



Carlyle House

DOCENT DISPATCH

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Sir William Johnson: Noteworthy Carlyle House Visitor

By Henry Desmarais



Sir William Johnson ca. 1750

James Munson's biography of John Carlyle lists "Indian Agent Col. William Johnson from New York" as one of the participants in the "Grandest Congress" held at the Carlyle House in April 1755. A recent book, *White Savage: William Johnson and the Invention of America*, by Fintan O'Toole, provides a vehicle for learning about one of the more intriguing visitors to the Carlyle House.

Johnson was born in 1715 about 20 miles northwest of Dublin. Although born into an Irish Catholic family, he would later become a Protestant, more for social than religious reasons; it was then simply the way to get ahead in the British Empire. An uncle, Sir Peter Warren, another Protestant convert,

became a famous British naval commander, ended up marrying into the New York De Lancey family and acquired huge landholdings in New York. Warren invited his nephew to come to America in 1738 to manage his vast estates.

Johnson began to trade (fairly) with the Indians (the term used throughout O'Toole's book, in lieu of today's preferred Native Americans), became reasonably fluent in Mohawk and exceedingly well-versed in Indian rituals, even dressing Indian-style on occasion. By 1742, Johnson had been initiated into the Mohawk nation (one of the Six Iroquois Nations) as a *sachem* (or administrative chief) and given an Indian name. His informal role as a mediator between the Indians and the British would soon be formalized, beginning with his appointment in 1746 as Colonel of the Warriors of the Six Nations by New York Governor George Clinton. Less than ten years later, Johnson would find himself a guest at the Carlyle House. As O'Toole notes,

"In mid-April 1755, [General Edward] Braddock summoned William Johnson to his camp at Alexandria, Virginia [presumably the Carlyle House], where he was preparing his own assault on the Ohio forts. There he announced the new command structure. The Nova Scotia campaign would be led by Brigadier

CARLYLE HOUSE

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General Charles Lawrence. The expedition against Fort Niagara would be under the command of Governor William Shirley of Massachusetts. To his surprise, and not entirely to his delight, Johnson had been chosen to command the attack on Crown Point. Braddock also gave him a formal commission as Sole Superintendent of ‘the affairs of the United Nations of Indians, their allies and dependants’. On 16 April Johnson was commissioned as major general in the provincial army and commander-in-chief of the colonial forces raised for the Crown Point campaign in New York, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, Connecticut and Rhode Island.”

Unlike both General Braddock and Governor Shirley, Johnson would leave Carlyle House and go on to glory, relatively speaking. While he would not be immediately successful in attacking his objective, he was able to repulse a French force at the Battle of Lake George (the lake so re-named by Johnson himself), taking a bullet in the hip and capturing the then-famous French general Ludwig-August, Baron de Dieskau in the process. Johnson’s accomplishments made him an instant hero in England, perhaps a necessary one given everybody else’s failures in 1755, and he was named the first Baronet of New York by a grateful George II.

Johnson would go on to become the “ultimate Indian diplomat,” helping to keep the Iroquois loyal to Great Britain, and his work with the Indians helped make Britain’s conquest of Canada possible. Among other things, Johnson would capture Fort Niagara in 1759 and play a key role in the capitulation of Montreal in 1760. His singular contributions would cause the artist Benjamin West to include Johnson in the now-famous painting depicting the death of General James Wolfe at the Battle of Quebec in 1759—even though Johnson was many miles away at the time. Through the years, Johnson would feud with Governors James De Lancey and William Shirley, two other early visitors to the Carlyle House, and with British General, Sir Jeffery Amherst, then Commander-in-Chief of British forces in America, over military

tactics, Indian policies, and more petty matters, and he generally prevailed (Shirley was disgraced and Amherst recalled.) At one point, senior British officials believed that Johnson “was all that stood between Anglo-America and a general Indian revolt which, if it spread through the Six Nations, could virtually undo the British conquest of North America.”

Johnson was apparently a rather colorful individual, reputed to be “an awesomely sexual figure.” He had several “wives” and many more mistresses, both white and Indian, with whom he had a number of children. He became one of the largest landholders in America, eventually accumulating 170,000 acres, some received as a direct grant from the Indians. Like John Carlyle, he was both a major slaveholder and a Freemason. Unlike Carlyle, his outlook on the eve of the American Revolution was “essentially loyalist.”

After William Johnson’s death on July 11, 1774, his family and most of his Indian friends would take the British side in the Revolution. His property would be seized in 1779 by the State of New York. Today, however, two of Johnson’s homes in New York’s Mohawk Valley are again open to the public. One is a large Georgian stone house, built about 1749 and known as Fort Johnson. The other, built in 1763, was made of wood but with the outside walls painted to look like stone. Docent-led tours are available at both, just as they are today at the Carlyle House.



Courtesy of
French and Indian War 250

Sources

James Munson, *Col. John Carlyle, Gent.*, 1986.

Fintan O’Toole, *White Savage: William Johnson and the Invention of America*, 2005.

www.oldfortjohnson.org

www.johnstown.com/Johnson.html

Henry Desmarais is a docent at the Carlyle House and frequent contributor to “The Docent Dispatch.” We are very grateful to have such talented and dedicated people supporting our research.

Thank you Henry



New Exhibit Opens

May 27, 2006

George William Carlyle:

An Appointment with Destiny

Article contributed by Mark Hill

May 27, 2006 is the 240th anniversary of George William Carlyle's birth. But more poignant is that it marks the 225th anniversary of young Carlyle's final birthday. Less than four months later, on September 8, 1781, the last male heir of John Carlyle dies while serving with the 3rd Continental Light Dragoons at the Battle of Eutaw Springs, South Carolina.

George William Carlyle was 15 years old when he fought at Eutaw Springs. During the action, he was with the 3rd Continental Light Dragons under the command of Lieutenant Colonel William Washington who led a daring charge against the British right flank. In the course of this engagement Washington's dragoons were caught up in some heavy brush and while trying to make a break for open ground were decimated. It was at this point that many in the unit were killed or wounded, including George William. It was also at this time that Lieutenant Colonel Washington was wounded and taken prisoner.

Little is known of the junior Carlyle's service. The only thing known for sure is that he was killed in action on September 8, 1781 at Eutaw Springs. In several sources, George William has been referred to as a "Voluntier", a "Cornet" and a "Cadet." Prior to Eutaw Springs young Mr. Carlyle is known to have carried letters from Major James McHenry (future Secretary of War under President Washington) and the Marquis de Lafayette on his way to South Carolina in July 1781. One letter from Major McHenry introduced "Young Carlisle" to General Nathanael Greene, commander of the Continental Army's Southern Department. General Greene responded to McHenry's letter by saying he would pay particular attention to George William.

Although George William Carlyle's military career and life was cut short he must have made a lasting impression. Henry "Light Horse Harry" Lee makes specific note of "Young Carlisle's" death in his *Memoirs of the War in the Southern Department* published in 1812.

On Saturday, May 27 the George William Carlyle exhibit will officially open, but expect to see it taking shape toward the end of May. The exhibit will include a reproduction uniform of the 3rd Continental Light Dragoons on loan from historian and author Bill Maurer. We will also have on loan from the Sons of the Revolution, Virginia Society, a reproduction of Lieutenant Colonel William Washington's battle ensign known as the "Eutaw Flag." The exhibit will run through September 10.

Please be sure to attend docent training for the George William Carlyle Exhibit on Monday, May 15 at the Lloyd House. Carlyle House docent and resident George William expert Mark Hill and historian Bill Maurer will speak on the history of the 3rd Continental Light Dragoons as well as George William Carlyle's short military career and his death at Eutaw Springs.



Third Continental Light Dragoon

By Don Troiani