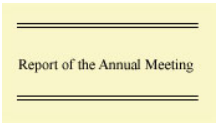
Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association
Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada



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Volume 32, Number 1, 1953

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300343ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/300343ar

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Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0317-0594 (print)
1712-9095 (digital)

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Cite this article

Wise, S. F. (1953). The Indian Diplomacy of John Graves Simcoe. *Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association / Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada*, *32*(1), 36–44. https://doi.org/10.7202/300343ar

THE INDIAN DIPLOMACY OF JOHN GRAVES SIMCOE

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In the many-levelled and shifting relationships between Great Britain and the United States in the years preceding the first of those adjustments of differences periodically necessary to the intercourse of these powers, the activities of an obscure lieutenant governor of a province whose prospects were yet before it might well be termed insignificant. This was so in the event, but not in the potentiality, for Governor Simcoe attempted, largely upon his own initiative, to affect directly the course of Anglo-American relations from the interior of North America. By introducing the politics of the wilderness as a factor in transatlantic diplomacy, he hoped to achieve ends partly those of his government, but more particularly his own.

John Graves Simcoe was the possessor of a Tory mind of more than usual rigidity. He came by it honestly, being from an English country family with a tradition of service to the Crown, and having himself entered the army after the briefest of exposures to Oxford. Removing him, as it did, from political controversy, the king's commission emphasized the lessons of his upbringing, and experience of social upheaval during the American Revolutionary War hardened them into conviction. He had a deep and genuine, if sentimentalized veneration for the monarchy, and for parliament as its appendage; he believed implicitly in the time-sanctioned position of the established church and viewed dissent with suspicion; he regarded a graded society, in which each member acted in the manner proper to his condition, as part of the natural order of things. Above all, he had a simple faith in the English social and political structure as an answer to the problems of man in society anywhere, and diagnosed the American Revolution as the inevitable outcome of the failure to impose an English pattern in North America. Simcoe's appointment as Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada in 1791 offered an opportunity for the testing of his Tory creed as the central theme of the Second Empire; and he enthusiastically threw himself into the job of establishing a little England in the untouched Canadian hinterland.

Not only did Simcoe see himself as the instrument for "preserving all the trans-atlantic Dominions of Great Britain",[1] but he entertained an even more exalted purpose. The Americans, he felt, had made a grave mistake in 1776, and were now suffering the consequences of social inversion and the congressional system. The "absolute prohibition of an order of Nobility" was sufficient assurance of eventual American collapse and of the existence of a strong American desire for a return to the old ways. So Simcoe set himself the task of con-

[1]E. A. Cruikshank, *The Correspondence of Lieut. Governor John Graves Simcoe* (5 vols., Toronto, 1923-1931), I, 50, Simcoe to Henry Dundas, Aug. 12, 1791. (Referred to henceforth as *Simcoe Papers.*)

structing a model government in Canada; a beacon to draw the erring peoples of America back to their old allegiance through a demonstration of its inherent superiority. (Among other things, he proposed to raise "the Tone of Principles and Manners" by the publication of excerpts from the encyclopaedia in the newspapers.)[2] Irredentism was almost the rule in the higher British officialdom of the period, but when coupled with Simcoe's strong convictions and the serious lack of perception which perhaps arose from them, it led him to conclusions which at best were quixotic and at worst dangerous. He proclaimed his ideas incessantly and with force:

> It is in the hope of being instrumental to the *Reunion of the Empire,* by sowing the Seeds of a vigorous Colony that I prefer the station I am appointed to & its fair prospects to any Post in his Majesty's Dominions . . . I am persuaded that it is the Interest of Northern America & G. Britain to be united in some mode or other & that such an Union is neither distant nor impracticable.[3]

In addition to these brave projects, Simcoe had caught, perhaps from some anonymous Montreal merchant, the dream of Canadian commercial empire; of the goods of the continental heartland flowing out of North America by way of Upper Canada and the St. Lawrence. Upper Canada, he thought, could well become "the secure medium, as Holland is to Germany, of the most profitable Intercourse with all the Inhabitants between the Appalachians and the Mississippi".[4] If strong British naval forces could be placed upon the Great Lakes, then perhaps Upper Canada might dominate the interior politically as well as commercially, and wavering states like Kentucky be enticed into renewed loyalty.[5]

To lay the foundations for a new empire, to build an ideal colony to a height capable of arousing American admiration, and to render it wealthy, powerful, and enterprising enough to attract the products and conceivably the attachment of trans-Appalachian America — all this required time; and this practical necessity anchored Simcoe's flights of wishful fancy. It would be hardly correct to assert that he sought to involve the United States and Great Britain in war. One can believe him when he breaks out: "I have no personal views, no personal fears, but those of Peace, Peace, Peace . . . be assured if we are forced into war while I govern Upper Canada, it shall not be the wisest sort, preventitive war, but absolutely and entirely defensive."[6] His dislike for the American system in general (and "Washington and such like cattle" in particular)[7] did not alter his conviction that war would be death to his Canadian plans; on the contrary, he was afraid that the retention of the western posts by the British might drive the Americans to seize them by force, and engulf the rest of British America in the process. Even if war did not materialize, the proximity

[2] *Ibid,* 18, same to Sir Joseph Banks, President of Royal Society, Jan. 8, 1791.
[3] *Ibid,* 53, same to Dundas, Aug. 26, 1791.
[4] *Ibid,* 28, Simcoe to Dundas, June 30, 1791.
[5] *Ibid,* II, 91, same to same, Oct. 19, 1793.
[6] *Ibid,* I, 166, same to Sir George Yonge, June 17, 1792.
[7] *Ibid,* 166.

of the United States might warp his infant colony through the contagion of the "Levelling principle."

For Simcoe, as formerly for Haldimand, the Indians posed an even more immediate menace than the Americans "as the formidable Enemy in our present Juncture of Affairs."[8] The Indians, although they had had objectives of their own, had been faithful allies during the Revolution, and indeed had won a measure of success not given to British arms. Indian anger over the omission of their territorial claims from the Treaty of Paris was the determining motive in Haldimand's decision to hold the posts and avert possible retaliation for British betrayal.[9] The fact that the Indians of the Ohio basin had never ceased hostilities against the United States did not, in Simcoe's estimation dissolve their threat. If the Americans eventually defeated them the Indians might turn on the British in revenge for failure to provide active assistance; if the war ended in a peaceful settlement reached without the good offices of the British, the Indians might respond to American incitement and attack defenceless Upper Canada, since "there is no such thing as a neutrality in their Ideas; they must have war somewhere."[10] There seemed only one path out of these many pitfalls: Simcoe concluded that by supporting the Indians in their claims to the lands between the Ohio and the Great Lakes he could maintain their friendship and at the same time provide Upper Canada, during its period of incubation, with a garrisoned territorial shield.

The conception of an Indian buffer state was not new, nor was Simcoe unique in favouring it at this time. Belief that revision of the 1783 treaty was possible had permeated the British administration, not excepting William Pitt himself.[11] In 1792 both Simcoe and George Hammond, minister to the United States, received official instructions to attempt to bring about, through British mediation of the American-Indian quarrel, some advantageous adjustment of the boundary.[12] What sets Simcoe off from his colleagues is that, driven by ambition for himself and for his colony, he pursued a revisionist policy long after it had ceased to be considered seriously at home and proceeded to lengths certainly not contemplated by his instructions.

Several factors gave Simcoe wider latitude for independent action than would usually have been the case. As always, official instructions from England were long delayed, and were of a very general nature. In addition, correspondence with Hammond in Philadelphia was difficult and sporadic, and since the British minister had no authority over Simcoe, their communication consisted chiefly of an exchange of information, opinions, and suggestions. Simcoe's relations with the Governor General and Commander-in-Chief at Quebec were mainly of a military character, and were impeded by the personal antagonism

[8] *Ibid*, 53, Simcoe to Dundas, Aug. 26, 1791.

[9] Public Archives of Canada, Series Q, XXIII, 46-47, Haldimand to Lord North, Nov. 27, 1783.

[10] *Simcoe Papers*, I, 51-52, Simcoe to Dundas, Aug. 26, 1791.

[11] For an example of Pitt's views, see W. R. Manning, *Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States: Canadian Relations*, 1784-1860 (3 vols., Washington, 1940), I, 375-378, Gouverneur Morris to George Washington, May 29, 1790.

[12] *Simcoe Papers*, I, 151, Dundas to Simcoe, May 5, 1792.

between himself and Lord Dorchester. Most important, the Indian Department, through which he had to work to manipulate the border tribes, occupied an anomalous position in the British administrative hierarchy (as Simcoe put it, "an Imperium in Imperio") and although he had technically no civil or military jurisdiction over it, he was able, in the absence of the Superintendent, Sir John Johnson, to exercise a good deal of unofficial control over the regional agents, the deputy superintendents.

At Montreal in June 1792, before setting out for his province, Simcoe met Alexander McKee, the Deputy Superintendent for the Detroit area, and very quickly reached an understanding with him. Putting their heads together, they worked out, as the basis for future Indian policy, a hypothetical boundary revision of the 1783 treaty which would, through the creation of an Indian buffer state, completely seal off British America from the United States.[13] This meeting marked the beginning of a close cooperation between the Lieutenant Governor and McKee, which was maintained by private correspondence.

Almost at once came an opportunity to seize the initiative on the frontier. After two disastrous defeats in 1790 and 1791, the United States government, while holding in readiness another army under General Anthony Wayne, extended a blanket invitation to all the frontier tribes to meet American representatives during the summer of 1793. In September 1792 the Indian confederacy assembled at the Glaize, a branch of the Maumee River, to decide the terms upon which peace talks should take place. George Hammond suggested to Simcoe that perhaps British mediation might ensue if the Indians "of their own spontaneous reflections" were to request it.[15] Simcoe ordered McKee to engineer this, and also to obtain from the Indians an unsolicited request for British documents which supported their contentions in the land dispute. He cautioned McKee, however, to observe the appearance of neutrality in the Indian deliberations, and especially not to promise British military assistance in the event of further hostilities with the United States.[16] The influential McKee (whose presence at such a meeting was quite customary) succeeded in evoking from the confederacy a sufficiently spontaneous petition for the presence of Governor Simcoe as mediator at the coming treaty, coupled with a curt demand for the production of British documents pertaining to Indian claims.[17]

But for Simcoe this was the only satisfactory result of the conference, for the Indians laid down as the prior condition for *any* negotiation American acceptance of the Fort Stanwix boundary of 1768; that is, roughly the line of the Ohio River. This stipulation flew in the face of the vast westward movement of population which

[13] *Ibid,* I, 173-4, Memorandum by J. G. Simcoe and Alexander McKee, June 21, 1792.

[14] In 1786 Joseph Brant had constructed an Indian confederacy of all the tribes domiciled in the area from the St. Lawrence lowlands to the Ohio-Mississippi triangle.

[15] *Simcoe Papers,* I, 176-77, Hammond to Simcoe, July 11, 1792.

[16] *Ibid,* 207-09, Simcoe to McKee (private), Aug. 30, 1792; *ibid,* V, 23, same to same, Sept. 24, 1792.

[17] *Ibid,* I, 219-28, Indian Council at the Glaize, Sept. 30 - Oct. 9, 1792.

had followed the Revolution, and in which permanent settlements had been established at many points north of the Ohio. It also rejected several treaties which had confirmed these lands to the United States, on the ground that they were fraudulently conducted with individual tribes, and not with the confederacy as a whole. Moreover, the adoption of this extreme position had split the Indian nations into two factions. The Six Nations, their power weakened by centuries of warfare, had finally exhausted themselves in the Revolution. Dislodged from their homeland in northern New York, a part, under the headship of Joseph Brant, had settled in Upper Canada as British pensionaries; while another group clung to tribal lands within the United States. The inclinations of both groups were for peace, and thus, although they joined the great Indian confederacy which Brant had formed in 1786, they did not take part in the war in the Ohio basin. At the Glaize council their representatives called for a moderate line, which would recognize white penetration across the Ohio, as the best means of securing peace. The western nations,[18] led chiefly by the Delaware, Shawnee, Wyandot and Miami, hotly rejected this proposal. They accused the Six Nations of being in collusion with the Americans and "sitting quiet while they destroyed us". Their decisive victories over Generals St. Clair and Harmar had rendered the Ohio nations intransigent and over-confident; since their own tribal lands were at stake, they were able to shout down the protests of the Six Nations and insist on the Ohio line as a prerequisite for peace.[19]

This turn of events left Simcoe in some uncertainty. which was subsequently increased when the American cabinet quite understandably refused to consider the Indian request for British mediation as tendered informally by Hammond.[20] It had always been clear to Simcoe that Indian unity was essential if boundary concessions were somehow to be squeezed from the United States. But no gesture of compromise could be expected from the Ohio nations. They must be conciliated, however, since they were prepared to fight the Americans and were quite capable of turning on the British if thwarted. The Six Nations, on the other hand, were neither as dangerous nor as stubborn as the western Indians. For these reasons Simcoe decided to support the claims of the extreme Indian faction; a precarious gamble that was made attractive by the promise of a wider belt of protective territory than he had originally counted on. But once committed to the support of the Indian irreconcileables, he was tied to their fortunes as well, and from this point on Simcoe's range of effective action was narrowed to efforts to promote Indian unity and to disguise his own

[18]Without stressing too much the difference between the western tribes and the Six Nations, it should be remarked that their answer to the problem of American expansion was not the relatively sophisticated one of trying to live with the white settlers but the primitively direct one of trying to live without them. Hence their energetic leadership in Indian efforts to expunge or push back the whites: the defeat of Braddock on the Monongahela; the Pontiac uprising; Lord Dunmore's War; the harryings of the western frontier during the Revolution; the continuance of border war after the Revolution formally was ended. In all these events the Ohio tribes provided the hard core of Indian resistance.

[19]*Simcoe Papers*, I, 228, Indian Council at the Glaize.

[20]*Ibid*, 267-68, Hammond to Simcoe, Nov. 27, 1792.

personal entanglement in Indian policies. It is from the failure to stress this shift of emphasis in Simcoe's policy that the obscurity which surrounds his relations with Joseph Brant has arisen.

During the months intervening between the Glaize council and the peace congress, Simcoe did his best to strengthen the chances for an outcome favourable to the British. In mid-winter he made the arduous trip to Detroit to discuss privately with Alexander McKee the new policy line. He refused an offer from the United States to provision the treaty meetings, since he felt this would lessen British influence upon the Indians.[21] He carefully examined Indian Department documents relating to the Ohio boundary and convinced himself (he had no choice) that the Indian claims were valid. He weighed the value of an appeal to the sense of justice residing in the American people.[22] But Brant, who through his prestige could sway a large section of Indian opinion, would not yield to Simcoe's persuasions that the Ohio stipulation was to the best advantage of the Indians. Simcoe complained of him: "He is a cunning and self-interested Savage [who] chooses not to understand the difference between a fair Peace, and one upon any terms."[23]

Brant was certainly ambitious, but this was the spur to his actions, not the cause. His intelligence has often been overestimated, but he grasped what few of his contemporaries did: that the Revolution had proven that further Indian military resistance to white encroachment was futile and self-destructive. Perceiving that the British could not be expected to act in the Indian interest, since they had their own concerns, he became the architect of the great Indian confederacy, seeing it as means to guarantee the survival of his race through direct arrangements with the United States.[24] In 1793, he felt, the opportunity had arrived "to obtain a good Peace, and if lost, may not be easily regained."[25] Brant's moderation appeared to Simcoe to be the most dangerous obstacle to Indian unity and the fulfilment of his hopes, and thus, although he later admitted that Brant was genuinely pursuing Indian interests, he sought to publicly envelope his actions in suspicion.

In May 1793, the three American commissioners to the Indians arrived at Navy Hall and began an uncomfortable and impatient vigil until the Indians should summon them to their council, which was already in progress at the Maumee rapids. During this nervous interval, Simcoe became aware, through his conversations with the commissioners and from news of the warlike preparations of General Wayne, that there was little prospect of agreement being reached on the Indian terms. The commissioners had instructions only to compensate the Indians for occupied lands north of the Ohio, and evidently could not accept the great white withdrawal which the Indian conten-

[21] *Ibid,* 277-78, Simcoe to Hammond, Jan. 21, 1793.
[22] *Ibid,* 202-04, Simcoe to Maj. Gen. Alured Clarke, Aug. 20, 1792; *ibid,* II, 303-40, Simcoe to Dundas, July 5, 1794.
[23] *Ibid,* V, 29, Simcoe to Hammond, Jan. 23, 1793.
[24] P.A.C., Series B, CXIX, 229, Brant's Transactions with the Indians at Sandusky, Aug. 26 - Sept. 8, 1783.
[25] *Simcoe Papers,* V, 37, Brant to McKee, March 23, 1793.

tion implied. Now, if ever, was the time for Simcoe to reduce his aims; but he was too uncertain of the effects of any readjustment upon the temper of the western tribes to recede at this point (and, one feels, too temperamentally inflexible as well). Instead, he resolved to play the game to the hilt, and in a private letter to McKee he ordered that the deputy superintendent use his authority with the Indians to gain the line "[we] deliniated at Montreal". He held out to McKee the great prospects which a revised boundary would open to British America, but at the same time forecast the improbability of a negotiated settlement, and since he gave no instructions for a moderation of the Indian terms, seemingly put his faith in a third Indian victory.[26] Provocative opinions to impart to the man on the spot, particularly since McKee was to interpret to the Indians the substance of all those records of land treaties upon which their case rested.

Not until the first week in July was the long Indian silence broken. Then a delegation of fifty Indians, with Brant as spokesman, came to Niagara charged to ask the U.S. commissioners whether they had power to conclude a boundary based upon the line of the Ohio. Rather than ask the Americans this fatal question, Brant merely enquired whether they were authorized to negotiate a boundary, to which the puzzled commissioners gave an affirmative answer. There was nothing equivocal about Brant's conduct here, as Simcoe suggested;[27] he saw himself as peacemaker, and hoped that by not revealing the Ohio contention time might be gained at the Indian council for the working out of some acceptable compromise. His praiseworthy deception was uncovered immediately upon his return to the council, and a second delegation was sent to the commissioners, now at the Detroit River. The Americans were taken aback by the Indian demand to know whether they were empowered to "fix on the Ohio River as the Boundary Line between your people and ours", but firmly replied that this was out of the question. They offered instead money compensations and legal recognition of the Indian right of soil to land still tribally occupied.[28]

At the council, in the midst of the unprecedented turbulence which erupted on reception of the American terms, Brant made an impressive appeal for concessions on the Indian side "for the Interest of us all and far preferable to an uncertain war". For a full account of the events that followed, Brant's journal is the only source. According to Brant, the Shawnee and Delaware chiefs, spearheads of the war faction, informed him that they had decided to drop the Ohio contention and accept his proposal for a more moderate boundary; that the next morning, after a midnight meeting with McKee, these tribes reversed their stand, announced their "final resolutions" to hold out for the Ohio line. This decision he attributed to the advice of McKee. The consequent ultimatum, which Brant, the Six Nations, and a large number of other tribes refused to sign, was presented to the Americans, who

[26] *Ibid*, 50-51, Simcoe to McKee (private and confidential), June 23, 1793.
[27] *Ibid*, I, 383, Simcoe to Clarke, July 10, 1793.
[28] *Ibid*, 405-09, Western Indians to Commissioners of the United States, July 25, 1793, 401-02; Commissioners of the United States to Deputies of the Confederate Indian Nations, July 31, 1793.

thereupon declared the negotiations at an end. Preparations for a renewal of frontier war began on both sides.[29]

The precise accuracy of Brant's account is not important. From what has been shown of the positions of Brant and McKee, the former's description is undoubtedly a rough approximation of what actually took place. The obscurity which has surrounded the incident (and by extension the semi-diplomatic activities of Simcoe)[30] is due in large part to a quite deliberate muddying of the waters of history by Simcoe and McKee in order to hide their share of blame for the collapse of peace proceedings. (It is significant, for example, that the 1793 council is the only one of the entire period for which no official record survives.) During the summer, Brant had made separate appeals to McKee and Simcoe to persuade the western Indians to adopt a more moderate boundary (the Muskingum line); McKee ignored him, while Simcoe advised him icily to cease tactics which were dividing the confederacy.[31] Yet after the final debacle in August Simcoe, in official letters to Hammond and Dundas, accused Brant of ruining chances for peace by holding out for the Ohio boundary against attempts at compromise by McKee — an assertion that McKee never made and Brant's career repudiates. He attacked Brant's character as "problematical", his conduct as "unsatisfactory", and accused him at the same time of being in the pay of the Americans and of trying to involve the British Empire in war with the United States.[32] It is clear that Simcoe's concern was not with the truth but to rescue his public reputation from the blemish of having far exceeded his instructions and of giving the United States cause for protest, if not stronger action.

The results of Simcoe's amateurish diplomacy followed in 1794. The confederacy was irrevocably divided, despite desperate attempts by Brant to heal the breach. The Ohio Indians were left alone to fight the army of Anthony Wayne, and in August, at Fallen Timbers, were totally scattered. The Indian barrier to settlement between the Ohio and the lakes was permanently broken.

Simcoe's abortive policy betrays a lack of judgment at almost every turn. His hopes for Upper Canada were precocious, to say the least; his analysis of the present condition and future tendencies of the United States was warped by prejudices; his belief that the American government would admit British mediation on the frontier was contradicted by every utterance of its members on the question; and his ultimate reliance upon Indian victory, in the light of past wars, demonstrates how fully his hopes had become his judgments. In any event, North American affairs were decided not on the frontier, but as

[29]*Ibid,* V. 5-17, Brant's Journal of the Proceedings at the General Council, May 17 - Aug. 12, 1793.

[30]See, for example, A. L. Burt, *Anglo-American Relations,* 1775-1820, (New Haven, 1940), 128 ff.

[31]*Simcoe Papers,* I, 403, Brant to Simcoe, July 28, 1793; V. 67, Brant to McKee, Aug. 4, 1793; II, 4-5, Simcoe to Brant, Aug. 8, 1793.

[32]*Ibid,* II, 49, Simcoe to Hammond, Sept. 8, 1793; 100, to Dundas, Nov. 10, 1793; 101-4, to Dorchester, Nov. 10, 1793. Fragmentary verification of Brant's version is found in *ibid,* III, 313, Col. John Butler to Joseph Chew, Mar. 1, 1795; II, 30-31, Journal of a Treaty Held in 1793 with the Indians . . . by Gen. Benjamin Lincoln.

heretofore in Europe. The outbreak of the war with France in 1793 made it essential for Britain to reach an understanding with the United States; accordingly there followed Jay's Treaty, the confirmation of the Revolution settlement and the end of revisionism.

Simcoe was not able to make that mental leap which a movement in space from England to North America required. An instinctive conformer in a society which proclaimed balance and proportion as its virtues, accustomed in his professional life to ordered and roughly predictable conduct enforced by discipline, he was at sea in an environment in which emotions were as wild and excessive as the landscape, and which transformed British truisms into American absurdities. Thus the ultimate paradox imbedded in his policy: he tried to shape the new world into a reassuring image of the old by employing as tools the savage tribes of primitive America.