

## *Joseph Brant and his World: 18<sup>th</sup> Century Mohawk Warrior and Statesman* By James W. Paxton

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# Book Reviews

Spring 2010

## *Joseph Brant and his World: 18<sup>th</sup> Century Mohawk Warrior and Statesman*

By James W. Paxton

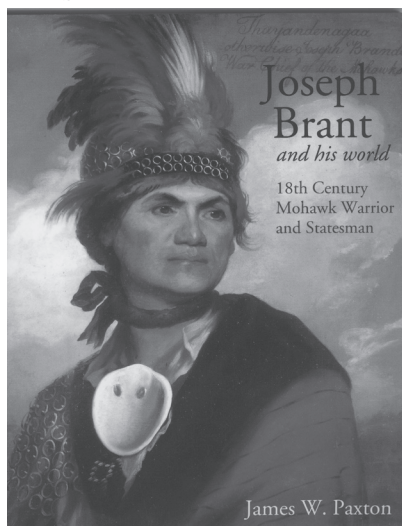
Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 2008. 96 pages. \$19.95 soft-cover. ISBN 978-1-55277-023-8 ([www.lorimer.ca](http://www.lorimer.ca))

Joseph Brant—Thayendanegea in the Mohawk language—will always be a controversial figure in Ontario's history. Brant, a Mohawk chief who worked for both the British Indian Department and his people, straddled both the Haudenosaunee and British worlds. He was an advocate for his people but encouraged assimilation. Brant leased land to speculators along the Grand River despite the objections of colonial officials, and these leases quickly fell apart as the purchasers went bankrupt; today they are part of the complicated land claims filed by the Six Nations. James Paxton has written a short but excellent biography of the man who is at the centre of all this.

One cannot write a biography of Brant without first acknowledging the much larger, standard work about Brant: Isabel Kelsay's 1984 work, *Joseph Brant: Man of Two Worlds*. Paxton disputes Kelsay's interpretation, asserting that

Brant was not a man split between two worlds but instead "embodied a whole but distinct culture that emerged from the contact and interaction of diverse people." (p. 6) Brant, in Paxton's opinion, represented what the Mohawk had become: a product of almost two hundred years of inter-cultural exchange. Parts of Brant were British while other parts were Mohawk.

Paxton moves quickly through the cultural and historical background of the Haudenosaunee. This overview, cursory by necessity, results in Paxton making some assertions that other historians would contest. For example, he overlooks the context behind the Iroquois policy of official neutrality in the eighteenth century. It was a policy born of necessity: their defeat at the hands of the French and their First Nations allies in the late seventeenth century. Paxton portrays this policy, however, as an Iroquois attempt to leverage



influence with both the French and English. He also overstates Haudenosaunee support of the British war effort in 1746. Other historians, such as Francis Jennings and Richard Aquila, argue that most of the Six Nations did not want to take up the hatchet against the French. The Mohawk, Brant's nation, were willing allies.

These, however, are minor issues. A short history cannot cover everything, and Paxton moves on into Brant's early years in a world that seemed to be in an almost continuous state of either warfare or tension. He does not reveal anything new in this part of the book, but provides a strong overview of the forces that acted on Brant and how Brant responded and developed as a result. Paxton's effort to situate the events of Brant's life into the broader context of Mohawk culture provides a rich background to this portion of the study.

Brant's life, and those of all Haudenosaunee, changed irrevocably with the American Revolution, an event that split them as much as it split the British colonies. It was a division that Brant inadvertently facilitated as he pushed the Six Nations to support the British. Paxton does not attempt to depict Brant as the leading figure in this event. Instead, he is careful to point out Brant's weaknesses, and highlight that Brant was not as influential amongst all the Haudenosaunee as the British believed (and Brant led them to believe). One wonders if Brant actually thought he was influential, or if he was simply shrewd enough to use his connections with the British for his own gain, or to help the Mohawk. One can assume that Brant learned a great deal about playing colonial politics from his brother-in-law, William Johnson.

It is an element of Brant's life that Paxton touches on repeatedly: his obvious importance as a leader, but his mixed reputation and influence amongst not only

other First Nations but also amongst his own people. When Brant leads the Haudenosaunee to Quebec he is not able to hold them together as a unified people. Some settle on the Grand River; another group goes to the Bay of Quinte with Deserontyon; a third returns to their traditional lands in New York State. When President George Washington invited Brant to Philadelphia to seek his aid against the First Nations in the Ohio Valley, Brant agrees to help but overstates his influence in the Ohio region. Indeed, some western chiefs taunt Brant for his failure to support their war. Paxton does not try to solve the question of Brant's influence. Instead he uses it as an interesting foil to draw out what he sees as the most important part of Brant's character: his dual personality as he moves between Mohawk and British worlds, and between the roles of warrior and diplomat.

James Paxton has written an excellent overview of Joseph Brant. He argues persuasively for his interpretation of Brant, and his epilogue ends convincingly with the statement that Ontarians need to know more about the man and the people who were so decisive in the shaping of Ontario's history.

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