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Introduction

The Chain of Friendship in the Colonial Past

The latter years of the eighteenth century marked a period of change and uncertainty in both Europe and North America. Events previously thought impossible had occurred. In 1783 the British Empire was compelled to acknowledge the loss of the majority of its North American colonies, and within a decade the mainland of the European continent would undergo a series of revolutionary conflicts. In their struggle for independence, the American colonists and their allies, most notably Britain's imperial rival France, had dealt the British nation a very rare defeat in modern history.¹ Indeed, when Lord Cornwallis surrendered his army at Yorktown to the allied French and American forces in October 1781, British fifers and drummers unwittingly foreshadowed the future by prophetically playing "The World Turned Upside Down." Louis XVI's ancient regime in France had little time to enjoy this lone victory against Britain, since France's involvement in the American Revolution led directly to the demise of the old order in French government and society, brought Louis's execution in 1793, and sank his nation into more than two decades of warfare, finally ending in 1815. In this new age of revolution and rampant republicanism, the British government would take whatever measures necessary to preserve its age-old constitution and way of life, defined by the common law, habeas corpus, Protestantism, and the sanctity of private property.² To ensure these ends, Crown and

Parliament strove to secure the nation's remaining imperial interests in Canada, the Caribbean, South America, the Mediterranean, and India, while protecting its overseas trade.

In the forty-year period between the outset of the American Revolution in 1775 and the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, Britain had few military allies, and the Crown's allies in Europe were all characterized by temporary ententes, crafted for immediate convenience. In some cases, such as Spain in 1795, former allies even defected, becoming Britain's enemies during the long years of bitter struggle against revolutionary France. Thus, in the era spanning 1775 to 1815, nowhere did Great Britain find allies more faithful and persevering than among the indigenous peoples of North America. Indian nations from along the Gulf of Mexico to the frozen lakes and tundra of Canada fought for the Crown, and many would have continued to do so after 1815 had Britain further prosecuted an American war. The purpose of this study is to examine the changing relationship between Britain and its Native allies in the vast region of the Great Lakes, from the dark days ending the American Revolution until the War of 1812. In 1783 many questions loomed. What would become of the Crown's Indian allies? Would the newly formed United States respect the territorial integrity of these nations? How would this affect the "Chain of Friendship," the historical alliance between the Indians and their "British Father," and what diplomatic changes would this entail? Would the Crown be faithful to its wartime Indian allies, and would it defend the Indians' territorial rights against the expanding United States? In an era of peace, would Britain consciously alter its Indian policies, perhaps to the detriment of the Indians? Just as important, how would the Natives adapt and respond to any forthcoming policy changes? Would they want to continue an alliance with their British Father? If not, would they pursue a neutral course, or would they seek closer ties with the Americans?

The Chain of Friendship between Britain and its Native allies bears a rich history, traced to a time when colonial New York, under successive Dutch and English governments in the mid-seventeenth century,

entered into multiple agreements with the Indians of the Hudson Valley and, most important, the Iroquois League. The latter, including the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, and Senecas, had subjugated many of their surrounding tribes, ultimately adding links to the so-called chain.³ Originally known as the “Covenant Chain,” this general entente subsequently included other English colonies, and in 1677 the expanded Covenant Chain became the formal basis upon which the English colonies crafted their future Indian policy and diplomacy. Thus in the North the Iroquois served as the diplomatic liaison through which the English colonial governments had dealings with other tribes that were considered inferior members of the chain. The metaphor of the Covenant Chain would continue to describe British-Indian relations for more than a century and a half, beyond the close of the era of frontier wars.

By 1760, in the midst of the global conflict commonly remembered as the Seven Years’ War, the fortunes of war had placed Great Britain in possession of much of the interior of North America. In the Great Lakes region, British troops occupied key posts relinquished by defeated French garrisons. At Detroit in December 1760, British agent George Croghan lost no time in extending the “Ancient Chain of Friendship” to the western tribes, ushering in a period of diplomacy between Britain and the Natives of the Great Lakes.⁴ In the summer of 1761, Croghan’s superior, Sir William Johnson, superintendent of British Indian affairs, met with an even larger group of western leaders—including Wyandots, Ottawas, Ojibwas, Potawatomis, Kickapoos, Miamis, Delawares, and Shawnees—who declared their “intentions to keep the Covenant Chain bright and lasting and so to hand it down to posterity.”⁵

Yet it seemed that the Chain of Friendship with the nations of the Great Lakes was fully severed in 1763 and 1764 when more than a dozen Indian tribes attempted to rid themselves of the British and very nearly succeeded. Far from viewing the occupying British troops as conquerors, the Indians of the interior, with their interpretation of the Chain of Friendship, had perceived them as guests. In the conflict

traditionally known as Pontiac's Conspiracy, the Native confederacy in the Great Lakes revolted against Major General Sir Jeffrey Amherst's British policy of limiting trade with the Indians and eliminating the ceremonial distribution of gifts to the tribes.⁶ With the exception of Forts Detroit, Niagara, and Pitt, every major British post in the West either succumbed to Native military pressure or was abandoned. In the end, neither side fully mastered the other in Pontiac's war, and perhaps the most crucial result of the conflict was that it demonstrated to each side its need to cooperate with the other. By the end of the war the Indians saw more clearly their growing reliance on European goods and weaponry, and they now realized that the French most likely were never going to return. As for the British, the war demonstrated that they did not possess the level of hegemony in Indian country that they had once imagined, and that their continued imperial presence in the Great Lakes would require a substantial degree of Native consent.

Though one might assume that Pontiac's war would have permanently damaged British-Indian relations, just the opposite occurred. Once the two sides developed a mutual respect for the other, the foundation was laid for the type of relationship with the tribes that Croghan and Johnson had originally envisioned. One scholar has described this fresh understanding resulting from Pontiac's war as the restoration of a diplomatic "middle ground," while another regards it as "[a]n unprecedented balance of power," both implying mutual obligations.⁷ Now the Chain of Friendship could truly flourish, better than it had prior to Pontiac's war when suspicions abounded. Consequently, when Sir William Johnson negotiated the end to hostilities with the western tribes in the summer of 1764, he capped off the ceremonies by giving the tribal delegations a "great Belt" consisting of twenty-three rows of beads with the year etched on it, representing "the great Covenant Chain." An unnamed Ojibwa chief present suggested keeping "the Belt of the Covenant Chain at Michillimackinac . . . where all our people may see it." This Ojibwa leader then reminded Johnson "to hold fast by it [the Covenant Chain], to remember what

has been said, and to abide by your Engagements [promises].”⁸ Thereafter, the Chain of Friendship continued to subsist, albeit tenuously at times, between Britain and the nations of the Great Lakes, remaining a symbol of friendship and strength for the next nineteen years before encountering its greatest test, the end of the American Revolution in 1783.

With 1783 as its starting point, the present study canvasses numerous changes in British-Indian relations between the Revolution and the War of 1812. This crucial twenty-nine-year period had three distinct phases. The first, 1783–95, saw Britain enjoy its greatest influence over the allied tribes of the Ohio Valley, as this alliance inflicted two significant defeats on American forces before suffering its own demise against Anthony Wayne’s victorious “Legion” in 1794, followed by the Treaty of Greenville in 1795. Then, between 1796 and 1807 British-Indian policy was wholly transformed, and British officials, both in Canada and at Whitehall in London, implemented a policy of retrenchment in an effort to vastly reduce the government’s financial obligations and diplomatic ties to its former allies, particularly those Natives dwelling in U.S. territory. During this decade of relative calm, Anglo-American relations appeared stable, and the former British-Indian wartime coalition tended to fade. Finally, from 1807 to 1812 close British-Indian relations were in part revived as the U.S. expansionist policy continued to alarm and provoke the Natives and as Britain’s relations with the Americans continued to deteriorate as a by-product of British maritime policies primarily aimed at crippling Napoleonic France. In other words, when Great Britain and the Natives of the Old Northwest again became military allies, this restored relationship was formed more in the context of sharing a common enemy than out of a sense of devotion and respect for traditional allegiances. Thus after 1807, when British agents attempted to restore their government’s former Chain of Friendship, the Native responses were often varied and lukewarm. The British-Indian alliance that was re-formed on the immediate eve of the War of 1812 was a matter of necessity for both Britishers and Natives alike.

The principal thesis of this study argues that Britain, in its efforts to unite the Indians prior to the War of 1812, could not fully restore the Chain of Friendship, but instead ultimately had to settle for multiple chains of friendship. The argument also emphasizes the fact that Whitehall for the most part did not achieve a long-term Indian policy, and that Britain's diplomatic initiatives did not have a uniform effect when implemented in different regions of the Empire's North American borderlands. In practice, British Indian agents were compelled to tailor Whitehall's directives to conform to the unique circumstances and conditions of each of the separate geographical areas in which Britain conducted its affairs with indigenous peoples. This study specifically compares British relations with Indians living in both the United States and Canada who were generally served by the Crown's three principal Indian agencies in Upper Canada at Forts Amherstburg (Malden) near Detroit, Fort St. Joseph near Mackinac, and Fort George in the vicinity of Niagara, between 1783 and 1812.⁹ The argument here is that the Native peoples in each of these vast regions, with their diverse histories and varied political and military goals, often played key roles in shaping local variations in British policies. Factors affecting these bonds included: the fur trade, geographical position, Indian relations and warfare with the United States, the influence of British Indian agents, intertribal relations between various Native groups, religious concerns and prophetic movements, degree of Indian acculturation, and the constitutional issues of Native sovereignty and legal status.

The last of these issues, namely the questions of Native sovereignty and legal status, were added dimensions that Crown officials in Canada had to consider when dealing with Indians in Canada, as opposed to those dwelling in the United States. Wanting to provide a refuge for their defeated wartime allies, British officials established three Native reserves in Upper Canada by 1796, including the Bay of Quinte (1784), the Grand River (1784), and Chenail Ecarte (1796).¹⁰ The first two were comprised mainly of Iroquois and other eastern peoples who had lost their lands and homes during the American Revolu-

tion, while Chenail Ecarte was intended to accommodate refugee allies who were defeated by Anthony Wayne's U.S. Legion a decade later. At the Bay of Quinte and at Chenail Ecarte, British-Indian relations remained static during this period, but the Grand River inhabitants, the most numerous of the three groups, attempted to redefine their traditional relationship with their British allies by asserting their sovereignty. Therefore chapters 4 and 5, covering Upper Canada, focus principally on the Grand River controversy.

Previously, two seminal works have provided insights into British-Indian relations in the Great Lakes region during the period covered by this study. In *Crown and Calumet: British-Indian Relations, 1783-1815* (1987), Colin Calloway offers an important analysis using an ethnohistorical approach to understand both British and Native perspectives of this relationship as these cultures interacted in the contexts of trade, war, and diplomacy. Calloway de-emphasizes policy history, concentrating more on issues of intercultural contact and racial conceptions and misunderstandings of Native social and economic structures. Robert S. Allen's *His Majesty's Indian Allies: British Indian Policy in the Defence of Canada, 1774-1815* (1993) provides a policy history that lucidly demonstrates how Britain's Indian policy effectively slowed American expansion and saved Upper Canada, but failed to preserve Native lands and cultures. Until the time of his death, Allen had worked in the Canadian government's Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, giving him a unique perspective on the evolution of British and Canadian Indian policy from the period of the fur trade and frontier wars until modern times.

More recently, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Alan Taylor has completed a fine study detailing the political outcomes of the American Revolution in New York and Upper Canada, entitled *The Divided Ground: Indians, Settlers, and the Northern Borderland of the American Revolution* (2006).¹¹ Taylor's work cuts through the many complexities of postwar New York and its Canadian border region by examining the rival careers of former friends Joseph Brant, illustrious Mohawk leader, and missionary Samuel Kirkland. With its heavy focus on

affairs in New York and on the schemes of American officials, both at the national and regional levels, Taylor's *Divided Ground* differs from the present study. While not intended as a full analysis of British-Indian policy in the Great Lakes, or as a study on the British Indian Department, Taylor's *Divided Ground* nevertheless better illuminates the postwar career of Joseph Brant and his struggles at the Grand River reserve in Upper Canada than any scholarly work heretofore. By illustrating this struggle for power and sovereignty in response to British policy at the time, Taylor has nicely anticipated the history presented in the chapters that follow.

The present study is also a policy history, but the reader will find that it incorporates more Native perspectives than previous monographs on Euro-American frontier policy, whether British or American. Moreover, this book takes into account the fact that British policy, as it made its way down from Whitehall to the actual setting in which it was applied, became elastic and even protean in virtually every respect save one, the issue of Native sovereignty. In other respects, the rational coherence and long-term stability seemingly implicit in the term "policy" were frequently lacking in Britain's relations with its Native allies on both sides of the Canadian-U.S. border. At the center of policy making in Whitehall, relations with indigenous peoples on the Empire's North American periphery were at best tertiary concerns compared to the imperial bureaucracy's primary focus on Britain's powerful European rivals, especially revolutionary France, and to a secondary focus on whether the United States would take an antagonistic or a neutral posture toward British interests. Whitehall officials, distracted by these more pressing crises, often issued directives to their North American subordinates without devoting the necessary time and energy needed to construct a cohesive long-term plan for imperial relations with Britain's Native allies in Canada and the United States. Consequently, the lack of a dominant policy gave Native leaders and British agents in the field more latitude for improvisation and a far greater impact in defining the British-Indian relations that resulted. Moreover, the lack of a definitive British policy in this

period not only has meant that a much richer history exists in which Natives interacted with British and Canadian leaders in diverse ways but also that these First Peoples were prominent in shaping that history. By acknowledging and illustrating these protean aspects of British-Native diplomacy and the various nuances of intercultural relations that resulted, the present study makes a unique contribution to understanding how British-Indian relations evolved in North America between 1783 and 1815.