

*Battle Report: General William Johnson's
Letter to the Governors,
Lake George, September 9-10, 1755*

MILTON W. HAMILTON

ON September 8, 1755, the colonial militia of New England and New York under the command of Major General William Johnson defeated a French force of regulars and seasoned colonials at the head of Lake George. It was not the greatest battle of the French and Indian War, but it came when a victory was sorely needed, and the results were momentous. It retrieved both the glory and the morale so badly depleted when Braddock fell at the forks of the Ohio the previous July. It blunted a French drive which menaced Albany and the northern frontier, set up a new English outpost in that area, and the capture of a distinguished French general was a triumph for the victors and a humiliation for the enemy. It raised hopes of a new and successful offensive into the French territory, which was not realized. Finally, it brought international fame and acclaim to the commander, William Johnson, and propelled him on a significant career. As Sir William Johnson, Baronet, and as sole superintendent of Indian affairs in the northern colonies, he rose rapidly in influence and fortune.

The significance of any event may be largely due to its impact upon the contemporary scene. Timing and favorable reporting may determine the success, or at least the effect, of a military victory. Hence it is always proper to look into the means by which the news is received. A commander who can like Caesar report, "Veni, vidi, vici;" or like Perry write "We have met the enemy and they are ours," is assured of immortality. A first-hand account by the commander in the field certainly deserves a good

press. And this is exactly what happened in the case of the Battle of Lake George. The importance of the battle was dramatized by General William Johnson's "Letter to the Governours of the Several Colonies who raised Troops on the Present Expedition."

The setting of the battle may be briefly outlined. General Edward Braddock at Alexandria, Virginia, in April 1755 had planned three thrusts at the French on the continent. His own expedition to the forks of the Ohio, was to be supported by one against Fort Niagara, led by Governor William Shirley, and by a third against Crown Point under William Johnson. The French, countering these, sent General Baron Dieskau in command of French regulars to Canada. He had expected to strike from Fort Frontenac against the west and to take Oswego. But the defeat of Braddock, and the capture of his papers, changed the French plans. It now appeared that the chief threat to Canada lay in the Crown Point expedition. A garrison left at Fort Frontenac could keep Shirley immobilized at Oswego so General Dieskau led an expedition from Montreal to Crown Point on Lake Champlain. From there he set out with a smaller force of regulars, colonials and Indians to meet the English, or to destroy their outpost at Fort Edward at the carrying place between the Hudson and the lakes.

General Johnson had experienced many delays and difficulties in recruiting and organizing his force of irregulars and Indians. Eventually, he brought about three thousand men from Albany up the Hudson to Fort Edward. This was the northern outpost of the English and here were begun new fortifications. The question now was whether to advance upon the French Fort St. Frederic at Crown Point, via Wood Creek to South Bay, the head of Lake Champlain, or march overland to the head of Lake George, where boats could use that body of water to move north. General Phineas Lyman, second in command, had started a road by the former route but when Johnson arrived it was decided that the Lake George route was better. On August 28, Johnson established his camp at Lake George, and a stream of supplies and men followed him. Then, suddenly, it was learned that the French were approaching.

But let General Johnson's letter¹ tell the story:

Camp at Lake George 9th. Sep^r. 1755

Sir,

Sunday Evening the 7th. Inst. I received Intelligence from some Indians Scouts, I had sent out, that they had discovered Three large roads about the South Bay, and were Confident a very Considerable Number of the Enemy were Marched or on their March Toowards our Encampment at the Carrying Place, where were Posted about 250 of the New Hampshire Troops, and five Companies of the New York Regiment: I got One Adams a Waggoner, who Voluntarily and Bravely Consented to Ride Express with my Orders to Colonel Blanchard of the New Hampshire Regiment, Commanding Officer there; I Acquainted him with my Intelligence, and directed him to withdraw all the Troops there within the Works thrown up. about half an hour, or near an hour after this, I got Two Indians and Two Soldiers to go on foot with Another Letter to the Same Purpose.

About 12 OClock that night the Indians And Soldiers returned with a Waggoner who had Stole from the Camp with about 80 [8] others their Waggons [Waggoners] and horses [Forces] without orders; this Waggoner says he heard and saw the Enemy about 4 miles from this side the Carrying Place; they heard a Gun fire, and a man Call upon Heaven for Mercy, which he Judged to be Adams; the next morning I

¹ There are three existing manuscripts, or contemporary copies, of the letter. That in the Johnson Manuscripts, New York State Library, would have been printed in volume II of *The Papers of Sir William Johnson*, James Sullivan, et al. eds., 13 vols. (The University of the State of New York, Albany, N.Y. 1921-1962) [hereafter referred to as *Johnson Papers*.], but for the policy of the editors not to reprint any document already printed in official publications. The letter from the copy in the *London Magazine* had been printed in the *Documentary History of the State of New York*, E. B. O'Callaghan, ed. 4 vols. (Albany 1849-51), 2:703. This manuscript was damaged in the New York Capitol fire of 1911, but portions are still legible. It is in the hand of Johnson's secretary, Peter Wraxall, and has an endorsement, "A Copy of this Letter was sent to Genl. Shirley." Had the transcription been made by the first State Historian its text would have been included in the galleys left in proof before the fire, and which were used by later editors to fill in gaps in the damaged manuscripts.

The second manuscript copy, in the Henry E. Huntington Library, was in the hand of William Alexander, General Shirley's secretary, and was taken from the copy sent to Shirley. It is printed in *Johnson Papers*, 9:228-34. This is the version printed here, though it differs in the second paragraph where words are given in brackets from the contemporary broadside and newspaper publication. Reference to the Wraxall manuscript shows that the proper reading of this sentence should be: "About 12 aClock that night the Indians & Soldiers returned with a Waggoner who had [left] Stole from the Camp wth about 8 others their Waggons & Horses without orders;" thus both the broadside version and Alexander's copy had small errors. The number "8" is obviously correct, while "Waggons and horses" makes more sense than "Waggoners and Forces." The word "horses" in the Wraxall manuscript could be easily misread for "forces."

The third manuscript is in the library of the Church Historical Society, Austin, Texas. A contemporary copy, it is in the hands of two unidentified copyists. It was mentioned in R. W. G. Vail, *The Voice of the Old Frontier* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1949) p. 255, as in the New York Historical Society, where it had been on loan.

called a Council of War, who gave it as their opinion, and in w^{ch} the Indians were Extreemly Urgent, That 1000 men should be detached, and a Number of their People would go with them in order to Catch the Enemy in their Retreat from the other Camp, either as Victors or defeated in their Designs. The 1000 men were detached under the Command of Col^o. Williams of one of the Boston Regiments with Upwards of 200 Indians. They Marched between 8 & 9 OClock in about an Hour And a half afterwards we heard a heavy firing, and all the Marks of a Warm Engagement, w^{ch} we Judged was about 3 or 4 Miles from us: We beat to Arms, and got our men all in readiness; the fire Approached nearer, upon w^{ch} I judged our People were Retreating, and Detached Lieut. Col^o. Cole with about 300 men to Cover their Retreat: About 10 OClock some of our men in the rear, and some Indians of Said Party came running into Camp, And Acquainted us that our men were retreating, that the Enemy were to Strong for them; The Whole Party that escaped returned to us in large Bodies. As we had thrown up a Breast Work of Trees round our Encampment, and Planted Feild Peices to defend the Same, We Immediately hawled Some heavy Cannon up there to Strengthen our Front, Took possession of some Eminences on our left Flank and got one feild peice there in a very Advantegious Scituation; the Breast work was manned throughout by our People, and the best Disposition made thro' our whole Encampment w^{ch} time and Circumstances would permit; about half an hour after 11 the Enemy appeared in Sight, And Marched along the road in very regular order, directly upon our Center; they made a Small halt about 150 Yards from our breast work, when the regular Troops (whom we Judged to be such by their bright and fix't Bayonets) made the Grand and Center Attack; The Canadeans and Indians Squatted, and Dispersed on our Flanks; The Enemy's fire we received first from their regulars in Platoons, but it did no great Execution being at too great a Distance, and our men defended by the Breast Work; Our Artillery then began to Play on them, and was Served Under the direction of Capt. Eyre during the Whole Engagement in a manner very Advantegeous to his Character, And those Concerned in the Management of it: The Engagem^t. now became General on both Sides: The French regulars kept their ground and Order for Some time with great resolution and good Conduct; but the Warm and Constant fire from our Artillery and Troops Put them into Disorder.—their fire became more Scattered and Unequal; and the Enemy's fire on our Left grew very faint; they moved then to the right of Our Encampment, and Attacked Col^o. Ruggles, Col^o. Williams and Col^o. Titcomb's Regiments, where they Maintained a very Warm fire for near an hour, Still keeping up their fire in the other Parts of our Line, tho not very Strong. The three reg^{ts}. on the Right Supported the Attack very resolutely, and kept a Constant and Strong fire upon the Enemy: This Attack failing, and the Artillery Still Playing along the line, we found their fire very weak, with Several Intervals. This was about 4 OClock, when our men and the Indians Jump'd over the breast Work, Pursued the Enemy, Slaughtered numbers, and took Several Prisoners, Amongst whom is the Baron De

Dieskau, the french General of all the Regular forces lately Arrived from Europe, who was brought to my Tent about 6 O'Clock, Just as a Wound I had received was Dressed; The Whole Engagement and Pursuit ended about Seven O'Clock.—I don't know whether I can get the returns of the Slain and Wounded on our Side to transmit herewith, but more of that by And by; The greatest loss, we have Sustained, was in the Party Commanded by Col^o. Williams in the morning, who was Attacked And the men gave way before Col^o. Whiting, who brought up the rear, Cou'd come to his Assistance; The Enemy, who were more Numerous, Endeavoured to Surround them; Upon w^{ch} the Officers found they had no way to Save the Troops, but by retreating; w^{ch} they did as fast as they Could: In this Engagem^t. we Suffered Our greatest Loss; Col^o. Williams, Major Ashely, Cap^t. Ingersol and Cap^t. Puter of the Same Regim^t., Cap^t. Farrell, a Brother in Law to the General, who Commanded a Party of Indians, Cap^t. Stoddart, Cap^t. Magin, Cap^t. Stevens, all Indian Officers, and, the Indians Say, near 40 of their People, who fought like Lyons, were all Slain. Old Hendrick, the great Mohawk Sachim, we fear is kill'd.

We have abundant reason to think we killed a great Number of the Enemy, Amongst whom is Mons^r. St. Pierre, who Comanded All the Indians; the Exact number on either Side I cannot Obtain; for tho': I sent a Party to Bury our Dead this afternoon, it being a running Scattered Engagement we can neither find all our dead nor give an Exact Account; As fast as these Troops Joined us, they formed with the rest in the Main Battle of the Day, so that the Killed and Wounded in both Engagements, Officers Excepted, must Stand upon One return.

About 8 O'Clock last night a Party of 120 of the New Hampshire Regiment, and 90 of the New York Regim^t., who were Detached to our Assistance under the Command of Cap^t. Maginnes from the Camp of the Carrying Place to reinforce us, were Attacked by a Party of Indians and Canadians at the Place where Col^o. Williams was Attacked in the morning; their Engagement began between 4 & 5 O'Clock; this Party, who, our People say, were between 3 & 400, had fled from the Engagem^t. here, and gone to Scalp our People killed in the Morning; Our Brave men fought them for near 2 Hours, and made a Considerable Slaughter amongst them; of this Party 2 are Killed, 11 Wounded, and 5 Missing; Captain Maginnes, who behaved with the Utmost Calmness & Resolution, was brought on a Horse here, and I fear his Wounds will Prove Mortal; Ensign Falsam, of the New Hampshire Regiment, Wounded thro the Shoulder.

I this Morning Called a Council of War, a Copy of the Minutes of which I send you herewith.

Mons^r. Le Baron De Dieskau, the french General is badly Wounded in the Leg and thro': both his Hipps, and the Surgeon very much fears his Life; He is an Elderly Gentleman, an Experienced Officer, and a man of high Consideration in France; from his Papers I find he brought under his Command to Canada in the men of War lately Arrived at Quebeck 3171 Regular Troops, who are partly in Garrison at Crown Point, and Encamped at Ticonderoga, and other Advantageous Passes

between this and Crown Point; he tells me he had with him Yesterday morning—200 Grenadiers, 800 Canadeans, and 700 Indians of Different Nations. His Aid De Camp Says (they being Separately Asked) their Whole Force was about 2000; Several of the Prisoners say about 2300.—The Baron Says his Major General was killed, And his Aid De Camp Says the greatest Part of their Cheif Officers; also he thinks by the Morning and afternoon Actions they have lost near 1000 men, but I can get no regular Accounts; most of our People think from 5 to 500. We have about 30 Prisoners most of them badly Wounded; The Indians Scalped of their Dead already near 70,—And Were Employed after, the last night, and all this Morning, in bringing in Scalps; and great numbers of French & Indians yet left Unscalped; they Carried off numbers of their Dead and Secreted them: Our men have suffered so much Fatigue for 3 Days Past, and are Constantly Standing upon their Arms by Day, half the Whole upon Guard every Night, and the rest Lay down Armed and Accoutered, both Officers and men Are Almost wore out; The Enemy may rally, and we Judge they have Considerable reinforcements near at Hand, so that I think it Necessary we be upon our Guard, and be Watchfull to Maintain the Advantage, we have gained; for these reasons Don't think it Either prudent or Safe to be sending out parties in Search of the Dead.

I don't hear of any Officer kill'd at our Camp, but Col^o. Titcomb, and none wounded but myself and Major Nicoles of Col^o. Titcomb's; I cannot yet get a Certain return of our dead And wounded; but from the best Accounts, I can Obtain, we have lost about 130 who are Kill'd, about 60 Wounded, & Several Missing from the morning and Afternoon's Engagements.

I think we may Expect very Shortly another, and More Formidable Attack, And that the Enemy will then Come With Artillery; The late Col^o. Williams had the Ground Cleared for Building a Stockaded Fort; our men are so harras'd, And Obliged to be so Constantly on Watchfull Duty, That I think it wou'd be both Unreasonable, and, I fear in Vain, to Set them at Work upon the Design'd Fort.

I Design to order the New Hampshire Regiment up here to reinforce Us, and I hope some of the Designed reinforcem^{ts}. will be with us in a few Days, When those fresh Troops Arrive I Shall Immediately set About Building a Fort—

My Wound w^{ch}. is in my Thigh is very Painfull, the Ball is lodg'd and Cannot be got out. by which means I am to my Mortification Confined to my Tent.

10th. This letter was begun and Should have been Dispatched Yesterday, but we have had Two Alarms and Neither time nor Prudence would permit it. I hope Your Excellency will Place the Incorrectness hereof to the Account of our Situation.

I am Most respectfully &c.

The next morning Johnson and his field officers held a council of war, took stock of their losses and those of the enemy, considered the possibility of a further attack, and what should be

their present policy. They found it impossible to follow up the victory at once, and resolved to fortify and strengthen their position as they awaited reinforcements. And it was resolved that the governments who had supplied the troops should be informed of the victory by "express." "One general Letter to be sent to the Province of Massachusetts Bay, giving as Summary [an] Account as time and Circumstances will Permit of the Engagement of Yesterday & of the Intelligence derived from it. . . ."²

The commander was responsible not to one, but to five provincial governments (New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire); the same report would have to be recopied for the several governors to whom it was sent. It was written or dictated by Johnson to his secretary Peter Wraxall under pressure in the midst of alarms and confusion. Later he noted

it was wrote at different times. Circumstances led us to expect a fresh Attack. two Alarms Actually happened during the time it was writing. An Army like Ours after such Events is not easily restored to Calm. We were all fatigued both in Body and mind. In such a Situation it was both difficult to collect and pen an exact Relation.³

Yet when he calmly reviewed it later he found nothing to change, save a revision of the casualties and an exact report on the numbers of the enemy. But if he was satisfied with this summary report, many others were not. It became almost at once the subject of controversy.

Peter Wraxall, the secretary, who was also aide-de-camp and doubled as adjutant general, had no time to make five copies of the letter so he relied upon the one express being copied *en route*. On the outside of the letter, Johnson added a memorandum to Lieutenant Governor Phips of Massachusetts asking him to make a copy for General Shirley. In Albany, James Stevenson

² *Johnson Papers*, 2:23-25.

³ *Johnson Papers*, 2:48. Cf. also his letter to Governor Charles Hardy, Sept. 16, 1755, in *Documents Relative to Colonial History of the State of New York*, E. B. O'Callaghan; B. Fernow, eds., 15 vols. (Albany, 1856-87) 6:1013. [hereafter referred to as *New York Colonial Documents*.] In this letter Johnson said that he now had more information on the morning engagement. He also admitted that the enemy's delay was a great help, in that it "gave us time to recover & make disposition to receive the enemy." He had also learned from General Dieskau that the Indians had dissuaded him from attacking Fort Edward, believing that it had cannon. This decision was fortunate for the English, "for he would have found our troops separately encamp'd out of the works, and no cannon there, and his victory would have been a very cheap one and made way for another here."

saw the note, opened the letter, and made a copy which was sent to General Shirley at Oswego. This act, which no doubt brought the news to Shirley more quickly than it would have come otherwise, was unauthorized by Johnson and Shirley was angered at having received a second-hand copy.⁴

Upon the death of Braddock, Shirley had become commander-in-chief of the forces in America. He quarreled with Johnson over the Indian auxiliaries for his expedition against Fort Niagara which he claimed Johnson had not furnished, as well as over many other details of the campaign. Because Shirley's army was now stopped at Oswego, and soon was to abandon the attempt on Fort Niagara, he was thwarted and fretful. The success of Johnson was gall and wormwood, and Shirley's reply to the good news was anything but happy. He stood on his dignity as commander-in-chief. "What could be your Reason for postponing My being acquainted with these matters which I ought to have known as soon as possible . . . seems difficult to say." Instead of congratulations, Johnson got a reprimand. He was urged to proceed at once on Ticonderoga, and the judgment of the situation by Johnson and his officers was questioned.⁵ Shirley soon expressed the opinion that holding the present position was unsatisfactory and he did not expect Johnson to succeed.

However, in Massachusetts the news from Lake George was electrifying, for the victory, it was claimed, had been won largely by this province's troops. The General Court directed the Lieutenant Governor to "acquaint the General with the great Satisfaction which this Court takes in the Conduct and brave Spirit shown by the Officers and Soldiers in the late Engagement . . . and the Welcome reception which the News of this seasonable and important Success has met with throughout the Province . . ." The General Court was less happy that some accompanying documents had first reached Governor De Lancey in New York and it wanted all reports and prisoners first sent to Boston.⁶

Stephen Hopkins, Governor of Rhode Island, on receipt of Johnson's letter, was lavish in his praise. And he like many others

⁴ *Johnson Papers*, 2:95, 165.

⁵ *Johnson Papers*, 2:165.

⁶ *Johnson Papers*, 2:102-03.

both in America and England, found much to praise in the General's conduct.

We all rejoice, yea we rejoice much at your Success, yet are not half so Much pleased with that as with your Conduct and Bravery . . . We are not more encouraged by your ardor to engage, than by your Judgment to retreat, as on the one Hand Success can add Nothing to your Courage, so on the other we hope it will take nothing from your Caution.

Also commended was his "Humanity and Beneficence" in treatment of the French general.⁷

In spite of its irregularity as an official report to the governors and commander, Johnson's letter proved to be a journalistic ten-strike. Being official as well as first-hand, it was highly prized as a document. Moreover, its power, suspense, and calm narration of exciting events had the elements of great reporting. Through its lines there stood out romantic personalities: "King Hendrick," the Mohawk Sachem who fell at the head of the Indian allies, the gallant Baron Dieskau, a gentleman and a soldier of repute, wounded, defeated and captured; threatened with massacre by the enraged savages, he was protected from their fury by General Johnson. And here was Johnson, modestly reporting his own wound ("the ball is lodged and cannot be got out") as he praised the men and lamented the dead and wounded. The romantic setting, the ambushade, the clearing on the edge of the lake; the camp fortified with its improvised breastwork of wagons, boats and felled trees; this was an engagement to capture the imagination. It was no wonder then, that it was reprinted up and down the land.

No sooner did Johnson's express reach Boston on Monday, September 15, than the letter was taken to the printers and inserted in the newspapers. The *Boston Weekly News-Letter* had it on September 18; the *Boston Gazette* and the *Boston Evening Post*, on September 22. A week later, under a Boston dateline, the letter was published in the *New York Mercury* and the *New York Gazette*. In Philadelphia, the *Pennsylvania Journal* had it in the issue of October 2, and the *Pennsylvania Gazette* on October 9. Also on October 9, it appeared in the Annapolis *Maryland Gazette*. In Virginia, the *Williamsburg Gazette* had the letter in its

⁷ *Johnson Papers*, 2:90-91.

issue of October 17.⁸ Frequently, the complete letter occupied all of page one, and sometimes a major portion of reading matter in the four page newspapers was devoted to the victory. In other newspapers, as far as South Carolina (*Gazette*), the action was summarized and other accounts were printed. Subsequent issues often published in full the captured French documents which Johnson had sent down to New York.

First news of the victory set off wild celebrations in New York, Philadelphia and Charleston. As other letters, some by eyewitnesses, were published they supplemented or vied with that of the commander. Frequently they were less complete, or represented one view, and some led to controversy.

Peter Wraxall, Johnson's aide-de-camp and secretary, was a civil officer of the New York colony, and felt obliged to send off a letter to Lieutenant Governor James De Lancey. He also forwarded copies of the French General's papers, which were thereupon first published in New York. His letter soon found its way into the *New York Gazette*, September 18, 1755. Already there was concern over the jealousies of the various companies and their commanders, thus Wraxall's letter was amended (or as he said "garbled"), by adding a postscript of praise for General Lyman and other officers. Johnson in his letter had avoided reference to the troops as coming from any particular province. Now, he and Wraxall were vexed by the garbled account. Thomas Pownall later confessed his knowledge of this postscript which he had approved as a "prudent" measure but the Wraxall missive, undoctored, was sent to other governors and forwarded to the Board of Trade.⁹

The part played by General Lyman soon became the subject of controversy since he was second in command. His own letter, written after the battle, was printed in the *Connecticut Gazette* on September 10, and later in the *New York Gazette*, October 6. It

⁸ All of these issues are located in the library of the American Antiquarian Society, save the *Pennsylvania Journal* (Historical Society of Pennsylvania), and the *Maryland Gazette* (Maryland State Library).

The microfilm copy of the *South Carolina Gazette* was consulted in the New York State Library.

⁹ *Johnson Papers*, 2:172; 13:63. *New York Colonial Documents*, 6:1003. There are other differences in the two versions of Wraxall's letter, notably in the fuller account of Johnson's wound in that which was sent to the governors and Board of Trade.

was far from comprehensive or impartial. Because he was writing home, he stressed the part of the Connecticut troops who were in the center and who met the first attack, and he referred to the Massachusetts men who sustained the flank attack. In fact he said that they "alone were attacked." When news of this publication reached the camp at Lake George, it stirred a storm. Colonel Edward Cole of Rhode Island was angered that his men, also in the breastworks and who had covered the first retreat, received no mention by Lyman. He counter-attacked in a letter which challenged not only this version of the part played by the Connecticut troops, but that by Lyman himself. The latter he practically accused of cowardice; of assuming a prone position behind a tree during most of the battle. He called upon Lyman to disavow the letter.¹⁰ Colonel Cole also charged that Lyman or his amanuensis sought to take from General Johnson the credit of the victory by implying that Johnson's wound had kept him from the battle. This Cole denied, stating that Johnson was wounded at two o'clock, and returned to the action as soon as his wound was dressed.¹¹

Such conflicting testimony merely emphasized the value of the official report of the commander. Johnson had been careful not to describe (as a witness) events of the two engagements where he had not been present; the first ambushade and the late skirmish of the New Hampshire troops. Now his account became the basis for two more comprehensive accounts.

¹⁰ *New York Gazette*, Oct. 6, 1755; publication of the Lyman letter in the *Connecticut Gazette*, September 20, was noted by William Smith in his *Diary*, II, 396-97, located at the New York Public Library, where a copy of the *Gazette* is inserted. The *New York Mercury*, Nov. 17, 1755, contains Col. Edward Cole's letter.

Two letters of General Lyman to his wife, describing the battle, are printed in William Chauncey Fowler, *History of Durham, Conn.* (Hartford 1866), pp. 134-38. Lyman's egotism and bias in these (if not intended for publication) is pardonable. They go even further in claiming credit for God and Connecticut: "The whole 1800 were repulsed and drove back by our Connecticut forces in their first attack; and after that by the Province forces . . . ;" p. 134. In his second letter Lyman wrote: "This God did, with only the Province [Mass.] troops, about 1000 or little more, and Connecticut forces, about 100 Rhode Island, and about 200 of the men raised in Connecticut for New York, but they had not much of the battle. The Connecticut forces sustained the whole of the first onset. . . ." p. 138.

¹¹ This controversy is the subject of an article by the writer: "Hero of Lake George: Johnson or Lyman," *New England Quarterly*, xxxvi, no. 3 (September 1963), pp. 371-82. The Cole letter provides a few additional notes to the argument there given.

A leading pamphleteer of the day was the Boston clergyman Charles Chauncy (1705-1787), who earlier had published *A Letter to a Friend* concerning the defeat of General Braddock. Now he brought out *A Second Letter to a Friend Giving a more particular Narrative of the Defeat of the French Army at Lake-George, By the New England Troops than has yet been published*. Dated September 29, it was printed by Edes and Gill in Boston, and was announced in the *Boston Gazette*, October 20, 1755.¹² He quite frankly based his account upon Johnson's letter.

You have probably seen his *Letter to the Governours of the several Colonies* concerned in the Crown-point expedition; giving an account of his engagement with, and success against, the enemy; For it was printed the very day it came to hand, that everyone might be acquainted with its contents. And if you have seen this letter, you must be pleased with it, and conceive a high opinion of the General's merit. Perhaps the best bred *regular* could not have disposed matters under like circumstances with greater wisdom.—And the vein of modesty that runs thro' his whole narrative cannot but recommend him to all who are capable of discernment.—But as his letter was wrote so soon after the action, it was impossible the account of things should be particular enough to satisfy the curiously inquisitive.¹³

From various letters, some in the press, and from personal accounts of officers, like that of Major Hoare sent back to the Massachusetts government from the Camp, Chauncy elaborated his account and occasionally corrected the General's. Johnson said the first engagement was three or four miles from the camp; but Chauncy's informer accompanied a surveyor who measured the distance with a chain and found the ambuscade no more than

¹² *A Second Letter to a Friend: Giving a More particular Narrative of the Defeat of the French Army at Lake-George, By the New-England Troops, than has as yet been published: Representing also the vast Importance of this Conquest to the American-British-Colonies. To which is added, Such an Account of what the New-England Governments have done to carry into Effect their Design against Crown-Point, as will shew the Necessity of their being help'd by Great Britain, in Point of Money.* Boston: N. E. Printed and Sold by Edes and Gill, at their Printing-Office, next to the Prison in Queen-Street, M,DCC,LV.

A later publication in London of the two letters in one pamphlet emphasized the Lake George battle and included the name of Johnson on the title page:

Two Letters to a Friend, on the Present Critical Conjuncture of Affairs in North America; Particularly on the Vast Importance of the Victory gained by the New England Militia under the Command of General Johnston, at Lake George, Being the most genuine Account of this Action yet published. Boston, Printed; London Reprinted, For T. Jefferys, at the corner of St. Martin's Lane, in the Strand: MDCCLV.

¹³ *Second Letter*, p. 3.

two and a half miles from camp. Johnson was vague about the time; he said Colonel Williams marched about 8 or 9 o'clock, and about an hour and a half afterwards they heard the firing; and that about 10 o'clock some men of the retreat came running into camp. Now Chauncy reported his informer took out his watch when the firing was first heard and pencilled the time—five minutes before eleven; and “the retreat was not finished till $\frac{1}{4}$ after 12.” Chauncy also reported the losses on both sides from later figures, and gave an interpretation of the importance of the victory. He could not avoid some panegyric for the contributions of Massachusetts both before and after the event, and included some caustic remarks about the small help from New York, and the lack of interest and help from the southern colonies.¹⁴

The second published contemporary account was more ambitious. Samuel Blodget's *A Prospective-Plan of the Battle near Lake George on the Eighth Day of September, 1755* was noteworthy for its engraved sketch of two engagements with a key to identify men and objects. The numbered key amounted to a running account of the battle. First printed in Boston for Richard Draper, its appearance was announced by an advertisement in the *Boston Gazette* on December 22, 1755. The plan was engraved by Thomas Johnston of Boston.¹⁵

Samuel Blodget, formerly in the New Hampshire company, was a sutler, a noncombatant on the scene, and an eye-witness. He described his point of vantage, how he observed the action, and related how he checked and obtained further information from others. He, too, sought to correct the record. He assumed that his readers had seen the General's letter, for he noted “The Breast-work Gen. Johnson speaks of in his Letter;” and again “The Field-Piece on the Eminence Mentioned by General Johnson in his Letter.” Hence it was a commentary and a supplement to the official report.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁵ *A Prospective-Plan of the Battle near Lake George on the Eighth Day of September, 1755. With an Explanation thereof; Containing a full, tho' short, History of that important Affair.* By Samuel Blodget, Occasionally at the Camp when the Battle was fought. Boston, New-England: Printed by Richard Draper, for the author, MDCCLV.

For bibliographical comment and location of issues, and of two versions of the *Plan*, see Vail, *Voice of the Old Frontier*, pp. 250-51.

When his pamphlet appeared, Blodget sent a copy with an obsequious letter to General Johnson, dated Boston, Jan. 7, 1756. He explained that it was "at the Desier of a number of Gentlemen of this Town."

"Not that I think [that I] by any Means can add any Light to the Generall of that Campaign the Least of whos advantages and Knoledg far Exseads My Best and Greatiest." But it had been done to correct false ideas and impressions of the campaign, and "in Vindecation of your Honour."¹⁶

This pamphlet, too, was widely copied, and the plan was re-engraved by Thomas Jefferys for publication in London, February 2, 1756. The London version of the plan, frequently reprinted without the key, has become better known and is the standard illustration of the battle. Yet the re-engraving produced a number of errors and was less exact than the original.¹⁷

But, to return to General Johnson's Letter. In spite of the frequent newspaper publication, printers brought it out as broadsides, of which four separate printings have been identified.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Johnson Papers*, 2:104-05.

¹⁷ See the discussion of these editions of the Blodget map in Vail, *Voice of the Old Frontier*, pp. 250-51.

¹⁸ Three variants of the broadside were listed by Dr. Vail in *Voice of the Old Frontier*, pp. 254-55; and a fourth, #490, under which some of the others were no doubt included by Sabin and Evans. I have checked these holdings to list them under the proper variants.

#487 Camp at Lake George, |Sept. 9, 1755. |To the GOVERNOURS of the several Colonies who raised the Troops|on the present Expedition, |Gentlemen,| . . . |I am, Most respectfully, |Gentlemen, |your most Obedient Servant, |Wm. Johnson. |[n.p. 1755]. 3 p. folio (31 x 19 cm.).

MWA, MHI, MH, NTI, FPJCB, MWIW, DLC, VIU.

#487-A [same as above, but with last word, "in," of last line on page 2 omitted.]
MHI, MIU-C.

#488 Camp at Lake George, |Sept. 9, 1755. |To the GOVERNOURS of the several Colonies who raised the Troops|on the present Expedition|Gentlemen,| . . . |I am, Gentlemen, |most respectfully|your Most Obedient Servant, |Wm. Johnson. |[n.p., 1755] 3 p., folio (29.5 x 19 cm.)

MWA, MHI, MWIW-C.

Judging from the closing phrases, this was the copy followed in the *London Magazine*, xxiii; 544-46.

Correspondence of Lawrence C. Wroth and Matt B. Jones in the bibliographical file of the John Carter Brown Library helps to fix upon the place and date of printing. Jones in a letter of Nov. 6, 1934, quotes a letter of Benning Wentworth to Josiah Willard, Portsmouth, Sept. 20, 1755 (Mass. Archives, v, 227) in which he speaks of receiving "in yours of the 16th a printed copy of Major General Johnson's letter." Since Charles Chauncy (*supra*) noted that Johnson's letter was printed in Boston the day it was received, this

It was in this form that it first found its way abroad and in England the news of the victory was as eagerly seized upon as in America. Some glory for British arms, some good news from North America, some new hero or new hope for the future was bound to find a place. The first London publication was in a *London Gazette Extraordinary*, dated October 30, and re-printed in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for October. This, however, was an abbreviated and somewhat incorrect version. The *London Magazine* for November explained that the letter was received from Governor Benning Wentworth of New Hampshire, included in his letter to Sir Thomas Robinson, Secretary of State, dated September 19, 1755. The governor noted that he had "just received by the post the inclosed printed copy of Major General Johnson's letter from his camp at Lake George." This apparently was one of the broadsides, printed in Boston, as he did not mention a newspaper. The *Gentleman's Magazine* followed in November with more details of the battle, and boasted that when it had printed the General's letter in October, "no other magazine had a syllable."¹⁹

The effect of these publications upon the English reading public is a matter of conjecture. But the fame of William Johnson as a paragon of military virtue, "a second Marlborough," and even as "the heaven-sent general," was undoubtedly a conse-

would mean the broadside was printed September 15 in Boston. On September 19, Wentworth wrote his letter to London and enclosed the broadside. And the first newspaper printing was dated September 18. Chauncy's letter was dated September 20.

Dr. Wroth compared the broadside with others and noted that the type and the water-marked paper suggested the printer may have been John Draper. Lawrence C. Wroth to Lathrop C. Harper, Nov. 3, 1941.

#489 Camp on Lake GEORGE, Sept. 9. 1755|To the Governors of the several Colonies who raised |the Troops on the present Expedition. |GENTLEMEN| . . . |I am, most respectfully, Gentlemen,|Your Most Obedient Servant,|Wm. Johnson. |

[Followed by ten line postscript dated at *Newport*, Sept. 20. 1755. Telling of the French losses as learned from a "Person who left the camp the 12th Instant," the French losses, that they "had found and buried old *Hendrick*, the great Mohawk Sachem;" that Baron Dieskau was still alive; and that he had met on the road "about 5000 Men Marching to join our Army."]

3 p. folio (31.5 x 19 cm.) RPJCB.

It is evident that this unique example was printed later, perhaps on the date of the postscript, at either Boston, or Newport.

¹⁹ *Gentleman's Magazine*, xxv: 473-74; 519. *London Magazine*, xxiii: 544. The first printing in the *Gentleman's Magazine* was not literal, paraphrasing some portions, omitting some details, and shortening the letter. That in the *London Magazine* (which was copied in the *Documentary History of New York*, *supra*), was taken from the broadside.

quence. King and Parliament were not slow to reward the victorious commander. On November 18, the official reaction was announced at Whitehall: "The King has been pleased to grant unto W^m. Johnson of New York, America, Esq. and his heirs Male the dignity of a Baronet of Great Britain."²⁰ Further honors and rewards were expected; the *Gentleman's Magazine* noted that "it is said, if he returns victorious from Crown Point, he will be invested with the order of the Bath."²¹

Contemporary critics marveled at this rapid rise to fame and position, and some who were unfriendly caviled that the honors were misplaced or undeserved. Historians have raised the question whether his title was not due chiefly to powerful friends, or to the sly intrigues of such persons as Thomas Pownall, who was ambitious to be governor of Massachusetts and to discredit Governor Shirley. One historian citing the text of Sir William's patent, printed in the *Johnson Papers*, which says nothing of Lake George, but refers to help given to the king's forces in Ireland, concluded that the title was not a recognition of his military success.²² Yet that it was entirely due to his military success there can be no doubt. In fact, it is my opinion on the basis of the evidence here given, that the baronetcy was not only due to his victory at Lake George, but that it came as a direct consequence of his "Letter to the Governors."

In the letter from Secretary Robinson to Sir William Johnson, dated Whitehall, Nov. 11, 1755, it was stated:

Your printed circular letter, containing an account of the success of His Majesty's Arms in the Action near Lake George on the 8th Sep-

²⁰ *Documentary History of New York*, 2:703, quoting the *London Gazette*.

²¹ *Gentleman's Magazine*, xxv: 519-20.

²² Patent printed in *Johnson Papers*, 2:343-50. This was quoted in Lawrence Henry Gipson, *The British Empire Before the American Revolution*, VI: 190, with the conclusion that Johnson's title was not due to his victory at Lake George. Francis W. Pixley, *History of the Baronetage* (London, 1900), pp. 18-39, explains that the so-called "Baronets of Ireland" were first created as a reward for help given in suppressing the rebellion in Ulster in 1612. The patents from that date, first in Latin but after 1732 in English, contained the statement that the baronet "generously and freely Gave and Furnished to Us an Ayd and Supply large enough to Maintain and Support Thirty Men in Our foot Companies in Our said Kingdom of Ireland to continue for three Whole Years for the Defence of our said Kingdom and Especially for the Security of the Plantation of our said Province of Ulster." Until 1827 the patents also conferred knighthood on the baronet's eldest son at the age of 21, and so Sir John Johnson was knighted in 1765. It also conferred the right to use "the bloody hand of Ulster" upon the escutcheon.

tember and the gallant behaviour of the troops under your Command, has been laid before the King, and I have his Majestys Command to take this early opportunity of expressing to you the sense, His Majesty has of the great and eminent service you have performed in the defence of his just rights, and in your Country's cause. . . .

The prudence, Judgment and precaution, which you showed in sending to the New England Governments before the action for reinforcements, must likewise have its praise, which is so justly due to the whole of your Conduct. . . .

. . . the King, has been graciously pleased to confer upon you, as a distinguishing Mark of His Royal favour and approbation of your Conduct, the dignity of a Baronet of Great Britain . . .²²

At this time news of colonial rivalries which emerged after the battle had not reached the ears of king and ministry. Defeats, disasters, mismanagement, graft, and divided (or diverse) authority helped to make America the graveyard of military reputations. A reversal of that trend would have been welcome; but Loudoun, Abercromby, and even Amherst, were to reap the whirlwind.

²² *New York Colonial Documents*, 6:1020. In a letter to Henry Fox, dated Fort Johnson, April 2, 1756, Sir William Johnson acknowledged his title, and graciously passed on the recognition of their services to the officers and men.

"On the 20th March I was honoured with Sir Thomas Robinson's Letter to me bearing date the 11th November.

"His Majesties gracious Approbation of My Conduct previous to, and on the 8th of September, and the honour He hath been pleased to confer on Me as a Mark of His Royal Favour, adding thereto the Condescension of directing His Secretary of State to signifie the same to me, I receive with Sentiments of the highest Gratitude and dutiful respect. . . .

"I have transmitted to the Governours of the severall Provinces whose Troops I had the honour to Command those Paragraphs of Sir Thomas Robinson's Letter which signifie to me, the Honour of His Majesties Approbation of the Behaviour of their Officers, and private Men, His Royal Commendations of the Alacrity and Dispatch with which, their Reinforcements were Raised, and His Majesties Paternal Assurances of His Favour and Protection." *Johnson Papers*, 2:436-37.

Two years later a Portuguese publication in Lisbon, purported to be a translation of the Johnson letter. According to Vail, *Voice of the Old Frontier*, p. 262, this was "one of a curious series of at least ten tracts on the French and Indian War published in Portuguese in Lisbon between 1755 and 1758."

RELAÇÃO | De huma batalha, succedida no campo do Lake Giorge na America Septentrional, entre as Tropas Inglezas commandadas pelo Coronel Guilherme, e as Francezas das quaes era Commandante o General Barão Dieskau, aos 30. de Junho do presente anno de 1757. | Traduzida no Idioma Portuguez. | Extrahida de huma Carta escrita pelo mesmo Coronel, logo despois do successo, ao General Wensvort, Governador da nova Hampshire, e mandada inclusa em outra escrita em Postmaute Capital da mesma Provincia. [orn.] LISBOA: Anno M.DCC.LVII. | Com todas as licenças necessarias.

The translation, if such it can be called, was very free, or "idiomatic." The date of the battle was June 30, 1757! Portions of the original letter were omitted and the names were very badly garbled. The heading said the troops were commanded by Colonel William (Guilhelmo); not Major General Johnson, but the letter was signed "Wilhelmo Gonson."

William Johnson's military career had reached its apogee; in December he resigned his commission to devote his time to his other task—the management of Indian affairs. In January he was elaborately feted in New York. It was not until February 1, 1756, that news of his title reached America, and even later before he was informed in his house on the Mohawk. Then in February Parliament voted him a purse of £5000, he was commissioned as Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the Northern District, and a Colonel of the Six Nations. His fame in England was still in the ascendant. His virtues were extolled in Parliament, and his portrait was issued (February 1756) in a glorifying mezzotint, as "Major General of the English Forces in America." While other commanders failed, or were broken, he was to rise again as a military victor in the taking of Fort Niagara in 1759. His dominant position in handling Indian affairs in colonial America for the rest of his life rested upon his success in that field and upon his strength of character, without help from his military ventures. But if there was a turning point in his career, it was no doubt on that fateful day in September 1755.

How often, indeed, has capricious fortune depended upon the accidents of communication. A timely report, a good press, and a receptive public can pave the way for recognition and fame. So the fame, fortune and career of Sir William Johnson may well have sprung from his "Letter to the Governours," so hurriedly composed upon the field of battle.

Copyright of Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society is the property of American Antiquarian Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.