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Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America's Independence: Chapter 7

Molly Brant

“ One word from Mary Brant is taken notice of by the Five Nations than a thousand from the white man without exception.” Daniel Claus (Berkin, 114)

The American Revolution brought about profound changes not only for the British and the Colonists, but also for the many American Indian nations that shared the same lands with the two clashing white forces. For many Native Americans, the revolution posed unique challenges and opportunities. Many of the Indian nations were courted by both the Americans and the British as potential allies in the war. Native American tribes, like the Iroquois, had to make the tough decision of who to ally with...or to stay neutral. Any decision they made would have a tremendous impact on their people.

Molly (also known as Mary) Brant, who was born a Mohawk Indian, one of the Six Nations of the Iroquois League, most likely in 1736 . She was the daughter of a sachem (chief), which would have given her considerable influence in her culture. She was well educated in the European ways of life and it is likely that her formal education took place in an English mission school. She learned to write and speak English well. (Cataraqui Foundation).

At the age of 18, Mary went with a delegation of Mohawk elders to Philadelphia in 1754-55 to discuss fraudulent land transactions. While this kind of activity would be unheard of for women to participate in colonial or British society, it was perfectly normal for an Iroquois woman. In Iroquois society, the women chose the sachems. They also controlled the use of farming lands, which gave them control over the food supply. Because of this, Iroquois women had a great deal of economic power and were able to veto warriors' decisions. It is very possible that this trip to Philadelphia was part of her training as she became a clan matron.

According to the author of *Revolutionary Mothers*, Carol Berkin, Molly married William Johnson in 1759 at the age of 16. Other sources say that a marriage did not actually occur. Whatever the particulars of their domestic situation, Molly became the mistress of Johnson's estate first at Fort Johnson and then at Johnson Hall. They had eight or nine children together. Johnson was England's superintendent for the northern colonies and was a considerable political force within his own right.

Numerous records indicate that Molly had a very active role in running the Johnson household, including purchasing orders. There is even suggestion that she “took responsibility for the daily affairs of the Indian Department while Sir William was away.” (Cataraqui Foundation) One visitor to Johnson hall described Molly as “quiet in demeanour, on occasion, and possessed of a calm dignity that bespoke a native pride and consciousness of power. She seldom imposed herself into the picture, but no one was in her presence without being aware of her”. (Cataquari Foundation)

Carol Berkin asserts in her book that “Together, Molly and William became the most powerful political force in the Mohawk Valley” (110). Even after Johnson's death in 1774, Molly used her influence to convince most of the Iroquois nations to ally with the British. During the early years of the war, Molly sent ammunition and guns to those fighting for England and housed and fed loyalists.

She also supplied intelligence on American movements and supplied ammunition to the British troops before the Battle of Oriskany in August of 1777. The information she provided to her brother, Joseph Brant, led to the ambush of American troops at the Oriskany ravines by the Mohawk and loyalist troops under his command.

Throughout the war, the British relied on Molly's influence with the Mohawks. She convinced

the Society of Six Nations Matrons to convince their men to fight for England. She also rallied the Iroquois warriors when they began to doubt their involvement in the war (Berkin, 113).

Of course, these loyalist activities put Molly and her family in danger. After the attack on American troops at Oriskany, settlers in the area refused to sell her supplies. The Oneida Indians, who had sided with the colonists, killed her overseer and took her livestock. An Oneida and patriot raiding party broke into her home and destroyed many of her possessions. It was after this that Molly took her family and fled to the safety of a Cayuga village.

She moved again to Fort Niagara after General Burgoyne's defeat at Saratoga where she worked to secure a British victory. Berkin asserts that, as "both the widow of Warragihageh (Johnson) and an Iroquois matron, she proved far more effective than the new superintendent of Indian affairs in rallying and sustaining the support of the Iroquois." (113)

After the war ended, Molly and her family settled on lands in Ontario given to them by the British as compensation for their loyalty. It was in Ontario that she and other loyalist refugees founded the town of Kingston.

For the last thirteen years of her life, Molly used her influence to try and protect the lands granted to her people by the British. She also worked to prevent Mohawk military alliances with the Iroquois who remained in US territories (Berkin 114).

When she died in April 1796, the tower bell in the local Anglican church at Cataraqui tolled for her. Mohawk neighbors, Mississauga chiefs, British officers from Fort Frontenac and local political leaders and merchants gathered to mourn her loss. The Anglican minister asked at her funeral, "Who will replace her"? (Berkin 114).

The answer? No one could. Molly Brant was an intelligent, unique and dynamic woman who successfully straddled the white and Native American worlds she was part of. While I'm sure the colonists did not appreciate her efforts on England's behalf, I believe that Molly chose the course of action she felt would best protect her people and advance their cause. The Iroquois nations saw their lands and way of life threatened by the ever encroaching white civilizations that surrounded them. Molly and her people saw the white's greed for land and I'm sure they observed the lack of respect many British and colonists had for them. This had to be a difficult pill to swallow, since the Iroquois were (and I would venture to say still are) a proud and powerful confederation of nations. For years they had fought and existed in North America as a political and military force to be reckoned with, long before the colonies were established.

I think Molly saw that her people's best chance of survival and self determination lay with the British. She used her considerable influence and intellect to ensure the best outcome for her tribe. I find her an admirable and interesting woman; a person who took matters into her own hands and did her utmost to fashion the best possible life during a tumultuous and trying time. A woman who not only looked out for not only her own family's welfare, but for the welfare of the six Iroquois nations who looked to her for guidance.

Works Cited

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