

August 6, 1777:
Battle of Oriskany, on the Mohawk River

ORISKANY

by John R. Matheson UE

August 6th, 1977, marked the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Oriskany, one of the bloodiest battles of the American Revolution. Many important dignitaries participated in a daylong celebration at the Battlefield. A dramatic production of a stimulated battle and a re-enactment of the Ambush of Bloody Ravine was produced by the Brigade of the American Revolution.

Inasmuch as Oriskany marked a major engagement of 1st Battalion, King's Royal Regiment of New York, and the greatest Loyalist victory in the north, I felt compelled to attend. Earlier pilgrimages to the Mohawk and to Oriskany had been in the company of a Loyalist friend and were the result of much prior reading. This time very many thousands were present. I discovered how greatly the telling of history is influenced by point of view and by audience.

In 1642 Arent Van Curler reported seeing a majestic valley, the Valley of the Mohawk, which he described as "the most beautiful land that the eyes of men ever beheld". The Mohawk River starts as a woodland stream in the hills north of Rome, New York. For 150 miles it washes the soil of rich valley flatlands, it channels through a gorge at Little Falls, then pierces the mountains between Canajoharie and Fonda, emptying at last over the great falls into the Hudson River and on to the Atlantic.

Experts claim that in proportion to the numbers of combatants engaged no other battle yielded more casualties. Oriskany was commonly recognized as a British victory. Here Rangers, Indians and Sir John Johnson's Royal Greens, operating many miles from their base, successfully surprised and ambushed the Tryon County forces led by General Nicholas Herkimer, whose task it was to march to relieve the besieged garrison of Colonel Peter Gansevoort at Fort Stanwix. On July 30th, having determined to go to Gansevoort's relief, Herkimer ordered his command to muster at Fort Dayton near German Flatts. By August 4th they began the march towards Stanwix some 50 miles to the West. This relief force never arrived. Oriskany proved the end of their journey.

The Utica newspaper covering the events of August 6th, 1777, bore banner headlines:

*"Bloody Battle at Oriskany!"
"General Herkimer Wounded"
and
"March Failed"*

It went on to report quite frankly:

"A fearsome engagement was fought this day, at a terrible cost in blood, by the militiamen of Tryon County... ", and "Herkimer's men, exhausted by their gallant efforts and the untimely fall of their leader, have been unable to complete their mission ... That mission was nothing less than the relief of Fort Stanwix, where, as our readers doubtless know, the forces of Independence have been under siege by the enemy these past several weeks... "

Elsewhere one reads: *"Indeed, our informants tell us with a certainty that bodes no question, without Herkimer's calm and wise counsel, the slaughter of the Continentals would have been complete, and the bloodshed in this valley nothing less than devastating. "* Eleven days after this fearsome battle and following the amputation of his severely wounded leg, General Herkimer died.

Surviving Loyalist veterans regarded Oriskany as a victory and reported such to their sons.

With the passage of years historic events become subject to new interpretations. On August 6th, 1877, at the Centennial celebration of the Battle, Lieutenant Governor Dorscheimer declared:

"Herkimer and his men were ambushed by the Indians. That was a favourite device in Indian warfare, but it did not succeed with these sturdy Germans ... No more important battle has ever been fought in this country. Nowhere, with an opportunity for escape, have troops sustained so severe a loss. Never has a battle which began with disaster been turned into victory more complete. And this was a German fight. "

A few years later in 1883 in the year of Independence 107 a splendid monument was erected, under the direction of the Oneida Historical Society, with a claim of victory graven in bronze.

"Here was fought the Battle of Oriskany, on the 6th day of August, 1777. Here British Invasion was checked and thwarted. Here General Nicholas Herkimer, intrepid leader of the American Forces, though mortally wounded, kept command of the fight till the enemy had fled ..."

There is no point today in arguing the merits of this claim, nor of discussing why, later, St. Leger lifted his siege of Fort Stanwix and returned to Canada. For a variety of reasons, which include British military incompetence and English parliamentary unwillingness to proceed further against her colonial children, America won the War of Independence. With this final result of victory it is easy to understand how, by a process of ex post facto reasoning, each event in the struggle, however painful, is now interpreted by some Americans as a step towards success. One cannot fail to be impressed by the extent of contemporary research and, in particular, by the detailed description of the Battle which was presented by Mr. Wallace Workmaster, the Historic Site Manager of Fort Ontario in Oswego. Parenthetically, comment should be made of the magnificent achievement of the National Park Service of the United States Department of the Interior in the costly reproduction of Fort Stanwix on its original site in Rome, New York. This Authority should be commended as well for the compact, lucid and objective publication they distribute concerning the Fort's historic past.

Loyalists who claim to be children of the Mohawk Valley see in these dire struggles the emergence of not one but two democracies, America and Canada, for certainly the character of our people was refined by the hot fire of the Rebellion. And great has been the contribution to Canadian development of these emigres of the Valley of every ethnic origin.

Of course, these loyal ones heard the trumpet call of freedom. We, who live after them, have seen America in our time act as a great sword of righteousness in the world. We are proud to be their neighbours and we are proud to be ourselves.

The proclamation of freedom, the eloquent message of independence - independence from the burdens and tribulations and manifold vicissitudes of an exhausted Europe, the exciting ideal of the pursuit of happiness, had great appeal, but never at the price of rebellion.

Relative late comers to the Valley from Britain had seen with their own eyes the horrendous cost to the British people of protecting colonial security from French military depredation. They had left impoverished communities at home. They were newly re-established in a new land of unlimited opportunity - a land of milk and honey. A study of the Loyalist claims filed after the Treaty of Separation indicates just how prized were these little possessions of land and chattels in the Valley. Happy indeed had been their prospects!

To the highland crofters, reared to military service and duty, this Rebellion was a tragic replay of a painful and familiar scenario. They could never accept orders to abandon their allegiance. Their response was Jacobite - proud and predictable. Exile, now from their beloved Valley, loss of all their possessions - loss of life itself was a small 'price to pay for honour!

To the earlier settlers of the Valley, to the Dutch and to the Palatines this issue of loyalty to the Crown was less immediate as a moral issue. The connection to Britain was more tenuous. Canada stands beholden particularly to her Dutch and German Loyalists for whom the decision to stand upon principle against neighbours, even against brothers, and certainly against all their material interests, was agonizing.

Mention in closing must be made of the two excellent groups representing Canada at Oriskany. Lieutenant Gavin K. Watt and his detachment of the King's Royal Regiment of New York and the Iroquois Mixed Choir. Particularly poignant was the sacred message in Mohawk brought back to the Valley by a superb choir from Caughnawaga, Quebec. Surely of all the multitudes of people present these proud, handsome choristers had the greatest right to be there! The beauty, dignity and holiness of this Christian witness on the hilltop was unforgettable. Her Majesty could have sent no finer ambassadors from Canada to the hospitable and kindly Americans who now inhabit the Valley.

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Col. The Hon. John Matheson, Honorary President of UELAC and Col. The Hon. George F.G. Stanley, an Honorary Vice-President of UELAC were both key men in the creation and introduction of Canada's Maple Leaf flag.

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<http://www.rcamuseum.com/English/Great%20Gunnery/matheson.htm>