

# "Johnson Forever!"

## Revisiting a Hero of the Seven Years War

**Mark Eaton**

William Johnson moved to New York from his ancestral homeland Ireland in 1738 and soon became one of the most influential and prosperous colonists of his time. As a trader, land developer, speculator and government official, he co-operated extensively with the tribes of the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy. Considered a fair and honest man by these people, Johnson developed close personal and economic relationships with many of them, especially within the Mohawk tribes. So when the British and French clashed between 1744 and 1748 (King George's War), the New York colonial government turned to Johnson.

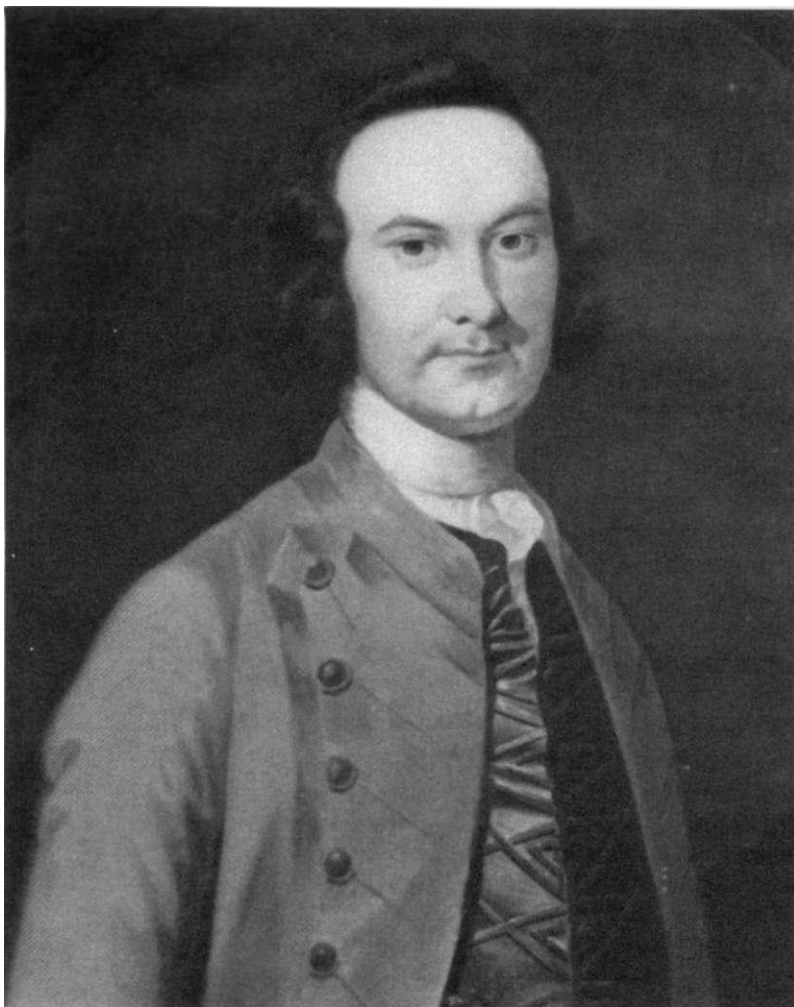
Through his work as the official agent in charge of supplying the trading post at Oswego and as the government's Indian agent, Johnson became known as an influential entrepreneur and broker of Indian affairs. Indeed, Governor George Clinton of New York did not delegate authority to Johnson based on his promise as a military leader; Johnson's actual military role during King George's War was minimal. On the contrary, his duties included supplying Oswego with stores and manpower, sending, but not accompanying, infrequent and often unsuccessful Iroquois raiding parties against the French, and acting as a conduit between the Iroquois and the British colonial government.

When the final clash between the British and French in North America began in 1755, colonial officials once again turned to Johnson - this time to gather Iroquois support for the British war effort. Despite his lack of formal military training, his apparently unrivaled influence with

the Iroquois Confederacy and his familiarity with the region which could facilitate the supply of an army led the British colonial government to commission him to lead a military expedition against the French in 1755.

However, as the commander of the Crown Point expedition force in 1755, and later as the interim commander of the siege against Fort Niagara in 1759, Johnson failed to attract and maintain significant military support from the Iroquois nations. Although historians have consistently portrayed Johnson as a great military leader based on his performance in these two battles against French forces descending from Canada, his inexperience in military affairs and his inability to obtain the full support of Britain's Iroquois allies raise doubts about his ability as a military leader.<sup>1</sup> In the final analysis, Johnson's close relationship with the Iroquois nations during the Seven Years War (1755-1763) did not result in their effective or consequential participation in two of the most significant British victories against the French. Therefore, his legacy as a great military leader rests on dubious foundations.

By 1754 it was clear that another major conflict between the British and the French would soon erupt. Attempting to unite the colonies and gain the allegiance of the Iroquois, colonial officials organized meetings in Albany in June and July 1754. The British agreed to fortify the Iroquois frontier against future French incursions and "the Indians agreed to furnish at least one thousand braves to be used for general service." In addition, 600 more would



Portrait of William Johnson in the years immediately prior to the start of the Seven Years War. (By John Wollaston Jr., circa 1751).

all others whatsoever are strictly required and enjoined to cease and forbear acting or intermeddling therein."<sup>7</sup>

On the same day Braddock's second-in-command and Governor of Massachusetts William Shirley informed Johnson of his new commission as commander of the planned expedition against the French fort at Crown Point. Johnson initially proposed destroying the fort with a force composed entirely of Iroquois, an indication of his belief in his extraordinary influence over the Indian nations.<sup>8</sup> According to the battle plans devised at Alexandria, however, Johnson would lead an army of approximately 4400 men raised by the governments of New York, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts, as well as any number of Indians he could recruit.<sup>9</sup> Johnson invited members of the Iroquois Confederacy to Mount Johnson between 21 June and 4 July 1755, where they discussed issues related to the upcoming British campaign. According to the minutes of the conference 1,106 Indian men, women and children attended, "a greater number... than were ever before known at any public meeting."<sup>10</sup> After delivering a speech intended to revive memories of past French atrocities perpetrated against the Indian nations of the region, Johnson stated:

My war kettle is on the Fire, my Canoe is ready to put in the water, my Gun is loaded, my sword is by my side, and my axe is sharpened. I desire and expect you will now take up the Hatchet and join us, your Brethren against all our Enemies.<sup>11</sup>

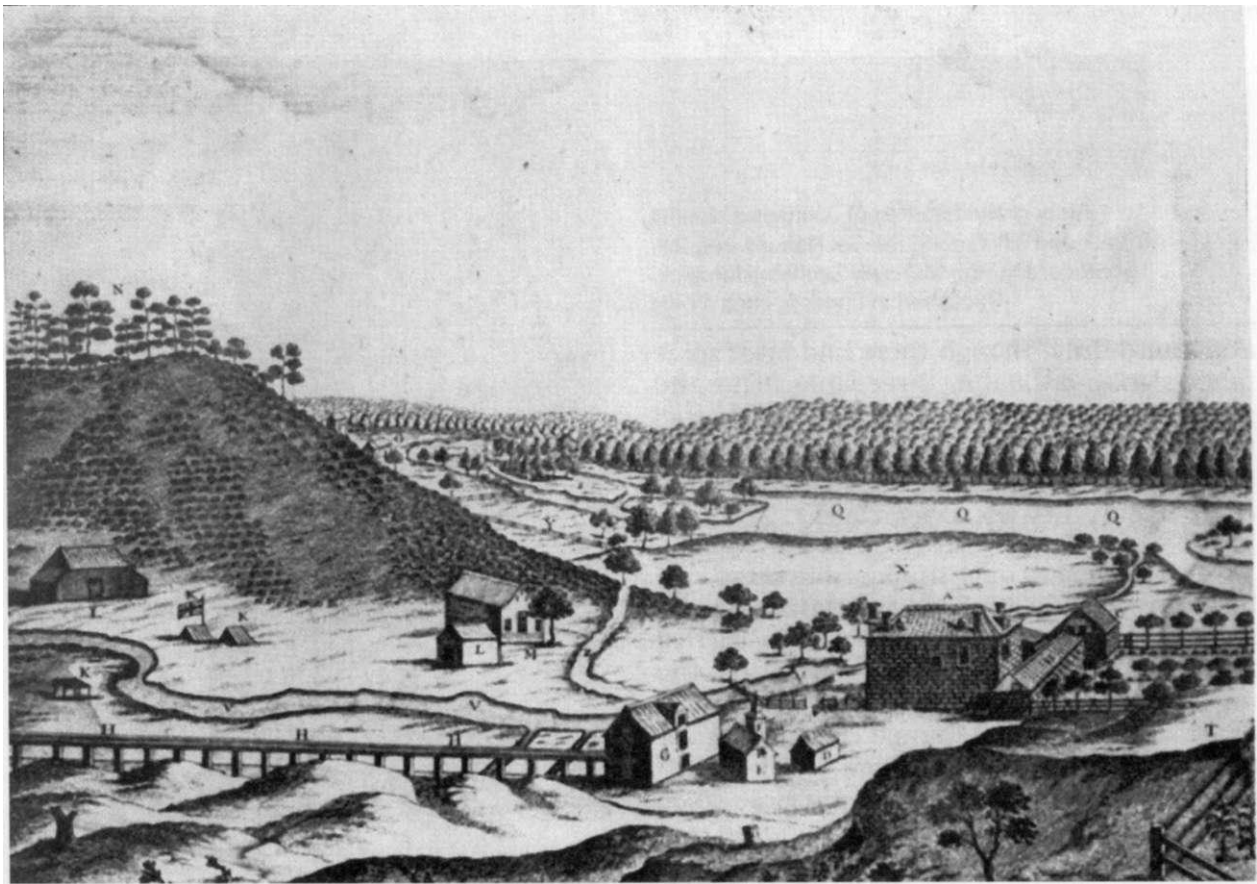
Five days later the Indian nations answered Johnson's call to arms by promising to join the British campaign against the French.<sup>12</sup> However, within a week the alliance started to show cracks. On 3 July the Cayuga Sachems told Johnson that they wished to avoid meeting their Canadian cousins, the Caughnawaga Indians, in the upcoming expedition against Crown Point.<sup>13</sup> Johnson promised to send representatives to meet with the Caughnawaga Indians and request they remain neutral. Even Johnson's most reliable Indian allies, the Mohawks, ignored his initial request for warriors. In spite of the reluctance of the Iroquois to commit fully to the

be raised for the protection of Oswego.<sup>2</sup> This promise of strong Iroquois support was made in spite of the fact that only 150 Iroquois attended the meeting, with Mohawk representation dominating.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately for the British the small and unrepresentative Iroquois delegation seemed to indicate that the majority of the Iroquois nations had adopted a neutral stance.<sup>4</sup>

Soon after his arrival in North America as the new Commander-in-Chief of Britain's colonial forces, General Edward Braddock<sup>5</sup> recognized Johnson's potential value in the upcoming campaign against the French. On 16 April 1755 at the Alexandria military conference, Braddock

appointed Colonel Johnson to be Sole Superintendent of the Indians of the Five Nations, with Instructions to engage as large a Number of them as he could for his Majesty's Service in the Expedition against Crown Point, Niagara, and the French Forts upon the Ohio.<sup>6</sup>

Braddock ordered Johnson to "treat and confer with them [Iroquois] as often and upon such matters as you [Johnson] shall judge necessary." Indian affairs in the northern British colonies would be the sole prerogative of Johnson, "and



A sketch of Fort Johnson (originally named Mount Johnson), Sir William's home and the site of many meetings between Johnson and his Iroquois friends. (By Guy Johnson, William Johnson's nephew, published in the *Royal Magazine*, London, 1759)

British cause Johnson moved his expedition forward, supervising initial preparations in Albany.

Thus far Johnson's only military experience "was as paymaster of Indian warriors who lived off the land, struck suddenly at vulnerable and unsuspecting targets, and then melted into the woods, defending nothing." However in the upcoming campaign Johnson's objective "was derived from conventional European warfare; the means had to be conventional, and the men must try to be like regulars."<sup>14</sup> To compensate for his lack of military training Johnson recruited highly skilled officers. One such officer, Captain William Eyre, was designated as artillery engineering head, quartermaster, and adjutant.<sup>15</sup> On 17 July, as soldiers and supplies poured into Albany, Johnson ordered his second-in-command, Major-General Phineas Lyman, to move up the Hudson River approximately forty miles and establish a fort, later named Fort Edward in honour of the brother of King George.<sup>16</sup> Johnson relied heavily on his much more experienced subordinates like Lyman and Eyre. However, while he should be commended for practicing sound judgement by relying on these officers, the fact remains that he was uninformed in military affairs.

Fort Edward served as a staging point for operations against Crown Point. Johnson arrived there on 14 August and departed soon after, travelling north another eleven miles until he reached the southern shore of Lake St. Sacrament on the 28th. With 1500 men he began to construct a camp on the shore of the lake "which he rechristened Lake George, in honour of his Majesty and to assert his right of dominion there."<sup>17</sup> With the arrival of the rest of Johnson's men the force included 3500 colonials.<sup>18</sup> However "disappointingly few Iroquois" answered Johnson's call to arms, estimates of the total number of Iroquois at Lake George ranging from just over 200 to 400 warriors.<sup>19</sup> Neither estimate seems to correspond with the apparent enthusiasm expressed by the Indian nations at Mount Johnson earlier that summer. Rather, the pessimism expressed by the Cayuga and Mohawk tribes during and after the Mount Johnson meeting seemed to spread to the other members of the Confederacy.<sup>20</sup>

In the following weeks the Lake George camp teemed with activity. Soldiers cleared the land and set up shelters, and a continuous stream of wagons filled with supplies, guns and bateaux flowed into the camp. However, "there was little drill or training done amid the building, digging

An engraved portrait of Johnson's closest friend and ally among the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy, the Mohawk Sachem Hendrick. (Published in London, circa 1740)

and guard duty, though there had been some practice in co-ordinating three ranks to fire and reload while giving ground."<sup>21</sup> This limited training did little to prepare Johnson's force for the mixture of guerrilla and conventional engagements they would soon face.

The camp was only supposed to serve as a base for portage operations against Crown Point.<sup>22</sup> However, Indian scouts soon carried information into the camp revealing the movements of a French force of 600 Canadiens, 600 Indians, and 200 French regulars, under the command of General Baron de Dieskau.<sup>23</sup> By the evening of 7 September the force stood within five miles of Fort Edward.<sup>24</sup> Johnson sent messengers south to the fort to head off a surprise attack by the French. However, one of the messengers fell into French hands and, under questioning, told Dieskau that unlike Fort Edward the camp at Lake George lacked both cannon and an adequate breastwork, leaving the greater part of the British forces in the region vulnerable to attack. This information, coupled with the refusal of the Canadian Indians to move against the cannon of Fort Edward, led Dieskau to move against Lake George instead.<sup>25</sup>

Dieskau's force turned north on the morning of 8 September and marched for Lake George. That same morning Johnson held a council of war. Following the advice of the Mohawk Sachem Hendrick, the war council decided against dividing the British force and instead sent 1000 men under the command of Colonel Ephriam Williams and 200 Iroquois under Hendrick to reinforce Fort Edward, which was still assumed to be the main target of the French.<sup>26</sup> An hour after the departure of reinforcement force, Johnson recalled that "we heard a heavy firing, and all the marks of a warm engagement, which we judged was about three or four miles from us."<sup>27</sup> French scouts had spotted the British force moving south on the road to Fort Edward and capitalized on this golden opportunity by preparing an ambush.<sup>28</sup> According to Dieskau's plan,

the British would walk past the Amerindians, past the militiamen, right up to the regulars. The regulars would open fire first. Then the



militiamen would attack from the sides and the Amerindians would sweep across the enemy rear.<sup>29</sup>

However, due to what Dieskau described as the "moment of treachery,"<sup>30</sup> the British managed a relatively successful retreat back to Lake George. The Canadian Caughnawaga cousins of the Iroquois had hoped to avert a conflict with their brethren whom they spotted at the head of the British force. According to Dieskau, the Caughnawaga "showed themselves before the time and did not fire," giving a large segment of the British force with sufficient warning to effect a speedy retreat.<sup>31</sup> For many, however, the warning came too late. The ensuing encounter between the Caughnawaga and Iroquois nations "was clearly an unexpected accident which neither had time to avert."<sup>32</sup>

The Iroquois in particular suffered a terrible blow in this first engagement when Hendrick, the great Mohawk leader and close friend of Johnson, had his horse shot out from under him and was stabbed to death with a bayonet.<sup>33</sup> According to witnesses "all Indian officers, and the Indians say forty of their people, who fought like lions, were all slain."<sup>34</sup> Iroquois morale

would not recover from these initial losses, and as a result their participation for the remainder of the battle was minimal.

After the speedy British retreat into the camp at Lake George and the erection of a makeshift breastwork and the placement of cannons around the perimeter, a second engagement began later the same morning.<sup>35</sup> Dieskau's troops followed the retreat closely but were stopped 150 yards from the camp. For the next five hours French musket fire covered the camp. However, because the French musketeers could do little damage from such a distance, "their fire gradually grew feeble."<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, Captain Eyre proved his enormous value to the expedition with his competent direction of the cannon fire which "made Lanes, Streets and Alleys thro' their army."<sup>37</sup> Johnson, on the other hand, was confined to his tent from the early stages of the second engagement after he received a bullet in his thigh. He claimed in his official report of the battle that the Indians participated actively in the pursuit of the French. However, for the most part, the Iroquois waited at a safe distance until victory was assured. Once assured of victory the Iroquois, "enraged by their own losses, they scalped and plundered, slaying the wounded and helpless, as the French defeat became a rout."<sup>38</sup> In reality the deciding factor at the Battle of Lake George was not Johnson's influence over the Iroquois, but the superior British numbers and the competent work of Johnson's subordinates.<sup>39</sup>

Johnson also failed to convince his Iroquois allies to stay for the completion of the Crown Point expedition. On 12 September, three days after the battle, the Mohawk (Lower Castle) and Oneida Sachems told Johnson they planned to return home "for a little while and cheer [sic] our people" which is "our constant custom after an engagement in which we have many losses."<sup>40</sup> The Mohawk women also opposed their men returning to Lake George because of the heavy losses they had already suffered; they believed that their home castles needed to be protected against the expected retaliation by Canada's native allies.<sup>41</sup> Even though the Iroquois had earlier agreed to participate in the expedition to its completion, battle losses and traditions precluded their further involvement in the campaign.

In the wake of the British victory at Lake George, two influential accounts of the battle, Johnson's own and one prepared by his assistant Peter Wraxell, perpetuated a myth of Johnson's role in the engagement.<sup>42</sup> Both gloss over the seriousness of the wound he sustained in the first hour of the engagement which forced him to remain in his tent for the remainder of the battle. The accounts also fail to mention General Phineas Lyman. Lyman assumed command of the army after Johnson's injury and, according to Colonel John Ranslair of Albany, even Johnson "ascribed the honour of the victory" to him.<sup>43</sup> Finally, the accounts give the Iroquois a great deal of credit for the victory, even though their contribution to the British effort after the early morning ambush was minimal and their early departure placed the Crown Point expedition in jeopardy. Because Johnson relied on the Iroquois (especially the Mohawks) for scouting operations, with their departure he was less willing to take offensive risks.<sup>44</sup> As a result, Crown Point was not captured and Johnson's prestige, which relied largely on the actions of his Iroquois friends, could have suffered if not for these lopsided battle accounts. In the event, the Johnson myth spread widely throughout North America and Great Britain.

In early 1756 Johnson still seemed to have considerable influence with the Iroquois. In February of that year, despite the losses they suffered only months earlier at Lake George, 586 Iroquois attended a conference at Mount Johnson.<sup>45</sup> However, when the war began to turn against the British, many Iroquois began to ally with the French. The British woes can be partly attributed to the dismal military campaigns of commanders Loudoun, Webb, and Abercromby between 1756 and 1758.<sup>46</sup> The British situation began to improve only after William Pitt became Prime Minister of Great Britain. He energetically committed his government to the war effort and appropriated the funds necessary to make victory possible. Meanwhile in France, a failed wheat crop meant that fewer goods for trade with the Indian allies of the French could be sent to North America. A British blockade of French supply ships further reduced the bargaining power of French traders and negotiators. Some confiscated French goods were even used by Johnson "to persuade the Iroquois and other Indian nations to side with the British."<sup>47</sup> In this

way the British regained some of the leverage recently lost in their dealings with the Iroquois.

The British forces in North America meanwhile began to accomplish important military objectives. The almost simultaneous capture of Forts Frontenac and Louisbourg by Captain John Bradstreet and Major-General Sir Jeffery Amherst respectively in 1758 "hit the French like a thunderbolt" and "deprived them of any initiative for campaigns that year." The French also abandoned Fort Duquesne, which Brigadier-General John Forbes occupied on 25 November.<sup>48</sup> These victories helped Johnson in his negotiations with the Iroquois. From 22 July to 1 August 1758 he "was accomplishing and Confirming the peace between the Six Nations, the Cherokees and the Catawbas."<sup>49</sup> More importantly, in April of the next year Johnson held a conference at Canajoharie with ten Indian nations. He informed those present that the new Commander-in-Chief of the North American forces, General Jeffrey Amherst, intended to open a campaign against the French. The campaign included a planned invasion of the French fort at Niagara, a vital depot in the continental trade system. Amherst, according to Johnson, "informed me to use all my influence to engage as many Indians as I possibly can, and aid and assist His Majesty's Arms, in the Operations of the ensuing Campaign."<sup>50</sup> Three days later on 21 April, "three sachems waited upon Sir William and his party to say that all the Nations in council had concurred in urging the Niagara campaign to be undertaken as soon as possible."<sup>51</sup> Johnson obtained a pledge of Iroquois participation in the upcoming campaign against the French and confidently reported to Amherst that over 800 Indians planned to join the expedition against Niagara.<sup>52</sup> However, just as at Lake George nearly four years earlier, events at Fort Niagara revealed that the full cooperation of the Iroquois would not be forthcoming.

The British government planned a three-pronged campaign against the French in the summer of 1759. The Fort Niagara expedition would be crucial because its capture would sever the fur-purchasing areas in the west from the eastern markets and "facilitate a thrust at the Canadian heartland at Montreal and Quebec."<sup>53</sup> As usual Johnson and his Iroquois friends hoped that a successful British expedition would

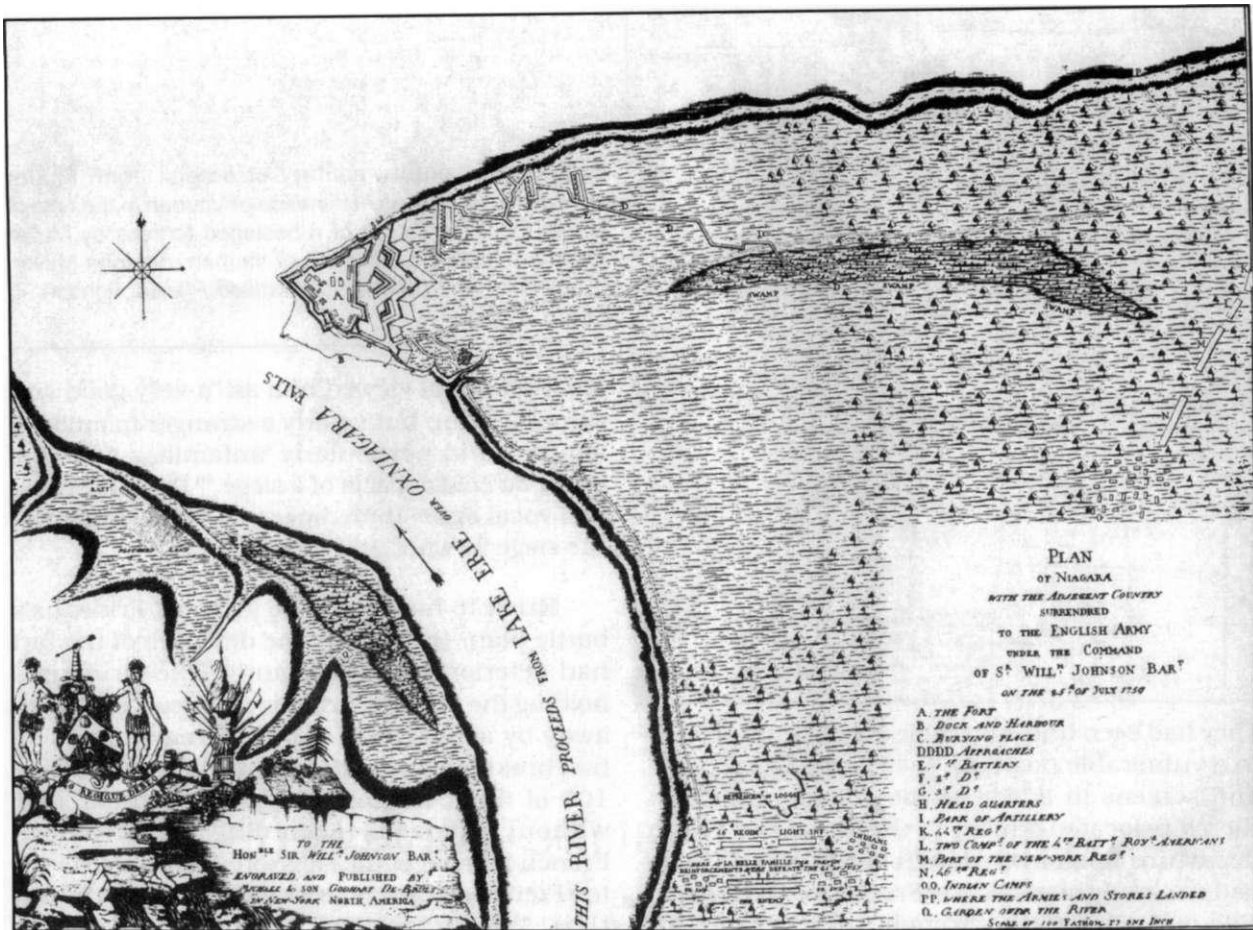
benefit them commercially at the expense of their competitors. In a letter to General Amherst, Johnson declared:

I am of the Opinion the Reduction of Niagara will Overset the whole French Indian Interest, and Trade, and throw it into Our hands, if the Conquest is properly improved.<sup>54</sup>

The Fort Niagara expedition departed Oswego on 1 July, travelling along the southern shore of Lake Ontario in whaleboats and bateaux stocked with stores, weapons, and soldiers. On 6 July the force settled into a creek about four miles from the fort.<sup>55</sup> Johnson ordered his Indians to move forward, spread out, and scout the area, "behind which the British landed quietly and efficiently, unloading heavy gear and cannon."<sup>56</sup>

The British force included the 44th and 46th Regiments of Foot, the 4th Battalion of the 60th Regiment of Foot (Royal American), the New York Provincials, and a detachment of the Royal Artillery. Brigadier-General John Prideaux commanded, Colonel John Johnston served as second-in-command, and William Johnson led a detachment of 900 Iroquois, nearly one-third of the 3000-strong British force.<sup>57</sup> They would face a fort that was recently strengthened by its commander, General Pierre Pouchot, who commanded a garrison of 486 men: "149 regulars from the regiments of La Sarre, Royal Roussillon, Guienne and Beam; 183 colonials; 133 militiamen; and 21 gunners ... thus it was indeed a formidable fort which the English had to conquer."<sup>58</sup>

As the British force disembarked, French scouts reported spotting "20 barges, each containing 20 men, who were at once considered the van-guard of the English army." Pouchot acted quickly to counter the apparent invasion, sending couriers to the French forts at Machault and Detroit calling for reinforcements. He then sent the corvette *L'Iroquoise* into Lake Ontario with a month's provisions and orders to harass the British force with cannon fire.<sup>59</sup> On 9 July Prideaux, emphasizing that superior British numbers made French resistance futile, sent a messenger into Fort Niagara proposing that the French surrender peacefully. Pouchot, however, believed that his garrison, the improved defences of the fort, and the substantial store of supplies would be enough to hold off the British until



A plan of the siege of Fort Niagara produced in honour of Sir William Johnson following the surrender of the fort. The title of engraving, *Plan of Niagara, with the Adjacent Country, Surrendered to the English Army under the Command of Sr. William Johnson, Bard, on the 25th of July 1759*, provides insight into one of the ways by which the Johnson myth spread throughout the British Empire. (Engraved by Godhart De Bruls, New York, 1762)

reinforcements arrived from the west. He refused to surrender and on the night of 9 July the British formally began siege operations.

General Prideaux planned his siege based on the tenets of seventeenth-century military engineer and architect Sebastien le Prestre de Vauban (1633-1707),<sup>60</sup> and retained the services of masons, sawyers, bricklayers, wheel-wrights, cutlers, carpenters, turners, black smiths, gun smiths, tent smiths, and others. To conduct an effective siege "all of these skills would be needed ... and the formation of such men into special work groups was a suggestion of Vauban." Vauban also promoted trench warfare as a form of siege craft that could prevent unnecessary bloodshed for the attackers:

The workmen were to begin a long trench, or sap, previously laid out by the engineers, slanting toward the fort at an angle oblique enough to allow the men in the trenches to be sheltered from the defenders' fire. The earth thus excavated was piled with the fascines and gabions on the side of the trench toward the enemy. By thus zig-zagging toward the fort, the

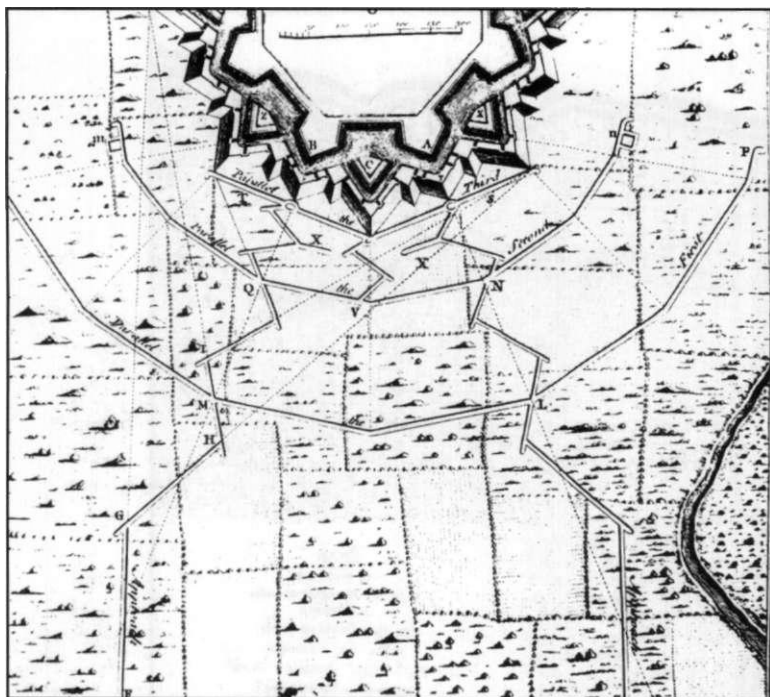
beseigers could advance close enough to risk storming the walls.<sup>61</sup>

Following the first night of trench work on 9-10 July, the British had moved to within 640 yards of the fort.<sup>62</sup>

Meanwhile Johnson had problems retaining the allegiance of his Indian force. During the first week of the siege Indian leaders from nations allied to both the British and the French attempted to convince each other to withdraw from the conflict:

Two Six Nations legates were admitted into Fort Niagara, where they and several Seneca, Mississauga, Ottawa, and Potawatomi discussed the misfortune of Amerindians fighting one another. They also learned of the impending relief force expected from Fort Machault. After the legates returned to the British camp, all of the Six Nations Iroquois suddenly decided to withdraw from the siege.<sup>63</sup>

By 13 July the Indian allies of the British had moved up the Niagara River, to a site named La Belle Famille, to escape the chaos of the siege.



Eighteenth-century military strategist John Muller acknowledged the pre-eminence of Vauban in the field of siegecraft. This sketch of a besieged fortress by Muller clearly reveals the influence of Vauban. (In John Muller, *The Attack and Defence of Fortified Places*, London: J. Millan, 1765)

Most probably viewed him as "a very good and valuable man, but utterly a stranger to military affairs," and particularly unfamiliar with the multi-faceted aspects of a siege.<sup>65</sup> Despite strong and vocal opposition, however, Johnson moved the siege forward.

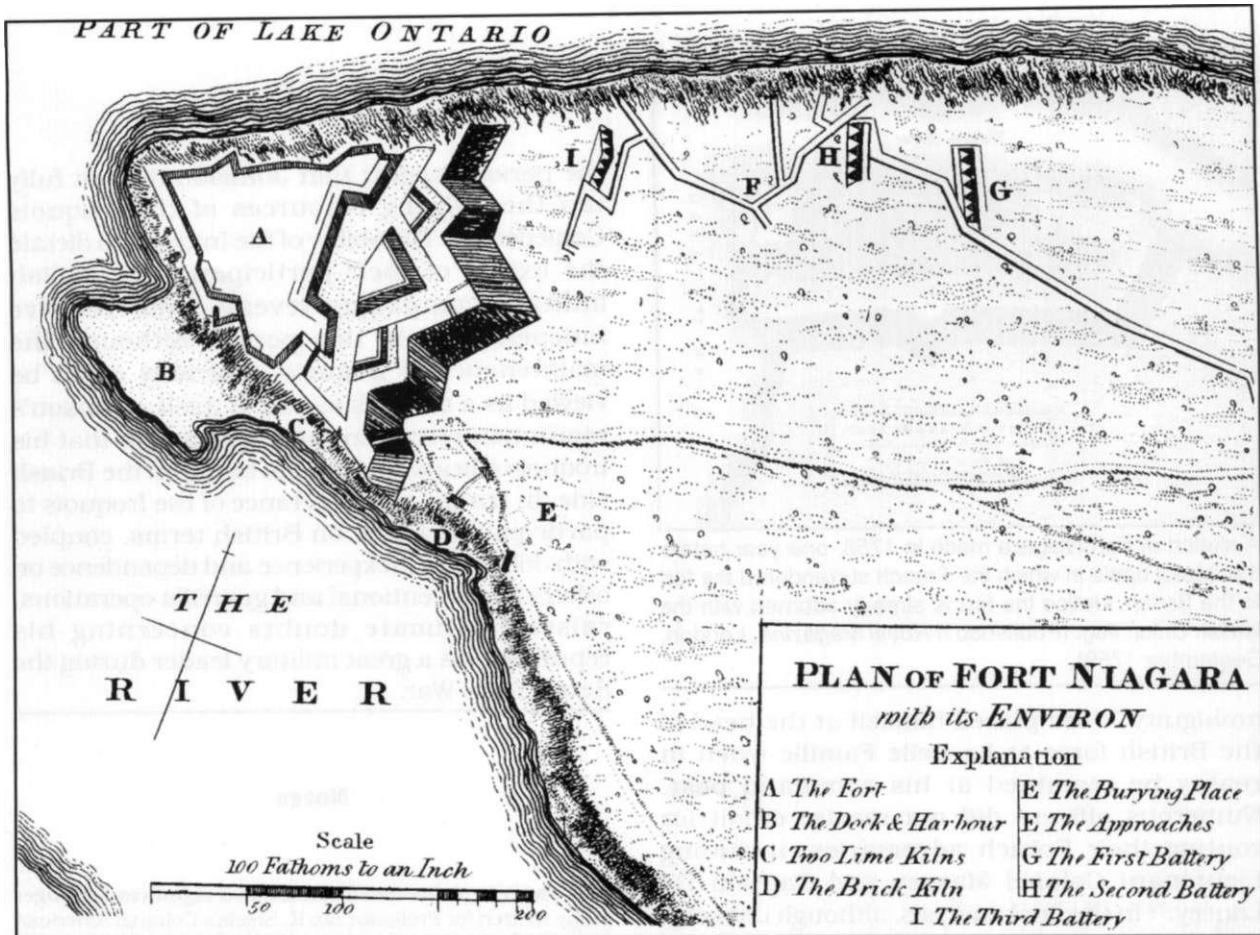
Much to his credit, he followed Prideaux's battle plan. By 23 July the defences of the fort had deteriorated significantly. The structures holding the French cannons in place were blown away by artillery fire and the French muskets had broken down to the point where only about 100 of them worked, and most of them were without bayonets. According to the official French journal of the siege only one out of every ten French arms was serviceable, despite the fact that "seven smiths or armourers were continually employed to repair them." However, word came to Pouchot that morning that the reinforcements he had called for, 600 French and 1,000 Indian fighters, were approaching.<sup>66</sup>

Unfortunately for Pouchot, the British intercepted messengers sent forward by the relief force and learned of its approach. Johnson sent Captain DeLancey (the son of James DeLancey, Governor of New York) with 150 light infantry to La Belle Famille, where a British detachment was already waiting. The Mohawks, the most loyal Indian allies of the British and the only Iroquois still willing to fight, negotiated with their French Indian counterparts one last time but to no avail.<sup>67</sup> The 24 July engagement at La Belle Famille lasted less than an hour and the British rout of the French relief force sealed the fate of Fort Niagara. Johnson next called on Pouchot to surrender. After the disillusioned commander was assured by his officers that the relief force had been defeated, he assessed the condition of the supplies and the fortifications and concluded that further resistance was useless. On 25 July Pouchot formally surrendered Fort Niagara to Johnson.

Once again the laurels of victory fell to Sir William Johnson. Throughout the colonies, and

They had been uncomfortable about being placed in a vulnerable position; they served as scouts and screens in advanced positions, and were therefore located directly in the line of fire. Their departure "took away much of the screen that had so closely hemmed the French in on the land side and allowed the French to learn more of the English activities."<sup>64</sup> Once again, Johnson's Iroquois allies had refused to commit fully to the British battle plan. Instead they conducted separate diplomatic negotiations with the Indian allies of the French and ultimately determined when and how their resources would be made available to the British side.

The British leaders did little to impede the negotiations and instead used the period of uncertainty to advance the trench-work further. By 20 July the trenches had moved forward over 500 meters, to within 100 meters of the fort. The British force next worked to weaken the fort's defences by increasing artillery fire. Then disaster struck the British. Colonel John Johnston, the expedition's second-in-command, was killed by musket fire. An hour later General Prideaux was hit by the discharge from one of his own mortars. The shell severed his head. Johnson now stepped into the leadership vacuum to assume command of the siege. A feeling of dismay swept through the regulars in the British force. Lieutenant Colonel Massey objected to Johnson's promotion because he felt that he had been assured of his seniority over Johnson by military authorities prior to the departure of the expedition. Other regulars were simply uncomfortable with Johnson at the helm.



Entitled *Plan of Fort Niagara With its Environ*, this sketch portrays the fortifications of the fort as well as the advancing British sap and numerous batteries. (Mary Rocque, *A set of Plans and Forts in North America*, London, 1763)

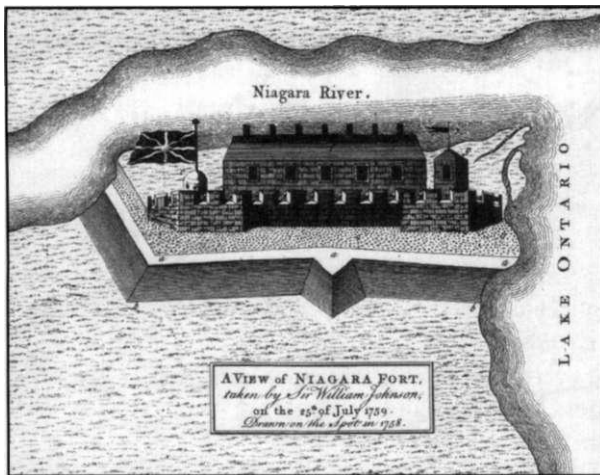
especially in New York, "the toast of the day ... was 'Johnson forever!'"<sup>68</sup> Although Johnson should receive much of the credit for the defeat of the French relief force at La Belle Famille, as well as for his decision to follow Prideaux's war plans, detractors began to clamour for a more even-handed appraisal of his actual role at the siege of Fort Niagara. By the time Johnson assumed command of the siege, Prideaux had already brought it to the verge of victory. With the British forces only 100 yards away as the defences of Fort Niagara steadily crumbled, victory over the French was inevitable. Some regular officers who had opposed Johnson's promotion continued to question his actual contribution to the victory. Nearly a year after the battle, Lieutenant Colonel Massey reported several inconsistencies in Johnson's official report of the siege to Prime Minister William Pitt. In a statement meant to dispel the myth that Johnson's Iroquois allies contributed significantly to the British effort at Niagara, Massey declared:

...as I hear the Indians have got great Credit, by that day, in Europe, I think I shou'd not do justice to the Regiment, I have the Honour to Command, if I wou'd allow savages, who behav'd most

dastardly to take that Honour, which is deservedly due, to such of his Majesty's Troops as was in that Action, and to who, shou'd I explain this fact to, but to your Excellency, so remarkable for rewarding Merit.<sup>69</sup>

Massey was not simply a disgruntled regular officer lashing out against Johnson as the recipient of the laurels of victory. In fact, Massey's appraisal of the Iroquois role in the siege of Fort Niagara was accurate. On 12 July 1759, the third day of the siege, the Iroquois decamped to La Belle Famille, where they awaited the conclusion of hostilities. Throughout the expedition they negotiated with the Indian allies of the French in order to avoid participating in the conflict. Finally, all the Iroquois allies, except for a small number of the most loyal Mohawks, stayed clear of the engagement at La Belle Famille. However, "as soon as the French began to retreat, all the Iroquois who had been wavering on the sidelines were off in hot pursuit with tomahawks and long knives, whooping and screaming as they butchered the stragglers."<sup>70</sup>

Following the surrender of Fort Niagara, Johnson composed a battle report which Francis Jennings describes as "a masterpiece of



A sketch of Fort Niagara made in 1758, one year before the fateful battle in which the French surrendered the fort to the British. Notice the fort is already adorned with the British Union flag. (Published in *Royal Magazine*, London, September 1759)

ambiguity."<sup>71</sup> He placed himself at the head of the British force at La Belle Famille when in reality he remained at his command post. Numerous officers did not receive credit for routing their French adversaries, including Lieutenant Colonel Massey and Captain De Lancey.<sup>72</sup> In the final analysis, although Johnson should be credited for gaining substantial Iroquois support for the initial stages of the siege, for following the battle plan of his unfortunate predecessor, and for succeeding to convince the hesitant regulars to accept his leadership, he had little influence over the actions of his Iroquois detachment during the siege.

Sir William Johnson has been hailed as a great military leader by numerous biographers who more often than not relied on questionable sources to reach their conclusions. During his early years as an entrepreneur in the Mohawk Valley and elsewhere, Johnson developed sound relationships with the Iroquois Nations, especially the Mohawks. In time, and most often during periods of military crisis, the British colonial government turned to Johnson to gain Iroquois support against the French. His role at Lake George in 1755 and Fort Niagara in 1759, however, revealed that his harmonious relations with the Iroquois did not necessarily translate into their wholehearted participation on the field of battle. At both Lake George and Fort Niagara the Iroquois Nations maintained separate diplomatic channels with the French and their Canadian Indian allies. The Iroquois also seldom conformed to the roles Johnson hoped they would in battle. Finally, population estimates for

the period suggest that Johnson did not fully tap the fighting resources of the Iroquois Confederacy. The ability of the Iroquois to dictate the extent of their participation in British military campaigns reveals their relative independence in this period. Although the maintenance of Iroquois neutrality could be viewed as a success in and of itself, Johnson's reputation rested on the presumption that his Iroquois allies would fight in battle on the British side. In reality, the reluctance of the Iroquois to participate in battle on British terms, coupled with Johnson's inexperience and dependence on others in conventional and guerrilla operations, raises legitimate doubts concerning his reputation as a great military leader during the Seven Years War.

## Notes

This paper is a shortened version of a significantly longer study written for Professor Ian K. Steele's Colonial American history course at the University of Western Ontario. Professor Steele's guidance in the original writing and subsequent revision of this paper is greatly appreciated.

1. The folklorist and biographer Augustus Buell incorrectly placed Johnson in an influential leadership position for the duration of the Niagara campaign of 1759. According to Buell, the experienced soldier General John Prideaux, unsure of his ability to conduct the siege effectively, gratefully "told Sir William that he should hold him responsible for proper suggestion and advise everyday, and that whenever he (Sir William) advised or suggested anything, he might consider it as done." See Augustus C. Buell, *Sir William Johnson* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1903), 186. David S. Igneri (*Sir William Johnson: The Man and his Influence* [New York: Rivercross Publishing, 1994], 81) claims that "victory at Lake George belonged to William Johnson." Milton W. Hamilton also claimed that at Lake George in 1755, "Johnson had won the battle" and was subsequently "acclaimed as a military leader and the architect of victory," in *Sir William Johnson: Colonial American, 1715-1763* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1976), pp.167, 170.
2. Igneri, *Sir William Johnson*, pp.61-2. The trading post at Oswego on the southern shore of Lake Ontario was a crucial link in the trade network of the region, and also possessed important strategic advantages.
3. William N. Fenton, *The Great Law and the Longhouse: A Political History of the Iroquois Confederacy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), p.475.
4. See Elizabeth Tooker, "The League of the Iroquois: Its History, Politics, and Ritual," in Bruce G. Trigger, ed., *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol.15 (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1978), p.421, for Iroquois population estimates by fighting men.

- Estimates taken from the year 1763 (which do not vary a great deal from those of 1736 and so can be applied to the period 1754-59) are Seneca, p. 1050; Cayuga, p.200; Onondaga, p. 150; Oneida, p.250; Mohawk, p. 160. It can therefore be assumed (by multiplying the estimates of fighting men by four or five, as is the general practice) that the Iroquois Confederacy consisted of more than 7000-9000 people. Therefore, the Albany meeting of June-July 1754 attracted a very small percentage of the Iroquois Confederacy, especially non-Mohawk members.
5. General Braddock arrived in Virginia in early 1755 with 1500 regular troops and orders from the British government. He announced plans for four operations that year, against Fort Duquesne, Nova Scotia, Fort Niagara, and Crown Point. See John Entick, *A Compleat History of the Late War, or. Annual Register of Its Rise, Progress, and Events in Europe, Asia, Africa, and America* (Dublin: Printed by John Exshaw, 1763), pp.3-4.
  6. William Alexander, *The Conduct of Major General Shirley, Late General and Commander in Chief of His Majesty's Forces in North America* (London: Printed for R. and J. Dodsley and sold by M. Cooper, 1758), p.11.
  7. William Johnson's Commission from General Edward Braddock, 15 April 1755, in James Sullivan, ed., *The Papers of Sir William Johnson* (Albany: University of the State of New York, 1921-65), vol. I, pp.465-6.
  8. Ian K. Steele, *Betrayals: Fort William Henry and the Massacre* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.30.
  9. Charles Henry Lincoln, ed., *Correspondence of William Shirley, Governor of Massachusetts and Military Commander in America, 1731-1760*, vol. II (New York: Macmillan, 1912), pp.158-60.
  10. Conference at Mount Johnson, 21 June - 4 July 1755, in Francis Jennings, ed., *Iroquois Indians: A Documentary History of the Diplomacy of the Six Nations and their League* (Woodbridge, CT: Research Publications, 1984), microfilm reel 17.
  11. William Johnson's Speech to the Sachems and Warriors of the Confederate Nations, 24 June 1755, in *Ibid.*
  12. Kaghswughtioni, the Onandaga Sachem, Speech to William Johnson, 29 June 1755, in *Ibid.*
  13. Cayuga Sachems Meeting with William Johnson, 3 July 1755, in *Ibid.*
  14. Steele, *Betrayals*, p.31.
  15. James Thomas Flexner, *Lord of the Mohawks: A Biography of Sir William Johnson* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1959), p. 128.
  16. Hamilton, *Sir William Johnson: Colonial American*, p. 144.
  17. Morris Patterson Ferris, *Account of the Battle of Lake George, September 8th, 1755. Compiled by the Committee on Historical Documents and Lake George Memorial Committee of the Society of Colonial Wars in the State of New York* (New York: [s.n.], 1897), p.6.
  18. Igneri, *Sir William Johnson*, 80. Estimates of the actual numbers involved in this battle vary. Flexner [*Lord of the Mohawks*, 128] gives the number of colonial troops as 4000, while Charles Chauncey (*A Second Letter to a Friend: Giving a More Particular Narrative of the Defeat of the French Army at Lake George...* [Boston: Printed and Sold by Edes and Gill, 1755], microfiche 12) claims that Johnson's army included only 2100 colonials and two or three hundred Indians.
  19. Steele, *Betrayals*, 40, 47; Igneri, *Sir William Johnson*, p.80.
  20. Tooker, "The League of the Iroquois," p.421.
  21. Steele, *Betrayals*, p.37.
  22. Hamilton, *Sir William Johnson: Colonial American*, p.157.
  23. Peter MacLeod, *The Canadian Iroquois and the Seven Years' War* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1996), p.67. Estimates of the number of French soldiers involved in the Battle of Lake George are more consistent than the British ones, probably due to the nature of the sources. The correspondence from General Baron de Dieskau to Count d'Argenson, and "The Report of The Battle of Lake George, by M. de Montreuil," both in E.B. O'Callaghan, ed., *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of New York* (Albany: Weed, Parsons and Co., 1853-87), vol. X, are informed sources.
  24. McLeod, *The Canadian Iroquois*, p.69.
  25. John Almon, *An Impartial History of the Late War: Deduced from the Committing of Hostilities in 1749, to the Signing of the Definitive Treaty of Peace in 1763* (London: Printed for J. Johnson and J. Curtis, 1763). 82. Due to the Indian tendency to avoid attacking well-manned and defended forts (cannon), coupled with their utilization of the French watershed theory (arguing that Fort Edward was located in the Hudson drainage basin and therefore legitimately within British territory). General Dieskau was forced to change his strategy. See Steele, *Betrayals*, p.46.
  26. William Johnson's Account of the Battle of Lake George, September 9, 1755, in O'Callaghan, ed., *The Documentary History of the State of New York*, vol. II (Albany: Weeds, Parsons, and Co., 1849-51), 691. The war council's original plan called for the division of the 1000 man reinforcement force into two separate units of 500. Hendrick "objected to this division, insisting that the whole expedition be sent south together." Steele, *Betrayals*, p.48.
  27. William Johnson's Account of the Battle of Lake George, in O'Callaghan, ed., *The Documentary History of the State of New York*, vol. II, p.691.
  28. Steele, *Betrayals*, p.45. As an aide-de-camp to Maurice, Comte de Saxe, in the French Army in Europe during the 1740s, Dieskau witnessed the benefit of adding "irregular cavalry, hussars (light cavalry soldier), and skirmishers" to a force in order to facilitate scouting, raiding and ambush tactics as an extension of conventional tactics.
  29. McLeod, *The Canadian Iroquois*, p.71.
  30. Baron de Dieskau to Count d'Argenson, September 14, 1755, in O'Callaghan, ed., *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, vol. X, 317.
  31. *Ibid.*, p.317.
  32. Enid McFadden, "The Six Nations and the Seven Year's War: Consensus with the French Indian Allies" (MA thesis, The University of Western Ontario, 1990), p. 12.
  33. Ferris, *Account of the Battle of Lake George*, p.8.
  34. William Johnson's Account of the Battle of Lake George, in O'Callaghan, ed., *The Documentary History of the State of New York*, vol. II, p.693.
  35. *New York Mercury*, 22 September 1755. One common element in the historiography on the Battle of Lake George is that the breastwork and the cannon were not set up until it was evident that the French forces were approaching the camp. This calls into question not only

- the military judgement of Johnson and his advisors, but their common sense as well.
36. Chauncey, *A Second Letter to a Friend*, p. 7.
  37. Steele, *Betrayals*, p.50. See also O'Callaghan, ed., *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, vol. VI, 1005.
  38. Hamilton, *Sir William Johnson: Colonial American*, pp. 164-5.
  39. Igneri, *Sir William Johnson*, p.83.
  40. Conference between Major-General William Johnson and the Indians, 11 September 1755, in O'Callaghan, ed., *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, vol. VI, p. 1012.
  41. McFadden, "The Six Nations in the Seven Years' War," pp.13-14.
  42. William Johnson's Account of the Battle of Lake George, in O'Callaghan, ed., *Documentary History of the State of New York*, vol. II, 691-5; and Captain Wraxell to Lieutenant-Governor DeLancey, 10 September 1755, in *ibid.*, vol. VI, 1003-4.
  43. William Livingston, *A Review of Military Operations in North America* (New York: Alexander and James Robertson, 1770), pp.79-80.
  44. Steele, *Betrayals*, p.54.
  45. Fenton, *The Great Law and the Longhouse*, p.484.
  46. Igneri, *Sir William Johnson*, pp.89-92. Loudoun presided over the British army in America in the most desperate period of the Seven Years War, when the French forces succeeded almost everywhere, from Lake Champlain to the Ohio River. Abercromby simply could not adapt to the wilderness warfare of America. Igneri tells the story of Webb holding his army at Fort Edward when General Montcalm was besieging Fort William Henry, only about 11 miles away.
  47. *Ibid.*, pp.93-4.
  48. Hamilton, *Sir William Johnson: Colonial American*, p.238.
  49. Summary of Indian Transactions, *The Papers of Sir William Johnson*, vol. II, p.886.
  50. Conference Between Sir William Johnson and the Confederate Nations of Indians, at Canajoharie, April 1759, in Francis Jennings, ed., *Iroquois Indians: A Documentary History*, microfilm reel 23.
  51. Hamilton, *Sir William Johnson: Colonial American*, p.242. See also Jennings, *Iroquois Indians*, reel 23, for a more detailed account of the April 1759 Canajoharie Conference.
  52. Hamilton, *Sir William Johnson: Colonial American*, p.243.
  53. James P. Barry, "When Fort Niagara Fell," *American History Illustrated* 3/2 (1968), p.5.
  54. Hamilton, *Sir William Johnson: Colonial American*, p.243.
  55. *Ibid.*, pp.246-7.
  56. Barry, "When Fort Niagara Fell," p.5.
  57. Do., 5. See James Roger Tootle, "Anglo-Indian Relations in the Northern Theater of the French and Indian War, 1748-61" (PhD dissertation, Ohio State University, 1972), pp.337, 340-1, 362, on the degree of Iroquois support in other British expeditions.
  58. Hamilton, *Sir William Johnson: Colonial American*, p.248. See Brian Leigh Dunnigan, "Vauban in the Wilderness: The Siege of Fort Niagara, 1759," *Niagara Fronier2\II* (1974), pp.37-52, for a description of how General Pouchet followed the tenets of Sebastien Le Prestre de Vauban in the transformation of the defences of the fort.
  59. Pouchet's Journal of the Siege of Fort Niagara, in O'Callaghan, ed., *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, vol. X, pp.977-8.
  60. See F.J. Hebbert and G.A. Rothrock, *Soldier of France: Sebastien Le Prestre de Vauban, 1633-1707* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989) and Gerard Chaliand, *The Art of War in World History: From Antiquity to the Nuclear Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) for details on the military strategies developed by Vauban.
  61. Dunnigan, "Vauban in the Wilderness," pp.44-5. According to Dunnigan, "Gabions...were wicker baskets, without top or bottom, which could be placed along the trench line and quickly filled with excavated earth in order to form a breastwork for the trench. Fascines...were tightly bound bundles of sticks, used to build up the breastworks and support the lines of the trench".
  62. Brian Leigh Dunnigan, *Siege - 1759: The Campaign Against Niagara* (Youngstown, NY: Old Fort Niagara Association, 1986), p.39.
  63. Ian K. Steele, *Warpaths: Invasions of North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.216.
  64. Dunnigan, "Vauban in the Wilderness," p.47. According to Vauban, "the surest way to carry through a successful siege is to have an army of observation" (Chaliand, *The Art of War in World History*, p.562). Therefore, according to the tenets of Vauban, which General Prideaux had been following throughout the siege, the departure of Johnson's Iroquois could have hampered the progress of the siege.
  65. Dunnigan, *Siege - 1759: The Campaign Against Niagara*, pp.62-3.
  66. Pouchet's Journal of the Siege of Fort Niagara, in O'Callaghan, ed., *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, vol. X, pp.985-6.
  67. Barry, "When Fort Niagara Fell," p.9.
  68. *Ibid.*, p.45.
  69. Dunnigan, *Siege - 1759: The Campaign Against Niagara*, p.90.
  70. Barry, "When Fort Niagara Fell," p.9.
  71. Francis Jennings, *Empire of Fortune: Crowns, Colonies and Tribes in the Seven Years War in America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), p.418.
  72. *Ibid.*, p.418.

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