# George Johnston, Indian Interpreter

By Alice B. Clapp
Carnegie Public Library
SAULT STE. MARIE

On a summer day in the year 1793, the little Indian village of Bawating at the foot of the Rapids was all astir over the arrival of a strange canoe come down from Lake Superior.

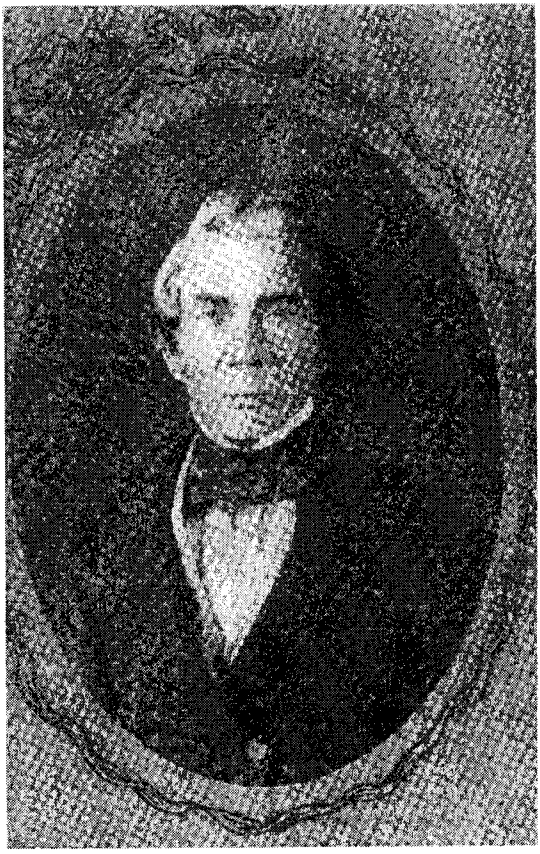
The village had many red visitors, for the Indians lured by the fish in the St. Mary's River came from near and far and in summer the shore was dotted with their wigwams. But white visitors were not so common, and when a white did come he was usually a traveler on his way to seek the Northwest Passage, a Jesuit Father carrying the cross into the wilderness, or a fur trader on his way to the winter hunting grounds.

The new comers were a fair-haired Irishman and a black-haired, black-eyed Indian girl. They received a warm welcome from the Cadottes, the Londries, the Nolins and the Piquettes, the only four white families of the village, and from the three or four hundred Indians there.

They had come to this village to live and they would have had to go far to find a more beautiful spot. In a grove of pine, spruce, birch, maple and elm looking out over the St. Mary's River to the Algoma Hills, within sight and sound of the water from their own Lake Superior singing its way over the Rapids, they built their home. But it was not easy to build a house in those days. The trees must be felled and the logs drawn from the wood by oxen. There were no saw mills. The lumber had to be sawed by hand, and as all this took time they purchased the Londrie house and lived there until 1795 or '96 when their own house was completed. The remains of this house are still standing down on the river front.

This was the way the historic Johnston family came to the Sault, and though this was only 1793, they were historic even then.

Two years before Columbus discovered America Mrs. Johnston's ancestors had settled at La Pointe on the Southwest



GEORGE JOHNSTON

shore of Lake Superior which for three hundred years had been the stronghold of the Chippewas. Their council fire had never gone out.

Her Indian name was O-Shau-gus-co-day-way-qua, the Woman of the Green Prairie; but her English name was Susan.

She was a daughter of Chief Waub-o-jeeg, the White Fisher, a brave warrior and a wise leader. It was his counsel which prevented the Chippewas from joining in the Pontiac uprising.

Her grandfather Mamongazid, Big Feet, was the friend of Montcalm, the man for whom Montcalm called when he fell wounded on the Plains of Abraham.

She was a full blooded Chippewa, a princess of the tribe and like all of her family proud of her ancestry. Her brother Waishky, a chief like his father, who lived on the edge of the Indian burial ground, said to the Indian Agent who by direction of the Commissioners at the Treaty of Fon du Lac in 1826 presented him with a silver medal, "What need I of this! It is known whence I am descended."

Although Mrs. Johnston understood English she never spoke it, and she always wore her Indian costume. She was well versed in Indian lore, and was an authority among her people, who always came to her for counsel. Thomas L. McKenney, U. S. Commissioner of Indian Affairs, who came here with Governor Cass in 1826, says that Mrs. Johnston was a devoted wife, a tender and affectionate mother and a faithful friend, and that she vied with her generous husband in hospitality to strangers. "As to influence," he says, "there is no chief in the Chippewa nation who exercises it, when it is necessary for her to do so, with equal success. She has never been known in a single instance to counsel her people contrary to her conceptions of what was best for them and never in opposition to the views of the Government."

Mrs. Angie Bingham Gilbert, daughter of Abel Bingham, the first Baptist missionary in the Sault says, "Mrs. Johnston, although uneducated in books, reared among a savage people in the wilds of forest life, possessed that innate dignity, intelli-

gence, self respect and courage which rises to occasion, superior to circumstance. She wonderfully adapted herself to her strange position; was the head of the household, loved by her family, meeting on equal terms guests of the house from palace or wigwam."

When Jeremiah Porter, the first Presbyterian missionary, came to the Sault, she joined that denomination and later built for them the first Presbyterian church.

John Johnston was born in Ireland on the estate of Craigie near the Giant's Causeway. His family belonged to the nobility, but had had reverses, and to make his own way he came to Canada when twenty-eight years old with letters to the Governor General, Lord Dorchester. He was offered a clerkship, but in Montreal fell in with some of the Northwest fur traders and after making two trips with them decided to be a trader. He was outfitted with a canoe and five Canadian voyageurs and went to winter at La Pointe.

It was here that he met and according to tradition fell in love with O-shau-gus-co-day-way-qua, the Woman of the Green Prairie. But it is much more probable that he married her for her dowry, which was the good will of the Indians with whom he was to trade, and thanks to whom he gained control of the fur trade of the whole Lake Superior country. It must be said to his credit, however, that having married her he remained faithful and lived with her for the rest of his life, raising a large family and keeping open house for all visitors, red as well as white, and many were the Indians who came for food, medicine, advice or anything they happened to want.

These were the days of mixed marriages and many traders had half-breed families, but few took them as seriously as John Johnston. As he was unique among traders, so was his home unique among the homes in the wilderness of the Northwest Territory. A man of culture, refinement and learning he had about him not only the necessities of life but many of the luxuries as well and he spared neither time nor money in the education of his children.

Captain Marryat in a book entitled *A Diary in America* published in 1839, says he was much impressed to find in two of the log houses in Sault Ste. Marie complete editions of Byron's works. One of these sets was no doubt the property of John Johnston.

Every one who came to the Sault was entertained at the Johnston home and none of them could speak of it too highly.

Into this home, three years after John and his wife came to the Sault, was born a second son, George Johnston, who when quite young was sent with his older brother Lewis to Montreal to be educated. Both brothers and their father served on the British side in the War of 1812, and George was present at the surrender of Mackinac on August 14, 1814. His nephews, Howard and William Johnston of Neebish Island, say that he was also present when the Northwest Fur Company buildings at the Sault were burned by the Americans under Major Holmes, but I have found no record of this.

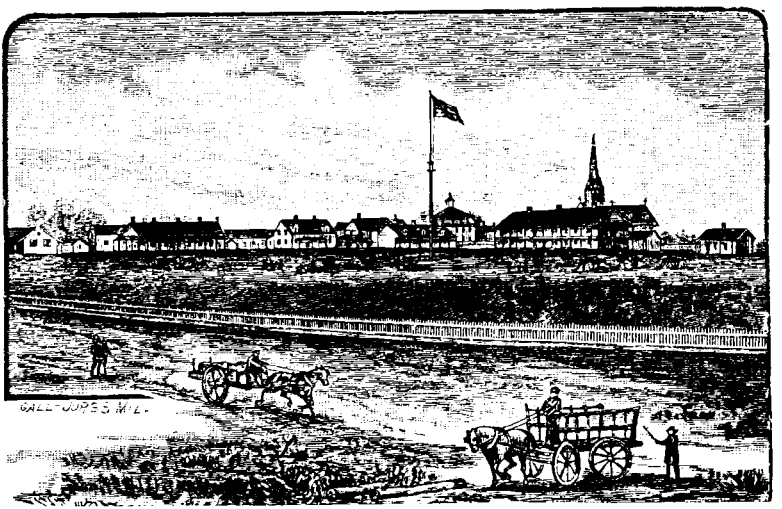
Mrs. Angie Bingham Gilbert who knew George Johnston well says, "He was a very well educated man, conventional and very ceremonious in manner, uniting in himself very noticeably the studied manners of his rank in both nations, the Irish and the Indian."

His picture shows little of the Indian except the high cheek bones. Like many men of the time he looked like a minister.

He was very tall. Mrs. Anne Jameson, the English writer, who visited at the Johnston home in 1837 says she had difficulty in reaching high enough to take his arm.

He took her over the Rapids in a ten foot birch bark canoe and she was told that she had the distinction of being the first English woman to "shoot the rapids."

George Johnston held several government positions. At one time he was stationed on Traverse Bay, at another he was Sub Indian Agent at La Pointe, and it was there he married his first wife, Louisa Raymond, an Indian woman. They had three children, two sons and a daughter. The eldest, John George, lived for a time at Bay Mills and his grave may still be seen



OLD FORT BRADY

there in the little Indian burial ground on the shore of the St. Mary's river.

For his second wife he married Mary Rice of Boston who was connected with the Baptist Mission. Mrs. Gilbert tells us "She was a bright, capable, energetic woman, holding up the failing fortunes of the family as long as she lived."

They had three sons, all of them killed in the Civil War, and a daughter who, on the death of her mother, was taken to live with her relatives in the east. At her death the silver which had belonged to her parents was sent to George Johnston's two great grandchildren and a niece who reside in the Sault at the present time.

Some persons are born with the desire to put everything on paper, and George Johnston seems to have been one of them. He had the note-book habit, and unlike his father, who, as Schoolcraft tells us, destroyed everything, he kept most of his papers and letters, and these carefully preserved by his descendants were recently acquired by the Sault library.

They came in a little leather trunk, the kind the fur traders carried, just large enough to fit into the end of a canoe. According to one of the letters, this trunk was a gift from "W. Simpson," probably a trader.

In addition to the letters and papers, there was a small rosewood box with George Johnston's engraved silver plate on the cover, and another box filled with mineral specimens. Probably most of these specimens were brought to him by Indians, for according to the letters they were always offering to show him a secret location, expecting in most cases to be paid for the information.

Forty-two of the letters are from Henry R. Schoolcraft, fifteen from Lewis Cass, two from Ramsay Crooks, twelve from James Schoolcraft, the brother of Henry R., two from Gabriel Franchère, two from William Brewster, three from Laurence Taliaferro, four from Hiram Draper, etc.

The papers consist of several note books; the certificate of baptism of George Johnston's children, signed by S. A. Mc Cos-

key, Bishop of Michigan, dated 1843; receipts, deeds, accounts; the oath of Jas. Wessimet, Justice of the Peace, regarding the marriage of John Johnston in 1835 "to Susan, a Chippewa woman." As John Johnston had only one wife, Susan, to whom he had been married for over forty years, the explanation seems to be, that it was a tardy remembrance on the part of his promise to Waub-o-jeeg to marry his daughter as the white men married.

In one of the note books, among other things, is a collection of Reminiscences, most of which have been published in the *Michigan Pioneer Collections*. One of them is an account which describes the visit of General Cass and the lowering of the British flag. The Indians had planned a massacre, but Mrs. Johnston, hearing of it, sent her son George to warn General Cass, and the tragedy was averted. General Cass never forgot this, and mentions it in one of his letters. He was at this time Governor of the Territory of Michigan, and ex officio Superintendent of Indian Affairs. On this trip to explore the north shore of Lake Superior and discover the source of the Mississippi river, he had planned to make a treaty with the Indians at the Sault and arrange for a military post to be located there.

The geologist of this expedition was Henry R. Schoolcraft, a young easterner about the age of George Johnston, who had been educated at Middlebury and Union colleges and had accepted this position because nothing better had turned up.

This was the first meeting between Schoolcraft and George Johnston. In 1822 Schoolcraft became Indian Agent of the Northwestern Frontier with headquarters first at the Sault and later at Mackinac Island and George Johnston was his interpreter. Later Schoolcraft married Johnston's oldest sister Jane, and from this time on the two men were closely associated in both business and family affairs.

In 1832 Schoolcraft undertook to find the source of the Mississippi River, the project Cass had had to abandon in 1820, getting only as far as Cass Lake. Schoolcraft was accompanied

on the expedition by Doctor Douglass Houghton, Michigan's first state geologist, Lieutenant Allen of the U. S. Army, Rev. W. T. Boutwell, missionary, and George Johnston who acted as interpreter.

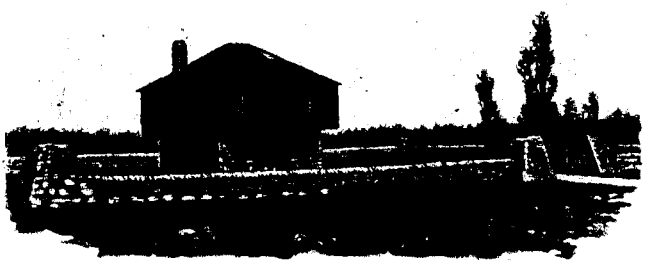
Guided by an Indian they reached the small lake which is the source of the Mississippi, and on an island in the center of it planted the American flag.

Trying to think of a name for the lake, Schoolcraft asked Mr. Boutwell, who was a classical student, for some Latin or Greek word meaning true source or head, but all Mr. Boutwell could think of were the Latin words veritas—"truth" and caput—"head." After pondering these for a while Schoolcraft decided to use the last two syllables of the first word and the first syllable of the last word which made "Itasca," and that is the way the lake was named. This incident was told to Justice Steere by Jeremiah Porter, when as a very old man he revisited the Sault in 1890, and was written down by Justice Steere in his book which contains both the Schoolcraft and Allen accounts of the expedition.

Another one of the reminiscences is an account of the expedition to settle the boundary line between the Sioux and the Chippewa, at which time Johnston acted as interpreter. It was on this trip that Colonel Bliss, commander at Fort Snelling, offered him the Sub Indian Agency of the Upper Mississippi, which he declined, stating that he had been stationed at La Pointe in that capacity and the Indians had almost eaten him out of house and home.

In the same book with the reminiscences is part of a talk which he must have been asked to give at some time. Unfortunately there is not much of it, but the picture he gives of the Sault will bear quoting: "When I arrived from Montreal in 1808 I found this place a perfect wilderness inhabited by a few local Indian traders & a dense Indian population. At this time game of every kind was abundant for we could by opening our windows shoot from indoors pidgeons, partridges, rabbits and porcupines. We could see the beaver, otter and mink swim-

ming up or down stream and the beaver crossing the river with their youngest cubs on their backs. The moose and elk abounded. The reindeer were seen passing on the ice at the end of our docks. Such was the state of the country then and the chief and only fur traders were British subjects, their goods and merchandise was imported from England and at Montreal large packages reduced to portable ones which were carried over portages on men's backs and conveyed to the regions of the Indian country in large birch canoes embracing the N. W.



OLD BLOCK HOUSE AT FORT BRADY

and southern portions of it and although the Island of Mackinac at this time was occupied and garrisoned by American troops yet literally the country was still in the possession of English traders for at this time American enterprize had not reached the country nor was the fur trade appreciated by the American citizen until the War of 1812 when John Jacob Astor who visited this place in 1809 forming a company in New York styled the American Fur Co. commenced their operations in 1815."

There are also in this book carefully copied passages of literature, mostly from the Bible, and a few of the writings must have been his own, for they have no quotation marks and are signed G. J. One of them reads, "No friend have I, no

hopes of any. What a world to live in,—O God, judge and assert my rights." Another "O may the God of mercy true

Direct my paths in virtue to pursue."

There is also a long poem on the death of Willy, the son of Schoolcraft who died when quite young. This child was often called Penaci, the Indian word for bird.

At one time George Johnston kept a boarding house on the ground where the Court House stands and in a little note book is a record of his guests. The entries read like this: "Mr. McWilliams & Lady, Saturday, July 10, 1858 took tea. August 30, 1857 Mr. Wing, Lady and Nurse took dinner. Miss Angeline Bingham and two friends took dinner. Col. Prince and son took board from May 23 to May 29."

In one book he has written the names of some Indian plants, one on a page and beneath it the ailment for which the plant was used. For instance Mos-say-wask heads one page and underneath is written "cure for toothache—make use of the root." He had probably planned a pharmacopoeia but unfortunately only a few plants were entered.

On reading the letters one marvels at the time which must have been spent in composing such stilted epistles.

On September 24, 1828, Schoolcraft writes to George Johnston at La Pointe to tell him of the death of his father. This is the letter:

"By the enclosed you will perceive that we have lost the best of fathers. This afflictive stroke came suddenly upon us. During his last trip to New York he had contracted a malignant fever. He reached the vicinity of St. Mary's in a small vessel on the 17th and was brought up upon a bed, in a barge in so low a state that he could scarcely recognize any of the family. On the 18th and 19th he roused so much as to converse freely. On the 20th and 21st he grew worse, but retained the possession of his senses. On the 22nd a visible declension took place. He made but few replies to anything addressed to him after 1 o'clock and expired at 8 in the evening, surrounded by his family. It is a strong consolation to reflect that he

died, as he had lived, in full reliance upon the merits of Jesus. Every circumstance connected with his disease tends to confirm our belief that he is numbered with the blessed. And he has bequeathed to his family a name of unsullied purity and honor. The most kind and incessant attention was given to alleviate his malady, by Dr. James but with only partial success, although I am inclined to believe that we owe to this gentleman the prolongation of his life for some days. I enclose you a lock of his hair, cut by my dearly beloved Jane. His mortal remains were this day followed to the grave by the collected population of the place and deposited by the side of our ever dear son Willy. Your mother, Jane, Eliza, Charlotte, William, Anne and John present you their love in affliction."

On the opposite page he has drawn the silver plate which was put on the coffin with the inscription "John Johnston, Esq. Born Ireland, August 25th, 1762. Died Sept. 22nd 1828. Aged 66 years 27 days." Below this is a list of the pall bearers—Col. Lawrence, Capt. Beall, Capt. Ransom, Capt. Hoffman, Lieut. Bradley, Mr. Agnew, Mr. Havring, Mr. Audrain.

He was buried in the old cemetery where the library now stands but was later removed to Riverside. The coffin plate was made from some of the family silver which was melted for the purpose and it is now in the possession of the Library.

In another letter, also written in 1828, Schoolcraft tells of having just moved into Elmwood, the house he had built on the ground which now belongs to the Michigan Northern Power Co. This was the Indian Agency and was paid for by the United States Government. The house is still standing and is or was until recently used for an office building.

One letter tells of the death of Madame Franchère, wife of Gabriel Franchère, and another of the death of Shing-waukouce, the Chief on this side of the river.

A letter from Ramsay Crooks, to John Johnston, written from New York in 1819, is interesting for what he has to say about public affairs and also for the light it throws on his

own character. George Johnston had gone East but evidently did not stay for any length of time and Ramsay Crooks writes to his father:

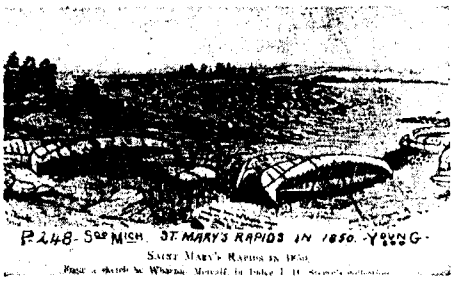
"George's determination has surprised and disappointed me a good deal; seeing you had given me reason to expect the pleasure of a visit from him in the course of the winter. But I suppose he did not find Montreal the place he thought it—discovered that happiness intrudes but seldom into the circles of modern refinement. Saw wealth and ostentation however profoundly ignorant, caressed, flattered, yea almost adored, while worth and merit if unassisted by fortune, were left to depend for existence on the food of the Camelion. If such he found the boasted civilization of Canada (and such it is in almost every large town) I should not wonder did he not stop short of the inmost recesses of our forests: and certainly cannot be blamed for undertaking a toilsome and tedious journey to regain comforts and friends, whose real value he would perhaps never have known, had he never left St. Mary's, for although man may have within his reach all the substantial enjoyments our transitory state affords, yet without an acquaintance with the forced existence of our fashionables he will not feast with a becoming relish on the luxury of comfortable seclusion. May God grant him health and the happiness of rejoining you soon.

"The Queen of England died in November. His Majesty has lost his sight but retains such health as may be expected at his very advanced age. Upwards of 20,000 of the British army of occupation had landed at Dover and the residue of troops under Lord Wellington would quit the French territory immediately. Ferdinand by his bigotry has reduced the Spanish Monarchy to complete impotency. The crowned heads of Europe have refused to interfere in the revolt of South America and except a part of Peru the whole country south of the Isthmus of Panama is completely revolutionized.

"I beg you will present my best regards to your family and that you may live to embrace them on the morn of many New

Years to come, is the sincere prayer of My dear Sir, Yours very truly Ramsay Crooks."

The oldest letter in the collection was written from the Falls of St. Anthony in 1824. It is to George Johnston, and is signed E. Purcell. Although written in lead pencil it is easily decipherable. The writer regrets that he was too busy to see more of him on his visit to the Falls and says that he is sending him a small lancet which he may find useful. Edward Purcell was Post Surgeon at the Falls of St. Anthony and the first physician in Minnesota.




ST. MARY'S RIVER IN 1850

For his services to the government as interpreter, Indian Agent, etc., George Johnston never seems to receive his dues and many of his letters have to do with money matters. His claims were evidently just, for both Cass and Schoolcraft promise to use their influence to have them paid, but Indian Agents changed and nothing ever came of it.

In 1856 five Chiefs put their marks to a claim for $1,600 for medicine, food and shelter which they said had been allowed and was supposed to be paid by the government. They owed this to George Johnston.

Not all of their claims of course were just, many were instigated by dishonest traders, and in one letter Schoolcraft

writes: "The most just claims have been in several cases rejected. Indian affairs in your quarter have indeed fallen into a poor condition and it will require no little effort to revive them." Again he says, "It is vain, when the Indians have made a bad bargain, as they did in 1842, to get affairs rectified afterwards. They must look sharp at first and exercise foresight. By putting their hands to paper in a hurry and without fully understanding the terms of a treaty, they do injustice to themselves. Thus they have signed away Lake Superior, but it is to them, gone forever."

George Johnston not only failed to receive his pay from the government, but he invested what little he did have in Detroit property which never amounted to anything, and his affairs seem to have gone from bad to worse. The money from Ireland, evidently from his father's estate, is slow in coming, Schoolcraft writes. He puts his affairs into the hands of first one firm of lawyers and then another and it seems as if every lawyer in Michigan must have had his power of attorney at some time.

He writes to one influential person after another for aid in helping him collect his just dues, and finally sends a Memorial to Congress, enumerating his claims, but there seems to have been no one powerful or interested enough to help him.

In 1847 Schoolcraft, who was Acting Superintendent of Indian Affairs with headquarters in Washington, began the preparation, under government appointment, of his *Historical and Statistical Information Respecting the History, Condition and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States.* Congress made an appropriation of almost $30,000 a volume for the first five volumes of this work, and the sixth volume was published by the War Department. It is now impossible to buy this first edition of six volumes, and the five volume edition published by Lippincott who bought the plates from the Government is very scarce. The six volume edition which belonged to George Johnston and afterwards to the late Justice Steere is now in the Library.

A number of Schoolcraft's letters to George Johnston have to do with the preparation of this work. In one he says, "You are favorably situated for collecting traditions and traits of the red race and their character and history; and possessing as you do a full knowledge of their language with more than the ordinary share of English literature and letters, you would be almost inexcusable not to employ your leisure moments in putting on record all you can find among them worthy of it. It is a debt you owe to them and to the country and such labor, if well directed and well executed, will form your best claim to remembrance. Life is at best but short and he only lives well who does something to benefit others. So far as you may transmit to me, anything you may collect, in name or lodge-tales or picture writing or any other branch I can assure you that you shall have final and full literary credit."

That George Johnston complied with Schoolcraft's request there can be no doubt after reading the letters, for in nearly all of them he thanks him for either a legend, a song, a bit of picture writing, a translation, a list of names or something of the sort, but one looks in vain for the "final and full literary credit" promised him.

When you pick up your Longfellow and read again the Legend of Hiawatha, thinking perhaps of Schoolcraft from whom Longfellow took his material, give a thought also to George Johnston for he too had a part in it.

Although only sixty-five when he died, George Johnston must have been an old man, broken in spirit and feeling that his life had been a failure. The late Lewis Kemp tells us that he disappeared from his home one cold winter day. Practically all the citizens of the place turned out on snow shoes and with dogs to find him. The party that went north found him across the canal, near the Rapids frozen to death. He was placed on a one-horse sleigh and taken to his home in Fort Brady. Sergeant Galley was in charge of the Fort, which was unoccupied (this was 1861), and the Johnstons lived in one of the houses. Mr. Kemp, although just a little boy, remembered this

well and said that he with Willie Spaulding and three little Indian boys followed the sleigh.

Before reading these letters and papers George Johnston was just a name but now he is a man of flesh and blood with both virtues and vices. Perhaps he accomplished little, but considering his handicap of mixed blood is it fair to judge him according to our standards? Like his parents before him he had friends from both palace and wigwam and seems to have been held in high esteem by all of them. If we must judge him let us judge him by his friends.