

Gendered Encounters: Warriors, Women, and William Johnson

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I

In recent years, New Indian History has emphasized cultural synthesis. Redirecting attention away from traditional themes of conflict and conquest, historians have examined the process by which Indians and Europeans learned to coexist. Initially, according to this literature, neither side enjoyed absolute power and authority over the other. Consequently, native people and European settlers carved out a “middle ground” between their two cultures upon which they engaged in relationships based on mutual accommodation. This mode of contact led to an exchange and intermingling of European and Indian cultural forms and practices.¹

The process of cultural synthesis has been applied to a variety of Indian–white relations. Of interest to this article is its relevance to the Iroquois–William Johnson alliance. The Iroquois, composed of the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, Senecas and ultimately the Tuscaroras, were the dominant Indian group in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in what is now New York state.² From 1744 to 1774,

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The author wishes to thank participants at the British Association for American Studies Conference at Glasgow 1999, for their comments on an earlier draft of this article. Special thanks are also due to Ann Little and, in particular, Peter Way for their valuable suggestions. This work was supported in part by the Marcus Cunliffe Bursary provided by the University of Sussex.

¹ Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Daniel H. Usner, Jr., *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley before 1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Colin G. Galloway, *New Worlds For All: Indians, Europeans and the Remaking of Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

² For general histories on the Iroquois see, William N. Fenton, *The Great Law of the Longhouse: A Political History of the Iroquois Confederacy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998); Daniel K. Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of*

Anglo-Iroquois relations centred on the activities of William Johnson, Superintendent of Indian Affairs. As a former Indian trader and long-time resident of the Mohawk Valley, Johnson established close relations with the Six Nations, particularly the Mohawks, becoming well versed in their languages and customs. In his role as frontier diplomat, Johnson was extremely successful at facilitating the exchange of cultural forms. Timothy Shannon explored how Johnson, along with the Mohawk leader Hendrick, created an “Indian fashion” in which European clothing combined with Indian aesthetics to assume a new cultural meaning in the Mohawk Valley. Nancy Hagedorn argued that Johnson played a leading role in the standardization of “forest diplomacy.” This was a form of diplomatic protocol that blended Indian and European conventions. Colin Calloway inferred that Johnson’s actual home represented a symbolic, if not physical manifestation of the middle ground since it “became a meeting ground for British and Indian diplomats.”³

There is, however, a real danger in overstating the theme of cultural synthesis. The governing pattern of Anglo-Iroquois relations during the mid-eighteenth century was not the creation of a biracial culture, but the ascendancy of Anglo-American culture over Iroquois culture. Furthermore, although cultural exchange obviously occurred, this phenomenon did not always occasion positive end results. Europeans could learn and borrow from Indian culture in ways that furthered their own interests at the expense of Native Americans. Far from operating as an innocuous mediator, Johnson proved extremely adept at employing his intercultural skills to promote the interests of the Crown and colonies, often to the detriment of the Iroquois. This article explores how he manipulated one facet of Iroquois culture – gender – to serve imperial needs.

During the Seven Years’ War with New France (1756–63), the British Crown relied heavily on Johnson to secure a military and political alliance with the Iroquois. Their geographical position as a buffer zone between

the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), Richard Aquila, *The Iroquois Restoration: Iroquois Diplomacy on the Colonial Frontier, 1701–1754* (1983 rpt. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997).

³ Timothy J. Shannon, “Dressing for Success on the Mohawk Frontier: Hendrick, William Johnson and the Indian Fashion,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd series, 53: 1 (1996), 13–42; Nancy Hagedorn, “Brokers of Understanding’: Interpreters as Agents of Cultural Exchange in Colonial New York,” *New York History* [hereafter NYH], 76: 4 (1995), 379–408, see especially, 402–04; Calloway, *New Worlds for All*, 131. For older works on Johnson see, Milton W. Hamilton, *Sir William Johnson: Colonial American, 1715–1763* (Kennikat Press, 1976); James Thomas Flexner, *Mohawk Baronet: A Biography of Sir William Johnson* (1959 rpt. Syracuse University Press, 1989).

French Canada and the northern British colonies, rendered the Iroquois an essential ally. Johnson's proficiency at establishing a cross-cultural alliance was due in large part to his knowledge and manipulation of Iroquois gender roles. Gender in this article is conceived as a social construct that is culturally and historically relative. Although gender draws on physiological differences between the sexes, it is not determined by them. In any given culture, at any given time, a distinct set of values and ideas govern the behaviour of men and women.⁴ Iroquois culture, on the eve of European colonization, was matrilineal and considerably egalitarian. Men and women regarded each other as autonomous beings who pursued different, but equally valued activities. Women farmed the land and participated in village politics. Men predominantly engaged in hunting and warfare. For eighteenth-century Englishmen, this appeared to be a perversion of the "natural" order. English culture was by contrast immensely patriarchal, embracing a rigid gender hierarchy in which women were subservient to men. Within this culture, agriculture and politics were deemed male pursuits.⁵ The neglect of farming by Iroquois men was accordingly viewed as a sign of indolence, while their passion for war seemed evident of a "savage" masculinity in need of refinement. The English pitied Iroquois women as overworked drudges, yet at the same time considered them to wield an "unnatural" degree of political power.⁶

Despite their uneasiness with Iroquois gender roles, colonial settlers and administrators were unable to reorder them according to their own cultural preferences. Reliant on the Iroquois as trading partners, military allies, and peaceful neighbours, the English could not afford to exert unwelcome pressure on them, but were instead obliged to accommodate them. William Johnson took this process of accommodation one step further by actually plugging into the existing Iroquois gender system to serve imperial interests. He drew on his understanding of Iroquois warrior culture to successfully mobilise a sizable number of Iroquois men

⁴ For a view of gender as a social construct, particularly in reference to the Iroquois see Nancy Bonvillian, *Women and Men: Cultural Constructs of Gender* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1995), 1–11, 66–74. See also, Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review*, 91 (1986), 1053–75.

⁵ Recent literature that discusses gender roles and relations in modern England includes, Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England, 1500–1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) and G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁶ For examples of contemporary negative appraisals of Iroquois gender roles see, John Bartram, *Observations on ... his Travels from Pensilvania to Onondaga* [1743] (London 1751), 77; *Citizen Soldier: The Revolutionary Journal of Joseph Bloomfield*, ed. Mark E. Lender and James Kirby Martin (Newark: New Jersey Historical Society, 1982), 66.

against the French. Additionally, his knowledge of the political influence of Iroquois women in matters of war, allowed him to pursue a number of measures designed to “court their vote.” Nonetheless, Iroquois men and women did not enjoy a simple gender role enhancement in this period. Both faced challenges to their traditional roles and responsibilities. As part of his effort to construct an Anglo-Iroquois alliance, Johnson combined the gendered practices and values of Europeans, Euro-Americans, and Indians in ways that were ultimately injurious for the Iroquois.

II

The cultivation of a martial spirit was central to the Iroquois construction of masculinity. Male warriors were accorded immense social prestige within their communities, owing to the vital service they provided. They engaged in war primarily to obtain prisoners to replace recently deceased kin. It was believed that through the adoption or torture of prisoners, the social, spiritual, and emotional equilibrium of the community could be maintained. From a young age, boys were encouraged to cultivate the virtues of the warrior ethic, including stoicism, valour, and fortitude. Warfare provided the ultimate test of manhood. The number of captives and scalps brought back to their villages was an important hallmark of skill and bravery. Successful demonstration of the warrior ethic gained them considerable social standing, increased their prospects in marriage, and provided an important means through which they could obtain positions of leadership.⁷

When confronted with the task of enlisting Iroquois warriors, William Johnson put into practice his knowledge of male gender roles. At a large conference held with the Iroquois at the outset of the Seven Years’ War, Johnson employed a tactic designed to win their confidence. He began by reassuring them that: “It is not that the English are afraid of the French or any of their Enemies, that I make you this offer.” Instead, their involvement in war was presented as an opportunity to demonstrate their renowned martial spirit. Failure to assist would consequently cause the English to suspect “that you lost your ancient Bravery.” By contrast, Johnson emphasized the military vigour of the British. The King’s “Warriors,” he informed them, “are now gathered together with their

⁷ For insightful descriptions of Iroquois warrior culture see Richter, *Ordeal of the Longhouse*, Ch. 2; Joseph F. Lafitau, *Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of Primitive Times*, ed. and trans. William N. Fenton and Elizabeth Moore (Toronto, 1977), Vol. 2, Ch. 3.

swords in their hands, his great guns are loaded and all his warlike instruments are sharpened and ready.” Although “they are slow to spill blood ... when they begin, they are like an angry wolf.” Thus he urged the Iroquois to “be men therefore” and state openly where their loyalties lay.⁸

By appealing to Iroquois desires to demonstrate the warrior ethic and at the same time making grand claims about British military prowess, Johnson hoped to induce warriors to fight. His methods were largely successful as a substantial number of Mohawk warriors fought at the Battle of Lake George a few months later. For the remainder of the war, countless Iroquois scouting parties harassed the Canadian frontier. Large numbers of warriors also joined British troops during some of the major campaigns of the war, including the capture of Fort Frontenac in 1758 and Fort Niagara in 1759, and the fall of Montreal in 1760.⁹ Of course there were important political and economic rationales guiding warrior behaviour. Some felt a genuine loyalty toward the British; many others were motivated by a desire to rid the French from their territories. Assisting the British also guaranteed monetary rewards, clothing, and provisions. These factors aside, there remained strong cultural incentives for Iroquois men to enlist in British military campaigns. In a radically changing environment in which the Iroquois were daily losing political, economic, and social autonomy, engaging in battle – albeit the battle of others – provided Indian men with the opportunity to perform traditional and much cherished gender roles. Johnson skilfully played on these cultural needs.¹⁰

During his numerous conferences with the Six Nations, Johnson continued to incite their martial spirit. He appealed to their collective pride, urging them to “retrieve” their “pristine fame” so that “the very

⁸ *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, 15 vols., ed. E. B. O’Callaghan and John Brodhead (Albany: Weed, Parsons, and Company, 1853–87) [hereafter, *DRCHNY*], 6, 970–74.

⁹ Iroquois military involvement in the Seven Years’ War is documented throughout Hamilton, *Sir William Johnson*. See also Ian K. Steele *Betrayals: Fort William Henry and the Massacre* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), Ch. 2; Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years’ War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754–1766* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), Ch. 34.

¹⁰ Richard R. Johnson found similar cultural incentives behind Indian warrior involvement in New England’s King Philip’s War of 1675. Lending military assistance to English colonists “allowed young [Indian] men to earn their manhood in the traditional ways frowned upon by a surrounding white society.” “The Search for a Usable Indian: An Aspect of the Defense of Colonial New England,” *Journal of American History* [hereafter *JAH*], 64 (1977), 644.

name of the six nations ... will be a terror to their enemies!” On other occasions he employed gender metaphors to shame them out of neutrality and onto the battlefield. Thus at one meeting he told them that they were behaving “more like fearfull & silly women than brave and honest men.”¹¹ At the same time, Johnson remained acutely aware that the Iroquois were constantly assessing the “manly” performance of the British, and thus a show of strength was essential to maintain support. He repeatedly urged his superiors, “could we but give such a convincing [*sic*] proof of our Prowess” it would answer the needs of the Iroquois and “turn them with such destructive Rage upon the French.”¹²

The ability to successfully recruit warriors depended on an appreciation of their gendered cultural practices. Johnson understood that the Iroquois held very distinct attitudes regarding the ordering of relations between men. Reflective of their culture as a whole, which placed a high value on personal autonomy, Iroquois war parties were generally egalitarian in nature. Although some warriors enjoyed greater respect and leadership than others due to previous war exploits, no warrior held authority over another. Village sachems were also unable to exert coercive powers. It was up to individual warriors to decide whether or not to engage in a military venture. Despite complaints that the Iroquois were “a people under little, or no subordination,” Johnson skilfully took advantage of this cultural trait.¹³ The lack of rigid hierarchy enabled him to recruit warriors regardless of the sentiments of the larger community. The formally pledged neutrality of the Onondaga, Seneca and Cayuga nations during the Seven Years’ War, did not deter Johnson from enlisting many of their men. Johnson sent his deputies to appeal directly to warriors, instructing them to employ promises of military glory and material rewards to “spirit up the Indians” and “prepare the Warriors minds for War.”¹⁴

While the lack of hierarchy in Iroquois culture enabled Johnson to recruit warriors, it generated problems when attempting to incorporate them into the British war effort. The British army was an immensely hierarchical institution. The Commander in Chief enjoyed pre-eminent authority. Below him were a series of tiers delineating the various levels

¹¹ *An Account of Conferences held and treaties made between Sir William Johnson, Bart, and the Chief sachems and warriors of the ... Indian nations ... at Fort Johnson ... in the years 1755 and 1756* (London, 1756), 42; DRCHNY, 7, 235.

¹² *Ibid.*, 7, 90.

¹³ Johnson to Jeffrey Amherst, 19 Jan. 1759, p. 74, Vol. 39, Amherst Papers in the War Office Papers, series 34 [hereafter in the form WO 34/39/74], Public Records Office, Kew, London.

¹⁴ *The Papers of Sir William Johnson*, 14 vols., ed. James Sullivan et al. (Albany, 1921–65) [hereafter *WJP*], 9, 635, 583.

of leadership. At the bottom of the hierarchy were the regular soldiers. As part of their “manly” conduct, British and provincial troops were expected to be deferential, disciplined, and orderly.¹⁵ The Iroquois did not express their masculinity through the creation of hierarchical structures. Subordination was not considered by them to be “manly” behaviour. Rather, independence and autonomy were central to warrior manhood. As Johnson explained to his superior at the beginning of the War: “To establish the Indians into Companys of 100 Men each with Capts. Lieuts. & Ensigns, is impossible that sort of regularity cannot be obtained amongst those People.”¹⁶ Thus Johnson was obliged to utilize Indian warriors as separate auxiliaries, granting them a high degree of freedom to travel and scout independently of British and provincial armies.

Johnson allowed warriors to participate in the war according to their own gendered practices in other ways as well. He encouraged officers to permit warriors to perform traditional rituals such as the war dance. This was an important custom designed to arouse martial fervour. The historian and New York colonial administrator, Cadwallader Colden, was deeply impressed when he witnessed this ceremony. He described how each warrior, “sings [of] the great Acts he has himself performed, and the Deeds of his Ancestors; and this is always accompanied with a Kind of a Dance, or rather Action, representing the Manner in which they were performed.” Through this ceremony of male bravado, “they work up their Spirits to a high Degree of warlike Enthusiasm.”¹⁷ The custom of taking home captives was also permitted on occasion by Johnson who understood that such war trophies provided an important means for warriors to acquire status.¹⁸ Johnson in fact took advantage of this practice. To persuade warriors to assist the British cause, he frequently requested them to go on the warpath for the specified purpose of obtaining captives and scalps to replace recently deceased kin and friends.¹⁹

As Johnson maximised the role of the Indian warrior to serve the interests of the Crown, facets of this traditional cultural construct became circumscribed. Iroquois warriors found themselves less able to engage in

¹⁵ This was the ideal and by no means the reality. As General Major of a number of campaigns, William Johnson frequently complained of the disorderly behaviour of troops. See, for example, his letter to John De Lancey, 4 Sept. 1755, *ibid.*, 2, 6–9.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1, 615.

¹⁷ Cadwallader Colden, *The History of the Five Indian Nations of Canada which are dependent on the Province of New York, and are a barrier between the English and the French in that Part of the World*, 2 vols. [1747] (New York: AMS Press, 1973), 1, xxiii.

¹⁸ *An Account of Conferences Held*, 25.

¹⁹ *WJP*, 9, 726, 767, 780, 787.

warfare according to their own cultural preferences. Not only were their methods of conducting war modified, but, more significantly, their behaviour as men in the arena of warfare faced new constraints.²⁰ While it is important not to overstate the degree of change experienced, it is worth suggesting some of the subtle ways warrior masculinity was conditioned.

The role of the Indian warrior was traditionally grounded in a complex nexus of social and religious meaning and ritual. Extensive engagement in European warfare eroded these cultural moorings. Before embarking on a military expedition, warriors typically performed a series of rituals including war feasts, dances, songs, and the ceremonial sacrifice of dogs.²¹ Once they joined the British war effort, however, warriors no longer controlled their own military agenda. Having to be ready to march when instructed by Johnson or commanding officers meant that there was often little time or opportunity to perform traditional rites. In 1758, the Mohawks complained to Johnson of his impatience to march, noting “it was very contrary to our established Custom & manners to be as it were thus drove out to War.” Johnson also exerted great pressure on them not to leave immediately after battle, despite their practice of mourning. To help assuage grief it was customary among the Iroquois, after warfare, to perform an elaborate condolence ceremony in which they ritualistically mourned for their losses.²²

Central to warrior culture was a concern over purification. Before

²⁰ A number of studies have examined the cultural exchange of Indian and European tactics of war. None have yet situated this examination within a discussion about gender. See, for example, Thomas S. Ablner, “Scalping, Torture, Cannibalism, and Rape: An Ethnohistorical Analysis of Conflicting Cultural Values in War,” *Anthropologica*, 34 (1992), 3–20; Calloway, *New World for All*, Ch. 5; Adam J. Hirsh, “The Collision of Military Cultures in Seventeenth Century New England,” *JAH*, 74: 4 (1988), 1187–212; Armstrong Starkey, *European and Native American Warfare, 1675–1895* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998); Peter Way, “The Cutting Edge of Culture: British Soldiers Encounter Native Americans in the French and Indian War,” in *Empire and Others: British Encounters with Indigenous Peoples, 1600–1850*, ed. Martin Daunton and Rick Halpern (London: UCL Press, 1998) 123–48.

²¹ On the cultural meaning attached to the dog sacrifice see Harold Blau, “The Iroquois White Dog Sacrifice: Its Evolution and Symbolism,” *Ethnohistory*, 11: 2 (1964), 97–119. Elizabeth Tooker documented that this war ritual “among the Mohawks and Oneidas, at least ... lapsed in the latter part of the 18th century,” but was revived in the early nineteenth century. “The Iroquois White Dog Sacrifice in the Latter Part of the Eighteenth Century,” *Ethnohistory*, 12: 2 (1965), 129–40, quote from p. 136.

²² *WJP*, 9, 937. Theda Perdue argues that Cherokee warriors who assisted the British army in the Southeast experienced a similar erosion of traditional war rituals. *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700–1835* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 90.

military engagements, warriors ingested purgatives to cleanse their bodies. Such purification rites soon lost sway. Instead of purification, contamination in the form of alcohol abuse became widespread among warriors. Its impact was highly destructive, triggering violent encounters between Indian warriors as well as with British and provincial soldiers.²³ As intoxication rendered warriors less able to perform effectively or to perform at all, the manly prestige and glory once attached to this role diminished. Other aspects of warrior social behaviour also changed. Traditionally, concerns over purification had extended to sexual abstinence. On the warpath, warriors not only avoided contact with their wives but also refrained from sexually abusing female captives. It was feared that, through contact with women, female life-giving energy would pollute and weaken the life-taking energy of warriors.²⁴ Perhaps through the influence of alcohol or through extended contact with white soldiers, the sexual mores of warriors loosened. Johnson's deputy and nephew, Guy Johnson, recalled how in the early 1760s, Iroquois chiefs complained about "the Degeneracy of their Warriors, who then pursued [sexual] Intrigues."²⁵ In a memoir about the Iroquois which first appeared in 1768, a French officer also noted this change in behaviour. While he observed that there were many men who, "wishing to be warriors," refrained "from sexual activity or indulg[ed] in it only in moderation," he added: "Not all the young men think [like] thus." He noted the existence of "libertines unconcerned by military glory who, through their dissolute behavior, seem to constitute a class apart."²⁶

Indian warriors found that they were increasingly prohibited from performing traditional war customs such as scalping and ritualized torture. Johnson and many British officers sought to curtail what they considered to be excesses of the warrior ethic. In the aftermath of the Battle of Lake George, Johnson "with great Difficulty" managed to prevent the Indians from scalping and killing the captured French general.²⁷ Officers attempted to satisfy the Indian desire for captives and scalps by offering them material rewards instead. In the assault on Fort

²³ Complaints about the disruptive behaviour of drunken warriors are numerous. James Abercromby to Johnson, 19 Sept. 1758, WO 34/38/48; *Idem to idem*, 26 Sept. 1759, WO 34/38/49; Johnson to Abercromby, 22 Sept. 1758, WO 34/39/56; *Idem to idem*, 30 Sept. 1758, WO 34/39/57; *DRCHNY*, 7, 228–29; *WJP*, 9, 448.

²⁴ Indian warrior attitudes to rape are examined in Abler, "Scalping, Torture, Cannibalism, and Rape," 13–15.

²⁵ "Guy Johnson's Opinions on the American Indians," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Bibliography*, 77 (1953), 317.

²⁶ Michael Cardy, "The Iroquois in the Eighteenth Century: A Neglected Source," *Man in the Northeast*, 38 (1989), 10.

²⁷ *WJP*, 2, 174.

Frontenac in 1758, Colonel Bradstreet prevented his Indian allies from molesting prisoners by turning their attention to the plunder. “The search for valuable goods, became then their entire pursuit.”²⁸

The shift in attention from captives, to material plunder is significant because it reveals how once dominant cultural and religious motives for warfare became overshadowed by economic concerns. This was part of a trend established in the late seventeenth century. In this earlier period, the Iroquois waged war against Indian neighbours in order to rob them of much needed pelts and to secure access to hunting grounds. Animal furs were vital if the Iroquois were to be able to obtain European trade goods.²⁹ Engagement in imperial warfare during the mid-eighteenth century took this economic concern to a new level. During the Seven Years’ War, the payment of wages and commissions to Indians became a widespread phenomenon. Iroquois men hired out their labour to others as soldiers, spies, carriers, messengers, and scouts for cash rewards. In their home villages, the criteria for measuring their manly performance began to alter. Personal prestige was gained not just by the number of captives and scalps brought back, but by the size of financial earnings. In this respect, Iroquois men took on certain facets of European definitions of manhood in so much as their performance as men was increasingly evaluated on the basis of economic status.³⁰

III

As the role of Indian warriors faced new strains, so too did village matrons. During his lengthy relations with the Iroquois, Johnson frequently encountered the reality of female political power. The matrilineal-based nature of Iroquois society granted women a range of political roles and responsibilities unheard of for European women of the same era.³¹ Although politics was primarily a male domain, female heads

²⁸ *An Impartial Account of Lt. Col. Bradstreet's Expedition to Fort Frontenac, 1758* (Toronto, 1940) 21–22.

²⁹ In addition to economic imperatives, Richter persuasively demonstrates that seventeenth-century intertribal warfare was also motivated by cultural concerns, namely to replenish tribal numbers and spiritual power. See *Ordeal of the Longhouse*, Chs. 2 and 3.

³⁰ Johnson’s formal accounts document substantial cash payments made to Indians for services rendered during the war. *WJP*, 2, 566–645; 3, 149–81; 9, 644–54. See also Way, “The Cutting Edge,” 136–38. On the emergence of economic inequality among the Mohawks during the eighteenth century see David B. Guldenzopf, “The Colonial Transformation of Mohawk Iroquois Society” (Ph.D. dissertation, State University of New York at Albany, 1987).

³¹ Recent studies on the traditional political role of Iroquois women include Gretchen

of household were nonetheless responsible for selecting hereditary chiefs, and participated in decisions regarding the activities of warriors and fate of captives. Their role as farmers granted them particular influence over warriors from their lineage. Their production and control of crops not only enhanced their social status, but meant that by choosing to withhold provisions they could, in effect, deter warriors from embarking on military expeditions. Alternatively, when faced with the death of a relation, matrons could appeal to these warriors to ease their grief by obtaining prisoners and scalps.³² In keeping with their traditional role, Iroquois women continued to exercise political influence throughout the Seven Years' War. They participated in village councils, attended formal Anglo-Iroquois conferences, and accompanied male kin at war camps. They personally communicated with Johnson, expressing security concerns, acting as messengers, and providing intelligence. On at least one occasion, an Iroquois woman served as an interpreter.³³ If Johnson had any doubts concerning their political role, he was informed by one Mohawk sachem: "Brother our women are very dear to us & their requests and opinions are always regarded by us in an especial manner."³⁴

Throughout the war, Johnson received repeated requests from his superiors to consult "with the principle Sachems and leading men of the

Green, "Gender and the Longhouse: Iroquois Women in a Changing Culture," in *Women and Freedom in Early America*, ed. Larry D. Eldridge (New York University Press, 1997), 7–25; Joy Bilharz, "First Among Equals: The Changing Status of Seneca Women," in *Women and Power in Native North America*, ed. Laura F. Klein and Lillian A. Ackerman (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 101–12; Nancy Bonvillian, "Iroquois Women," in *Studies on Iroquoian Culture*, ed. *idem.* (Man in the Northeast Occasional Publications in Northeastern Anthropology, 1980), 47–58. It is important not to overstate the extent of female political power as Elizabeth Tooker intelligently argued in "Women in Iroquois Society," in *Extending the Rafters: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Iroquoian Studies*, ed. Michael Foster et al. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 109–23.

³² Judith K. Brown examined the economic basis of female political power and social status in, "Iroquois Women: An Ethnohistoric Note," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 235–51.

³³ Evidence of the political involvement of Iroquois women during the Seven Years' War is scattered but ample. On female participation in village councils see *WJP*, 1, 453; *DRCHNY*, 7, 103. On female attendance at conferences and informal meetings with Johnson see *WJP*, 1, 663; 9, 626, 943, 946, 781; 10, 65; *DRCHNY*, 6, 966. On female presence at war camps see Samuel Blodget, *A Prospective Plan of the Battle Near Lake George ...* (Boston, 1755), 3. On female grievances and concerns expressed to Johnson see *WJP*, 1, 276; 9, 927; 13, 112; *DRCHNY*, 7, 116. For female messengers and suppliers of intelligence see *WJP*, 2, 687, 688; 3, 25; 9, 533, 610–11, 638, 675; 10, 57, 61. For female influence over warriors see *WJP*, 1, 738; 2, 80; 9, 950, 958. For female interpreters see *WJP*, 9, 634.

³⁴ *DRCHNY*, 7, 116.

six Nations.”³⁵ Johnson, however, recognized the inadequacy of this approach. Although he was personally uncomfortable with the political participation of women, he was unable to dictate the terms of diplomatic protocol. To legitimize his political actions among the Iroquois, he needed to win the approval of matrons. Consequently, Johnson set about to harness their influence. He engaged in the politics of the middle ground in a way that furthered his own interests. Gift-giving was a key strategy for winning loyalty and gaining influence.³⁶ Just prior to the Battle of Lake George, Johnson issued “Some Hints For A Commanding Officer,” which included: “when you make presents to the Indians let them be such as will be most acceptable to their Wives and Mistresses.” Johnson took special care in supplying appropriate gifts for women which included functional items such as tools and clothing but also more decorative articles such as jewelry, mirrors, and delicately patterned handkerchiefs. Johnson’s account books reveal that he also made frequent cash gifts: “To a squaw to buy Leather for Mockasens ... To a Mohawk Widdow for her sons gun who died lately ... Cash to several squaws.” In distributing these gifts, Johnson targeted the wives of influential sachems and women whose male kin joined him on military campaigns.³⁷

Perhaps most evident of Johnson’s desire to utilize the social standing of Iroquois women was his own marriage to a Mohawk woman, Molly Brant. Although evidence suggests that this was a genuine love marriage, Johnson could not but be aware of the political and social advantages he stood to gain from such a partnership.³⁸ His marriage to Brant gained him direct access into Mohawk kinship networks. Through such networks, he

³⁵ *WJP*, 9, 321.

³⁶ Wilbur Jacobs discusses Johnson’s use of gift-giving among women in *Wilderness Politics and Indian Gifts: The North Colonial Frontier, 1748–1763* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 46–47. See also Shannon, “Dressing for Success on the Mohawk Frontier,” 36–41.

³⁷ “Hints for a Commanding Officer,” *WJP*, 1, 539. For the range of gifts given by Johnson see *ibid.*, 1, 384–5; 9, 650, 651, 657. For Johnson’s strategic method of distribution see *ibid.*, 9, 589, 627, 655.

³⁸ This relationship has been well documented. For most recent works see Thomas Earle, *The Three Faces of Molly Brant: A Biography* (Kingston, Ont.: Quarry Press, 1996); Lois M. Feister and Bonnie Pulis, “Molly Brant: Her Domestic and Political Roles in Eighteenth-Century New York,” in *Northeastern Lives, 1632–1816*, ed. Robert S. Grumet (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 295–320; Gretchen Green, “Molly Brant, Catherine Brant, and their Daughters: A Study in Colonial Acculturation,” *Ontario History* [hereafter *OH*], 81: 3 (1989), 235–50; Jean Johnston, “Molly Brant: a Mohawk Matron,” *OH*, 56: 2 (1964). Michael Mullin examines the social and political advantages Johnson had to gain through this partnership in “Personal Politics: William Johnson and the Mohawks,” *American Indian Quarterly*, 17 (1993), 350–58.

could make important alliances and exert influence. It did not hurt that Molly's stepfather was an important Mohawk sachem, Brant Canagaraduncka. Whenever Johnson visited the Mohawk village of Canajoharie, he always stayed in Canagaraduncka's home. In addition to her stepfather, Molly's brother, Joseph Brant would also emerge as an important Indian leader. Johnson was quick to recognize the potential power of Joseph, once commenting that he would be useful because of his "connection and residence."³⁹

The status and authority Iroquois culture conferred to women rendered Molly Brant a useful partner, regardless of family connections. Residing in Johnson Hall, William Johnson's manorial estate in the Mohawk Valley, Molly Brant played an important role as hostess and housekeeper. During the countless conferences and meetings between Johnson and the Iroquois, she was responsible for ensuring that Indian guests were fed, housed, and entertained. She also sought to exert her influence whenever she could. According to contemporaries, she proved a useful ally. One acquaintance remarked, she "has always been a faithful and useful friend in Indian affairs, while she resided in Johnston [*sic*] hall ... When treaties or purchases were about to be made ... she has often persuaded the obstinate chiefs into a compliance with the proposals for peace, or sale of lands." In a similar vein, another contemporary remarked: "she was of great use to Sir William in his Treaties with those people. He knew that women govern the politics of savages."⁴⁰

Johnson, however, pursued a two-pronged approach. All the while he sought to manipulate the political power of women, he also carried out measures designed to minimize their role in the Anglo-Iroquois alliance. Johnson sought to create an alliance of men by divorcing women from the political process and by undermining their influence in decisions over war. This was not always performed in a deliberate or conscious fashion. Johnson carried with him the cultural baggage of an eighteenth-century European male. In his world-view, women and politics did not mix.

One of the most serious challenges women faced was the erosion of their influence over warriors. Johnson was partially responsible for this. During the many military campaigns, Johnson appealed directly to warriors, thereby by-passing traditional sources of authority. Historians

³⁹ Feister and Pulis, "Molly Brant: Her Domestic and Political Roles," 299–301; *DRCHNY*, 7, 580.

⁴⁰ The author of the first quote is John Ogden a traveller in Canada. Quoted in Feister and Pulis, "Molly Brant: Her Domestic and Political Roles," 302. Tenth Tilgman Papers, 1775–1786, p. 9, Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Washington D.C.

have made much about how civil chief's authority was undermined, while that of warriors enhanced. The same held true for village matrons. Johnson sent his Indian officers to appeal directly to warriors, advising them that "the best way to engage Indians, is to Secure in yr. Interest ye. head Warriours who can bring their party along with them."⁴¹ Armed with money, gifts, and wampum belts these officers traveled throughout Indian country personally soliciting the military support of individual warriors.

Johnson perhaps felt justified in engaging in such a policy because he recognized the diminishing power of Iroquois women. Economic conditions in Iroquois villages had already disrupted relations between women and warriors. The destructive impact of warfare generated havoc in the agricultural economy, rendering women less able to produce enough crops to sustain their villages.⁴² Loss of economic status undermined women's political and social standing. Their traditional means of exercising influence over warriors by bestowing or withholding provisions diminished. Johnson stepped in to fill their place. Throughout the Seven Years' War, he provided countless warriors with arms, clothing, and most significantly, food.⁴³ By performing this duty he was in effect supplanting women in their traditional role.

Women's other traditional political roles were also encroached upon. Johnson gained increasing influence in the nomination of "pine chiefs," that is chiefs that held non-hereditary offices. Through the patronage they enjoyed from Johnson, they posed a direct challenge to the power and position of hereditary chiefs traditionally selected by women. There is also evidence that Johnson was involved in the appointment process of hereditary chiefs. Johnson was often requested by allied Indians to approve the selection of new hereditary chiefs and "invest" them "with all the powers of a sachem." Thus, although matrons probably continued to perform their role in chief selection, Johnson enjoyed increasing power in rejecting or accepting their decisions. In addition, on at least one occasion he performed their traditional religious role in the installation ceremony, by presenting the names of the newly appointed sachems.⁴⁴

⁴¹ *WJP*, 1, 536.

⁴² By the late 1760s, Johnson reported widespread impoverishment among the Iroquois, many of whom relied on provisions from British forts. Johnson to John Stanwix, 16 Dec. 1758, WO/34/39/139; *Idem* to Jeffrey Amherst, 24 Mar. 1760, WO/34/39/125; *Idem* to *idem*, 26 May 1760, WO/34/39/139. On Johnson directly provisioning Mohawk women and children see *WJP*, 9, 798–99, 802–03.

⁴³ See, for example, *ibid.*, 9, 626, 780–82, 792, 794.

⁴⁴ *An Account of Conferences Held*, 60; Mullin, "Personal Politics," 353.

Uncomfortable with the political involvement of women, Johnson sought to restrict their presence at conferences. In December 1750 he wrote to George Clinton, Governor of New York, regarding a spring conference with the Six Nations: “I would not advise yr. Excellency to call any more Indians, than the Sachims & Head Warriours of every Nation for Calling the rest is only expensive, and troublesome & not the least Service [for] thy have nothing to Say.”⁴⁵ Johnson considered the presence of women to be an additional and unnecessary expense. Perhaps at this early point in his career, he did not fully appreciate their political importance. But, throughout his career, he persisted in requesting to speak with and addressing only male chiefs and warriors. Although women continued to attend conferences, they were rarely formally addressed.

As Iroquois men continued to involve women in matters of war and politics, Johnson continued in his efforts to create a diplomatic alliance of men only. In 1762, at the outset of a conference with the Six Nations, he sent a message among the villages requesting women not to attend. The women complied but sent a message via an Oneida sachem of their disappointment at being excluded. So as to remind Johnson of the political value attached to women, the male speaker informed Johnson: “it was always the Custom for them to be present on Such Occasions (being of Much Estimation Amongst Us, in that we proceed from them, & they provide our Warriors with Provisions when they go abroad).” Johnson’s reply reveals his true opinion about women and politics:

When I Called you to this Meeting I really could not Discover any Necessity there was for the presence of Women & Children, and therefore I Called none but those who were Qualified for, and Authorized to proceed on business; And altho’ I am Obligated to your Women for their Zeal & Desire to promote a good work, And know it is their Custom to Come down on Such Occasions, I could heartily wish that no more persons would Attend any meeting than were necessary for the Discharge of the business on Which they were Summoned.⁴⁶

What is curious about this statement, is that only six years earlier Johnson had acknowledged the political importance of Iroquois women when he told some Seneca Indians: “I am sensible your Women are of no small consequence in relation to public affairs and I shall be always disposed to consult & inform them of our public Business.”⁴⁷ It is important to account for this change in attitude, or at least in Johnson’s willingness to reveal his true sentiments. The timing of this conference in 1762 is significant. By this date, as Johnson recognized, the political clout of

⁴⁵ *WJP*, 1, 315.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 3, 707–08, 711–12.

⁴⁷ *DRCHNY*, 7, 103.

women was waning, especially in relation to their influence over warriors. Also, and perhaps more importantly, by 1762 the political landscape of North America had been transformed. With the defeat of New France, the Iroquois had lost enormous political leverage. The balance of power between the British and Iroquois shifted as the latter group found that they were no longer able to play off imperial rivalries to their advantage. In this new political climate British officials like Johnson were better able to set the terms for intercultural diplomatic protocol. Under pressure from his superior, Jeffrey Amherst, to economize on Indian expenses and possessing a personal dislike for women in politics, Johnson's actions can be understood.

IV

During the Iroquois–William Johnson alliance, a high degree of cultural synthesis occurred. To secure the friendship of the Six Nations, Johnson was obliged to allow their gendered practices and values to shape martial and diplomatic exchanges. Johnson, however, took this process of accommodation one step further by actually manipulating the Iroquois gender system in ways to serve imperial needs. Ultimately, cultural mingling did not always entail positive consequences for the Iroquois, as they found themselves less able to structure gender roles and relations according to their own cultural preferences. This pattern of interaction became even more pronounced in the period following the Seven Years' War when missionaries, reformers, and Quakers exerted even greater influence to reorder Iroquois cultural mores in accordance to European norms.⁴⁸ Iroquois men and women demonstrated a high degree of resistance. They also demonstrated an ability and willingness to modify traditional practices in order to cope with new conditions. While this is indicative of their strength and resourcefulness, it also points to the fact that during this period their dominant experience was one of a loss of power and cultural autonomy.

⁴⁸ No one has yet fully studied the intent and impact of protestant missionaries on the Iroquois gender system prior to the Revolutionary War. For an article that deals with this topic indirectly see John C. Guzzardo, "Superintendent and the Ministers: The Battle for Oneida Allegiance, 1761–75," *NYH*, 57 (1976), 255–83. For the impact of Quakers and reformers on Iroquois gender roles in the new American nation see Diana Rothenberg, "The Mothers of the Nation: Seneca Resistance to Quaker Intervention," in *Women and Colonization: Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Mona Etienne and Eleanor Leacock (New York: Praeger, 1980), 63–87 and Joan M. Jensen, "Native American Women and Agriculture: A Seneca Case Study," *Sex Roles*, 3 (1977), 432–41.