnson possessed a masterful mind, of quick intuitions and wide versatility; fertile in resource and keen in perception; prompt in decision and tremendously energetic in execution. Not, perhaps, amounting to what is rather indefinitely termed "genius," but well-balanced, steady, and safe.

There can be no doubt that Sir William's last years were made gloomy by the growing contentions and rapidly widening breach between the colonies and the mother country. Politically, he was an ardent Whig, and as such naturally opposed the policies of the Grenville and North ministries toward the colonies. But in his public utterances and in his correspondence at the time he was conservative to the point of being non-committal. In a letter to General Gage, dated September,

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1765, after deploring the "riotous conduct" of certain colonists, he says:

Having a large property to lose I cannot be supposed to think differently from the real interests of America; yet, as a lover of the British Constitution, I shall retain sentiments agreeable to it, although I should be almost singular [alone] in my opinion, and I have great reason to think that the late transactions and what is daily expected in other Colonies, will be productive of dangerous consequences. But I do not enter into their debates nor suffer myself to be led by artful constructions of the law.

A more significant expression occurs in a subsequent letter to Dr. Cadwallader Colden, where he uses the more epigrammatic, though still ambiguous, phrase: "For my part, I neither wish us here more power than we can make good use of, nor less liberty than we have a right to expect."

In another letter he "congratulates his correspondent on the repeal of the Stamp Act," and in another says: "Unless they alter the Stamp Act, we shall all be Republicans!"

General Schuyler, whom he visited at Albany in 1773, on the occasion of placing two of his half-breed daughters in a private seminary there, records him as "using language concerning the attitude of the ministry, and

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also its personal make-up, which I should have hesitated to use myself!" But Schuyler does not quote him—doubtless because it was a dinner-table conversation. In April, 1774, he visited New York city, and said to Philip Livingston, in the course of a friendly chat:

If the Colonies unite in revolt and the people are unanimous—or nearly so—in it, I do not believe the Crown can subdue them. The regular troops will find it very different if they have our Old Provincials against them instead of with them. I believe, notwithstanding the extreme lengths to which the troubles have proceeded, there is yet one chance left for reconciliation. But I fear it can never be accomplished by His Majesty's present advisers!

His last recorded utterance on the subject was early in July, 1774, not more than a week before his death. Dr. Wheelock was visiting him, as he habitually did during vacations. The doctor records him as saying:

All this trouble must lead to blows before long. A serious collision may happen any day now. The Colonists cannot retreat, and the King, apparently, will not. I am filled with forebodings. I dread the coming of a struggle that must shake the British Empire to its foundations. For my part I can only say now that I shall not be found on the side of the aggressor!

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Governor Seymour, who had seen the above in the Wheelock MSS. and copied it, interpreted it as a guarded declaration of intent to espouse the American cause, and invariably expressed the belief that he would have done so had he lived to hear the news from Bunker Hill.

The nearest approach to positive testimony that I have ever seen occurs in a statement made by Colonel Daniel Claus, Sir William's son-in-law, which has never before been published, so far as I know, and for a copy of which I am indebted to W. Max Reid, author of the History of the Mohawk Valley.

For brevity I may premise that after their defeat at Oriskany and the slaughter they suffered there, followed so closely by the surrender of Burgoyne, the Iroquois became deeply dejected, and many of them, particularly the Senecas and Cayugas, seriously contemplated neutrality, if not making terms with the American colonists and abandoning the British cause. This situation called forth all the resources of the great chief, Joseph Brant, to keep the Indians faithful to the king. On this subject Colonel Claus says:

Brant was ably seconded in his efforts by the tears and prayers of his sister Molly, who had been driven from her home at Danube by the enraged

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Americans after the battle of Oriskany. The Americans had not expelled Molly in 1776 at the time the Royalists were driven out, but had left her in peace at the Indian Castle at Danube, where she took up her residence with her family, when Sir John Johnson occupied Johnson Hall after the baronet's death.

Shortly after the battle of Oriskany the Americans found out that when St. Leger and Brant were besieging Fort Schuyler, Molly sent a message by an Indian runner warning Brant that a body of nearly a thousand Militia under General Herkimer were on the march to relieve the garrison of that Fort. She was then obliged to leave the Mohawk Valley, and she went for safety among the Five Nations, where she was assisted by her brother and the people, and among whom she took asylum. Every one of them pressed her to stay with them, but she fixed upon Cayuga as the center, and having relations among them by whom she was kindly received. After General Burgoyne's surrender she found them, in general, very fickle and wavering, particularly the Head Chief of the Senecas, Cayenguorrahton, with whom she had a long conversation in council. She reminded the Chief of the great friendship between him and the late Sir William Johnson, whose name she could never mention without tears, which always greatly affect the Indians.

She told the Chief that she had often heard Sir William declare his fixed intention to live and

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die a firm adherent of the King of England and all his friends; together with other striking arguments, which had such an effect upon the Chief and other Sachems present that they promised henceforth truthfully to keep their engagements with her late friend the Baronet; for she is considered and esteemed by them as his relict, and one word from her would go further than a thousand from any white man whatever, because the white man must generally purchase the friendship of the Indians at a high rate. In fact they attached much more importance to her advice than even to that of her brother Joseph, whose prominence, zeal and activity rather occasioned envy and jealousy with many of the Indians.

It is fair to presume that Colonel Claus reported Molly's interview with the Seneca chief correctly. There might, perhaps, be some question as to Molly's own accuracy in quoting Sir William, or in the representations she made of his opinions and his decision. She was at that time undoubtedly in a most revengeful mood toward the Americans. She desired, above all things, that the Indians should remain true to the cause of the king. She realized that nothing but the success of the Royal cause could restore to her and her children the fortune bequeathed to them in Sir William's will. Under these conditions she may have been, and probably was,

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what the lawyers called an interesting witness.

Yet, if Sir William ever expressed any such views, she was quite as likely to hear them as any other person then living. It may be mentioned as a strange fact in connection with this matter, that neither Sir William's son, Sir John Johnson, nor his two sons-in-law, Colonel Claus and Guy Johnson, ever pretended to have heard him make any positive expression on the subject.

Whatever deductions we may draw from this conflicting testimony, one thing alone is certain: to the day of his death he held scrupulously aloof from the debates and the councils of both sides, taking no part whatever in the agitation; and he was invariably equally kind and hospitable to the Sons of Liberty, and to the officials of the Crown. If he had really made up his mind, he took his decision with him to the tomb.

For my own part, I venture no opinion. But it seems quite justifiable to say that had he lived and adhered to the American cause, the fate of the "Old New York Frontier," in respect to the warfare of Indians and Tories on the settlers, would have been vastly different from what it was; because the only man who could have swerved the Iroquois from

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their ancient covenant with the king was Sir William Johnson.

He died as he had lived—in harness. On the 11th of July, 1774, he made a long speech—nearly two hours—to about six hundred Indians, mostly Iroquois, who had assembled at Johnson Hall to invoke his influence to prevent the invasion of the Indian country on the Ohio known as “Dunmore’s War,” which culminated in the defeat and destruction of a considerable force of Indians—mostly from the Ohio tribes—under the chief, Cornstalk, by a superior army of Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania frontiersmen under General Andrew Lewis at Point Pleasant—the confluence of the Ohio and Great Kanawha rivers.

He was at this time much weakened by dysentery, and exposure to an extremely hot sun, together with the excessive mental and physical strain of the long speech, brought on prostration by heat, which soon developed into cerebral apoplexy. He died at six o’clock p. m., July 11, 1774, about two hours after finishing his speech. His last words were spoken to Joseph Brant, who, with others, carried his limp form into the Hall. They were: “Joseph, control your people—control your people! I am going away!”

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These words, spoken to Brant in the Iroquois tongue, were echoed through every village of the Six Nations, from the Lower Mohawk Castle to Niagara. Unquestionably they, more than any other influence—or more than all other influences combined—caused the almost unanimous election of Brant to be grand sachem or senior chief of the Iroquois Confederacy not long afterward. The Indians interpreted the words to mean that Sir William, with his latest conscious breath, bequeathed his mantle to Joseph Brant, and the magic of his power over them was not impaired by death itself.

Sir John Johnson was at his home—the Mount—nearly ten miles away, when his father was stricken. An express sent by the hands of young William Johnson, the half-breed son, mounted on the fleetest horse in Sir William's racing-stable, reached Sir John about five o'clock—young William ruining the blooded horse he rode. Sir John instantly saddled his own best race-horse—an Irish steeplechaser named Royal Duke, the most valuable stallion then in the colonies—and covered nine miles of the distance in thirty minutes. The steeplechaser fell dead within a mile of Johnson Hall, and Sir John borrowed the horse of a farmer who hap-

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pened to be in the road when his own stallion fell, and soon arrived at the Hall. But his father, though still breathing, was unconscious, and in a few minutes passed away.