

The pain hit suddenly, with tightness in my chest, and all at once every ounce of air tried to escape my body. This had happened to me before. Many times.

“Mama!” Miriam screamed, catching me in her arms as I folded to the floor. She helped me to the rocking chair beside her kitchen fire. Unable to stand, I resigned myself to leaning back and looking up at her. After a few minutes the pain stopped, leaving me dizzy and sweaty.

“You need rest,” Miriam said, “weeks of rest.”

I shook my head. As soon as I could speak, I said, “I want to go home. Book me passage on the next boat to Kingston. I can rest on the journey. When Death comes for me, I want to be under my own roof.”

Her eyes brimmed with tears. “Mama, make your home with me. Stay in Niagara where I can care for you.” In her voice I heard the fear—the knowledge—that if I left, she would never see me again.

“Back in Kingston,” I said, “Your sisters can look after me. There’ll be three pairs of hands to share the burden of caring for a useless old woman.”

Miriam took my hand. “No burden,” she murmured, but made no further protest. She saw immediately the practicality of my returning home, and also understood the strength of my desire.

Upon going down to the harbour to enquire, Miriam learned that the *Mississaga* was due to sail from Niagara in one week, on September 13. But when she tried to book my passage, the harbour master told her that all passenger space had been reserved for Lieutenant Governor Simcoe, his wife and children, and their servants.

“Tell them it’s Molly Brant who needs a berth,” Miriam said. “I’m not leaving until you do.”

When this information reached Mrs. Simcoe, she herself ordered that a cabin be provided for me.

Miriam returned triumphant from the harbour, a ticket in her hand and her dark eyes flashing. Those dark eyes are the only feature she got from me. In every other way she takes after her father. In appearance, she is the least Indian of my children.

After a week of rest, I was able to walk without assistance up the *Mississaga's* gangway. It was the evening of September 12. Mrs. Simcoe was already on board. Although the boat was not due to sail until the next morning, it was important to be ready for a favourable wind whenever it arose. On deck a little girl and a little boy, both neatly dressed, stood watching the loading under the careful eye of their nursemaid. Those must be the Simcoe children, I thought, for I had heard that the Governor and Mrs. Simcoe had brought their two youngest to Upper Canada, while their four older girls remained in England with relatives until their father’s term as Governor was completed.

In the evening, while we were still moored, Mrs. Simcoe visited my cabin. It was an honour to be waited upon by the Governor’s lady. I have received, of late, many honours.

Mrs. Simcoe was a small woman with sharp, dark eyes, a tiny face, and a strong, determined chin. She sat down on a chair that was bolted to the floor and regarded me fixedly as I lay back upon my cushions. After inquiring about my health, she made no effort to conceal her curiosity about my life.

She mentioned that she and the Governor had dined with Captain Brant, as she called my brother, and found him to be a charming and most interesting dinner companion. Through her praise, she found the surest way to my confidence. When she asked about my childhood, I told her that I had been born in 1736, or so I believed, for we Mohawk count the years, but do not give them names or numbers. My brother Thayendanegea, I said, was born six years later.

“We lived near Canajoharie in the Mohawk Valley. Our father died while we were young children. After his death, our mother remarried. Our stepfather’s name was Nickus Brant.”

“So you took your stepfather’s name. Was he a white man?”

“No. He was Mohawk, a sachem of the Turtle clan, but he told us that his father’s father had been Dutch. Mother wanted us to take his name. She saw that the world was changing, and wanted her children to be ready. That was why she sent us to the mission school. When we enrolled, they gave my brother the name Joseph. They named me Mary, though everyone called me Molly even then. I did not like my new name, but I got used to it. Only my Mohawk name has power for me.”

“And what is that?”

“Konwatsi'tsiaiénni.”

“Heavens!” Mrs. Simcoe exclaimed. “I couldn’t pronounce that, let alone spell it.”

“My name means that someone lends me a flower. It is a lovely name. I tried to persuade Sir William to call me Konwatsi'tsiaiénni, but he said Molly was more to his taste.”

At the mention of my husband, Mrs. Simcoe's ears pricked up. I am accustomed to that reaction. People have always been curious about our marriage—and who could blame them? But I had said as much as I wanted to. After a few minutes, with apologies for tiring me, Mrs. Simcoe took her leave.

Today I am a respectable woman, fifty-nine years old, the relict of Sir William Johnson, First Baronet of New York. I take pride in that, but do not think for a minute that Sir William raised me up in the world. My family holds high rank among the Mohawk people.

When Sir William first met me, I'm sure he had no idea that we would remain together as long as he lived. But he saw from the start how I might become useful to him.

When I was still a girl, the Mohawk Elders thought I had the potential to become a Clan Mother. As part of my training for this role, they sent me when I was eighteen with a delegation to Philadelphia to complain to the authorities about fraudulent land transfers. An interesting experience for me. The English authorities handled it wisely, once it was explained to them that no one, not even a chief, possessed the authority to sell communal land. The Mohawk elders won a victory there, and I returned to my village knowing something about diplomacy.

But at that age, I was still a wild thing. What I cared about were fast horses and my freedom. When I reached the age of twenty-two, I still had not met a man I liked enough to marry.

It was a horse that brought me to Sir William's notice. I was with friends visiting Fort Johnson, which was not so much a fort as a fortified house. Sir William, as Superintendent of Indian Affairs, kept open house for Indians as well as whites. Mohawks were always welcome there.

On this particular day, several young officers were riding about on the field in front of the fort, showing off their horses' paces. Sir William was present, but I hardly noticed him. At forty-three, he was too old to interest me. The creature that caught my eye was a big bay gelding.

It embarrasses me to remember how I called out to the officer astride the horse as he cantered by, "Give me a ride!"

"With pleasure," he said, and reined in the bay.

With one leap, I was seated behind the rider, and we galloped all around the field, my braids and the fringes of my tunic flying.

When the ride ended, Sir William was livid.

"Take that horse to the stable and cool it down," he said to the young officer. "Remember in future that you are a gentleman, and govern yourself accordingly."

I had jumped down quickly and was striding off with as much dignity as I could muster when Sir William called out, "Just a minute, young woman."

I halted. Nobody disobeyed Sir William.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Konwatsi'tsiaiénni," I said. I held my chin up and looked him straight in the eye so he would know that we were equals. "But you may call me Molly Brant."

As his eyes locked on mine, I kept my features as stiff as a wooden mask, the way I'd been brought up to do in the face of any challenge. For a minute neither of us spoke. Gradually his expression softened from anger to amusement. He smiled. "You pounced like a wildcat upon that horse's back. What else can you do, besides ride horses?"

I was sure he would not care whether I could bead a moccasin or paddle a canoe, so I told him that I knew my letters and numbers, from having attended the mission school.

“I need someone to keep my books,” he said. “Do you seek employment?”

The offer was so unexpected that I had no time to think. Keeping books did not sound difficult. White people “kept” chickens and pigs, creatures that had to be fed and confined. That might be hard work. But books do not eat, nor do they try to escape.

Always eager to try something new, I replied, “I can do that.”

“Come with me,” he said. Sir William took me into the house. When he opened the door to the dark little office he called his counting room, I had the feeling that I was about to cross into the unknown.

Sir William opened a ledger that rested on a stand and explained what I would have to do. Quickly I realized that keeping books meant writing down what you spent and what you earned. At the mission school I had learned to add and subtract, which appeared to be all the arithmetic a bookkeeper needed.

We agreed upon a salary of twenty pounds a year, in addition to my room and board. He promised that I would not be housed like an indentured servant or a slave. I was to have a room of my own with a feather bed.

I did not like the way Sir William's eyes lingered upon my body when he mentioned the feather bed. His reputation was well known. He had sired bastards all over the County, showing no preference for white women over Indians. Yet I believed that I would be safe from his advances, for he had his mistress already living at Fort Johnson, a big-bosomed German named Catherine Weissenberg, who had already borne him three children. Sir William unashamedly acknowledged these little ones, Nancy, Polly and John, as part of his household.

Having no desire to become a second mistress, I maintained an air of dignity on all occasions, especially when alone with Sir William. From time to time, I reminded him that my

rank was high among the Mohawk people. He knew this. My influence among my people was one reason he valued me. For, as Superintendent of Indian Affairs, his first duty was to maintain good relations with the Mohawks, as with all the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy.

Increasingly he consulted me about one issue or another. I remember the time he asked what I thought was my people's greatest need.

"Most of my people consider it to be secure possession of our lands," I answered. "But in my opinion, education is as great a need."

"More mission schools?" he asked.

"That's a start. But I meant higher education, to fit us for business and diplomacy. Look at my brother Thayendanega. Is he not as clever as your son John? With the same education, could he not also become a man of power and influence?" This John, Sir William's legitimate son, was his heir.

"Possibly," Sir William said. "Your brother is a likely lad."

Sir William did not mention the subject again. But I noticed that he kept an eye on my brother, who frequently visited Fort Johnson. Though only sixteen, Thayendanega was handsome and well spoken. He was also clever and ambitious.

I was not surprised when, two years later, Sir William sent my brother away to school in Connecticut. He could see that Joseph, as Sir William insisted on calling him, had talents far beyond those needed for hunting and for war.

The *Mississaga* weighed anchor at six in the morning, and we passed a rough day, sailing into a strong headwind. I remained in my cabin, fully dressed but lying on my berth, having promised

Miriam that I would rest on the two-day voyage. Late in the afternoon Mrs. Simcoe came to see me.

“I find that remaining on deck keeps me from become seasick,” she said. “It is only the desire to see how you fare that has brought me below.”

She sat down and, tilting her head, gave me an appraising look. I had changed from the plain, black gown I had worn the previous day to one of fine, dark blue wool with deep silken fringes across the yoke and along the sleeves.

“I admire your style of dress,” she said. “It suits you well.”

“Thank you. Sir William also approved. He wanted me to wear the finest silks, satins and velvets, but I always insisted upon fringes. To me, clothes without fringes do not look complete.”

Mrs. Simcoe smiled as her hands smoothed the skirt of her pale grey gown. “I must speak to my dressmaker about the addition of fringes. When I return to England, I might introduce a new fashion.” She rose. “Now that I know you are well, I shall return to my cabin to write in my diary. I make an entry every day, if possible. Someday I intend to publish my diary as a book.” Before opening the door, she turned toward me. “Miss Molly, have you ever thought to keep a diary?”

“Me?” I laughed.

“You could do it. There are many who would love to read about your life.”

After she had gone, her words remained with me. She was right. But I would never seek to publish the story of my life. My memories are locked in my heart, and there they shall remain.

There I was, a Mohawk maiden living under the same roof as Sir William Johnson, to say nothing of Catherine Weissenberg and their three children. It was obvious that Sir William

admired me. I was pretty, with fine features, smooth skin, and a graceful figure. Had I made myself available, he would gladly have taken me as a second mistress.

Catherine must have suspected this, for she did not befriend me. In fact, she seldom spoke to me and was never in my presence if she could avoid it.

As time went by, Sir William seemed less old to me, especially when he took off the long white wig that he wore in public. His natural hair was dark and hardly touched with grey. But I was determined to be his bookkeeper and not his concubine. Thus I avoided giving him smiles that he might mistake for invitations, and I always conducted myself with decorum. No more leaping onto horses' backs for me.

Then Catherine died. She had cut her finger slicing potatoes. The cut became infected. Within a week, blood poisoning killed her, leaving Sir William stunned.

I had never felt that he loved her deeply. She was a servant, below him in social class. If he cared for her, it was to the same degree that he cared for his dogs. But to have her so suddenly struck down, a woman in her prime, leaving three small children! Only a heart of stone would not be moved.

Her funeral was small, attended by her children, the household staff (including me) and Sir William. Afterwards, I chanced to enter the counting room to complete certain entries in the ledger, and there was Sir William sitting by the fire. The room was small, dark and private. Probably he had not expected his solitude to be disturbed. When he raised his head, I saw tears in his eyes.

This was no time to stand on ceremony. Instead of excusing myself and withdrawing, I pulled up a chair and sat beside him.

"Truly, sir, I am sorry for your loss," I said.

He reached out to take my hand. I did not pull it away.

“Miss Molly,” he said, “Catherine was loyal and obedient and she lived only to please me. I fear that she received little in return.”

I did not answer. We sat there by the fire, my hand in his, for perhaps half an hour until a servant brought word that two officers had come to call. My sympathy must have touched him, as his remorse had touched me.

“You do me good, Miss Molly,” he said as he left to greet his guests.

I made no entries in the ledger that afternoon, but took Nancy, Polly and John for a walk along the river. It was a fine spring day. We brought with us one of Sir William's beagles. The children threw sticks for the dog, and their spirits seemed brighter from the exercise.

Upon our return, Sir William invited me to join the company for dinner. This surprised me, for Catherine had never dined with Sir William's guests. I sensed that something new was about to begin.

That night he came to my bed, quietly opening the bed curtains, slipping between the sheets and taking me into his arms. He kissed my lips, my eyes, my breasts.

This is the way it will be, I thought. I am his woman now.

It did not disturb me that he should bed me on the night of Catherine's funeral. Death makes the need for life more vivid. But it is not the sort of thing I want the world to know.

Within that same year, 1759, I gave birth to Peter, our first son. From then on, I was busy mothering Nancy, Polly and John, as well as my own child. I continued to keep Sir William's books, and my duties increased as he gave into my charge his entire estate.

His duties as Superintendent of Indian Affairs carried him frequently from home, but he was with me often enough to beget seven more children over the next fifteen years.

Sir William was always famous for his hospitality. After he built Johnson Hall, a handsome house considerably larger than Fort Johnson, we were constantly entertaining guests, both Indian and white. There was always plenty to eat and drink. Our guests did as they pleased. Sir William and I normally retired before midnight, but we would hear the talking and laughing continue downstairs until three in the morning.

There was serious purpose behind all this hospitality, for revolution was brewing. In the Mohawk Valley there were many who wished to break away from Britain. Sir William's responsibility as Superintendent of Indian Affairs was to keep the Iroquois nations loyal, for if there should be war, England would need their help. I was of great assistance to my husband in this. It pleased my people to see that I was an equal partner in Sir William's life.

My husband foresaw the coming war, but did not live to witness it. In 1774 he died of a stroke suffered while delivering a speech to an Iroquois council. He left me two hundred pounds and a female slave.

John Johnson, Sir William's heir, took over the title and the estate. As was proper, he took up residence in Johnson Hall. I could have continued to live in the small dowager house nearby, but I was only thirty-eight and needed activity in my life. With Sir John's approval, I moved to Canajoharie with my children and opened a general store.

Canajoharie was where I expected to spend the rest of my life, but the outbreak of war changed my plans. With my children, I was driven from the Mohawk Valley, taking refuge first at Fort Niagara and then at Fort Haldimand on Carleton Island, near the place which later became Kingston. Along the way, I became a diplomat in my own right.

In the morning, just before the Mississaga docked in Kingston, I heard a tapping at my cabin door.

“Come in,” I called, suspecting that my visitor was Mrs. Simcoe.

There she stood before me, arrayed in a long, grey travelling cloak, and wearing a bonnet lavishly trimmed with silk flowers. She closed the cabin door.

“I have come to bid you farewell,” she said. “You must be happy to be home.”

“Very happy. I have three daughters in Kingston, as well as a comfortable home. My house, as you may know, was the government's gift to me, along with my pension.”

“From what I have heard, you earned a greater reward than anyone could pay. Governor Simcoe has told me that without your persuasion, the Iroquois nations would not have remained loyal to Britain. And you did more than that, he said. You supplied arms to Loyalists. You gathered information that led to the British victory at Oriskany.”

“Yes, I did all that.”

The silence that fell between us was broken by the sound of voices outside the cabin and loud thumping above us on the deck.

“I must join my husband and children,” she said. “We must prepare to disembark.” The Governor's lady opened the door and with a slight bow she said, “It was a pleasure to have made your acquaintance.”

“The honour is mine.”

I listened to her footsteps retreat along the passage until they were lost amid the general noise. My own packing was done. For a few minutes I had time to dwell upon the memories locked in my heart.

I had indeed rendered service to England by carrying on my husband's work after he died. I had also raised eight children. And when the war ended and settlement of Upper Canada began, I helped to obtain for the Six Nations the grant of the Haldimand Tract, six miles wide on both sides of the Grand River. That was my last achievement. I pray that my people will find prosperity there, and a lasting home.

Notes

Contemporary Observations

September 13, 1795. On board the *Mississaga*. At 6 this morning we weighed anchor. The Ft & Newark [now Niagara-on-the-Lake] looked very pretty under a rising Sun as we left Niagara River. The wind is fair & we keep the South Shore so I hope to discern the entrance of the Genesee River. . . . Orders were given for my accommodation that no person should have a Passage to Kingston on the *Mississaga*, but I relented in favour of Brant's sister who was ill & very desirous to go. She speaks English well & and is a civil & very sensible old woman. *Mrs. Simcoe's Diary.*(Ed. Mary Quayle Innis). Macmillan of Canada. 1965.

December 9, 1793. Capt. Brant dined here. . . . He wore an English Coat with a handsome Crimson Silk blanket lined with black & trimmed with gold fringe & wore a Fur Cap, round his neck he had a string of plaited sweet hay. It is a kind of grass which never loses its pleasant scent. The Indians are very fond of it.
(Ibid)

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On June 4, 1793, General Benjamin Lincoln attended a ball given at Niagara by Lieutenant Governor Simcoe. Among other details of the ball, General Lincoln observed:

What excited the best feelings of my heart was the ease and affection with which the ladies met each other; although there were a number present whose mothers sprang from the aborigines of the country [These included the daughters of Sir William Johnson and Molly Brant.] They appeared as well dressed as the company in general, and intermixed with them in a manner which evinced at once the dignity of their own minds and the good sense of others. . . .
(Quoted by Mary Quayle Innis, *ibid*, p 10)

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Indian agent Daniel Claus commented in 1779, "One word from her goes farther with them (the Iroquois) than a thousand from any white man without exception who in general must purchase their interest at a high rate." Alexander Fraser, commanding Carleton Island in 1779-1780, declared that the Indians' "uncommon good behaviour is in a great measure ascribed to Miss Molly Brant's influence over them, which is far superior to that of all their Chiefs put together."

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Molly Brant died at her home in Kingston on April 16, 1796, at the age of sixty. Her body was interred in the burial ground of St. George's Church, where St. Paul's Church is now located.

Joseph Brant was born in 1742 and died in 1807 at his home in the place that would become Burlington, Ontario. His house is now Joseph Brant Museum.

Sir William Johnson (1715-1774) emigrated from Ireland at the age of twenty-three in order to manage the land granted to his uncle, Admiral Sir Peter Warren. Knighted for his services in the French and Indian Wars (1755-1760), Johnson was a shrewd trader and businessman. His Indian name, Warragghivagey, means He who does much business.

Sir William Johnson and Molly Brant had eight children who survived infancy, two sons and six daughters. They were educated in Montreal. One son died in battle and the other became a farmer. The daughters all married, most to non-aboriginals. Within a few generations, Molly's descendants were thoroughly anglicized.