

## COLONEL THOMAS DONGAN, GOVERNOR OF NEW YORK.

BY EDWARD CHANNING.

---

Governor Dongan was of good family. He was in no sense an adventurer of any kind. In 1698,—eight years after his retirement from service in New York, he succeeded to the family title of Earl of Limerick,—so that we may know he was of noble Irish birth. His name was pronounced “Dungan,” and spelled in all kinds of ways,—“Duggan,” “Dongan,” “Dungon;” this multiplicity of spelling has worked somewhat in his favor, perhaps somewhat against him; a great many entries in the records have been supposed to relate to him when, very likely, they relate to somebody else,—and those who have studied the earlier records have even taken entries as far afield as “Duncan” or “Doncan,” as belonging to him.

For twenty years, more or less, he had served as colonel,—perhaps not all that time as colonel,—but had official connection in charge of, or in connection with, one of the Irish or English regiments in the service of the King of France; for fifteen or twenty years, or more, he had lived in France and had acquired the use of the French language, so that he could speak it, and, when not over-excited, could write it. The appointment of this Roman Catholic,—who was in the confidence of James, Duke of York,—as governor of New York in 1683, was one of those providential chances which have so often befallen us in our past, in guiding the path of the United States, and in guiding the path of civilization in America. Furthermore, Dongan possessed aptness for politics and the effervescent enthusiasm which are so highly developed in the Irish race. He was a man

who could make friends with anyone he wished; he possessed a certain personal magnetism, certain personal qualities, which enabled him to get along with Dutchmen and Englishmen in New York, and with Frenchmen in Canada.

In order to understand Dongan's work, it is necessary to refresh one's recollection of American history. In 1680, the English-American colonies stretched along the Atlantic coast from the feeble settlement in Maine to the feeble settlement in South Carolina, and intervening between the New England colony and the Chesapeake Bay plantations, was the recently conquered Dutch New Netherland occupied partly by Englishmen,—perhaps half the population, or possibly a little more, of the Hudson Valley, excluding the eastern end of Long Island, was English; the rest was Dutch; and as recently as 1674 the province had been in the hands of the Dutch.

The political condition in New York was not unlike that which has prevailed in later times. The people of New York were very much dissatisfied with their governors and with their proprietor, and they had, to all intents and purposes, rebelled against the officials of the Duke of York. The Duke of York had collected taxes, imposed revenues by decree, without asking the consent of anybody in New York. In 1680, Andros, who was then governor, had forgotten to renew the decree, so that when the collector, William Dyer,—son of the famous Mary,—collected the revenue imposed on the cargo of certain vessels, the merchants protested. Dyer was arrested and indicted on the charge of treason for taking the property of the king's subjects without legal warrant. In 1683, when Dongan came out as successor to Andros,—the lieutenant-governor having administered affairs in the interval,—he had a very difficult part to play. He at once got the situation there under control, and he was very much aided in doing that by being authorized by James, the proprietor, to summon a representative assembly, which was the first body of the kind that ever met in New York. He was also authorized to grant charters of incorporation to the cities of Albany and New York, of the kind that the people of Albany and

of New York wanted. With his peculiar qualities, his command of resources and language, he at once ingratiated himself with the people of New York, so that he had them behind him as no governor had before his time, and very few have since.

The most important achievement of Dongan was his establishing a definite limit to French dominions. There was no more dangerous period in the history of the English and French relations. In 1670, Jean Talon, Intendant of New France, despatched Daumont de Saint-Lusson to take possession of the interior parts of North America for the king of France. This, Saint-Lusson performed with abundant ceremony at Michillimackinac in 1671. The next steps in gaining the interior for France are associated with La Salle. It is customary to look upon his work as tracing the course of the Mississippi and identifying the river itself. La Salle's work was really in opening up the "hinter-land,"—the region in behind the seaboard,—to French traders and colonists.

The force that hindered La Salle and that constantly interfered with the carrying out of the French policy as to the possession of the interior of North America was the League of the Iroquois, or the "Five Nations," as they then were. On looking over the maps which were published in the first sixty years of the eighteenth century, one is impressed with the great extent of the territory which was dominated by the Iroquois. The limits of their domains as given on the maps of Jeffreys, Kitchin, Huske and Mitchell, differ considerably in extent, but even in the narrowest limits that can be assigned to them, they occupied not only a great extent of ground, but happened to live in that precise part of North America which was of the highest strategic importance. Their "home domains," if one can use such a phrase, extended from the hills of western New England along the valley of the Mohawk River to the southern shore of Lake Erie. Indian tribes living to the west and south of the territory actually occupied by the Iroquois were tributary to them. Their hold upon these outlying dependents was contingent upon their success in war. In the fifty years after 1675, their power was at the highest.

The good-will of the Iroquois was necessary to the French and it was necessary to the English, and whichever had possession of the Iroquois and had their good-will, was pretty certain to succeed in the long run. The Iroquois were, however, a difficult set of people to secure; they were the craftiest of the Indians that we know of,—and they instinctively realized that it was a good thing to have the English and the French more or less at war, to have two powerful nations intriguing for their good-will, and to give their confidence not too closely to either the English or the French; so the Iroquois had coquetted with the Dutch and French and then with the English and the French, until the time of Louis XIV. In 1665, he sent over to Canada the regiment of Carignan-Sallieres to compel them to take the French side.

In the winter of 1665-66, these French veterans with some Canadians marched over the ice and through the forests from the St. Lawrence southward to attack the Mohawk tribe of the Iroquois confederacy and found themselves in front of the town of Schenectady. To their surprise, they discovered that it was no longer Dutch, but with the rest of New Netherland had been captured by the English, less than two months earlier. This was the moment for a bold leader to have attacked the Dutch-English settlements on the Mohawk and upper Hudson; but, fortunately, the French commander did not seize the supreme moment. Instead, he led his men back to Canada. Later, the French came southward again, and this time found their way to the Mohawk villages and inflicted some slight damage. This vigorous action on the part of Louis XIV was the one thing needed to throw the Iroquois into the arms of the English.

The French also sought to conquer the Iroquois by converting them to Christianity, but this idea did not commend itself to the Indians. On the contrary, they resented it, because they instinctively realized that conversion to Christianity would weaken them as a military power. Moreover, the Jesuits were opposed to selling brandy to the natives,—indeed, there is nothing more creditable in the history of the French power in Canada than the fight of

the Bishop Laval of Quebec against the traffic in liquor with the Indians. The Iroquois, however, liked the sensation of intoxication. As they could get drunk easily and cheaply on rum at Albany and could only get drunk with difficulty and at considerable cost on brandy procured from Montreal, they naturally turned to the Dutch and English fur-traders. These, moreover, had no objections to providing them with fire-arms and ammunition. These weapons made the Iroquois superior to the western tribes or the "Farr Indians" as they were called. The Iroquois not merely made the western tribes tributary to themselves, but they acted as middleman between the Albany fur traders and the securers of fur in the West. Thus a constant supply of peltries came to the Hudson by way of the Iroquois villages and every skin that came to Albany meant just so much less profit to the French traders in fur. The control of the Iroquois was equivalent to the possession of North America, and that the English and not the French secured that great advantage was due to Thomas Dongan more than to any one else.

Dongan's position was precarious, for his employer, James, Duke of York, as well as the king, was in the pay of Louis of France, and Sir John Werden, the duke's secretary, was constantly writing to Dongan not to embroil himself with the governor of New France. At almost any moment, Louis might put so much pressure on James that he would disown his agent in America. On the other hand, Dongan, being a Roman Catholic, had the confidence of duke and king, and his knowledge of the ways of Frenchmen gave him a chance to hold his ground and at the same time to maintain a species of official friendship.

In July and August, 1684, Governor Dongan and Lord Howard of Effingham, Governor of Virginia, held a conference at Albany with sundry chiefs of the Five Nations. Two most important objects were accomplished: the Iroquois were induced to desist from attacking the back settlements of the Chesapeake colonies and acknowledged themselves subjects of England. As a token of their amicable intentions, five axes were buried in the south-east corner

of the court-yard of the fort,—“one in Behalf of Virginia and their Indians, another in Behalf of Maryland and theirs, and three for the Onnondagas, Oneydoes, and Cayugas.” To emphasize the fact that the Indians and their territories were under the protection of the king of England, the arms of the Duke of York were affixed to the walls of the Iroquois fortified towns or castles with the consent of their inhabitants and defenders.

Dongan now began a correspondence with the French authorities at Quebec which was destined to continue for some years. In 1684, he informed Count Le Febvre de la Barre, who was at the head of the administration of New France, that the Iroquois were under the government of New York and had traded with the people of that province for about forty years and with no one else except secretly. Moreover he informed the French governor that the province of New York included all the territory south and south-west of the Lake of Canada. On his side, La Barre denied that the Iroquois were British subjects. This Dongan would not admit for one moment and reiterated the declaration that they were subjects of the British crown and under the government of New York.

La Barre now organized an expedition to punish the Senecas for their repeated assaults upon Frenchmen and their disregard of French interests. Upon learning of this threatened attack on the subjects of England, Dongan wrote that he should be very sorry to hear that La Barre had invaded the “Duke’s Territories” after his promises and expostulations. As an additional dissuasive, he told the Frenchman that he had caused the Duke’s coat-of-arms to be displayed on the Indian forts. La Barre replied that French missionaries had labored among the Iroquois for twenty years; that he was about to punish evil doers among them; and that he hoped Dongan did not desire to protect robbers, assassins, and traitors, since in that case, he “could not distinguish their protector from themselves.” The expedition was undertaken, but turned out badly, owing to the advanced age and incapacity of La Barre and the lack of coöperation of those under him.

His soldiers sickened and starved, and, making a disgraceful treaty with the Senecas, he returned precipitately to Montreal and Quebec and was soon afterwards recalled to France. His successor was Jacques René de Brisay, Marquis de Denonville.

The new governor had scarcely arrived in his province before Dongan opened a vigorous correspondence with him. The New York magistrate began by complaining of the doings of La Barre and said that he hoped he would live on better terms with Denonville than he had with that gentleman. He then went on to warn the newcomer not to interfere with the Iroquois who were English subjects and under the protection of the English government. They were, it is true, fighting with the "Farr Indians" southwest of the Great Lakes; but Dongan thought that Denonville should not engage himself in Indian quarrels; in fact, he could not believe that a person of the French governor's "reputation in the world" would follow in his predecessor's footsteps. On his side Denonville was inclined to take a high tone, but Dongan met arrogance with arrogance and sometimes assumed an ironical air which his correspondent did not fully understand. On one occasion he lamented "that Monsr de Nonville has so soon forgot the orders he had from his Master to live well with the King of England's subjects, but I find the air of Canada has strange effects on all the Governors boddys." The Frenchman sought to appeal to the Irishman's religious sense as a fellow Roman Catholic and implored him to check the insolence of "the enemies of the Faith, who by their wars and customary cruelties blast the fruit of our Missionaries among the most distant tribes," and the Jesuit priest Lamberville, who had lived among the Iroquois, added his efforts to those of Denonville. Dongan, however, evidently felt that he was as good a Catholic as any Frenchman; he replied that he would import English or Irish Roman Catholic priests to convert the savages to the true religion. He did import a few, but they did not take kindly to the idea of a life in the wilderness and refused to play the part which had been assigned to them. Again Denonville

wrote:—"Think you, Sir, that Religion will make any progress whilst your Merchants will supply, as they do, *Eau de Vie* in abundance, which, as you ought to know, converts the Savages into Demons and their Cabins into counterparts and theatres of Hell." To this Dongan answered that when the English missionaries arrived "care would then be taken to dissuade them [the Iroquois] from their drunken debouches though certainly our Rum doth as little hurt as your Brandy and in the opinion of Christians is much more wholesome." At times Dongan tried to cajole his opponent, as when he sent him "some Oranges hearing that they are a rarity in your partes." Denonville, however, declared that the New Yorker's intentions did not at all correspond with his fine words and as for his oranges "it was a great pity that they should have been all rotten." Such were some of the amenities of international colonial politics in the Seventeenth Century.

November 16, 1686, representatives of France and England assembled at Whitehall, London, and put their names to an instrument which is generally known as the Treaty of Neutrality. In this it was provided that there should be peace and good correspondence upon the lands and seas of America and that neither of the parties to this compact should violate the territories of the other on the western side of the Atlantic, no matter whether there was war or peace in Europe. The expectation of the French king doubtless was that this would deliver the Iroquois into the hands of his representative in New France. Copies of the treaty were sent to Dongan and to Denonville with orders from their respective masters that it should be duly observed and executed. The reading of this document must have been disheartening to Dongan, but the Irish governor at once put on a bold front. He sent a copy of the document to Denonville with a request that he would "not seek any correspondence with our Indians on this side of the Great Lake." On his part, with Louis's approval, the governor of New France prepared a great expedition to conquer the Iroquois, but not to attack the English. With nearly a thousand regulars, he set out for the country of the Senecas.



He captured a party of English traders, had an indecisive conflict with the Indians, destroyed their corn and some of their villages, and returned to Montreal and Quebec. Dongan met this attack as if the Treaty of Neutrality had no application to the Iroquois. He supplied them with arms and ammunition to defend themselves against French aggression and wrote vigorous letters to the French governor demanding the return of his captives. In the following winter, the Iroquois took matters into their own hands, marched to the banks of the St. Lawrence and destroyed French settlements within sight of Montreal. Dongan informed his master of the doings of the Frenchmen and pointed out the financial value of the beaver trade. Louis complained to the English king and asked him to order Dongan to desist from his opposition. James, who had now succeeded his brother, declared that the Iroquois were English subjects and had acknowledged themselves to be such before the governors of Virginia and New York in July, 1684. He informed Louis that he was very much surprised at the French complaints, as he was obliged to protect his subjects; he directed Dongan to inform Denonville that the Iroquois were English subjects and to take the necessary measures for protecting them against French attack and to call upon the neighboring English colonies for assistance. Orders were also sent to Andros, who was now governor of New England, and to the other English colonial governors to give Dongan such help as he might require.

The danger to English interests in America was very real. As long as the colonies were under separate governments, it was difficult to bring about concerted action even when the governors of New York and New England were both appointed by James and governed without the necessity of consulting elected representative bodies. The imminence of danger from the side of New France was the one thing needed to induce James to take the final step of consolidating all the colonies north of Pennsylvania into one government with Andros as governor-general and Francis Nicholson as lieutenant governor, April 7, 1688. In recalling Dongan,

he was told that the king was entirely satisfied with his actions as governor of New York and that he might expect marks of royal favor. While removing Colonel Thomas Dongan from his position, James ordered his successor to protect the Iroquois as subjects of New England and defined the eastern limit of the Dominion of New England as the St. Croix River and also declared that that dominion extended northward to the River of Canada, as the St. Lawrence was then known to Englishmen.

In upholding the rights of England on the continent of North America, James Stuart, his Roman Catholic governor of New York, and his arbitrary ruler of New England acted as high-minded, patriotic Englishmen. In constitutional and political affairs, the actions of James and Andros stirred against them the wrath of the English colonists. These suspected the good faith of all three: Dongan's good work in New York was not sufficient to balance Andros' misrule in New England. In the long series of wars which followed the Glorious Revolution, the English colonists suffered severely; but in the end, by the Treaty of Utrecht, the Iroquois were acknowledged to be English subjects. This meant that English territory extended as far north as Lake Ontario. Such an outcome was the direct result of the firm stand that Dongan had taken. To him must be given the credit for first seeing the importance of the position of New York and of the Iroquois in the international politics of North America.

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.