Opportunity & Determination: Joseph Brant’s Path to the American Revolution & Beyond

During the 1700 to 1800’s colonization was in full swing which lead to a power struggle between Britain and their 13 colonies. Conflict initially was a civil war within the British Empire but grew to an international war once France and Spain got involved. The Americans allied with the French in a fight for independence from Britain during the American Revolution (1775-1783)[[1]](#footnote-1). These European powers weren’t the only ones involved, Indigenous groups also picked a side to fight for which influenced the outcome. Joseph Brant was the most notable indigenous leader during this time. He led the Mohawks and a few other tribes side by side with Britain during the American Revolution and post-war led the migration of the Mohawk to Canada, making his name historical[[2]](#footnote-2). Joseph Brant’s journey to becoming one of the most notable and fierce leaders of his time can be credited to his family’s religion and European connections, in turn it provided the opportunity for education. Family influence and beliefs, religion, and education are all interrelated, and without any of them Joseph Brant would not have become to influential war chief he was, nor would the other events have occurred. The combination of his upbringing, religious beliefs and education was the perfect mix which lead Joseph Brant to controversially greatness.

Joseph Brant’s family was not your typical family. They had connection to a British official and his family held status within the Mohawk community. Both his parents were Christians within a Mohawk society which wasn’t common, this gave Joseph an advantage already having faith in a religion which European missionaries viewed as superior as they were pressing to convert the indigenous groups anyways[[3]](#footnote-3). Although Brant’s father was not a chief, his family still held high status within their society[[4]](#footnote-4). This higher status and influence that the Brant family held led both Joseph and his sister down the path of political power. He and his sister had a stepfather who was a close friend to Sir William Johnson who was a British Superintendent of Indian Affairs[[5]](#footnote-5). In later years Molly, Joseph’s sister, married Sir William Johnson. This initial connection between their stepfather and this British official gave both Brant and his sister the opportunity to dive into British/Indigenous affairs. Due to the relationship between Sir William Johnson and father Brant, Joseph at just fifteen years old was involved in his first military service to invade Canada under Sir William Johnson’s leadership during the 7 years war[[6]](#footnote-6). Volunteering side by side with hundreds of other Mohawks, this was his first exposure to military movement and leadership. Sir William Johnson soon after or during this time married Molly Brant, this also contributed to the political influence which fell upon young Joseph Brant[[7]](#footnote-7). Her presence in politics within the Iroquois was amplified after the marriage. Sir William Johnson’s role within the Indigenous community and his position during the 7 Years War abled him to be present a lot through Joseph Brant’s adolescence. He stayed with the Brant’s throughout the war, building a relationship and sharing his views with young Joseph[[8]](#footnote-8). Johnson and Brant’s relationship later opened-up a door to education and religious growth and influence. The early alliance with the British due to his family’s relationship shaped Brant’s political career. Later in Brant’s life the amount of British influence is apparent, specifically William Johnson’s. When looking at the style of house that Brant built on his future Canadian homeland, it represented very similarly to Johnson’s home which Brant spent much of his adolescence in[[9]](#footnote-9). The way his presented in portraits also shows his ties to the British were strong[[10]](#footnote-10). His early exposure to faith and the military can be credited to his family and family’s ties to British influence which paved the path to his development as a highly educated leader.

Opportunity to education is a key contributor to why and how Joseph Brant came to be. At first Brant was taught traditional teachings from his elders and then basic educational skills from Anglican missionaries[[11]](#footnote-11). Because Johnson became an active figure in Brant’s life and they had developed a close relationship, Johnson made the decision to send nineteen-year-old Joseph to Moor’s Charity School in Lebanon, Connecticut in 1761[[12]](#footnote-12). This decision was made after Brant had made an impression on Johnson during the 7 years war; this education gave Brant the necessary skills and he met impressionable people by attending. Johnson probably made this decision with the intention of Brant playing an active role in politics between the British and Mohawk people. While attending Moor’s Charity School, Brant became fluent in English; enabling him to act an interpreter and later a spokesman for the Mohawk community[[13]](#footnote-13). In June 1763, Joseph Brant was sent to act as a guide and interpreter to Reverend Charles Jeffrey Smith, an instructor from the school. Together they spent the summer among Mohawks, Smith teaching Brant the Lebanon curriculum while Brant taught him Mohawk[[14]](#footnote-14). This experience gave Brant a positive reputation, both Minister Wheelock (founder of Moor’s Charity School) and Smith spoke highly of Brant. Making Joseph Brant literate in English gave him advantage over other Indigenous people with rank because he could translate and bargain with the British government. He spoke on behalf of both his Mohawk people and British allies when it came to making agreements or creating plans of action. His education in English and experience as interpreter combined with his British connection, Brant was set up to become a political force.

Brant’s religion was major factor making it possible for him to receive an education and why he was able to connect so well with Wheelock, Smith and Johnson. The school which taught Joseph Brant literary skills was ran by a minister; religion was part of daily teachings. The purpose of the school’s creation was partly to educate, but equally in part to “Christianize every Indian in the school”[[15]](#footnote-15). Brant’s early connection to Christianity strengthened important relationships for later in life. Had it not been for his parent’s faith and early relationship with Johnson, he would have never become the leader he was. In later years closer to the end of Brant’s life, his mission was to further educate and convert Mohawk people. Joseph spent time translating part of the bible into Mohawk language and building a church on the reserve for his people after the wars ended[[16]](#footnote-16)[[17]](#footnote-17).

Family relations, education and religion are all interdependent factors that lead Joseph Brant to become the leader he was during the American Revolution and after. His early on connection and battle experience with British official, William Johnson, chose who he was to ally with during the American Revolution. The relations and obligations that Johnson had with the Mohawks after his marriage to Molly Brant also had influence on the choice of alliance. Johnson’s reputation and relationships that he had built within the larger Indigenous community over many years abled him to give the Mohawks a place within the Covenant Chain[[18]](#footnote-18). The affiliation between Britain and the Mohawks was mutually reliant. Thus, Joseph Brant lead his people with Britain against the Americans and France[[19]](#footnote-19). The Mohawks siding with Britain was no surprise; their lands in the USA were filled with American settlers and military. With “promised stability and better life for the entire tribe”, Joseph Brant joined forces with the Britons[[20]](#footnote-20). After Britain lost in the war they consequently lost much of their power in America; they struggled to maintain control of land which the Iroquoian/Mohawks lived upon[[21]](#footnote-21). During and shortly after the American Revolution (from 1775-1785), Brant made multiple visits to Britain accompanying Sir Guy Johnson, William Johnson’s predecessor[[22]](#footnote-22). During these visits Brant spoke on behalf of the Mohawk and the Iroquoian with various concerns, focused mainly on land claims and the rights to it[[23]](#footnote-23). The Indigenous were granted the Grand River in modern day Ontario as compensation for losses from the war[[24]](#footnote-24). Though not without discontent, the migration of Mohawks was led by Joseph Brant. There the Mohawks settled, and Joseph Brant lived out the rest of his days finally able to pursue his long-term goals of advancing the cause of Christianity and education among his own[[25]](#footnote-25). He remained an active political leader up until his death.

Joseph Brant was a clear powerhouse of the 18th, credited to his family’s British ties, the opportunity to education and practice of Christianity faith. Brant would not have become the notorious leader he was without any of these points, all interrelated and interdependent his life was mapped out from a very young age. Joseph Brant was destined to become the leader he was and in the end he changed the demographic of Canada; leading his people to settle in modern-day Ontario. For the years to come the population of Indigenous people grew and changed. Relations with European powers were strengthened, strained and crushed. Canada would not have been the same without Joseph Brant.

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