Chief Joseph Brant: Mohawk, Loyalist, and Freemason

Perhaps no Freemason who ever lived in America has been so condemned by some authors and praised by others as Joseph Brant, the powerful and influential Mohawk Chief who sided with the British during the American Revolutionary War. On several occasions, he put into practice the Masonic virtues of brotherly love, forgiveness, and charity. On others, he exhibited cold-blooded ruthlessness, savagery and disregard for human life. Unfortunately, space does not permit a lengthy discussion of the life or exploits of this remarkable and complex native American.

The parents of Joseph Brant were Mohawks whose home was at Canajoharie on the Mohawk River in New York. Brant, however, was born on the banks of the Ohio River in 1742 while his parents were on a hunting excursion to that region, and was given the Indian name of Thayendanega, meaning "he places two bets". His father was Nickus (or "Nicholas") of the Wolfe family, who, although not a chief, was a Mohawk of some standing in the tribe.

While still in his early youth, Brant became a favorite of Sir William Johnson, the British superintendent of the northern Indians of America, who was extremely popular with the tribes under his supervision. During his time with the Iroquois, Johnson became particularly close to the Mohawk tribes. He was also a Mason and a former Provincial Grand Master of the New York colony. After Johnson’s European wife Catherine died in 1759, he married his former Indian mistress, Molly, who was Brant’s sister, in an Indian ceremony later that year. It was due largely to Johnsons’ relationship with Molly that Brant received the favor and protection of Sir William and through him the British government, which set Brant on the road to promotion.

Brant and a number of young Mohawks were selected by Johnson to attend Moors Charity School for Indians at Lebanon, Connecticut, the school which in future years was to become Dartmouth College. Here he learned to speak and write English and studied Western history and literature. He is the only one of those chosen known to have derived any benefit from the educational process. He left school to serve under Sir William from 1755-1759 during the French and Indian War (1754-1763). After this, he became Sir William's close companion and helped him run the Indian Department, administered by the British out of Quebec. He also became an interpreter for an Anglican missionary and helped translate the prayer book and Gospel of Mark into the Mohawk language.

About 1768, he married Christine, the daughter of an Oneida chief, whom he had met in school. Together, they settled on a farm near Canajoharie which Joseph had inherited. While here, Brant assisted in revising the Mohawk prayer book and translating the Acts of the Apostles into the Mohawk language. He also joined the Anglican Church, was a regular communicant, and evinced a great desire to bring Christianity to his people. His wife died of tuberculosis about 1771, leaving him with a son and a daughter. In 1773, he married his wife’s sister, Susannah, who died a few months afterward, also of tuberculosis.
In 1774, Sir William Johnson died and was succeeded in his territories by his son Sir John Johnson, and as Superintendent of the Indian Department by his son-in-law, Col. Guy Johnson, both of whom were Masons. The Johnsons, together with Brant and the Tory leaders Col. John Butler and Col. Walter Butler (also both Masons) were to become leaders of the Loyalist resistance and terrorism in Northwest New York.

Those who remained loyal to England, known as "Loyalists" or "Tories", were not all colonists. Other allies of the British were numerous Indian tribes, more especially the Iroquois tribes who occupied the lands from upstate New York south to northern Pennsylvania with scatterings further south and north and extending west to the Great Lakes. The Iroquois League, also known as the Six Nations, was a confederation of upper New York state Indian tribes composed of the Mohawks, Onondagas, Cayugas, Senecas, Oneidas, and Tuscaroras. They lived in comfortable homes, often better than those of the colonists, raised crops, and sent hunters to Ohio to supply meat for those living back in New York.

In August, 1775, the Six Nations staged a big council fire near Albany, after news of Bunker Hill had made war seem imminent. After much debate, they decided that such a war was a private affair between the British and the colonists, and that they should stay out of it. Brant feared that the Indians would lose their lands if the colonists achieved independence. The Johnsons and Brant used all their influence to engage the Indians to fight for the British cause, and ultimately succeeded in bringing four of these tribes, the Mohawks, Onondagas, Cayugas, and Senecas into an alliance with England. The Oneidas and Tuscaroras ultimately sided with the Colonists.

About the year 1776, Brant became the principal war chief of the confederacy of the Six Nations, due perhaps to the patronage of the Johnsons and the unusual circumstances in which he was placed. With this high office of leadership, he also received a Captains commission in the British army in charge of the Indian forces loyal to the Crown. Immediately after receiving this appointment, Brant made his first voyage to England. By making this trip, he gained time, and was enabled to observe for himself the power and resources of the King and British government. He also went to protest the policy of Guy Carleton, commander of the British forces in Canada, who refused to invite the Six Nations to join the war against the Americans, except to use 40 to 50 men as scouts.

Also during this trip Brant received the Masonic degrees in either Falcon Lodge or Hiram's Cliftonian Lodge in London in April 1776. He had the distinction of having his Masonic apron given to him from the hand of King George III. Brant was certainly not dissuaded or criticized by the British or the Tories for his efforts. In fact, the intent of the British with respect to the use of Indians in the Revolutionary War. After the surrender of the American forces at the Battle of the Cedars on the St. Lawrence River in 1776, Brant exerted himself to prevent the massacre of the prisoners. In particular, one Capt. John McKinstry, a member of Hudson Lodge No.13 of New York, was about to be burned at the stake. McKinstry, remembering that Brant was a Freemason, gave to him the Masonic sign of appeal which secured his release and subsequent good treatment. He and Brant thereafter remained friends for life, and in 1805 he and Brant together visited the Masonic Lodge in Hudson, New York, where Brant was well received and on whose wall his portrait now hangs.

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