MADAME MONTOUR, WHITE QUEEN OF THE IROQUOIS

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Americans commonly take pride in the claim that they have given woman a higher place in society than she has ever known before in history. But in this period which our British friends significantly call the second Elizabethan period, it may be worth pointing out that if you want to find accounts of women rulers in American history, you will find them, not in the records of our government at Washington, but in the obscure annals of the American Indian.

Of special interest to us, because she was a white woman and French, is the story of Madame Montour, wife of Chief Carondawana, and, after his death, queen of a group of Oneida Indians on the west branch of the Susquehanna.

The story of Madame Montour must necessarily begin with her own statement about herself,[1] made to Witham Marshe, secretary of the Maryland Commissioners, at Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in July, 1744. She was born, she said, in Canada, was the daughter of "a French gentleman," and had been captured by the Indians when she was about ten years old. She grew up among the Indians and married a famous war captain, by whom she had several children. About fifteen years before the Lancaster interview her husband had been killed in a battle with the Catawbas. Marshe says she had but one son, and mentions two daughters who were then with her at Lancaster. We infer that she was born about 1684. We also get a picture of a very able woman who because of her intelligence, tact, and knowledge of languages had been useful on various occasions to the provincial authorities.

There is a legend that her father was Count Frontenac and her mother a Huron woman. But there is no documentary evidence for this, and it involves besides the difficult problem of absentee parenthood, for Count Frontenac was not even in Canada at the time in question. He had been recalled to France in 1682 and did not return until 1689.

In an attempt to explain the name Montour, some writers have spoken of an earlier marriage to a Seneca brave named Roland Montour. The author of the article[2] on Madame Montour in the *Handbook of the American Indians*, in an effort, apparently, to make doubly sure her right to the name, represents her as the daughter of a French nobleman named Montour and later the wife of a Seneca brave named Montour. That, it seems to me,

[1] *Mass. Hist. Coll.* Vol. VII. First Series, p. 190.

[2] *Handbook of the American Indians North of Mexico*, ed. by F. W. Hodge. Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C., 1907. Vol. I, pp. 936–939.

is rather overdoing the Montour story! The fact is that we know absolutely nothing about Madame Montour's father. We can conjecture only that he was white, French, and that his name was Montour.

As far as documented history is concerned, Madame Montour first appears at Albany in 1711 at a conference between the sachems of the Five Nations and Robert Hunter, royal governor of New York. For our account of her on this occasion we are indebted to Cadwallader Colden:

> He [Mr. Hunter] . . . had allwise a French woman standing by him, who had married one of our Indians, to inform him whether the interpreters had done their part truly between him and the Indians, notwithstanding that Colonel Schuyler was present at the same time. This woman, commonly called Madame Montour, had a good education in Canada before she went among the Indians, and was very useful to Mr. Hunter on many occasions, for which she received a pension and was sometimes admitted to his table in her Indian dress.[3]

The statement bears testimony of the faith and trust which Robert Hunter reposed in this young woman, not yet thirty.

In 1727 she acted as interpreter at a council in Philadelphia between Lieutenant-Governor Patrick Gordon and various Indian chiefs. Then in 1729 the death of her husband was duly noted by James Logan, Secretary of Pennsylvania for the Proprietaries. "On the 16th of 6 mo," wrote Logan, "presents of strowds were sent to the chiefs of the Five Nations upon the death of their captain, Carondawana . . . while on the 29th day of 5th month, 1730, there was forwarded a whole suit of mourning clothes to Carondawana's widow, Montour, and a coat to her little son and a handkerchief."[4]

By this time she was living on the west branch of the Susquehanna, at the mouth of the Loyalsock, a stream which empties into the Susquehanna about five miles downstream from the present town of Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Here she presided over a village part Indian and part French, indicated on Evans' map of 1749 as French Town, but known to early travelers by its Indian name, variously spelled Otstonwakin, Ostonwakin, Otstuagy, etc. Here Conrad Weiser found her in 1736. We read in his journal under the date of March 22:

> The 22d we came to a village called Ostuaga, from a high rock which lies opposite. . . . We quartered ourselves with Madame Montour, a French woman by birth, of a good family, but now in mode of life a complete Indian. She treated us very well according to her means.[5]

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[3] Quoted from Katharine W. Bennet, "Madame Montour" *Proceedings of the Northumberland County Historical Society*, Vol. XIII, 1943, p. 30.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 37.

[5] "Narrative of a Journey Made in 1737 by Conrad Weiser from Tulpehocken to Onondago," pp. 6–23 in *Coll. of the Hist. Soc. of Pa.*, Vol. I, Phila., 1853. Entry of Feb. 22, 1737.

Weiser visited the village again in the fall of 1742, when he acted as guide and interpreter for Count Zinzendorf. Count Zinzendorf had founded a colony for the Moravian Brethren on his estate Herrnhut, in Saxony, and was at this time engaged in missionary activities among the Indians. I quote from Weiser's journal:

> At Otstonuege we were remarkably well received. The Count had much discourse with an old Frenchwoman who had lived from youth among the Indians and had fled with her relatives from Canada for I don't know what reasons. She spoke French with her children and was known to me for many years by the name of Madame Montour. She was a Roman Catholic and was a very intelligent person, as were her children, too.[6]

Zinzendorf has left his own account:

> Here at Otstonwakin we dismounted and repaired to Mme Montour's quarters. . . . When the old woman saw us she wept. . . . She was very confidential to Anna, and told her, among other things, that she was weary of Indian life. . . .[7]

It was also on this occasion that Weiser met for the first time Madame Montour's son Andrew, with whom he was later to be so closely associated. As interpreters they made a very effective team. They both spoke Mohawk and English. Weiser spoke German but knew no French; Andrew spoke French and also the Delaware Indian dialect, in which Weiser had no skill. If, as has been said, the success of the English in the French and Indian War was possible only because of Weiser's influence in keeping the Indians of the Six Nations friendly to the English cause, may it not be true that *his* success was due in large measure to the continued loyalty and support of his half-Indian friend, Andrew Montour? Andrew's name is mentioned so frequently in the wilderness records of western Pennsylvania that the reader is almost ready to believe that *he* is the proverbial Indian behind every tree.

Madame Montour and her family seem to have left Otstonwakin shortly after this, never to return. When Conrad Weiser visited the spot the following summer, he found the village deserted, except for a hunter's cabin, in which were lodged two Indian men, a squaw, and a child. From the journal of Bishop Spangenburg we learn[8] that in 1745 Madame Montour and a daughter were living with Andrew's family on an island in the Susquehanna near Shamokin (Sunbury). While staying at Shamokin (Sunbury) the missionaries crossed over to the island several times to treat a boil on

[6] Quoted from P. A. W. Wallace: *Conrad Weiser.*, U. of Penn. Press, 1945, p. 139.

[7] Quoted from J. F. Meginness: *Otzinachson: A History of the West Branch of the Susquehanna.* Williamsport, 1889, p. 103.

[8] "Spangenberg's Notes of Travel to Onondaga in 1745" *Pennsylvania Magazine of Hist. and Biography.* Vol. II, 1878, pp. 424–432.

Andrew's sister's neck. The later journal of Martin Mack identifies[9] the sister as Margaret, who, by 1753, had married an Indian chief named Peter Québec and was living in a town known as French Margaret's Town, now the seventh ward of the city of Williamsport, Pennsylvania. From Mack's journal we also learn that as late as 1753, on the eve of the French and Indian War, the settlements on the west branch of the Susquehanna had not cut themselves off completely from the French in Canada. Speaking of Andrew Montour, here named by his Indian name Sattelihn, Mack reports:

> He is now absent, to bring Margaret's relatives, who live in French Canada, to her. The French have set 100 pounds on his head. . . . The Six Nations have expressed themselves to this effect, that whatever nation should kill him, they would at once begin war, he is held in such high esteem among them. . . . French Margaret is also held in high esteem by the Indians, and allows no drunkard in her town. Her husband is a Mohawk, who understands French well, as also their children, but they do not speak it.[10]

French Margaret seems to have been fully as picturesque as her more famous mother. The memorials of the Moravian Church contain an account of a visit she made to Bethlehem in 1754 on her way to New York. Traveling in semi-barbaric state with her Mohawk husband and two grandchildren, an Irish groom and six relay and pack horses, she was something of a sensation to the unostentatious Moravians. She attended divine worship, expressed much gratification in the music, and was pleased to find sisters conversant with French.[11]

Our final record about Madame Montour comes from Andrew himself. On the eve of the French and Indian War the military authorities were questioning him about the line of forts which the French had erected between Lake Erie and the present Pittsburgh. Andrew stated that he had been "three times from Log's Town to Weningo [Venango] on foot, and come there the second night every time with ease; that one time was in the month of March when his mother, who was blind, rode on horseback and he led the horse on foot all the way and yet was at Weningo the second day before night. . . ."[12] Madame Montour at this time would be close to seventy years of age.

It is tantalizing to have so many solid facts about Madame Montour and yet be so much in the dark about some of the most elementary things. We don't even know her first name. But whatever conjectures may be fabri-

[9] Quoted by J. F. Meginness: *Otzinachson*, pp. 134–137.
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 135.
[11] *Ibid.*, pp. 136–137.
[12] *Colonial Records of Pennsylvania*, Vol. V, p. 762.

cated about her, there is no doubt about the impression she and her able son made on contemporary history. And it is fitting, is it not, that the name of this wilderness queen should be perpetuated, not on memorials of stone or bronze, but in the geography of the state whose Indian trails she so often traveled—as a girl nimble-footed following her dusky captors, as a young woman dutifully in the steps of her warrior husband, later as a queen traveling with her savage retinue, and finally old and blind, but still proud, on a horse led by her famous son. A county, a town, a stream, an island, and a mountain range—all in Pennsylvania—bear her name.