PETER WILLIAMSON

"Remarkable for his Captivity and Sufferings."

From an engraving by R. Cooper
WHEN Benjamin Franklin, then colonial envoy to Great Britain, made his half-forgotten tour of Scotland, he arrived at Edinburgh early in September, 1759.

As the envoy drove in through the Cow Gate it is scarcely to be supposed that he expected to meet in "Auld Reekie" anyone whom he had known in his native Pennsylvania. However, as Mr. Franklin on one of the first days of his visit strolled through the sacred precincts of the Parliament House, his ever observant eye caught the legend:

Coffee Room.
Peter Williamson
The Indian Captive
From Another World.
All are Welcome.¹

Before the door of this singular place of entertainment stood the wooden figure of a Mohawk in full panoply of war. About the entrance were suspended spears, bows, and quivers of arrows. One article in particular would attract Franklin's attention, and if he stepped over to inspect the label, he would read:

Chief Jacob's night cap which
Peter Williamson got in a
Present from Benjamin Franklin
Esq. of Philadelphia.²

Unfortunately we have no record of a meeting between Franklin

¹Mr. Nolan is the author of numerous books and articles on his home city of Reading and on the history of eastern Pennsylvania. Notable among them is General Benjamin Franklin.
²Caledonian Mercury, May, 1761; John Kay, Original Portraits and Caricature Etchings (Edinburgh, 1842), I, part I, 128-139.
and Williamson in Edinburgh, although it is almost certain that such occurred. It can, however, be positively stated that the two men had met five years before in the Pennsylvania wilderness north of the town of Bethlehem.

Benjamin Franklin in December, 1755, rejoiced in the title of “General Franklin” and was the leader of a militia detachment which marched into the Lehigh hills and constructed a fort, a rather absurd gesture of defiance against the victorious French who then threatened the eastern seaboard after their victory of Braddock’s Field. Williamson at that period had been serving in some obscure position in the auxiliary services of the British Crown. If we are to credit Peter’s own recital, he had been captured by the Indians and while with them had to witness many atrocities, including raids on the “Pennsylvania Dutch” farmhouses and burnings at the stake. How he escaped to join “General Franklin’s” militia force “somewhere in Berks County” is not clear. He probably was at Gnadenhütten when Franklin’s nondescript army marched by.\(^2\)

Still pursuing the Williamson narrative, we are told that he was once more taken prisoner, this time by the French regulars near Fort Oswego, and carried to Montreal. Thence he was repatriated in a cartel prison ship to France and Aberdeen.

Now, back in his native Scotland, Peter brought out his *magnum opus*:

\[
\text{French and Indian Cruelty Exemplified, in the LIFE, and Various Vicissitudes of Fortune, of PETER WILLIAMSON, Who was carried off from Aberdeen in his infancy, and sold for a slave in Pennsylvania.}^4
\]

This same Peter Williamson, one of the greatest liars who ever


\(^4\) Title taken from the Edinburgh edition of *Indian Cruelty*, published in 1792.
lived, was born and bred in the historic Scottish town of Aberdeen. As his pamphlet tells us, he was kidnapped, and sold into Pennsyl-
vania. Subsequently, by his own account at least, he was cap-
tured by a raiding party of Iroquois in the French service, but escaped and joined “General Franklin” at Guadenhütten above Bethlehem. Williamson’s narrative, well embellished with horrors and decorated by a woodcut of Peter in Indian dress, made a publication of one hundred and ten pages. It thrilled our fore-
fathers through ten reprints, one at least made in America.

All this sold well enough until some malicious persons began to whisper that Peter had never been among the Indians at all, and that the garb depicted by the woodcut was strangely like the costume worn by the mountebanks who accompanied itinerant showmen to the rural fairs in Perthshire. The Aberdonian burgesses sued Peter for the defamation of the name of their city by the story of his abduction. The unhappy author was compelled to make a public recantation and to see his book burned by the hangman of the Brig of Dee. Peter retaliated by suing the burgesses for his kidnapping, and in the end was awarded £100, which carried some vindication, although his stomach was ruined by the incredible amount of brandy he had to drink with his own counsel and with the judicial referee.⁶

Peter removed to Edinburgh and, with the confidence often habitual to those who have made a limited sojourn in a foreign land, produced another authoritative work, entitled A Concise View of the Whole World. The American paragraphs of this work are often of particular interest:

| British Canada: Sixteen hundred m. in length and twelve hundred m. in breadth. Its chief city Port Nelson. From this port alone are brought 50,000 beaver skins in one season, worth 5s. per pound. Papists. [Peter, a staunch Presbyterian and a Deacon of the Tron Kirk, always noted religions.] |
| Carolina: An island 700 m. in length and 40 m. in breadth. A fertile country producing everything necessary for life. Subject to the King of Spain. Papists. |
| Florida: A French-American colony. 1400 m. in length |

⁶Reclaiming Petition, Alexander Cushnie and Others, Magistrates of Aberdeen, 11th February 1762, Session Papers, Signet Library, XXIV, No. 10; Answers for Poor Peter Williamson, 2nd March 1762, ibid.


Maryland: Chief city Annapolis. Lord Baltimore is the proprietor. Its inhabitants are mostly Papists who have been transported from Europe for crimes but are become much civilized since naturalized and are very hospitable to strangers.

New York: 200 m. long and 100 m. in breadth. Chief town New York. Produces all matter of grain, cattle, horses with timber and dry fish, salted, which are transported into Spain, Portugal and Italy. Church of England. Inhabitants chiefly Dutch.

Once definitely installed in Edinburgh, our hero displayed enterprise and versatility. In addition to his printing business he established one of the earliest private post offices in Scotland, known as "Williamson's Penny Post." Also he brought out the first Edinburgh directory. However, as the years passed he seems to have relied more and more upon the proceeds of his well-known Coffee House somewhere within Parliament Hall, where no coffee seems ever to have been drunk. This was one of the sights of the Scottish capital, and all visitors were taken there. Peter's American connection was amply emphasized, as evidenced by an advertisement in the Caledonian Mercury:

Just arrived from North America and to be seen at John Mitchell's in Sellers Close opposite the upper end of the Luckenbooths from ten to nine at night for a sixpence a person, Statue of King Hendrick the Mohawk Chieftain as big as life, also an Indian Queen in a miniature canoe.

Exhibited by the famous Peter Williamson, author of
a book entitled "French and Indian Cruelty," who entertains the publick with the most surprising Indian performance.

The Caledonian bard Fergusson, who took many a tass of brandy at Peter's bar, too many for his own good, deplored the paucity of business when the courts are not in session:

This vacance is a heavy doom
On Indian Peter's Coffee Room
For a' his china pigs are toom
Nor do we see
In wine the sucker biscuits soon
As lights a' flee.6

For customers who had ordered (and paid for) a sufficient amount of claret, Peter was wont to dress himself in Indian costume and do the Mohawk war-dance, ending with a blood-curdling whoop. The theme in which he most delighted was how he and General Franklin protected the Pennsylvania frontier from the French.

There survives in Kay's Edinburgh Portraits a curious woodcut showing Williamson chatting before the Cross of Edinburgh with Bruce, the Abyssinian traveler.

Williamson lived long enough to witness the end of the French Revolution. He divorced his second wife in 1789, commemorating the episode by printing a pamphlet which enjoyed a transient popularity in Edinburgh:

Giving some Account of the Adulterous Gallants and Reasons for suing the Divorce, and for Publishing the Proceedings in it.7

Peter died and was buried true to form. The obituary notice in the Edinburgh newspaper tells us that "by his own wish he was interred in the full panoply of a Delaware Indian Chief similar to those he had observed in Pennsylvania." It is to be hoped that

6 John Kay, Original Portraits and Caricature Etchings (Edinburgh, 1842).
7 Trial of Divorce. Peter Williamson, Printer, against Jean (Edinburgh and Leith, 1789). (A very rare brochure of which this author has only seen one copy.)
posterity will not be too critical either of his foibles or his exaggerations. After all Peter had a book to sell and probably thought that the world owed him a better living than was to be obtained from the revenues of a primitive post office or the proceeds of a city directory. His public demanded harrowing details, and he furnished them.  

8 Additional authorities include: *Biographia Curiosa* (London, 1822); *The Book of Bon Accord* (Aberdeen, 1839); *Traditions of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1825); files of Edinburgh *Evening Courant*. 