

A Celebration of Women Writers

"A Royal Mohawk Chief" by E. Pauline Johnson [Tekahionwake] (1862-1913)

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A Royal Mohawk Chief



HOW many Canadians are aware that in Prince Arthur, Duke of Connaught, and only surviving son of Queen Victoria, who has been appointed to represent King George V. in Canada, they undoubtedly have what many wish for—one bearing an ancient Canadian title as Governor-General of all the Dominion? It would be difficult to find a man more Canadian than any one of the fifty chiefs who compose the parliament of the ancient Iroquois nation, that loyal race of Redskins that has fought for the British crown against all of the enemies thereof, adhering to the British flag through the wars against both the French and the colonists.

Arthur, Duke of Connaught, is the only living white man who to-day has an [Page 158] undisputed right to the title of "Chief of the Six Nations Indians" (known collectively as the Iroquois). He possesses the privilege of sitting in their councils, of casting his vote on all matters relative to the governing of the tribes, the disposal of reservation lands, the appropriation of both the principal and interest of the more than half a million dollars these tribes hold in Government bonds at Ottawa, accumulated from the sales of their lands. In short, were every drop of blood in his royal veins red, instead of blue, he could not be more fully qualified as an Indian chief than he now is, not even were his title one of the fifty hereditary ones whose illustrious names composed the Iroquois confederacy before the Pale-face ever set foot in America.

It was on the occasion of his first visit to Canada in 1869, when he was little more than a boy, that Prince Arthur received, upon his arrival at Quebec, an address of welcome from his royal mother's "Indian Children" on the Grand River Reserve, in Brant county, Ontario. In addition to this welcome they had a [Page 159] request to make of him: would he accept the title of Chief and visit their reserve to give them the opportunity of conferring?

One of the great secrets of England's success with savage races has been her consideration, her respect, her almost reverence of native customs, ceremonies, and potentates. She wishes her own customs and kings to be honoured, so she freely accords like honour to her subjects, it matters not whether they be white, black, or red.

Young Arthur was delighted—royal lads are pretty much like all other boys; the unique ceremony would be a break in the endless round of state receptions, banquets, and addresses. So he accepted the Red Indians' compliment, knowing well that it was the loftiest honour these people could confer upon a white man.

It was the morning of October first when the royal train steamed into the little city of Brantford, where carriages awaited to take the Prince and his suite to the "Old Mohawk Church," in the vicinity of which the ceremony was to take place. As the Prince's especial [Page 160] escort, Onwanonsyshon, head chief of the Mohawks, rode on a jet-black pony beside the carriage. The chief was garmented in full native costume—a buckskin suit, beaded moccasins, headband of owl's and eagle's feathers, and ornaments hammered from coin silver that literally covered his coat and leggings. About his shoulders was flung a scarlet blanket, consisting of the identical broadcloth from which the British army tunics are made; this he "hunched" with his shoulders from time to time in true Indian fashion. As they drove along the Prince chatted boyishly with his Mohawk escort, and once leaned forward to pat the black pony on its shining neck and speak admiringly of it. It was a warm autumn day: the roads were dry and dusty, and, after a mile or so, the boy-prince brought from beneath the carriage seat a basket of grapes. With his handkerchief he flicked the dust from them, handed a bunch to the chief, and took one

himself. An odd spectacle to be traversing a country road: an English prince and an Indian chief, riding amicably side by side, enjoying [Page 161] a banquet of grapes like two schoolboys.

On reaching the church, Arthur leapt lightly to the greensward. For a moment he stood, rigid, gazing before him at his future brother-chiefs. His escort had given him a faint idea of what he was to see, but he certainly never expected to be completely surrounded by three hundred full-blooded Iroquois braves and warriors, such as now encircled him on every side. Every Indian was in war-paint and feathers, some stripped to the waist, their copper-coloured skins brilliant with paints, dyes, and "patterns" ; all carried tomahawks, scalping-knives, and bows and arrows. Every red throat gave a tremendous war-whoop as he alighted, which was repeated again and again, as for that half moment he stood silent, a slim, boyish figure, clad in light grey tweeds—a singular contrast to the stalwarts in gorgeous costumes who crowded about him. His young face paled to ashy whiteness, then with true British grit he extended his right hand and raised his black "billy-cock" hat with [Page 162] his left. At the same time he took one step forward. Then the war-cries broke forth anew, deafening, savage, terrible cries, as one by one the entire three hundred filed past, the Prince shaking hands with each one, and removing his glove to do so. This strange reception over, Onwanonsyshon rode up, and, flinging his scarlet blanket on the grass, dismounted and asked the Prince to stand on it.

Then stepped forward an ancient chief, father of Onwanonsyshon, and Speaker of the Council. He was old in inherited and personal loyalty to the British crown. He had fought under Sir Isaac Brock at Queenston Heights in 1812, while yet a mere boy, and upon him was laid the honour of making his Queen's son a chief. Taking Arthur by the hand, this venerable warrior walked slowly to and fro across the blanket, chanting as he went the strange, wild formula of induction. From time to time he was interrupted by loud expressions of approval and assent from the vast throng of encircling braves, but apart from this no sound was heard but the low, weird monotone of a ritual older [Page 163] than the white man's foot-prints in North America.

It is necessary that a chief of each of the three "clans" of the Mohawks shall assist in this ceremony. The veteran chief, who sang the formula, was of the Bear clan. His son, Onwanonsyshon, was of the Wolf (the clanship descends through the mother's side of the family). Then one other chief, of the Turtle clan, and in whose veins coursed the blood of the historic Brant, now stepped to the edge of the scarlet blanket. The chant ended, these two young chiefs received the Prince into the Mohawk tribe, conferring upon him the name of "Kavakoudge," which means "the sun flying from East to West under the guidance of the Great Spirit."

Onwanonsyshon then took from his waist a brilliant deep-red sash, heavily embroidered with beads, porcupine quills, and dyed moose-hair, placing it over the Prince's left shoulder and knotting it beneath his right arm. The ceremony was ended. The constitution that Hiawatha had founded centuries ago, a [Page 164] constitution wherein fifty chiefs, no more, no less, should form the parliament of the "Six Nations," had been shattered and broken, because this race of loyal red men desired to do honour to a slender young boy-prince, who now bears the fifty-first title of the Iroquois.

Many white men have received from these same people honorary titles, but none has been bestowed through the ancient ritual, with the imperative members of the three clans assisting, save that borne by Arthur of Connaught.

After the ceremony the Prince entered the church to autograph his name in the ancient Bible, which, with a silver Holy Communion service, a bell, two tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments, and a bronze British coat of arms, had been presented to the Mohawks by Queen Anne. He inscribed "Arthur" just below the "Albert Edward," which, as Prince of Wales, the late King wrote when he visited Canada in 1860.

When he returned to England Chief Kavakoudge sent his portrait, together with one of Queen Victoria and the [Page 165] Prince Consort, to be placed in the Council House of the "Six Nations," where they decorate the walls to-day.

As I write, I glance up to see, in a corner of my room, a draping scarlet blanket, made of British army broadcloth, for the chief who rode the jet-black pony so long ago was the writer's father. He was not here to wear it when Arthur of Connaught again set foot on Canadian shores.

Many of these facts I have culled from a paper that lies on my desk; it is yellowing with age, and bears the date, "Toronto, October 2, 1869," and on the margin is written, in a clear, half-boyish hand, "Onwanonsyshon, with kind regards from your brother-chief, Arthur."

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A Celebration of Women Writers: Mary Mark Ockerbloom, Editor.