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The World that Made William Johnson

Timothy J. Shannon
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

Readers of the *Atlantic Monthly* may have been taken aback when they received their December 2006 issue of that venerable journal of American arts and letters. In a pitch more appropriate to *People* or some other celebrity magazine, the *Atlantic* offered a list of "The 100 Most Influential Americans of All Time," and right there on the cover, posing as eye-candy for the intelligentsia was none other than #1 himself, Abraham Lincoln, the sexiest most dead American alive, or something like that. Had the high brow finally gone low brow? Had pop culture's fascination with list-making found a new frontier? What sort of cross promotion on the History Channel or (God forbid) the E! Network would we be seeing next- "America's Top Ten Recessions" or "The 100 Biggest Presidential Fashion Disasters"?

Fortunately, none of that has come to pass (at least not yet), but for those of us in the history business, the list did make for some interesting reading. As one might expect, the Founding Fathers were well-represented in the top ten: George Washington (#2), Thomas Jefferson (#3), Alexander Hamilton (#5), and Benjamin Franklin (#6) were all there, as was a dark horse candidate, the Federalist judge John Marshall (#7). But the farther along I read, the more disappointed I became. Where were all the great colonial Americans? Who was there to represent the era between Columbus and the Founding Fathers, almost two centuries' worth of American history? Some of the figures in the top ten were born in the colonial era, but they were obviously on the list because of their accomplishments in the Revolutionary and Early National periods. One had to read practically to the end of the list before coming to a figure whose claim to fame was undeniably anchored in the colonial experience: Jonathan Edwards at #90, sandwiched between two other names- Walter Lippman and Lyman Beecher- likely to elicit a yawn or shrug from today's John Q. Public. This indignity is compounded by the fact that the panel of experts who compiled the list included Gordon S. Wood and Joyce Appleby, two doyens of early American historians. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

American history, historical figures, Atlantic Monthly, founding fathers, Colonial Era

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The World That Made William Johnson

Timothy J. Shannon, Professor of History, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. This paper was presented at the 2007 Western Frontier Symposium, and revised for *New York History* in September 2008.

Readers of the *Atlantic Monthly* may have been taken aback when they received their December 2006 issue of that venerable journal of American arts and letters. In a pitch more appropriate to *People* or some other celebrity magazine, the *Atlantic* offered a list of “The 100 Most Influential Americans of All Time,” and right there on the cover, posing as eye-candy for the intelligentsia was none other than #1 himself, Abraham Lincoln, the sexiest most dead American alive, or something like that.¹ Had the high brow finally gone low brow? Had pop culture’s fascination with list-making found a new frontier? What sort of cross promotion on the History Channel or (God forbid) the E! Network would we be seeing next—“America’s Top Ten Recessions” or “The 100 Biggest Presidential Fashion Disasters”?

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1. Ross Douhat, “They Made America,” *Atlantic Monthly* (December 2006): 59–78.

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What accounts for this unwillingness, even among scholars, to reach back into our colonial past for examples of the people who have shaped our present? Is the colonial period really so remote and irretrievable that we cannot find among its cast of characters people we admire, respect, and wish to emulate? Are we too embarrassed by the values and ideas expressed by the likes of Anne Hutchinson, Captain John Smith, or Cotton Mather to embrace them, or are we unwilling to bestow the status of "American" on figures who lived too early to have had the chance to wrap themselves in the Stars and Stripes? Worse still, have we as a people relegated the colonial era to the irrelevancy of folklore, reducing it to a pageant of cardboard figures to be trotted out for Thanksgiving Day but otherwise ignored?

As the perceptive reader may have guessed by now, this is a round-about way of posing a more pointed question: why wasn't William Johnson included on this list? We are all entitled to our favorites, but one does not have to be a dues-paying member of the William Johnson Fan Club to wonder why this list lacks not only Johnson but also the sorts of people we would associate with him: the colonists and Indians who collided on the early American frontier. Not only are there no pre-Revolutionary Americans save Jonathan Edwards on the list; neither does it include a single Native American. The frontier is woefully underrepresented. Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett find no place on the list, and the only honorees associated with the nineteenth-century West are also the only ones forced to share a spot: Lewis and Clark (#70). The only name on the list that might call to mind William Johnson, the world he lived in, and his place in American history is James Fenimore Cooper (#83), who is described by the editors as "the great mythologizer of the frontier." So there we have it: given the choice between the reality of the frontier or its mythology, the *Atlantic* took the famous advice dispatched

by a newspaper editor in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and printed the legend.²

And that is how Johnson has been treated, even among those historians, writers, and readers who have studied him the most. He is our larger-than-life legend of the early American frontier: Johnson the Mohawk baronet, or Johnson the Irish chieftain, or Johnson the cultural cross-dresser.³ His biographers have always treated him as a singular character, a hero who followed a unique trajectory to fame and fortune in the colonial world. Such narratives make for good reading, but not always good history, because they remove Johnson from the context of his time. They emphasize how Johnson made his own world by bucking the racist attitudes of his day and forging his own hybrid identity and intercultural fiefdom on the American frontier.

In this essay, I want to offer a different perspective on Johnson. Instead of looking at the world he made, let us examine the world that made him. What were the circumstances of time and place that made possible his rise to wealth and power in colonial America? My purpose is not to deny Johnson his greatness, but to illuminate its foundations, to restore some of the historical basis to the legend that has grown up around him. In doing so, we can recover that colonial world that the *Atlantic's* Top 100 list seems to have forgotten and better appreciate Johnson's place within it.

JOHNSON'S MOHAWK VALLEY

In trying to fathom the reasons behind Johnson's success in colonial America, it is best to start in situ, in the Mohawk Valley as he found it when he arrived in North America in 1738. Although it is tempting to imagine Johnson as a hardy immigrant pioneer facing an untamed wilderness, it was in fact his good fortune to land in the middle of a bustling commercial economy already linked to larger regional and international

2. *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (film directed by John Ford, 1962).

3. See, respectively, James Thomas Flexner, *Mohawk Baronet: A Biography of Sir William Johnson* (1959; Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1979); Fintan O'Toole, *White Savage: William Johnson and the Invention of America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005); and Timothy J. Shannon, "Dressing for Success on the Mohawk Frontier: Hendrick, William Johnson, and the Indian Fashion," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d series, 53 (January 1996): 13–42.

markets. Rather than having to wrestle his living from the land with his bare hands, he quickly tapped into opportunities that would have been unavailable a generation earlier.

In 1738 the Mohawk Valley was a patchwork of native and colonial communities, each tied in one manner or another to the larger colonial world. Albany anchored the region's economy at the valley's eastern end. This still predominantly Dutch community had its roots in the seventeenth-century fur trade, but by the time of Johnson's arrival in America, its merchants were well underway in diversifying into other types of commercial development, including naval stores, agricultural products, and lumber. Upstream from the smaller Dutch farming town of Schenectady, Fort Hunter and the lower Mohawk town of Tiononderoge existed in an uneasy symbiosis at the mouth of the Schoharie Creek, the influence of the fort's soldiers, traders, and missionaries evident in the acculturation of their Indian neighbors, some of whom worshipped in the Anglican faith, lived in framed houses, kept livestock, and fenced their fields. Moving westward from the Schoharie, a traveler encountered Stone Arabia and Burnettsfield, two German-speaking farming communities founded by the "poor Palatines" who migrated to New York in 1709. Their inhabitants enjoyed a modest prosperity augmented by exporting their surplus wheat, peas, and pork to Albany and points beyond by way of the Mohawk and Hudson Rivers. The upper Mohawk town of Canajoharie generally enjoyed good relations with these German neighbors, although its inhabitants were not nearly as acculturated to European ways of life as their cousins in Tiononderoge. West of the Mohawk Valley but figuring prominently in its economy and security was Oswego, the British fort on the southeastern shore of Lake Ontario. Merchants supplied the fur trade at Oswego out of Albany, and the traffic between these two locations promoted a steady movement of people—Indians and fur traders, laborers and soldiers—through the Mohawk Valley.⁴

4. For contemporary accounts of the social and economic profile of the Mohawk Valley in the mid-eighteenth century, see William Smith, *The History of the Province of New-York*, ed. Michael Kammen, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), 1:212–15, and Thomas Pownall, *A Topographical Description of the Dominions of the United States of America*, ed. Lois Mulkearn (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1949), 33–38. For different perspectives on its ethnic and racial composition, see David L. Preston, "George Klock, the Canajoharie Mohawks,

If Johnson had arrived in the Mohawk Valley a generation earlier, say in 1720, he would have encountered a much different place, one with far fewer colonial inhabitants and not nearly as many outlets for his entrepreneurial ambitions. Before the construction of Oswego during the 1720s, it would have been difficult for Johnson to break the grip of the Albany merchants on New York's fur trade. In 1720 the German Palatine families would not as of yet have begun developing the commercial potential of Mohawk Valley land, and thus making possible the profits Johnson sought as a speculator and landlord during the middle decades of the century. A generation before Johnson, the Mohawk Valley was still dominated by the fur trade's intercultural barter economy. It was Indian country where the European presence was transient and insecure. In contrast, when Johnson arrived in 1738, the fur trade had given way to a more developed and diversified economy, one in which regional and international markets in a variety of goods, including land, had overshadowed exchange between natives and colonists.⁵

The Mohawk Valley was just one of several backcountry frontiers making this transition in the mid-eighteenth century. In Pennsylvania, the western migration of Indians dispossessed in the Delaware and lower Susquehanna valleys opened those regions to settlers and speculators during the 1730s and 1740s. Farther south, in the Shenandoah Valley and Carolina backcountry, colonists asserted possession of the land by planting towns, organizing county governments and courts, and turning Indian paths into wagon roads. Economic development in the Mohawk Valley had a jump on these other regions because of the foundations laid by Albany and Schenectady in the seventeenth century and the security

and the Good Ship *Sir William Johnson*," *New York History* 86 (Fall 2005):473–99; Philip Otterness, *Becoming German: The 1709 Palatine Migration to New York* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004); and William B. Hart, "Black 'Go-Betweens' and the Mutability of 'Race,' Status, and Identity on New York's Pre-Revolutionary Frontier," in Andrew R. L. Cayton and Fredrika J. Teute, eds., *Contact Points: American Frontiers from the Mohawk Valley to the Mississippi, 1750–1830*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 88–113. For a contemporary description of the valley's Native American communities, see *The Journals of Christian Daniel Claus and Conrad Weiser: A Journey to Onondaga, 1750*, translated and edited by Helga Doblin and William A. Starna (Philadelphia, Pa.: American Philosophical Society, 1994).

5. On the changing nature of the Mohawk Valley economy before Johnson's arrival, see Thomas Burke, Jr., *Mohawk Frontier: The Dutch Community of Schenectady, New York, 1661–1710* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), and David A. Armour, *The Merchants of Albany, New York, 1686–1760* (New York: Gariand Publishing, 1986).

provided by the British soldiers at Fort Hunter and Oswego. Had Johnson emigrated from Ireland to the Carolina, Virginia, or Pennsylvania frontier instead of the Mohawk Valley, the trajectory of his American career would have been much different. As the experience of speculators and landlords in those regions indicates, he would have had much greater difficulty attracting tenants to his estates and keeping them there. New York's manorial land system, another inheritance from its Dutch origins, made tenancy a common and acceptable form of land tenure there, whereas in other colonies, frontier settlers were loath to pay rent or recognize the land claims of great proprietors.⁶

In those other backcountry regions, Johnson would also have faced more volatile Indian relations. The Covenant Chain alliance between the Iroquois confederacy and New York had brought stability and security to that colony's frontier since the English conquest of New Netherland. As Johnson quickly learned, the Covenant Chain did not guarantee a perpetual peace between Indians and colonists, but it did provide an important diplomatic infrastructure for confronting and resolving differences before they led to war. During the first half of the eighteenth century, the Covenant Chain gradually extended to include Pennsylvania, Virginia, and the Carolinas, but the farther it stretched from its base in New York, the less effective it became in keeping the peace.⁷ During the decade between 1754 and 1764, the backcountry regions of those mid-Atlantic colonies endured the devastating intercultural violence of the Seven Years' War and Pontiac's War. By comparison, Johnson, his tenants, and their property enjoyed relative security during these turbulent years on the Mohawk frontier.

When he came to America, Johnson did not arrive in the primordial American wilderness idealized in the novels of James Fenimore Co-

6. Here it is useful to compare the experiences of other landlords and proprietors on mid-eighteenth century frontiers. For Virginia, see Warren R. Hofstra, *The Planting of New Virginia: Settlement and Landscape in the Shenandoah Valley* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); for the Carolina backcountry, see Marjoleine Kars, *Breaking Loose Together: The Regulator Rebellion in Pre-Revolutionary North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); and for Pennsylvania, see Jane T. Merritt, *At the Crossroads: Indians and Empires on a Mid-Atlantic Frontier* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

7. On the origins and operations of the Covenant Chain alliance, see Francis Jennings, *The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire: The Covenant Chain Confederation of Indian Tribes with the English Colonies from its Beginnings to the Lancaster Treaty of 1744* (New York: Norton, 1984).

per. Nor was his frontier the zone of cultural regression and degeneracy famously described by J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur in *Letters from an American Farmer*, where fur-traders and hunters shed the habits of civilization until they became indistinguishable from the land's native inhabitants.⁸ On the contrary, the Mohawk Valley provided Johnson with the right place to take full advantage of the financial and social capital he brought with him to America. It was a place where a rudimentary barter economy was already giving way to reliable markets in land and goods, where an infrastructure was already in place for long-distance trade, and where the colonial population enjoyed enough security to amass and retain wealth in an orderly way. Johnson seized these opportunities, perhaps better than any of his contemporaries, but he would not have enjoyed the same constellation of circumstances had he ended up somewhere else on the American frontier.

JOHNSON'S POLITICS AND PATRONAGE

Johnson also arrived in the Mohawk Valley at a time when its inhabitants were poised to play a central role in Britain's imperial ambitions in North America. The long Anglo-French peace in North America that followed the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 had turned the attention of imperial policymakers and colonial officials away from the Mohawk Valley, but that region became strategically significant again when France and Britain renewed their warfare in 1744. In the three decades that followed, Johnson found himself at the center of a storm of competing interests and alliances. Should he favor the pragmatic neutrality of the Albany Dutch or the imperial designs of the court party in New York's politics? How should he respond to the divided Anglo-French sympathies among his Iroquois neighbors? And what should he make of the efforts of other colonial governments, particularly those in Pennsylvania and Massachusetts, to wrestle control of the Covenant Chain alliance out of the New Yorkers' hands? Johnson, as the old Chinese saying goes, was cursed to live in interesting times, but he turned that curse into a

8. J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer and Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America*, ed. Albert Stone (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 76–79.

blessing by choosing wisely the political allies and patrons necessary to advance his career and fortune.

King George's War (1744–48) renewed tensions among New York's political elite that had been simmering since the resolution of the Zenger crisis a decade earlier. The court party, led by Governor George Clinton, saw the war as an opportunity to strengthen the governor's prerogative powers at the expense of the legislature and to assert Britain's claim to the Great Lakes frontier. The country party, led by James DeLancey, distrusted the governor's ambitions and favored the neutral position Albany had staked out with Canada at the start of the century.⁹ Clinton was neither a popular nor especially powerful governor, but Johnson decided early on to side with him, attending Albany treaty conferences as his agent to the Iroquois and accepting from him a militia commission and appointment to the governor's council. As those appointments suggest, Johnson was an ambitious fellow who figured that New York's governor, even an unpopular one, held the keys to political advancement within the colony.

Johnson faced a similar choice during the intercolonial treaty conferences that convened in Albany between 1744 and 1754. At these meetings, Clinton was not the only one soliciting Johnson's aid in negotiating with the Iroquois. Delegates from Massachusetts and Connecticut wanted to break Albany's hold on the Covenant Chain and convince the Six Nations to take up the hatchet against French-allied Indians along the New England-Canadian border. The Pennsylvania delegations at these meetings were usually split internally between Quakers reluctant to push anyone toward war and agents of the Penn family more interested in conducting land purchases than any other business.¹⁰ Each of these treaty conferences presented Johnson with a minefield of contending interests, but also with a chance to manipulate those interests to his own ends.

The pattern evident in his choices affirms that his guiding principle was to advance his own ambitions without surrendering his ability to act autonomously. He had little use for the Pennsylvania Quakers' pacifism

or insularity, and he recognized in their Indian diplomacy a rival to his own. Nor was he much enamored of the New Englanders who, if they succeeded in their designs, would have drawn the Iroquois away from New York's frontier to defend their own. Cozying up to the Penn family held much more promise, for they possessed both the wealth and political connections to reward Johnson for his efforts. Thus it is not surprising that when solicited by both Connecticut's Susquehanna Land Company and the Penn family for assistance in buying land from the Iroquois at the Albany Congress in 1754, Johnson ignored the former and cast his lot with the latter.¹¹

Ultimately, the most significant and enduring alliance Johnson made in the ever-shifting politics of this period was the one he formed with the Mohawks of Canajoharie. It is tempting to ascribe to Johnson a preordained sympathy for the Mohawks, to find in his Irish background a synchronicity with the Indians' way of life that led him to "go native" once in America, to depict him as an eighteenth-century equivalent of Kevin Costner's Lieutenant John Dunbar in *Dances with Wolves*. Yet Johnson left very little evidence to suggest such motivations for his close ties to Canajoharie, and when viewed in the broader context of other alliances he made during the 1740s and 1750s, it is reasonable to conclude that cold political calculation was as much a part of this relationship as any natural affinity he may have felt for his Indian neighbors.

Like Governor Clinton or the Penn family, the Mohawks had tangible benefits to offer Johnson. Alliance with them helped protect his family and property from the sorts of Indian raids suffered by Schenectady in 1690 and Saratoga in 1745. The Mohawks' advocacy on his behalf at treaty conferences convinced Governor Clinton of Johnson's indispensability in New York's Indian affairs. They served as his recruits when he received his militia commission, as customers for his mercantile business, and as partners and co-conspirators when he wanted to confront his political enemies. In choosing to ally so closely with the Mohawks, Johnson risked alienating other Iroquois, especially those Onondagas and

9. See Patricia U. Bonomi, *A Faction People: Politics and Society in Colonial New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 140–78.

10. See Timothy J. Shannon, *Indians and Colonists at the Crossroads of Empire: The Albany Congress of 1754* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), 30–51.

11. For Johnson's decision to back the Penns, see Milton W. Hamilton et al., eds., *The Papers of Sir William Johnson*, 14 vols. (Albany: University of the State of New York, 1921–65), 1:397–401.

Oneidas inclined to favor the French, but it was a decision that paid off handsomely for him as he sought preferment within and beyond New York.

As a landlord and Indian agent, Johnson dispensed patronage, but it is also important to remember how much of it he received, especially at the outset of his career. The world of colonial politics was a small one in which people accumulated and exercised power in face-to-face encounters. Colonial New York is a fine example of this social dynamic, its government dominated by a small but factious group of extended families who controlled most of the colony's landed and mercantile wealth.¹² In order to rise in this society, a person needed patrons. Fortunately for Johnson, he arrived in New York already well-connected, thanks to the prominence of his uncle Peter Warren, who had married into the DeLancey family and owned the Mohawk Valley lands on which Johnson initially settled. Johnson continued his pursuit of patronage by currying the favor of Governor Clinton at the Albany Indian treaties that convened during the 1740s. When it became clear that Clinton's coattails would carry him only so far, he turned his attention to the Crown itself, refusing to serve as New York's Indian agent until he received a royal commission and salary, which he obtained when he was appointed Indian superintendent for the northern colonies in 1756.

The same logic applied to Johnson's ties with the Canajoharie Mohawks. While it is true that he proved to be a generous benefactor of this native community, he also sought the favor of its influential members. Chief Hendrick served as his mentor in the arts of Indian diplomacy and provided Johnson with his entrée into the councils of the Iroquois confederacy at Onondaga. Johnson worked so closely with Hendrick in this regard that some Iroquois leaders suspected him of being the Mohawks' mouthpiece. Johnson likewise tapped into the power of Canajoharie's clan matrons when he took Molly Brant as his common-law wife.¹³ His long, successful marriage to Brant can be romanticized as an updated

12. See Stanley N. Katz, *Newcastle's New York: Anglo-American Politics, 1732-1753* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968).

13. On Molly Brant, see Lois M. Feister and Bonnie Pulis, "Molly Brant: Her Domestic and Political Roles in Eighteenth-Century New York," in Robert S. Grumet, ed., *Northeastern Indian Lives, 1632-1816* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 295-320.

version of the John Rolfe-Pocahontas story, but it is more accurately interpreted as a purposeful imitation of the example set by his uncle Peter Warren, whose rise within New York's society began with his marriage into the DeLancey family. Thus, rather than ditching the trappings of European civilization to live among the Indians, Johnson applied Old World methods of social and political advancement to his relations with them.

In the factious political landscape of colonial New York, a new arrival as ambitious as Johnson had to choose sides. That Johnson succeeded so well at this task—both among colonists and Indians—is a tribute to his political instincts. He made the right connections on both sides of the cultural divide, exploited them to their fullest, and then put them aside for new ones when the opportunity to advance presented itself. He was a man on the make who could not have made it without the support of his patrons.

JOHNSON AS A CULTURAL BROKER

What distinguished Johnson from other members of New York's elite was his work as a cultural broker between native and colonial peoples. Other speculators and landlords held political power in the colony, and other individuals straddled the cultural divide between Indians and colonists on the frontier, but only Johnson combined these two roles. What circumstances made it possible for him to do so?

To answer that question, it is useful to compare Johnson to other colonists who played the role of cultural brokers in the mid-eighteenth century. Generally speaking, this was not a job that attracted the genteel, wealthy, or well-connected. Most successful cultural brokers acquired their expertise the hard way, by living, working, or traveling among Indians for the extended periods necessary to learn their languages and customs and to cultivate personal relationships with them. By virtue of the time they spent on one side of the cultural divide, such individuals usually lacked strong or advantageous social connections on the other. Fur traders possessed the linguistic skills to work as interpreters, but colonial officials usually suspected them of divided or false loyalties. Missionaries had better reputations for honesty, but because many of them came from

dissenting faiths, they lacked access to the corridors of social and political power in colonial governments. The offspring of intercultural marriages or sexual unions had the greatest familiarity with native and colonial cultures, but their mixed-race ancestry marked them as culturally degenerate and untrustworthy among colonial elites.¹⁴ It was a rare figure indeed who combined the nitty-gritty work of a cultural broker with the social authority of a gentleman. Among Johnson's contemporaries, only one other colonial American came close to doing so, the Pennsylvania Indian interpreter Conrad Weiser.

Like Johnson, Weiser had emigrated from the Old World to the Mohawk Valley as a young man. He arrived in America with his German Palatine parents and spent time as a youth living among the Mohawks in the Schoharie Valley. By 1730, Weiser had moved to Pennsylvania's Tulpehocken Valley, but his ties to the Mohawks remained strong and during the next thirty years he became an effective interpreter and agent to the Iroquois for the governments of Pennsylvania, Virginia, and even South Carolina. He was a fixture at intercolonial treaty conferences and he counted among his friends the well-to-do and politically powerful on both sides of the frontier. Weiser's fluency in several Iroquois languages was his most obvious asset in this work, but many other multilingual interpreters failed to sustain careers as long as his. What those other interpreters lacked was Weiser's reputation for trustworthiness and the dexterity he exhibited in dealing with the protocol that accompanied Iroquois diplomacy. When Johnson attended his first treaty conference in Albany in 1746, he was a mere pup in such arts compared to Weiser. Weiser knew more influential Iroquois chiefs, had greater experience in negotiating with them, and had far better command of their languages.¹⁵ Yet, ten years later, Johnson was the one enjoying the benefits of a baronetcy and royal salary, while Weiser remained a hired gun (or, more accurately, a hired tongue) of colonial governors. What allowed Johnson to rise while his more seasoned rival stayed put?

14. On interpreters and other cultural brokers on the colonial frontier, see James H. Merrell, *Into the American Woods: Negotiators on the Pennsylvania Frontier* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 54–105, and Nancy L. Hagedorn, "Brokers of Understanding: Interpreters as Agents of Cultural Exchange in Colonial New York," *New York History* 76 (October 1995): 382–85.

15. The standard biography of Weiser remains Paul A. W. Wallace's now dated *Conrad Weiser, 1696–1760: Friend of Colonist and Mohawk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1945).

In answering that question, it is important to compare the social and ethnic backgrounds of the two men. Both had come to the Mohawk Valley as young men from marginal regions of Britain's early eighteenth-century world—Johnson from County Meath in Ireland and Weiser from the Rhine River Valley—but the circumstances of Johnson's migration were much different. He benefited from the sponsorship of his wealthy uncle. Weiser, on the other hand, was part of a group of immigrants who had been stripped of their modest capital while en route to America by unscrupulous agents and serial misfortunes. Although young and without resources of his own, Johnson arrived in New York primed to ascend in colonial society. Weiser never had the same opportunities. In New York and Pennsylvania, he remained on the social and geographic margins of the colonial elite. Despite Pennsylvania's large German-speaking population and reputation as "the best poor man's country," the colony had a narrowly defined elite descended from its English Quaker founders.¹⁶ Compared to Johnson, Weiser never stood a chance of breaking free from the stigma attached to his alien origins.

Nor did Weiser ever command the same political autonomy in Pennsylvania's Indian relations that Johnson achieved so quickly in New York's. Weiser was skilled in the arts of Indian diplomacy, but he took his orders from the colonial governors who employed him and he conducted their business without questioning it. Johnson, on the other hand, never ceased pursuing his own agenda even while presumably serving that of his superiors. His appointment as the Crown's Indian superintendent in 1756 freed him from dependence on colonial governors for favor and gave him an independent authority in conducting Indian affairs that he jealously guarded. Johnson famously exhibited this autonomy at the Fort Stanwix Treaty of 1768, when he deliberately violated his orders from the Crown in order to negotiate land purchases in the Ohio Country that advanced his own land speculations and those of a small coterie of friends.¹⁷

16. On Pennsylvania's reputation for economic opportunity, see James T. Lemon, *The Best Poor Man's Country: A Geographical Study of Early Southeastern Pennsylvania* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972); on Pennsylvania's political order at the time of Weiser's career, see Allan Tully, *William Penn's Legacy: Politics and Social Structure in Provincial Pennsylvania, 1726–1755* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

17. See Peter Marshall, "Sir William Johnson and the Treaty of Fort Stanwix, 1768," *Journal of American Studies* 1 (1967): 149–79.

When Weiser died in 1760, his material circumstances were not that far removed from those of other German Palatines who had managed to endure their trials and find some degree of prosperity in America. He owned a large farm on the Pennsylvania frontier and his family was the picture of the "decent competence" that Crèvecoeur said awaited industrious immigrants in America.¹⁸ His career as a cultural broker had been a great success, but it had not catapulted him into the upper echelon of colonial society. Johnson followed a different path. He used his access to patronage to turn his skills in Indian diplomacy into the central enterprise of his career, ultimately parlaying them into the life of a baronet and lord of the manor. His was a model of social mobility through cultural brokerage that other Indian agents, even one as talented as Weiser, could only dream of because they lacked the economic and political capital to achieve it.

JOHNSON'S WORLD AND OUR OWN

At the time of his death in 1774, Johnson was living in the style of a feudal lord and enjoying the benefits of a royal salary and aristocratic title. Among colonial Americans of his era, only Benjamin Franklin was more famous or able to offer a success story to rival Johnson's. If the archetypal American biography is the story of an immigrant who comes to a strange new land and makes good, then surely Johnson deserves recognition on par with more famous examples of this phenomenon, such as Andrew Carnegie (#20 on the *Atlantic's* top 100 list!).

Yet, Johnson was not an American, at least not in the sense that the compilers of the *Atlantic's* list used the term. He died before the creation of the United States and so missed his chance to join the pantheon of immortals occupied by the signers of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. More to the point, had Johnson lived to see those events, he would have ended up on the wrong side of them anyway. He may have been an Irishman transplanted to an American frontier, but he was a loyal British subject through and through. He owed his career to the British Crown and the British Empire. He would not have thrown

18. Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, 67.

it away to join the parricidal rebels we have enshrined as Founding Fathers.

In hindsight, the timing of Johnson's death was exquisite, for the world that had made him was on the verge of collapse in 1774. The Mohawk Valley that Johnson had known was swept into the vortex of the American Revolution and changed forever. The partnership he had forged with the Mohawks was transplanted to Canada when his loyalist heirs took refuge there and many of his Indian neighbors and tenants followed suit. Those Indians who remained in the Mohawk Valley lost the most effective and generous patron they had ever had, and even those who sided with the patriots found themselves dispossessed in the war's wake. When peace returned in 1783, a new wave of land speculators and settlers poured into the Mohawk Valley, with greater speed and numbers than anything witnessed during the colonial era. Among them was William Cooper, the father of the novelist, whose vision for the future held no place for the region's native inhabitants.¹⁹

In the transformative years that followed, Johnson's world was not so much forgotten as it was memorialized in the *Leatherstocking Tales* of James Fenimore Cooper. But even on Fenimore Cooper's fictional frontier, there was no room for Johnson because he failed in so many ways to fit the mold the novelist created for his new American hero, Natty Bumppo. Bumppo lived in the American wilderness among intrepid woodsmen and noble but doomed Indians. He did not build a Georgian mansion, consort with colonial governors, or speculate in western lands. Nowhere in Bumppo's character do we get a sense of the figure Johnson cut in colonial America: the loyal British subject who got ahead by seeking patronage and dispensing it, who transplanted to the American frontier an Old World sensibility about hierarchy and dependence and the reciprocal obligations that bind together the rulers and the ruled. We have inherited our notions of the early American frontier from James Fenimore Cooper, not William Johnson. That is why the former has his place on the *Atlantic's* list of the 100 Most Influential Americans while the latter languishes in obscurity. More than two centuries later, we are still choosing to print the legend.

19. See Alan Taylor, *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995).