



THE MYTH OF THE LOYALIST IROQUOIS:

Joseph Brant and the Invention of a Canadian Tradition

by James Paxton, Queen's University

Presented at the Iroquois Research Conference on
October 6, 2002.

The American Revolution smashed the Iroquois Confederacy and dispersed the remnant over several communities in Upper Canada and New York. While historians have profitably studied different aspects of the New York Iroquois in the postwar era, the Six Nations of Ontario have attracted relatively little attention. Canadian scholars usually interpret them as loyalists rather than Iroquois.¹ By casting the Six Nations of Upper Canada as loyalists, scholars assume the Iroquois acted out of the same sense of duty that compelled Euroamerican loyalists to reject the revolution. Although durable, this interpretation masks the cultural roots of their motivations and behaviour

and subsumes native independence under a rubric of loyalty that the Iroquois themselves resolutely rejected.²

The myth of Iroquois loyalty is intimately tied to the person of Joseph Brant, the enigmatic Mohawk chief who left an ambiguous legacy. Brant's adoption of many European practices and his ability to navigate English and Mohawk societies fluently has puzzled historians and caused his major biographers to question his "Indianness."³ Like Brant's Euroamerican contemporaries, many historians have accepted the image that he projected in his public dealings with Crown officials as an accurate representation of Mohawk beliefs. Brant, however, acted in accordance with Mohawk customs and consistently strove to attain chiefly authority. Among the Iroquois, chiefs' claims to power derived from the nature and extent of their alliances, which they built and maintained through kinship, marriage, their abilities as warriors and diplomats, and by redistributing goods to followers.⁴ Brant employed these indigenous methods to gain power but extended his alliances to include members of the colonial and imperial communities. Brant was no loyalist. He accommodated colonization by attempting to create a coherent world from the diversity of the Mohawk Valley that fitted Europeans and their practices into a worldview rooted in Mohawk culture and values.

Brant's rapid rise to prominence during the revolution rested, to a great extent, on a foundation laid during his youth. On the eve of the war, almost everyone in the Mohawk Valley would have agreed that Brant was a promising and ambitious young man, possessed of ability and good connections. In both

colonial and Iroquois society status derived in no small measure from the quality of one's relations.⁵ Brant obtained considerable influence from his relationship to his sister Molly Brant, a matron of the wolf clan, and her husband Sir William Johnson the superintendent of northern Indian affairs. The union transformed the longstanding alliance that had existed between the Mohawks who resided at Canajoharie and Sir William into one based on actual kin relations. Few benefited from this new relationship more than Joseph Brant.

William Johnson took an active interest in his brother-in-law's career. During the Seven Year's War and Pontiac's Rebellion the young Brant gained invaluable experience as a warrior by participating in war parties either led or sponsored by Johnson.⁶ Johnson also enrolled Brant in Eleazar Wheelock's school for Indians where he learned to read and write and then hired him as an interpreter in the Indian Department.⁷

Brant's education provided him the ability to interact with colonial society in a manner that most Mohawks could not. Through Johnson, Brant came into contact with individuals from all classes, from imperial officials and large landowners to tenant farmers. He learned firsthand the customs, beliefs, and prejudices of settler society and how best to interact with his Euroamerican neighbours. The ease with which Brant moved in colonial society is born out by the long lasting friendships he developed with some of the region's leading figures. John Johnson, Guy Johnson and Daniel Claus, the son and sons-in-law of Sir William, counted Brant among their friends. He also developed friendships with the Anglican minister Reverend John Stuart and with members of prominent local families, such as the Herkimers and Freys.

Most importantly, Brant learned a great deal about the exercise of power. Johnson dominated the social, economic and political life of the Mohawk Valley through his control of resources and patronage. Besides the Indian department, he operated successfully in the Indian trade, and he was the largest landlord in the county. Johnson extended and solidified his power by making strategic marriages for himself and his children and developing alliances with prominent Euroamerican and Mohawk families.⁸ Brant came to understand that European patronage systems resembled nothing so much as Iroquois kin and alliance networks. As Johnson ably demonstrated, the two could be combined to create powerful cross-cultural alliances.

Among the Mohawks, Brant's relationship to Molly Brant and Johnson ensured that he was a man of some substance. Always active in village politics, Brant often accompanied chiefs and sachems when they met with Johnson. The consistency with which Brant supported the principal Mohawk sachem Tekarihoka in such tasks suggests that they had formed an alliance.⁹ Nevertheless, Brant was not a leader in his own right. He did not have access to presents in sufficient quantity to build extensive alliances of his own; he lacked the experience to be considered a great warrior; and he was not a hereditary chief. Compared with other principal men, Brant's youth and inexperience prevented him from taking a leading role in village deliberations.

The death of William Johnson in July 1774 and the Mohawk Valley's slow descent into revolution eroded the alliances that had maintained stability, but provided opportunities for ambitious men to assume positions of leadership. After Johnson was buried, Molly Brant returned to Canajoharie, where she began to establish herself as an Iroquois leader in her own right;¹⁰ Guy Johnson assumed control of the Indian Department; John Johnson remained quietly on his estate; and John Butler, a senior Indian officer, had a falling out with the heirs. The Mohawks divided along generational lines. Sachems desired peace and promoted neutrality, while the young warriors hoped to win reputations for themselves on the battlefield. For the next year, the Mohawk Valley remained in a state of constant tension. Then, in June

1775, Guy Johnson precipitated a crisis when he fled the county to escape the Patriot-dominated militia. Many young warriors from Canajoharie, including Brant, ignored their sachems' pleas for neutrality and followed Johnson to Canada. That September, several warriors fought in the battle of St. John's, twenty miles southeast of Montreal. The Mohawks, in particular, sustained heavy losses. Many accused the British regulars of not supporting them and returned to their homes.¹¹

Guy Johnson was also unhappy with the situation in Canada. The military undermined his control of the Indian Department, and Johnson promptly sailed for England to rectify the intolerable situation. Brant accompanied him in order to lay Mohawk grievances before the government in London. There, Brant met Lord George Germain, the colonial secretary. After reiterating the Six Nations' losses in the battle of St. Johns, Brant told Germain that "The Mohocks ... have on all occasions shewn their zeal and loyalty to the Great King; yet they have been badly treated by his people." By which he meant the settlers that encroached on Mohawk land and the officers who failed to stop them. If the King did not attend to Mohawk complaints, he warned, the Six Nations would react unfavourably.¹² Although Brant's speech to Germain deviated from the Mohawks' normal form of address, it characterized his subsequent dealings with British officials. In discussions with imperial representatives Mohawk leaders expressed their requests forthrightly as an equal and independent people seeking fair dealings from an ally, and when they felt they were being cheated, chiefs almost never failed to expose English hypocrisy or insincerity.¹³ Before the colonial secretary, however, Brant phrased his arguments in terms of the reciprocal obligations that defined European-style patron-client relations. Clientage bound parties of unequal power with ties of interest that were expressed as duties.¹⁴ In contrasting Mohawk fidelity with the government's failure to protect their lands, Brant chastised the Crown for not protecting its loyal clients. Although Brant never conceded Iroquois independence, he found it useful and necessary during a war to suppress American independence to speak of loyalty. Brant left Britain with what he wanted, a promise to address Mohawk grievances.

Brant returned to New York in the winter of 1776. Despite his efforts to raise support for the war, most of the Six Nations clung to neutrality.¹⁵ Undeterred, the following spring Brant managed to raise a party of 70 or 80 loyalist settlers and a handful of his relatives and set out for the Susquehanna River. These men, described by one observer as Brant's "intimate friends," dubbed themselves Brant's Volunteers and elected to follow a Mohawk Captain without pay or provisions rather than join a loyalist unit.¹⁶ The relatively few Mohawks that joined Brant even after the Six Nations accepted the British hatchet in the summer of 1777, suggests that Brant lacked the stature and resources to lead many warriors.¹⁷ Nevertheless, Brant campaigned hard with his Volunteers throughout the 1777-1778 seasons, winning high praise from Daniel Claus and Colonel Mason Bolton, the commanding officer at Niagara. Both men reported favourably on Brant's actions and demeanour, so that General Frederick Haldimand, the Commander-in-Chief of Canada, came to have a high opinion of Brant's abilities.¹⁸

Events in the fall of 1778 threatened to ruin this reputation. In November, Brant had joined forces with a party of loyalist Rangers to attack Cherry Valley. During the battle warriors killed over thirty civilians, eliciting condemnations of Iroquois savagery from America and Britain alike. Claus and Bolton both attempted to distance Brant from the affair, assuring Haldimand that he had treated all prisoners "with great humanity."¹⁹ On his return to Niagara, Brant determined to tell his story directly to Haldimand. Armed with a letter of introduction from Bolton, he made the trip to Quebec that winter. The meeting was a great success. Brant not only escaped censure for Cherry Valley, but he left Quebec with a captain's salary for himself, assistance for Molly Brant, and the promise of land for the Mohawks should they be prevented from returning home after the war.²⁰ Afterwards, Haldimand came to see Brant as the most capable of Iroquois leaders and actively supported him with goods and favours.

Brant's ability to act in accordance with Haldimand's values and assumptions greatly influenced the general's opinion. Like many imperial officers, Haldimand willingly believed that Britain's native allies were undependable, fickle and irrational.²¹ The Cherry Valley massacre seemed to provide ample evidence of native savagery. Compared to his fellow chiefs, Brant was educated, well-spoken, and sociable. Claus described Brant as "the most sober, quiet and good natured Indian I ever was acquainted with."²² Haldimand embraced Brant precisely because he seemed to transcend the perceived limitations of his people. Brant had done everything in his power to prevent the massacre, and Haldimand hoped that with his support the Mohawk chief could exert just such an influence over the rest of the Iroquois.

The first material sign of that support came in the spring when orders arrived at Niagara to supply Brant with clothes and blankets to be distributed to his supporters as he saw fit.²³ Brant was not merely a passive recipient of favours, however; he drew heavily on the good will and resources of his friends and allies in order to behave more like a chief. As Haldimand used Brant to influence the Six Nations, Brant drew Haldimand into his alliance network in order to replace William Johnson as a dependable source of goods and prestige. Continued success as a war leader and a greater ability to reward followers enhanced Brant's reputation with the Mohawks and the upper nations.

As a result, Brant began to extend his alliances with other Mohawks. At the end of 1779 Brant married Catharine Croghan, a matron of the turtle clan and the niece of the Mohawk sachem Tekarihoka.²⁴ The marriage allied Molly and Joseph Brant's wolf clan with the turtle clan and gave Brant the support of two clan matrons who exercised considerable influence with the warriors. Additionally, Brant redistributed the presents he received from Haldimand to cultivate alliances with warriors and chiefs outside of Canajoharie. In particular, the large and influential Hill family, consisting of chiefs David, Isaac and Aaron, became his staunch allies. Brant's growing status was evident in the size of the war parties he was able to equip and lead. In 1778 Brant mustered fewer than 30 warriors, but in the two-year period between 1780 and 1782 he led parties ranging between 100 and 360 warriors.²⁵

Brant's rapid rise was not without consequence. The frequent demands he made for provisions kept his followers satisfied but irritated Indian Department officers. As the number of Brant's followers increased, so did his requests. When an officer complained that Brant made greater demands on the store and was "more difficult to please than any of the other Chiefs," Haldimand responded that he "had no doubt of [Brant] being difficult to please and of contributing to the general expense, but he has certainly merited much attention." He commanded his officers to keep "Joseph and his followers in Temper."²⁶ Tensions within the department erupted in the spring of 1781 when Brant and Guy Johnson quarrelled. Although the cause of the dispute is unknown, word of the disagreement soon reached Haldimand. Concerned about the effects of a serious breach in the Indian Department, Haldimand insisted that the dispute be resolved in Brant's favour.²⁷ In addition, Brant's relationship with John Butler also deteriorated towards the end of the war. Brant accused Butler of not outfitting his war parties properly. Both men appealed to Haldimand, but the general refused to do anything to antagonize either his most trusted chief or his most capable Indian agent.²⁸ Brant's constant striving to extend his influence with the Mohawks began to alienate the very friends that had assisted his rise to power. That summer Brant became even more isolated from the military establishment at Niagara when his old ally Colonel Bolton died in a shipwreck.

By the summer of 1782 the Six Nations had become aware that the war was winding down to an unsuccessful conclusion.²⁹ When the terms of the peace became known in May 1783, the Six Nations felt utterly betrayed. Not only had Britain excluded them from the Treaty of Paris, but their lands had also been ceded to the United States. At Niagara, a delegation of chiefs approached British General Maclean to insist that they "were free allies - not subjects to the King of England - that he had no right to

grant their land nor would they submit to it.”³⁰ When Sir John Johnson, Guy Johnson’s replacement, tried to reassure the chiefs that the King would continue to protect them, the leading Seneca chief Sayengaraghta confronted the superintendent with a litany of Britain’s broken promises and deceptions. He demanded that the King provide a material demonstration of his concern by supporting the Six Nations should it become necessary to resume the conflict with the United States, a sentiment that met with the approval of the other chiefs and sachems.³¹

Brant, no less than the other chiefs, was incensed at Britain’s betrayal, but he adopted a more subtle approach. It had become obvious that Britain would no longer support its native allies in war, but Brant believed that the government might assist the Iroquois in the transition to peace. After all, loyalists had already begun to submit claims, and four years earlier Haldimand had promised assistance to the Mohawks. Therefore, Brant avoided recriminations and demands for justice that would never be met and focused on wringing concessions from the government.

In deliberating with Haldimand, Brant sought to convince the general that the Mohawks were at least as deserving of reward as other kinds of loyalists. Brant reminded Haldimand how the Mohawks had “in confidence and expectation of a reciprocity ... determined ... to adhere to our alliance at the risk of our lives, families and property.”³² Unlike Sayengaraghta, Brant avoided issues of sovereignty or questions about the King’s authority to cede Mohawk lands that would only embarrass and irritate Haldimand. Rather, he argued that Britain was duty bound to compensate Mohawk loyalty and sacrifice in defence of the King’s cause. Haldimand responded readily to Brant’s appeals because he had always believed that the British-Iroquois alliance was, at heart, an elaborate patron-client relationship. The rapidity with which the two men reached an arrangement contrasted sharply with way Haldimand and Johnson had earlier brushed aside the Six Nations’ demands for justice.

As with all loyalist claims, the government compensated individuals on the basis of loyalty rather than their losses. Consequently, Brant and the Mohawks received the promise of new lands, support for the construction of a mill, a church and a school and £15,000 in claims money. The five upper nations received only £12,000, divided equally between cash and presents. In addition, the Six Nations could if they wished join the Mohawks wherever they might resettle.³³ The final agreement demonstrates the limits of Brant’s power and vision. As a chief, Brant’s interest did not extend much beyond his Mohawk-centred alliance network. It is not surprising then that the Mohawks benefited the most from the peace.

Isabel Kelsay has argued that the experience of the revolution transformed Brant from a loyalist into a chief, who identified more closely with his people.³⁴ The war, however, did not pose such a challenge to his identity. Brant had never sought to ape his English friends or assist Britain in its imperial ambitions. Rather, Brant consistently and relentlessly struggled throughout the war to establish his authority as a chief. In order to achieve his goals, Brant crafted a public image that was calculated to win concessions from colonial and imperial officials. But we should view this as a tactic to further his objectives and preserve Mohawk independence at a time when the Mohawks were weakened and without a home. Loyalty was, after all, the only real claim the Mohawks had on Britain. We cannot possibly hope to understand Joseph Brant if we pull him apart and examine his constituent parts - a war chief here, a loyalist there, a Mohawk at one time, an Englishman at another. Brant was a whole man who creatively adapted Iroquois customs in order to take advantage of whatever few opportunities colonialism presented. To view Brant and the Mohawks, and by extension the Six Nations, as loyalists overlooks the fundamental continuity that connected the postwar Iroquois with their past and informed their present.

- [1] See, for example, Gerald Craig, *Upper Canada, 1784-1841: The Formative Years* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1963); 4, Robert S. Allen, *His Majesty's Indian Allies: British Indian Policy in the Defence of Canada, 1774-1815* (Toronto and Oxford: Dundurn Press, 1992), 196; Jeffrey L. McNairn, *The Capacity to Judge: Public Opinion and Deliberative Democracy in Upper Canada, 1791-1854* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 219-20. Even historians of Canada's native peoples carelessly employ the term Loyalist Iroquois. For example, J.R. Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 85, and Olive Patricia Dickason
- [2] Charles M. Johnston, *The Valley of the Six Nations* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1964), 52.
- [3] William L. Stone, *The Life of Joseph Brant - Thayendanegea* (4th edition, New York: H & E Phinney, 1846); Isabel Kelsay, *Joseph Brant, 1742-1807: A Man of Two Worlds* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984); Charles M. Johnston, "Joseph Brant, the Grand River Lands and the Northwest Crisis," *Ontario History* 55 (Dec. 1963), 271-72; James O'Donnell, "Joseph Brant," in *American Indian Leaders: Studies in Diversity* ed. R. Davis Edmunds (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1980).
- [4] Mary A. Druke, "Linking Arms: The Structure of Iroquois Intertribal Diplomacy," *Beyond the Covenant Chain* ed. James H. Merrell and Daniel Richter (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 30-31.
- [5] *Ibid.*, 30-32.
- [6] Stone, *Life of Joseph Brant*, 19.
- [7] Kelsay, *Joseph Brant*, 115-16.
- [8] John Christopher Guzzardo, "Sir William Johnson's Official Family: Patron and Clients in an Anglo-American Empire" Ph.D dissertation Syracuse University, 1975; Robert William Venables, "Tryon County, 1775-1783" Ph.D dissertation Vanderbilt University, 1967, 176-178.
- [9] Journal of Indian Affairs, Jan. 17-31, 1765, *The Papers of Sir William Johnson* (14 v. Albany: University of the State of New York) 11: 555-56; Journal of Indian Affairs, Dec. 24-25, 1765, *Ibid.*, 11: 984-85.
- [10] James Taylor Carson, "Molly Brant: From Clan Mother to Loyalist Chief," in *Sifters: Native American Women's Lives* ed. Theda Perdue (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 53.
- [11] Reply of the Canajoharie Mohawks to the Tryon Committee of Safety, in Stone, *Life of Joseph Brant*, 113.
- [12] Speech of Captain Brant to Lord George Germain, March 14, 1776, Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York, ed. E.B. O'Callaghan (15 v. Albany: Weed, Parsons, and Company, 1854-1887), 8: 670-71. Hereafter cited *DRCHSNY*. Answer of Captain Brant to Lord Germain, May 7, 1776, *DRCHSNY*, 8: 678.
- [13] Journal of Indian Affairs, Sept. 20-22, 1764, *Johnson Papers* 11: 359-60; Journal of Indian Affairs, Dec. 24-25, 1765, *Ibid.*, 11: 984-85; Meeting of an Albany Committee with the Mohawks, Dec. 21-22, 1773, *Ibid.*, 8: 966-67.
- [14] S.J.R. Noel, *Patrons, Clients, Brokers: Ontario Society and Politics, 1791-1896* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 13-14.
- [15] Kelsay, *Joseph Brant*, 185-88.
- [16] Taylor and Duffin to D. Claus, Oct. 26, 1778, Frederick Haldimand Papers (London: World Microfilm Publications, 1978) 21774, 9-10, Queen's Archives, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario. Hereafter cited *HP*. D. Claus to F. Haldimand, Nov. 30, 1778, *HP* 21774, 19-20.
- [17] D. Claus to F. Haldimand, Sept. 15, 1778, *HP* 21774, 13; D. Claus to F. Haldimand, Mar. 17, 1779, *HP* 21774, 29-30.

[18] D. Claus to Secretary Knox, Nov. 6, 1777, *DRCHSNY*, 8: 723-24; M. Bolton to F. Haldimand, Dec. 16, 1777, *HP* 21760, 13; M. Bolton to F. Haldimand, Feb 2, 1778, *HP* 21765, 13-14; D. Claus to F. Haldimand, Sept. 15, 1778, *HP* 21774, 3; D. Claus to F. Haldimand, Oct. 13, 1778, *HP* 21774, 6.

[19] M. Bolton to F. Haldimand, Feb. 12, 1779, *HP* 21760, 92-93.

[20] Kelsay, *Joseph Brant*, 240.

[21] For example, F. Haldimand to M. Bolton, Aug 10, 1780, *HP* 21764, 130-31; F. Haldimand to Powell, Nov. 16, 1781, *HP* 21764, 264.

[22] D. Claus to F. Haldimand, April 19, 1781, *HP* 21774, 182-83.

[23] F. Haldimand to M. Bolton, May 23, 1779, *HP* 21764, 16-17.

[24] Barbara Graymont, "Thayendaneegea," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 5: 804.

[25] J. Butler to F. Haldimand, Jan. 28, 1778, *HP*, 21765, 13; M. Bolton to F. Haldimand, July 16, Aug. 8, 14, 1780, *HP* 21765, 334, 344, 348; Abstract Return of Indian Parties, July 24, 1780, *HP*, 21767, 97; Return of Indian War Parties, Feb. 19, 1781, *HP*, 21767, 163; Report of George Singleton, June 27, 1782, *HP* 21785, 38-39.

[26] Powell to F. Haldimand, June 27, 1782, *HP* 21762, 95; F. Haldimand to Powell, July 11, 1782, *HP* 21764, 312-13.

[27] F. Haldimand to D. Claus, Dec. 1780, *HP* 21772, 111-12.

[28] Powell to F. Haldimand, June 27, 1782, *HP*, 21762, 95, 98.

[29] R. Mathews to J. Ross, July 1, 1782, *HP* 21785, 40.

[30] A. Maclean to F. Haldimand, May, 1783, RG-10-A-6-h, vols. 1834-1835, 84-85, Public Archives of Canada.

[31] Proceedings with the Six Nations, July 22-31, 1783. *HP*, 21779, 123-26.

[32] Brant to Haldimand, May 21, 1783, quoted in Johnston, *Valley of the Six Nations*, 40; Substance of Brant's wishes respecting forming a settlement on the Grand River, March 1783, *Ibid.*, 44.

[33] Haldimand's Proclamation, Oct. 25, 1784, RG-10-A-6-h, vols. 1834-1835, 132-33, PAC.

[34] Kelsay, *Joseph Brant*, 379-94.

James Paxton was born and raised in the Niagara peninsula of Ontario. He received his BA from the University of Toronto and an MA from Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia. At Blacksburg, he administered "Smithfield Plantation" an eighteenth-century museum house dedicated to the interpretation of the land developer William Preston and European expansion westward. Currently, he is a doctoral candidate at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, where he is working on a thesis, tentatively entitled "Borderland Communities: Six Nations and Settlers from the Mohawk Valley to the Niagara Region of Upper Canada and New York, 1774-1830."

Text © 2002 by James Paxton.