

# Molly Brant: Textual Representations of Cultural Midwifery

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New York State's Mohawk River bisects a region of farms and small towns decaying with quiet elegance beside the superhighway that drained the life from their tiny business districts. North of the Mohawk Valley, the Adirondack Mountains begin their rise toward the High Peaks. To the south, rounded hills, home to the Mohawk Indian tribe for 8,400 years, roll away along the Schoharie Creek ("Summer Archeo," 12). The land bordering the river was and is a valuable combination of forest and fertile wetland laced with connecting waterways that link the area to Canada through Lake George and Lake Champlain. Easily approached through these waterways, the area has a troubled history, full of claims and counterclaims and disputes over use and ownership. Contact between Native American and European claimants to the area occurred early, and, although literal ownership of the area passed into European hands in the eighteenth century, the struggle for control over the textual presentation of the region has never been definitively concluded.

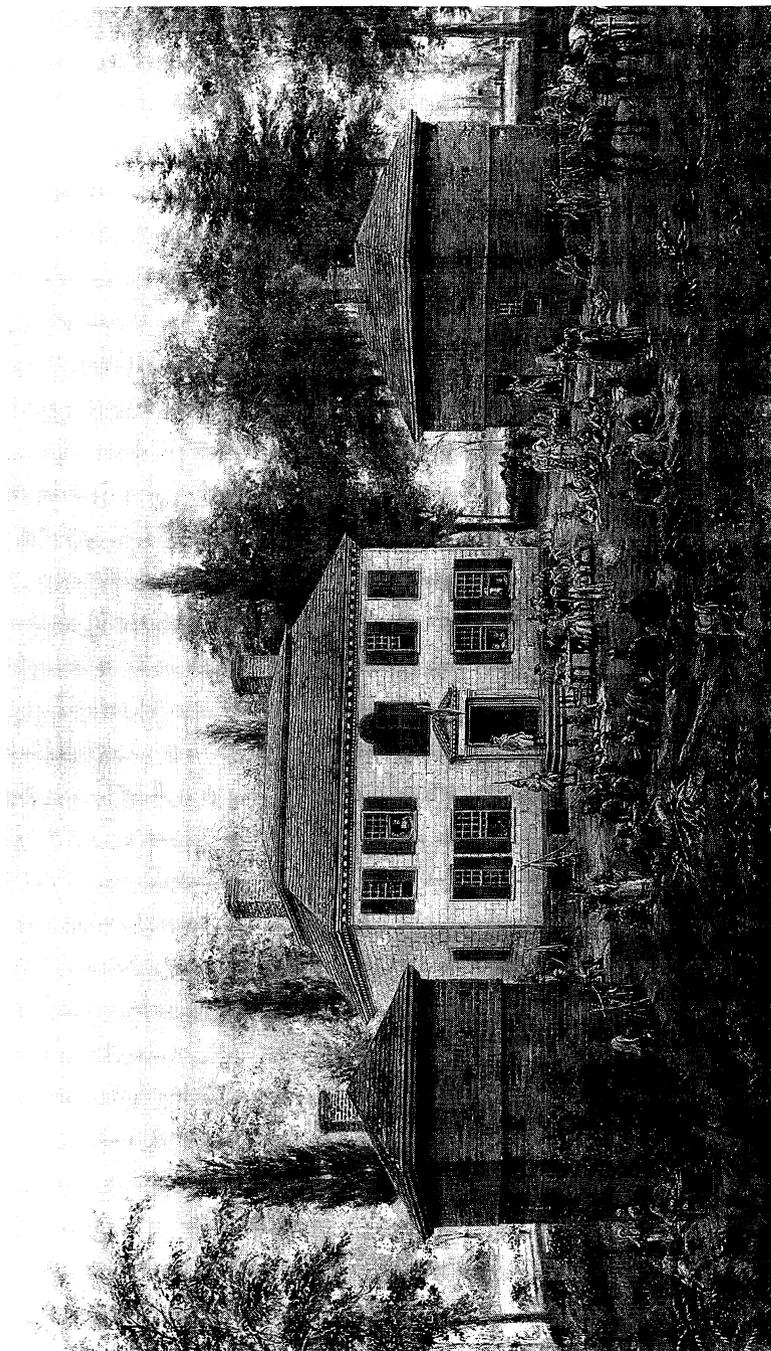
By 1608, the year of Samuel de Champlain's expedition down the lake that bears his name, a ferment of conflicting claims already made for a near-constant state of instability. Three nations of Native Americans, "the Algonquins along the St. Lawrence and the New England coast, the Iroquois stretched across what became New York State, and the Hurons on the shore of the lake named after them," raided back and forth, attracted by excellent hunting and fishing and, occasionally, by the need to settle clan feuds (Kittler, 18). Early Dutch, French, and British adventurers carried European politics into the wilderness. Until the Revolution scattered the Native Americans and terminated European hopes for

domination, power shifted from one group to another as alliances were made and broken, each ethnic group acting according to the dictates of self-interest.

Relations between Europeans and indigenous peoples proceeded here, as on other frontiers, partly through the midwifery of a Native American woman whose involvement with a European man granted her a voice in two cultures. Molly Brant, a woman from a prominent Mohawk family, became the consort—in fact, if not in law—of the valley's most powerful landowner, an Irish entrepreneur named William Johnson, whose name is still woven into the geography of the region from the Mohawk River as far north as Lake George. The site of his original settlement is Johnstown, New York. North of Johnstown, near Johnson Mountain, lies the hamlet of Johnsburg; to the west is St. Johnsville.

Johnson's pro-British activities earned him a New World baronetcy and a fortune. Molly Brant's statesmanship secured Johnson's influence among the Mohawks, enabling him to increase his land holdings and bind his network of supporters together until his death on the eve of the American Revolution. With Molly's help, Johnson held the New York Mohawks to the side of Great Britain, despite the pro-French sympathies of their Canadian kin. With Molly at his side, Johnson entertained ranking British officers, colonial politicians, and Iroquois chiefs, maintaining a treacherous balance among groups whose competing interests threatened continually to spill over into armed conflict. Because Molly's loyalty meant Johnson could be secure about matters at home, he was able to travel freely, consolidating his holdings and securing markets for his furs and other trade goods. Through his connection with Molly and her family, Johnson held a position of advantage when disputes over Mohawk land erupted with neighboring settlers (Kelsay, 90). Even after Johnson's death, Brant's efforts on behalf of his heirs and his British allies continued.

Leered at by historians, demonized by novelists, the scant factual evidence of Molly Brant's activities has, for two centuries, remained a nagging footnote to the clouded historical narrative of the Mohawk Valley. Along New York Route 5S, which parallels the Mohawk River, the names of signatories to Committee of Safety documents, settlers named *Nellis*, and *Countryman*, and *Fonda*, remain prominent on their descendants' rural mailboxes (Penrose). If some of those families became prosperous due, in part, to Molly Brant's success in extending the valley's fragile peace, little has been written to balance the negative impression so long fostered in print. Native Americans, expelled from the Mohawk Valley during the Revolution, have not written about Molly until recently, possibly because, among her own people, she shares the blame with Johnson for that expulsion. In reality, her watchful diplomacy, and Johnson's, may have stopped some of the more aggressive settlers from acting earlier to attack Indian lands. Literary and historical narratives trivialized Molly's efforts, Europeans having seized control of a text already in the making when they arrived. The older narrative remains, drawn into the maps of the region, recalled with regret and occasional bitterness by settler descendants and Native Americans alike. Molly



**Figure 1:** An Indian Council at Johnson Hall. *Collection of the Albany Institute of History and Art.*

Brant's story is a Mohawk Valley subtext, a record of distortion offered and accepted in the name of guilty nationalism. Brant's treatment in print serves equally as an illustration of women's centrality to the historical narrative of the region, since much of the historical dialogue, in fiction as well as factual commentary, exists as an extended conversation about Mohawk Valley women, who became, in the years following the Revolution, the textual equivalent of Mohawk Valley land.

The ancient Iroquois trail, which metamorphosed into Route 5S, connected tribes of the Iroquois Confederacy—the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Seneca, and Iroquois. Historical discourse along the trail began among those tribes with pictorial records woven into wampum belts (Lyons, 41). French Jesuits recorded their missions among the Iroquois tribes and the Revolutionary-era Committee of Safety preserved its correspondence, much of which consisted of complaints against Loyalist neighbors and plans to blunt the influence of the Johnson family (Penrose). Early post-Revolutionary histories depended heavily upon local gossip and the flawed recollections of elderly residents (Hamilton, ix). William Stone, a mid-nineteenth-century historian, gained access to the Johnson family's store of letters, as well as to diaries left by Sir William and his white heirs. Stone published a biography of William Johnson and another of Joseph Brant, Molly's brother, attempting to be scrupulous in documenting their activities. Arthur Pound, Milton Hamilton, and James Flexner expanded upon Stone's scholarship. Among them there is general agreement on the documentable acts of Johnson's life: his business and political activities, his work among the Mohawk Indians, and his military career. Information about Molly in these texts is largely speculative, occasionally bordering on prurient suggestion. Stone's biography of Joseph Brant is remarkably silent about Molly. A later biography by Isabel Thompson Kelsay contains attempts to document the facts of Molly's life amid a great deal of speculation about her motives. An artistic biography-in-verse by the contemporary Mohawk poet Maurice Kenny lends an impression of Molly's impact upon the Mohawk culture. Kenny's prose introduction provides some documentable fact to support the poems, but Kenny's unwillingness to describe Molly *through* Johnson and Joseph necessarily leaves gaps.

Indeed, Molly's experience cannot be historically or artistically separated from that of Johnson because Johnson committed so much of his life to paper. Joseph Brant could read and write—he had attended Reverend Wheelock's school for Indian boys which eventually grew into Dartmouth College—but Joseph was less inclined than Johnson to chronicle his own activities (Kelsay, 71-72). Until Kenny, impressions of Molly were filtered through the consciousness of whites.

Sir William Johnson was born in Ireland. He identified early on with the British despite a childhood spent surrounded by evidence of English mismanagement (Flexner, 9). In 1737 or 1738, Johnson sailed to Boston where his uncle, Peter Warren, engaged him to occupy Warren land in the Mohawk Valley, and "to

cultivate a farm with servants and slaves Warren would supply, to lease Mohawk land to settlers, and to establish a store primarily for the tenants” (Flexner, 15). Warren’s charge to Johnson reflected the European assumption that Indian land was fair game to be appropriated by whites, by negotiation and deceit if possible, by force if necessary (Kelsay, 27). Johnson moved into the Mohawk River wilderness at a time when the rough give-and-take of the frontier fur trade began to be replaced by the kind of community required for agriculture.

The frontier had not been wholly tamed. Johnson’s neighbors across the river in Fort Hunter were British soldiers living amid such squalor and filth that Johnson’s brother, writing during a visit from Ireland, asserted that as many as forty might die in a day, many to be buried in shallow graves on Johnson’s lawn (Smy, 15). The soldiers had formed the habit of taking “Indian wives” for the duration of their postings, and a number of these women lived around the fort (Flexner, 15).

Seeing his chance for wealth and prominence, Johnson sowed grain crops and entered into the fur trade. He made wide-ranging contacts along the valley in the interest of peace for profit—acquainting himself with soldiers, European settlers, local Mohawks, New York politicians, and his uncle’s contacts in Boston. Like the soldiers, Johnson perceived that relations with Mohawk women would serve him the double advantage of assuring his personal comfort and cementing his ties to an indigenous population able to make or break his fortune in the fur trade. With singular focus, Johnson began to insinuate himself into the tribal life of the Mohawks, causing his brother to remark on his willingness to sleep in Indian dwellings, eat a rough diet, and engage in all things as an equal with the Mohawks (Smy, 18).

The Mohawks reciprocated by adopting Johnson, calling him *Warraghiyagey*. Johnson interpreted the name to mean “a man who undertakes great things” (Flexner, 40). Arthur Pound, one of the twentieth-century biographers, said the name meant “he who does much business” (70). In either case, the Mohawks appear to have divined Johnson’s on-the-make rakishness. During England’s New World struggles against the French, *Warraghiyagey* campaigned among the Mohawks to secure their support for Britain and, for a time, his intervention was crucial. Unwilling to commit troops in sufficient numbers to effectively counter French encroachment, the British depended upon Johnson’s Indians to make up their shortfall in manpower. Further, the British in America lacked an organization to rival that of the Jesuits who secured the loyalty of the Canadian Iroquois by living among them, feeding them, healing their sick, teaching, and baptizing (Kenny, 199). The Jesuits weakened Iroquois culture, making their converts dependent upon them and, therefore, more liable to act decisively in the interests of France. To some degree, Johnson acted in this capacity among the Mohawks, supplying gifts of food, clothing, weapons, and liquor, allowing Indians to camp around his home and easing their contacts with British officers. Johnson, however, respected the tribal culture. He spoke at councils, donned Indian clothing, and immersed himself in ritual (Kelsay, 47-48). Clearly, he encouraged



**Figure 2:** Photograph of Fort Johnson.

a level of dependency, but, in the main, he respected the political, social, and spiritual constructs of tribal society. Johnson's death in June, 1774, thrust his heirs, including Molly, into prominence (Stone, 31).

When Britain was forced to turn her guns upon her own colonists, Johnson's son, Sir John, his sons-in-law, Guy Johnson and Colonel Claus, and the Mohawks entered jointly upon the precarious task of keeping their Mohawk Valley neighbors from breaking into all-out warfare against the Crown (Flexner, 350-352). Able at first to rely upon economic influence and seat-of-the-pants diplomacy, they willingly supported Indian/Loyalist raids on farms and Sir John took to the field for Britain when circumstances demanded it. Molly Brant enlisted warriors for the British cause. Her brother Joseph and her older son participated in night raids and full-blown military exercises; the son, Peter, achieved notoriety by taking the surrender of Ethan Allen at Montreal (Flexner, 350).

The joint efforts of the Brant and Johnson families' activities had the curious effect of preserving what remained of the Mohawk culture for a time, when that culture would certainly have been ravished earlier by the land hunger of English, Irish, and German settlers transported to make the wilderness fit for agriculture. "At best hostile to the aborigines whose land they coveted, the frontiersmen were swept by a mighty hatred for every individual with Indian blood. . . ." (Flexner, 178). Although Johnson and his family sided with the British against their settler neighbors as open conflict approached, Johnson's generosity and control had kept the settlers peaceful long enough for many of them to establish themselves firmly

and secure the very relationships that enabled them to prevail against Great Britain.

Molly Brant must bear both credit and blame for Johnson's influence among her people. Molly was not Johnson's first Native American companion, but she was the only one to claim a full partnership in his life, acting as his hostess at home and his emissary among the Iroquoian people. Because she was part of Johnson's private life, however, and because her race and gender consigned her to the margins of history, Molly's day-to-day pursuits are not as well documented as those of her male contemporaries. Further, what documentation survived was written by white males. Although there were Mohawks literate in English in Molly's day, the diaspora forced by eventual British weakness in the field scattered the tribe, disrupting their oral history and casting any written and pictorial records that may have existed into obscurity. If Molly's female contemporaries wrote about her, their work remains lost. The gaps in Molly's life story were filled in by the recastings of novelists who saw high drama in the plight of European settlers beset by raiding Indians and Loyalist intrigue.

Early on, then, Molly became the subject of negative speculation in print. The most staid of Johnson's biographers leered knowingly over Sir William's reputed sexual exploits among the Mohawks and his open relationship with Molly. Flexner generally wrote sympathetically of Molly, but the book jacket of his *Mohawk Baronet* features a drawing of Johnson's face next to the figure of a bare-breasted Native American woman. The only illustration of an Indian female in the text is an idealized portrait of an Iroquois woman, also nude to the waist (Insert, 214). Flexner speculated about the scope of Johnson's sexual athleticism (98-197). Flexner's history suffers from these references, which seem prurient, more derived from gossip and innuendo than established fact.

Arthur Pound, on the other hand, wrote as a sort of apologist for Johnson, asserting as early as page 35 that the morals of the westernmost frontier of European influence were hardly those of the New England Puritans. If Pound's book is more skeptical than Flexner's, it nevertheless cites Johnson's philandering as an item of importance. Oddly, it was Stone, one of the earliest biographers, a writer with access to local legend, who maintained a respectful detachment, merely reporting what he could safely point to in the Johnson papers. Stone did speculate, but his conjectures centered around the unknown father of Joseph Brant. Stone and Pound both claimed that Joseph and Molly were the children of Nickus Brant, whom Stone identified as Tehowagh-Wengaraghkwin, a Mohawk of the Wolf Clan, a man whom Molly and Joseph's mother almost certainly married after the death of her first husband forced a return from what is now Ohio to the village of her birth at Canajoharie, New York (Stone, 3). Kenny reported Molly's birthdate as 1735 (199).

Whatever the circumstances of their parentage, Molly and Joseph Brant were certainly among a generation of Mohawks closely familiar with Europeans from birth. Joseph was educated among whites and became a prominent member of

Johnson's Mohawk entourage (Kelsay, 71). Molly's entree at Johnson Hall would have been automatic because of her brother's acceptance there. Once Johnson's attraction for Molly manifested itself, her culture would have permitted a degree of sexual independence unknown among European farm wives. Like other single women among the Mohawk, Molly would have felt free to enter into a liaison with Johnson, expecting no social or moral condemnation of her behavior (Kelsay, 30). But Molly Brant was no simple paramour. She was a diplomat, a pro-active force in Johnson's house, and a powerful advocate for his causes along the frontier and at the council fires of her people, among whom women traditionally carried considerable influence (Shafer, 90-93).

Biographers agree that the lives of Sir William Johnson, Baronet, and Molly Brant intersected before Molly was out of her teens. Mohawk Valley romance has it that Molly first drew Johnson's attention "around 1753" when she attended a mustering of the local militia and playfully jumped up behind an officer on horseback (Pound, 140). Flexner implied that Johnson and Molly may have connected somewhat earlier, during the lifetime of Johnson's common-law white wife, Catherine Weisenberg (234). Johnson was just coming into the full flower of his influence in the 1750s, consolidating his wealth, demanding recognition for his success in pacifying and negotiating with the Mohawks, seeking recognition for his military prowess (Flexner, 160). Although young, Molly was not unlike Pocahontas in her ability to move among the influential men of her day, both Native American and European. Because the tribes of the Iroquois Confederacy had (and retain to this day) a formal role for women in political life, and because European men found it novel to interact with women who had no notion of Old World limitations governing female decorum, women like Molly had the freedom to cross-interpret culture (Shafer, 85-105). Johnson had previously been involved with a Mohawk woman called "Caroline" who, by all accounts, lacked Molly Brant's flair for public life. Pound claimed that Caroline married Johnson in a Mohawk ceremony, that she bore him a son, and that she died in 1752 (137). Flexner maintained that Pound's assertions were impossible to document (99). In any case, Caroline seems to have confined her interests to the personal. Certainly, Caroline was effectively out of the picture when Johnson noticed Molly. Just as certainly, Molly supplanted Catherine Weisenberg, the European woman Pound described as a purchased servant elevated to the status of live-in lover. Pound claimed that Johnson married Catherine on her deathbed (133).

After Molly moved into Johnson Hall, Weisenberg's children and their governess inhabited an upper floor and avoided contact with Molly and her children. Molly had her own cabin near the main house, but she spent most of her time in the big house and dominated the household in Sir William's absence (Pound, 141). Flexner assumed that tensions in the household found expression in racial terms:

In that biracial household, the Mohawk stateswoman wielded greater prestige than was ever possessed by Catherine (or

Catherine's mother, whose residence with the family was to overlap Molly's by many years). How the Weisenberg women reacted to being thus overshadowed by an Indian, no records indicate. . . . (Flexner, 234)

Weisenberg's children did not, by any accounts, maintain relationships with Molly when they were grown. A contemporary newspaper article chronicling Sir John Johnson's Loyalist history and flight to Canada made no mention of Molly Brant ("Sir John Johnson," B6).

Maurice Kenny, present-day author of a poetic biography of Molly Brant, cites a belief among Johnson's white neighbors that Molly must have been a witch, an indication of a clumsy attempt to explain a prominent white man's continuing fascination with a Native American woman which was probably shared by the Weisenberg women (Kenny, 71). Accusations of witchcraft doubtless served equally to explain Molly's political savvy to a white population raised to believe in male superiority and the supremacy of the European over the New World "savage" (Flexner, 186). Similar bigoted cant, written into history texts as well as historical novels, justified the dispossession of the Mohawks, at least in the minds of the European whites who farmed what was once Indian land (Hamilton, ix). Harold Frederic, a novelist who published a twisted collection of thinly disguised facts in a novel called *In the Valley* in 1890, dismissed Native Americans in general early in the book: "Doubtless," Frederic's narrator asserts, "much of my dislike for the Indian comes from his hateful and ridiculous assumption of superiority over the negro" (49). Frederic goes on to excoriate the Mohawks for filth, unmanly dependence upon women, and cowardice in battle (48-49). Frederic associated Molly with evil and had his narrator describe a late-night visit to Johnson Hall ending with a reference to Molly: "It was Molly Brant herself, nobly erect and handsome in her dark, sinister way, who came to us with word that the moon was up over the pine-ridged hills" (98).

If the valley settlers and their descendants hated Johnson for his economic power over them and for his pro-British sympathies, Molly was a primary vehicle through which that hatred could be expressed. As a woman and a member of a racial minority, Molly made an easy target for colonists motivated not a little by a need to justify the appropriation of other people's wealth and property, as well as for Johnson's white descendants, whose desire to ally themselves with the British peerage doubtless made them wary of appearing tainted by a Native American connection.

Molly's first concern must have been for the eight children she bore to Johnson, a racially-mixed brood caught between warring cultures (Pound, 142). Although not the first of Johnson's Mohawk children, they were among the privileged few to be raised in Johnson's home. Peter, the eldest, received a gentleman's education in Albany and Montreal. The younger children went to school in Johnstown. Flexner speculated that Molly may have permitted the

license accorded young Iroquois children during early childhood, but that, in later life, she saw all her children forced to emulate Peter's accommodation to the European. The girls, for instance, were once nearly assaulted while wearing Indian dress, a group of British soldiers having mistakenly assumed their complaisance. The girls adopted European dress almost exclusively as they grew into adulthood, finding it necessary for the protection it offered (321-322).

Molly's discretion and diplomatic skill, prized among the women of the Mohawk, were likely honed to a fine edge by the need to raise her children as noble progeny amid the poorer, more racially-biased settlers planted on William's acreage. If, partly through Molly's midwifery, a hybrid culture seemed about to be born, the good white farmers surrounding Johnson Hall were determined to use European moral codes to make sure that culture would be counted a stillbirth. Couched in their Christian rhetoric lay the tacit assumption that they deserved Johnson's lands and those of the Mohawks by virtue of their moral superiority, as if Johnson's sexual profligacy and the biracial composition of the family he raised with Molly provided ample justification for theft. Further, Molly's skillful manipulation of events, her comfortable closeness to the local seat of power, made enemies of men who envied her influence. She was effective, for a time, in convincing the Mohawks and the Senecas that their tribal interests resided with the British, even convincing the Senecas to take the field against colonials at Oriskany (Flexner, 349). Further, it was Molly who warned the British at Oriskany that General Herkimer was marching his colonials to the defense of Fort Stanwix (Flexner, 350). Peter fought with his Uncle Joseph Brant and a band of Loyalist officers who returned to the valley after the Loyalists fled, making guerilla raids on local settlers, forcing them to cower in their forts, threatening their tenuous economic foothold in the colonies by burning their crops and their homes. In his novel of the period, *Drums Along the Mohawk*, Walter D. Edmonds describes such a raiding party observing a settler cabin:

There were five of them in front of the warriors. A white man in deerskins, whom Brant introduced as Captain Bull, and who smirked a little as he bowed; a half-breed Indian who turned out to be Sir William's bastard son by Brant's sister, a dark-skinned fellow with an Irish face . . . (162-163)

Just as the tensions in Johnson's household found expression in statements about race, so the novelist made race and gender the vocabulary of threat in a scene showing the citizens of an unfledged nation under attack by hostile, ethnically ambiguous forces. Implicit in Edmonds' description is the possibility that a failure to throw off British rule might mean white families suffering under the yoke of "half-breeds" and "bastards." *Drums Along the Mohawk* represents an attempt to justify through hindsight the expulsion of Johnson, the Mohawks, and other Loyalists. As his will demonstrates, even William Johnson, the adopted

Mohawk, understood that his biracial children would never be permitted positions of leadership among their neighbors. Weisenberg's children and their spouses were named in Johnson's will as his legitimate heirs. They were granted his estates and his decaying feudal overlordship of the surrounding countryside (Stone, 3-34). Molly's children received bequests of land (Flexner, 344).

None of Johnson's heirs were able to enjoy the full extent of his generosity after pro-British activities furnished their neighbors with an excuse to banish them from the neighborhood. A meeting of William Johnson's neighbors, held after his death in 1774, endorsed the principles of the Boston Tea Party (Stone, 34). Thereafter, information and complaints concerning the activities of Johnson's family, including Molly and Joseph Brant, passed frequently from the Committee of Safety to rebel leaders (Stone, 54-55). The Johnson heirs fled to Canada, Sir John and the white family leaving in 1776 just ahead of the Third New Jersey Regiment which had been dispatched to arrest him ("Sir John Johnson," B6). Molly moved after the Battle of Oriskany. Her brother obtained a grant of land from Canada and, in 1784, he settled with other dispossessed Mohawks along a six-mile strip laid out on either side of the River Ouse (Stone, 239-240).

Molly lived out her life at various locations in Canada, continuing to further the aims of Johnson's white heirs whenever she saw an opportunity (Stone, 3-34). Sir John Johnson and Guy Johnson remained active for the Loyalists. Flexner wrote that Molly continued to agitate for the British from Canada, using her influence with the Iroquois people "against the patriots she felt had betrayed the policies of her man. She called for scalps . . . avenged herself on General Schuyler by using tribal pressure to drive his Mohawk mistress from his bed" (Flexner, 351). Villified among the colonists, Molly also became a controversial figure among her own people. Stone noted that Mary Jemison, a white captive among the Senecas, said the Senecas were "tricked" into fighting at Oriskany under the command of Molly's brother, Joseph (243). One of Kenny's poems articulates the Seneca point of view through the voice of Aliquippa, a woman warrior of the Senecas:

Molly and I could not have known then it was the British who  
duded us into fighting, would take the land, and the Americans  
who would accept our flesh, the earth, from her brother Joseph  
—obviously mad, muddled, ostensibly foolish and, with all his  
foreign education, ignorant—who gave away our flesh. (176)

Kenny's poetry represents a view held by at least some of the Iroquois people: that the indigenous peoples of the Mohawk Valley would have better served their own interests if they had ignored British needs in favor of efforts to preserve their ancestral lands (182). If Kenny's Aliquippa forgave Molly in the name of ignorance, her own descendants were not, according to Kenny, always so charitable. Kenny assumed the voice of Six Nations poet and author, Emily

Pauline Johnson, a great-granddaughter of Sir William, in a poetic consideration of the legacy conferred by white blood and the Johnson name:

If you open my skin  
 or slip the edge of a very sharp blade  
 into the folds of my skin  
 at the wrist  
 a smear of blood, a bubble, will rise.  
 That will be his.  
 If I dab at the wrist with a hanky,  
 wipe the skin,  
 I shall do away with him. (181)

Kenny's account has E. Pauline Johnson treat her white ancestry with a touch of contempt. A descendant of a Mohawk chief called Jacob Johnson who was a younger contemporary of Molly and Joseph, Pauline made a name for herself in the cultural life of Canada. Her birthplace is currently under restoration, partly through funding made available by Canadian Loyalist groups who recognize the Brant family as the leaders of "the largest group of Loyalists to settle along the Grand River: the Six Nations who arrived . . . in 1784" ("Grand River Branch," 18).

Even some of Molly's direct descendants left the Mohawk culture. Flexner reported that some of Molly's children married into "prominent" white society in Canada, becoming a Canadian version of Pocahontas' biracial family in the United States (352). The British, whom Molly had served for so long, did not forget her:

Molly received for her services to the Crown during the Revolution valuable Canadian lands and an annual pension of £100. Until her death—she was buried from the Episcopal Church in Kingston, Ontario, on April 16, 1796—she was consulted on Indian affairs by the governors of upper Canada. (352)

Even exile, then, did not dull her taste for statecraft. If some among her descendants deplored her liaison with a white man, they at least retained a sense of their Mohawk legacy. Those who passed into European society, while they lost the Native connection, could congratulate themselves for having solved the identity dilemma that so preoccupied Molly as she raised her children.

Any mistakes on Molly's part—and her petty vindictiveness over the matter of General Schuyler's Mohawk mistress indicates that she was not infallible—must be weighed against her obvious belief that the Mohawks were a *nation*, a power capable of acting with influence among the community of nations claiming sovereignty over their ancestral lands. When she offered Mohawk allegiance to

the British Crown, she did so as a member of an international community. Her concern with family was entirely in keeping with the leadership role expected of a prominent Mohawk woman.

Historians moved to write summations of Molly's life tended toward the sentimental. Pound, anxious to take the long view, credited Molly with the making of Johnson as a figure of history:

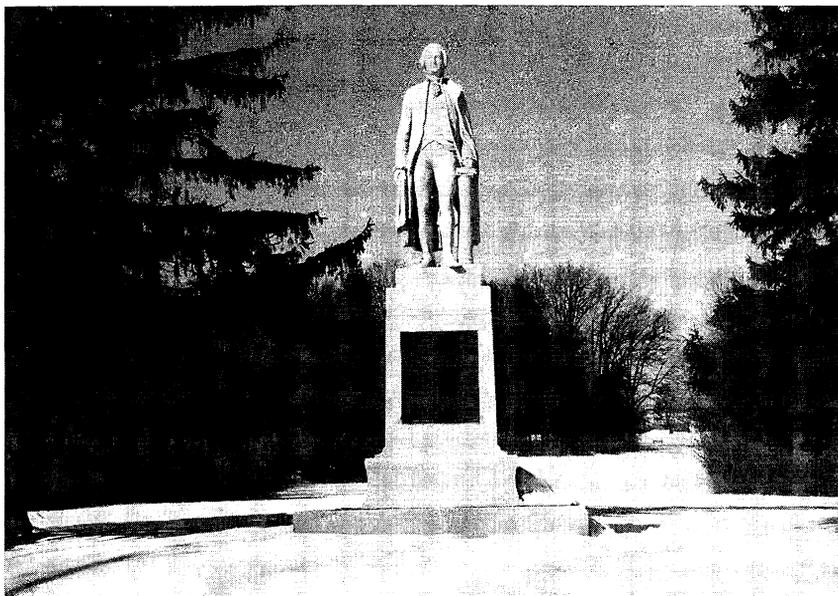
There are statues to William Johnson and will be more as time goes on. Probably there will never be a statue to Molly Brant, and yet it is at least arguable that except for her, holding her fractious man by the loosest possible rein and letting him go and come without question across wilderness America, there might never have been a William Johnson above the rating of successful merchant and colonel of militia, growing fat on the Governor's staff. (144)

Pound, perhaps, underestimated Johnson's drive and his relentless seeking of the operative connection. Maurice Kenny, seeking to remove the aura of evil surrounding Molly's name, may have underestimated Molly's capacity for manipulative diplomacy in lines which characterize her as a simple backwoods girl in love with a powerful man's private self:

I am a girl . . . waiting with a cup of tea,  
waiting in the cold bed across the long night.  
I could not harm the mouse that steals your cheese,  
nor darn your sock lest you pain  
from the bump of thread beneath your toe. (71)

The fragmentary Molly Brant who emerges from the pages of biographies of powerful males and the novels inspired by those biographies is an enigma. Johnson's other women, including Catherine Weisenberg, have merited only acknowledgement in print; even in death, Molly excites speculation. Conclusions about Molly Brant arise from the nature of that speculation as much as from the documented evidence of her experience.

That Molly held sway in Johnson's home with greater longevity and freedom than his other female companions constitutes an implicit denial of the European construct by which Mohawks were cast as untutored savages in the historical narrative of the Mohawk Valley. Molly moved skillfully among powerful men to whom most European settlers had no access at all. Johnson's willingness to trust Molly in the public domain of his existence, even if she moved more freely among Native American contacts than among whites, indicates a consciousness of shared aims that hints at depth and complication in their relationship: theirs was a marriage in practice, if not in print. The quiet romance of Kenny's poetry *may*



**Figure 3:** Statue of Sir William Johnson.

have existed. The solid interdependence of Pound's summation certainly did. Molly's ability to manage eight children and a large estate during Johnson's absences bespeaks strength and personal courage. She lived among white neighbors whose race hatred and political opposition to Johnson would have made them unapproachable in times of crisis, and her Mohawk family lived some miles distant. If she acted out of blind attraction to Johnson, even if she and Johnson knowingly contracted an unsanctioned marriage of convenience to advance congruent personal ambitions, Molly acted effectively until the Battle of Oriskany nullified the hope of British protection for her family.

In Canada, her *loyalty* reaped tangible rewards. In a United States where Europeans needed to justify the seizure of Native American land, her *treason* excited opprobrium in print. But Molly Brant was a Mohawk, not a British subject or a European colonist. If her actions were true to the interests of the Mohawk nation as she perceived those interests, she cannot be regarded as a traitor, even given the dissension and rifts among the Mohawks of her time. The Mohawks maintained themselves during pre-Revolutionary colonization through a policy of neutrality that enabled them to deal with European nations to their own advantage, circumventing the shifting loyalties of Old World conflicts (Kelsay, 12). When war between Old- and New-World Europeans rendered Mohawk policy irrelevant, the tribal social system splintered. Molly's diplomacy helped to hold off total disintegration for a time.

When the treatment accorded Molly Brant by historians and literary artists is weighed against the sketchy documentation of her life experience, two conclusions arise. The first is the degree to which Molly was judged by standards created by and for Europeans, the second is an awareness of the degree to which women became the discursive vehicle for the presentation of conflicting territorial claims.

Until Maurice Kenny published *Tekonwatonti (Molly Brant): Poems by Maurice Kenny*, Molly did not receive consideration as a free-willed agent of change. Historians and novelists alike presented her as an emblematic Mohawk, adjunctive to her brother, or as a meddling concubine kept for Sir William Johnson's convenience. When Molly's name did arise, authors before Kenny evaluated her behavior in terms of its effect upon Europeans. Labelled variously as promiscuous, devious, harmlessly infatuated, or evil, Molly was presented as a narrative justification—for hatred of Johnson, for illegal transfer of land, for racist cruelty—never as a person with a legitimate agenda. Nor was she judged, in print at least, simply as a Mohawk, with her experience weighed against the collective best interests of her people. Kenny wrote: "As her star seemed to fade, the glow of other Native women brightened; Sacajawea, guide to Lewis and Clark, and, of course, the apocryphal legend surrounding the mysterious Pocahontas" (12).

Like Sacajawea, Molly interpreted her culture for white men who needed her expertise. Like Pocahontas, Molly's most significant relationship was a liaison with a white man of power. The available evidence, however, shows Molly to have been less acquiescent, more an advocate for her own interests than Sacajawea or Pocahontas, at least as Sacajawea and Pocahontas appeared in the light of history and its accompanying fiction. Such extraordinary independence reaped benefits in terms of power, respect, and material rewards, but Molly paid a price, posthumously, when her story was written by others.

What seems to be a continuing scholarly discomfort about Molly, an inability to explain her nontraditional behavior and so to close the file on further speculation, stems in part from a historical/artistic dialogue in which women, taken as an undifferentiated mass, were equated with land. Until Cornwallis surrendered, conflict in the Mohawk Valley arose from the issue of land ownership and control. The discourse of territory often took the form of a conversation about women—about where women belonged, who should look after them, and what voice they could claim in the disposition of their own lives. Tangential to these conversations were discussions of sexual morality and race mixing: both issues involve independent behavior on the part of women, and independent female behavior threatened the construct of European moral worthiness to own and control land. Europeans were those who controlled not only their women but also the male impulse to indulge in racially mixed relations.

James Fenimore Cooper created the acceptable metaphor for woman-as-territory in a scene near the conclusion of *The Last of the Mohicans*. The daughters

of a British general, Cora and Alice Munro, fall into the hands of Magua, a vengeful Huron. Force-marched to the village of Tamenund, a Native American nationalist, the women at first stand passively while their fate is argued in English and Huron by Major Duncan Heyward, a suitor to both Munro girls; Hawkeye, the frontiersman; and Magua, who desires custody of Cora, the darker sister (Cooper, 310-322). An earlier attempt at trickery required Heyward to translate Hawkeye's speech into French (276).

The languages represent the cultures competing for control of the Mohawk region; the women are embodiments of the disputed land. The conversation concerns the fate of the women, yet Cora and Alice are, for most of the interchange, as mute as soil, simply waiting for their fate to be determined by the man best able to articulate his own interests. Cora does eventually throw herself at Tamenund's feet in an attempt to plead for her sister. Cora, however, technically falls outside the woman/land metaphor: her father tells Heyward in an earlier scene that she is the child of a West Indian first marriage and the lineal descendant of a slave (163). She is not worthy of the European protective net, and her advocacy, already weak by reason of her gender, is negligible, given her ethnicity.

Later, Frederic and Edmonds carried the woman/land connection into their novels, each presenting the Revolution partly as a war to secure the protection of European women and children. Molly Brant is virtually a demon in their stories, a dark force threatening white women and, by extension, the land they inhabited. Molly Brant, like Cora Munro, did not typify the acceptable metaphor. She was active and pragmatic enough to adapt to the shifting realities of her day. She tried to shape events for the benefit of her family, acting for the British in return for British protection. In short, she grew into her own voice, appropriating a role seen by Europeans as a function of masculinity. Further, her boldness flew in the face of the European tradition holding women to be incapable of survival in the public domain. It is her singular voice that speaks through the writings of everyone who has attempted to define her experience, a voice difficult to ignore because her efforts were, until the Battle of Oriskany, trusted by powerful Loyalists and highly damaging to the colonial cause.

Along the Mohawk Valley and into the Adirondacks, where maps still attest to her family's influence as well as to that of the Johnsons (Brant Lake, Canada's Brant County), Molly's name has continued, into the twentieth century, to crop up in dialogue concerning once-disputed land. In 1951, Milo Nellis, a colonial descendant, took advantage of his tenure as historian for the town of St. Johnsville to defend one of William Johnson's archenemies, a man named George Klock, along with members of the Nellis family who sided with Klock in a protracted struggle with Johnson over Mohawk land. Nellis did not mention the Mohawks as rightful owners. Molly is indirectly invoked as the procurer of undue influence for Johnson: Mr. Nellis claimed the Mohawks were "used" by Johnson to silence competing territorial claims (80). According to Mr. Nellis, Johnson used sex to

bind the Mohawks to himself, then reached beyond the grave through his descendants to cleanse his reputation and consign his rivals to ignominy:

Sir William is greatly praised for his influence over the Indians, an influence that had its stronghold in his licentious practices among them. He and his family and his historians attacked George Klock, and their intrigues and charges have been handed down to posterity unchallenged and unanswered. The Klock, Snell, Nellis, Timmerman and other families in this vicinity were completely wrecked by the war. Their loss paid much of the price of American freedom, neglect of even their memory has been the reward. (81)

Mr. Nellis did not mention that his ancestors chose their war and their role in it, nor did he allude to the lack of options open to the Mohawks. Molly Brant's name and reputation do not die precisely because her personal war was a protracted effort to create choices for her people—and William Johnson was one of "her" people—during the period of transition that so excited Milo Nellis. Juxtaposed against what surely were the *rights* of the Mohawks whose prior claim to the river valley went back thousands of years, the indignation of European settlers pales, and Molly Brant's strength stands as a virtue, whatever her errors in judgement. Viewed as a woman of her people, Molly Brant must be viewed as *effective* if not ultimately *successful* because she, like Johnson, understood that the Mohawk Valley would inevitably pass from tribal hands. With Johnson, she sought to carry something of the Mohawk/European past into a future stabilized by British military might.

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