Life and Adventures of Lieutenant-Colonel John Connolly
The Story of a Tory
By Percy B. Caley
CHAPTER V

Plans to Invade Ohio Country: His Capture

As he realized that public opinion in the back country was altogether too dangerous for a man of his sentiments, Connolly was bent upon reaching Lord Dunmore as soon as possible after leaving Pittsburgh. The better to conceal the true motive of his journey, he persuaded three Indian chiefs to accompany him, as these would lend support to his statement that the trip was made purely on Indian matters. (1). White Eyes, a Chief of the Delawares, and one of the three with Connolly, let it be known that he was going for the purpose of seeing Lord Dunmore who had promised him assistance in securing a grant from the King for the lands claimed by his tribe. (2) Bearing a copy of the treaty, Connolly and his red companions had, therefore left Pittsburgh on July 25th.

But the ruse he planned was not wholly effective. While passing the warm springs in Frederick County, he encountered a great number of patriots who did not hesitate to question his loyalty to the colonies. Though he avoided any sort of altercation with them, yet he did not succeed in allaying their suspicions, for some of them dispatched letters to Winchester, whither he was headed, describing him “as a suspicious and dangerous character.” Connolly had misgivings that they might do this, but he nevertheless kept on his way. His conjectures were not wrong; for soon after his arrival he was called upon to appear and answer charges of disloyalty preferred against him not only by those whom he had met on the road thither, but also by letters which had arrived from Pittsburgh since he had left that village. In the face of these multiple accusations things looked very dark, indeed, in spite of the fact that he presented the Indian Treaty and affairs connected therewith as his ostensible business. But just at the critical moment there arrived a messenger with letters from the

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President of the Virginia Convention, then being held at Richmond. One of these expressed entire approbation of his Indian negotiations inasmuch as these had been reported on so favorably by the Commissioners sent to inspect those transactions; another was a polite and complimentary letter to Connolly himself inviting him and his chiefs to visit Richmond. After these messages had been read, the Major was permitted to proceed on his way. (3)

The remainder of his journey was not without interest. Stopping at Fredericksburg, he dined with an old friend, a Dr. Mercer. Possibly to test his guest's sentiments, Dr. Mercer permitted some "inflammatory and unconstitutional toasts" to be drunk. When these were given Connolly remained silent. As a consequence, he found, on setting forth the next day, that his erstwhile friends had placed a spy upon him under the guise of a fellow traveller to Richmond. But, after a time, the astute Connolly succeeded in eluding his unwanted companion. (4)

Wishing to avoid further complications, he contrived to pass through Williamsburg at night. The fact that a storm, accompanied by much thunder and lightning, was raging aided him in escaping observation. One close call he had when a sentinel halted him. His suspense was brief, for on answering, "A friend", he was allowed to pass. Despite the inclement weather he dared not stop, but continued onward through the dreary night until he reached Yorktown. There, wet and tired, he procured lodging and went to bed. The next morning the rain was still falling. Concluding this a fortunate circumstance, inasmuch as it would probably keep the curious and idle indoors, he resolved to press forward. Fortune attended him, for he succeeded in passing through the village of Hampton, safe and unobserved. At the landing he managed to procure a boat and, by exercising a "little finesse with the waterman," was able to board the ship on which he expected to find Lord Dunmore. But the Governor had gone to Gosport, so, being anxious to see him, Connolly followed, and at last secured the "ardently wished-for-pleasure of an interview". (5)

The exact date of his arrival at Gosport is unknown, but it is recorded that he visited Dunmore sometime in August on the latter's ship, the Royal William, then lying
at Portsmouth, Virginia. Here he remained fourteen days.

(6) In planning their future actions, Dunmore deemed it worth while for Connolly to write encouraging letters to the gentlemen in Pittsburgh who had pledged support to the loyal cause and also to send reassuring greetings to the Indians. Connolly entered heartily into this scheme though he had his doubts concerning the constancy of his friend John Gibson. But Dunmore was persuaded that the latter was to be trusted and so overruled his cautious confederate. (7) To this mistake was ultimately due the defeat of their entire project.

This letter to John Gibson was written in Portsmouth on August 9, 1775. It either shows how blind some loyalists could be to the actual state of affairs or else it is highly colored for the purpose of inducing Gibson to espouse the side of the King. A part of it reads:

I am safely arrived here, and am happy to the greatest degree in having so fortunately escaped the narrow inspection of my enemies, the enemies to their country, to good order, and to Government. I should esteem myself defective in point of friendship towards you, should I neglect to caution you to avoid an over zealous exertion of what is now so ridiculously called patriotick spirit; but, on the contrary, to deport yourself with that moderation for which you have been always remarkable, and which must, in this instance, tend to your honour and advantage. You may be assured from me, that nothing but the greatest unanimity now prevails at home, and that the innovating spirit amongst us here is looked upon as ungenerous and undutiful; and that the utmost exertions of the powers of Government, if necessary, will be used to convince the infatuated people of their folly. I could, I assure you, Sir, give you such convincing proofs of what I assert, and from which every reasonable person may conclude the effects, that nothing but madness could operate upon a man so far as to overlook his duty to the present Constitution, and to form unwarrantable associations with enthusiasts, whose ill-timed folly must draw upon them inevitable destruction.

A hint at possible remuneration is subtly given; “Be prevailed upon to shun the popular errour, and judge for yourself, act as a good subject, and expect the rewards due to your services.” Nor was his uncle, Croghan, forgotten, for Gibson is requested to “give my love to George, and tell him he shall hear from me, and I hope to his advantage.” Moreover, however much he may have mistrusted Gibson, he asked the latter to interpret an enclosed letter from Dunmore to Chief White Eyes begging the Indians not to side with the Americans. One passage would seem to be reeking with duplicity, for he wrote, “I have no motive in writ-
ing my Sentiments thus to you, farther than to endeavour to steer you clear of the misfortune, which I am confident must involve but unhappily too many." (8) And yet one cannot help believing that he was at least half-way sincere in that statement, for later, when Virginia passed the law declaring that all Loyalists who, within a certain time, would swear allegiance to the new republic, would have their estates restored, he refused to take advantage of it. (9)

It turned out that Connolly's fears of loyalty were all too well justified. This gentleman, having already concluded to throw in his lot with the patriots, conceived it his duty to his country to disclose the messages he had received to the revolutionary leaders at Pittsburgh. This he did on or before September 24th. (10) Connolly naturally considered this a "dishonourable" act, and tells us in his Narrative, that, "Many other letters of mine were sent, at the same time and by the same conveyance, to persons who afterwards accepted offices of high trust under the Republican government; yet none, either then or since, ever divulged my opinion." (11)

In the meantime, after Connolly had dispatched the above letters to Pittsburgh, he and Dunmore had matured their plans; and had decided that he should go to Boston and try to secure the approval and cooperation of General Gage. Accordingly, Connolly set out for Gage's headquarters about August 26th, (12) on board the Arundel, a small schooner belonging to Lord Dunmore. (13) After a voyage of ten days he arrived in Boston. (14) Here he spent another ten days conferring with the General of the British forces. (15)

In brief, he was sent to propose that a body of troops from Canada and the western frontiers of Virginia, with Indian auxiliaries, should act in the west under his command, while Sir William Howe occupied the attention of the American forces in the north. (16) But, after his capture near Fredericktown, Maryland, on November 23, 1775, the committee which examined him found the following of his proposals to General Gage:

As I have, by directions from his Excellency Lord Dunmore, prepared the Ohio Indians to act in concert with me against His Majesty's enemies in that quarter, and have also despatched intelligence to the different officers of the militia on the frontiers of Augusta County in Virginia, giving them Lord Dunmore's assurance, that such of them as shall hereafter evince their loyalty to His
Majesty, by putting themselves under my command, when I should appear amongst them with proper authority for that purpose, of a confirmation of titles to their lands, and the quantity of three hundred acres to all who should take up arms in support of the Constitution, when the present rebellion subsided, I will undertake to penetrate through Virginia, and join his Excellency Lord Dunmore, at Alexandria, early next spring, on the following conditions and authority:

First. That your Excellency will give me a commission to act as Major Commandant with such troops as I may raise and embody on the frontiers, with a power to command to the westward, and employ such servicable French and English partisans as I can engage, by pecuniary rewards or otherwise.

Secondly. That your Excellency will give orders to Captain Lord, at the Illinois, to remove himself, with the garrisons under his command, from Fort George to Detroit, by the Auaboche, (17) bringing with him all the artillery, stores, &c., &c.; to facilitate which undertaking, he is to have authority to hire boats, horses, Frenchmen, Indians, &c., &c., to proceed with all possible expedition on that route as the weather may occasionally permit, and to put himself under my command on his arrival at Detroit.

Thirdly. That the Commissary at Detroit shall be empowered to furnish such provisions as I may judge necessary for the good of the service, and that the commanding officer shall be instructed to give every possible assistance in encouraging the French and Indians of the settlement to join me.

Fourthly. That an officer of artillery be immediately sent with me, to pursue such route as I may find most expedient to gain Detroit, with orders to have such pieces of light ordnance as may be thought requisite for the demolishing of Fort Dunmore and Fort Finastle, if resistance should be made by the Rebels in possession of those garrisons.

Fifthly. That your Excellency will empower me to make such reasonable presents, to the Indian chiefs and others, as may urge them to act with vigour in the execution of my orders.

Sixthly. That your Excellency will send to Lord Dunmore such arms as may be spared, in order to equip such persons as may be willing to serve His Majesty at our juncture, in the vicinity of Alexandria, &c., &c.

If your Excellency judges it expedient for the good of the service to furnish me with the authority and other requisities I have mentioned, I shall embrace the earliest opportunity of setting off for Canada, and shall immediately despatch Lord Dunmore's armed schooner, which now awaits my commands, with an account of what your Excellency has done, and that I shall be ready, if practicable, to join his Lordship by the 20th of April, at Alexandria, where the troops under my command may fortify themselves, under cover of the men of war on that station.

If, on the contrary, your Excellency should not approve of what I propose, you will be good enough to immediately honour me with your despatches to the Earl of Dunmore, that I may return as early as possible. (18)

Connolly informs us in his Narrative that General Gage gave the plans "his entire approbation." Unfortunately for the Major, however, he could not proceed directly to Canada as General Arnold with an American force was al-
ready beginning an expedition against that country. Hence, it was thought best for him to return to Virginia, taking with him Gage's instructions to the officers commanding in Illinois and Detroit, and to the Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs. The latter officer was to aid in meeting the expenses of the campaign. (19)

But the plot did not remain a secret for long. Washington, now commander-in-chief of the American forces, was encamped about Boston even while Connolly and Gage were conferring. The inhabitants of the city managed to pass in and out of the town with more or less freedom. It so happened that Connolly's servant, a William Cowley, had an acquaintance in Washington's private service. Thus it came about that Cowley was won over to the cause of the colonies. Nevertheless, he remained in his master's service until sometime after they had left Boston, in order to secure all the information that he could. Then he escaped and told the story of Connolly's program, as he had learned it, to the American officials. Though Connolly claims that this report was "a strange mixture of truth and falsehood," (20) it is thought best to quote it in full. The deposition is dated October 12, 1775:

William Cowley, of lawful age, being duly sworn, deposes and saith: That he has lived with Major John Connolly, of Fort Pitt, in the character of a servant, for two years last past; that the said Connolly was obliged to quit that place, fearing some injury from the inhabitants, who suspected him of being an enemy to his Country; that some time in August last, the said Connolly paid a visit to Lord Dunmore, on board his Lordship's ship, the Royal William, then lying at Portsmouth, in Virginia, and took this deponent as his servant; that the said Connolly staid fourteen days on board the said ship, and afterwards went to Boston in his Lordship's tender Arundel, with despatches to General Gage, from Lord Dunmore, where he was for the space of ten days. This deponent further saith, that after their departure from thence, the said Connolly asked this deponent if he was willing to go with him into the Indian Country; told him that he had been with General Gage, to get a commission, and orders to go into the Indian Country to raise the Indians and French; that there was some part of the Royal Irish at Fort Chartres, this deponent thinks he said, who had it in command from General Gage to join him, and who had nine twelve-pounders, that as soon as he had settled his business with Lord Dunmore, after his return, he intended, as he dared not go home through the heart of the Country, to take his Lordship's tender, go to St. Augustine, there get guides to lead him through the Cherokee Nation, Shawanese, Mingoeces, and Delawares; that he was to get commissions from Lord Dunmore, for Captain White Eyes and Cornstalk, and other of the chiefs and designed to make them presents, in order to encourage them to join him; that he intends to stay at Detroit this winter, to furnish himself
with boats and canoes, to bring his forces and cannon up the Ohio River; that he then intends to attack Fort Pitt, after taking which, he supposed all that part of the world would join him, especially as he had orders to give three hundred acres of land to every man that would enlist under him. This deponent further saith, that the said Connolly informed him of another scheme he had in view, namely, to proclaim freedom to all convicts and indented servants, then to march down to Alexandria, in Virginia, where he expects a reenforcement from Lord Dunmore, and to meet with some men of war, with which he intended to sweep the whole Country before him. (21)

It is unlikely that Connolly would divulge his schemes to his servant and consequently the above deposition must be taken with a grain of salt. Yet in essence it was true and the account, when it reached the ears of the western settlements, caused no little perturbation and set all people on the watch for Connolly or his confederates.

Connolly and his servants had departed from Boston on the 14th or 15th of September (22) enroute to Virginia and Lord Dunmore. Though the servant left him not long afterwards, as has been noted, Connolly continued on his way and arrived at Portsmouth on October 12th. (23) For a short time thereafter he was ill. This sickness, he says was due to “Excessive fatigue and anxiety,” for he had travelled during the year “upwards of four thousand miles, and always upon affairs that lay heavy on the mind.” (24) During this confinement on board the Royal William he and Dunmore perfected their plans.

On November 5th, Dunmore was pleased to grant him a commission as Lieutenant-Colonel Commandant of the Queen's Royal Rangers. (25) This regiment was to be raised in the western settlements and in Canada. He was further empowered to select his own officers, the selection to be confirmed by Dunmore. (26)

Acting under this authority Connolly selected two of his officers at the time. One Allen Cameron, of whom Connolly had a very high opinion, (27) was chosen as a first Lieutenant in the regiment later to be raised. The other, Dr. John F. D. Smyth, had presented himself before Connolly and Dunmore on the very day on which the former had been granted his commission of Lieutenant-Colonel. According to one authority Dr. Smyth had already been in the service of Lord Dunmore, having acted as the latter's representative among the Shawnee and Ohio Indians, trying to cement their allegiance to the royal cause, in the summer.
of 1775 while making a tour through the west. (28) But Connolly himself was sufficiently impressed with the gentleman, "observing him to be a man of quick penetration, firm loyalty, and ready to serve his Majesty at all hazards," and "intimately acquainted too with the lower parts of Maryland," through which he had decided to pass on his way to Detroit. Accordingly he importuned the Doctor to join him, hinting that a surgeon would be needed for his regiment. (29) Smyth fell an easy victim to this lure, inasmuch as he had already suffered some mistreatment for his British sympathies. However, both he and Cameron claimed, after their capture, that they had been over-persuaded by Dunmore. (30) Smyth, in particular, insisted that he had been "deceived by misrepresentation and false appearances" of Connolly. (31) In any case both pledged themselves to the adventure.

Having secured these assistants, Connolly soon completed his plans. The trio were to reach Canada as soon as possible. At Presque Isle, on Lake Erie, Smyth was to be left. There, during the winter, he was to keep two hundred men busy building boats and collecting provisions. Connolly and Cameron were to proceed to Detroit where they expected to assemble a large force. In the spring this body was to be transported to Presque Isle. From that place they were to take the boats and supplies collected under Smyth's supervision and proceed by way of French Creek, Venango, and the Allegheny Rivers to Pittsburgh. This town was to be seized and held as headquarters until the opposition of the country roundabout was entirely crushed, and the whole strength of the country collected and formed into regular regiments. Having accomplished this, a sufficient garrison was to be left in the fort while the remainder of the force crossed the Allegheny Mountains and advanced upon the Virginian frontier. After conquering this section a strong post was to be established at Fort Cumberland. With the rear thus protected, the invading army would press down the Potomac and seize Alexandria. At this place Lord Dunmore was to meet them with the fleet and all of his land forces. With Alexandria strongly fortified the communication between the northern and southern colonies would be completely severed and the objective of Connolly and Dunmore attained. (32)
But the plotters were not too sanguine, for a line of action was decided upon in case of failure. If their forces should be unable to seize Pittsburgh, they were to turn about and sail down the Ohio to the Mississippi. There the stores and artillery from Kaskaskia would join them and they would proceed down stream to the mouth of the Mississippi where transports would receive them and take them to join Dunmore at Norfolk in Virginia. Smyth considered the whole scheme a "well formed, judicious, and vast undertaking." (33) Doubtless it was and, had it worked out, the story of the Revolution might have been different. But, as it happened, the whole plot was "nipped in the bud" and can scarcely be said to have had a beginning.

At the time, however, they were much enthused with their ambitious designs and made their preparations with high hopes. Lord Dunmore was very active in aiding them. He, it was, who devised the method and supervised the concealing of their commissions and instructions. These, which altogether comprised eighteen sheets of paper, were cunningly hidden in the mail pillion sticks, on which Connolly's portmanteau was carried, hollowed out for that express purpose. After being adjusted, they were covered with tin plates and the canvas glued thereon as usual. This concealment proved effective under the strictest scrutiny. (34)

With their preparations completed the three adventurers made their adieus and set out upon their ill-fated journey on November 13, 1775. (35) They had determined to go through Maryland as that was the shortest route. (36) Accordingly, they embarked with Connolly's servant and their horses upon a flat-bottomed, decked schooner which was to take them up the Chesapeake Bay and the Potomac River. They intended to land near Smyth's home, on Port Tobacco Creek. (37) Thence they were to proceed on horseback by a private road to a place called Standing Stone which was beyond the influence of county committees and was not more than seven days' journey from Detroit. Their landing at the proposed place, however, was prevented by a furious northwest wind which drove them up the St. Mary's River. Landing on the shore of this stream they took to the public road as ordinary travellers and proceeded unmolested for several days. (38)
In the course of their travel it was decided that Smyth, after a while, should leave his two companions and pass through Pittsburgh in order to deliver dispatches to Alexander McKee, Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs, and to other Loyalists thereabouts. From that place he was to go down the Ohio to the mouth of Scioto, up that river, down the Sandusky to Sandusky Old Fort, and thence to Lake Erie. Connolly and Cameron, in the meantime, were to cross the Allegheny at Kittanning and proceed by the nearest and most direct route to Detroit. (39) But this strategy, too, was destined to remain untried.

The route they were following lay through Fredericktown, Maryland. As it chanced, they arrived in that village on the evening of a general muster of the militia. They became objects of suspicion at once, and it was proposed to examine them the next day. But that evening, as was usual after such gatherings, the militia, which included the members of the Fredericktown Committee, became intoxicated. In consequence they kept their beds until late the next morning, thus giving the three travellers an opportunity to avoid unwelcome scrutiny. Taking advantage of this good fortune the adventurers were up and gone before daybreak. (40)

About twelve miles beyond Fredericktown, in South Mountain, they became confused and took the wrong road. This route took them to a village known as Funkstown, where they dined. A few miles beyond this place they had the misfortune to pass a hatter who had formerly been a private in Connolly's militia at Pittsburgh. The hatter displayed his recognition by saluting Connolly as Major. Dreading the consequences of this ill-timed encounter, both Smyth and Cameron wanted to secure the hatter, but Connolly insisted that this would not be necessary, (41) though he was later to wish heartily that he had taken their advice.

The young man was, therefore, permitted to pursue his way unmolested. That evening he saw fit to lodge at Hagerstown, through which the trio had passed earlier in the day. Here, after dinner, he was exchanging commonplaces with a few convivial spirits in a "beer-house" when he chanced to overhear someone inquire who the three gentlemen were who had passed through town some hours before. Thereupon the hatter was pleased to announce that one was
Major Connolly of Pittsburgh fame. This declaration occasioned no little excitement, for just two days before the Colonel of the Minute Men of the village had received a copy of Connolly's letter to Gibson with orders to be on the lookout for the author, or his agents. The Colonel had informed his inferior officers of this and some of them happened to be present when the hatter volunteered his information. These hasted to their commander with the news. The Colonel, pleased that such a prize lay within his grasp, dispatched a squad of soldiers to seize the three suspects and bring them before the Committee of Hagerstown for examination. (42)

Meanwhile Connolly and his companions, with too much faith in their security, had gone no farther than five or six miles beyond Hagerstown before engaging lodging for the night, November 19th, at an inn conducted by a Dr. Snayvelley. Their host knew Connolly and from him they learned that rumors of the latter's conferences with Dunmore were being circulated, but that as yet nothing was locally known about his visit to General Gage. (43) Satisfied, the weary travellers retired to rest.

Sometime after midnight their door was forced and they awoke to find themselves prisoners of the large posse of over thirty men which had been sent from Hagerstown. Smyth characterizes the squad as "rude unfeeling German ruffians," and bewails the treatment he and his companions suffered at their hands. In any case, the exultant captors conducted their prisoners back to Hagerstown. Here they were "kept in separate houses during the next day and night, and suffered that kind of disturbance and abuse which might be expected from undisciplined soldiers, and a clamorous rabble, at such a crisis." (44)

They were closely searched as a matter of course, but nothing incriminating was found. At their examination Connolly exercised his wits in trying to persuade his captors that his letter to Gibson was nothing more than friendly correspondence and that Dunmore's letter to the Indians was in the nature of an apology. In this he was not wholly successful, for it was decided that he and his friends should be sent back to Fredericktown where they would be examined by the whole Committee. The decision caused Connolly to despair, for he tells us, "This fatal resolution, car-
ried only by a small majority, was, I foresaw, destruction to my hopes, as the news of my having been at Boston must soon get abroad." (45) Accordingly, they were escorted away by the same men who had seized them a few nights before. These fellows amused themselves and whiled away the tedium of their task by dropping to the rear and firing their rifles so that the balls would whistle pleasantly over the heads of their prisoners. (46)

**Footnotes**

4 Ibid., p. 323.
5 Ibid., pp. 323f.
11 *Pa. Mag. of Hist. and Biog.*, XII, 409.
12 In *Pa. Archives*, 1st series, IV, 682, Connolly says he left Boston on the 14th or 15th of September; his servant says, in *Am. Archives*, 4th series, III, 1047, that Connolly spent ten days in Boston; and in his own "Narrative," *Pa. Mag. of Hist. and Biog.*, XII, 409, he says he was ten days at sea on the trip from Portsmouth to Boston. This would make August 26th about the time he left Dunmore.
17 Probably the Wabash River.
20 Ibid., p. 410.
24 Ibid.,
30 *Pa. Archives*, 1st series, IV, 682.
33 Ibid., pp. 247f.
34 Ibid., p. 248; also "Connolly's Narrative," Pa. Mag. of Hist. and Biog., XII, 411.
37 Smyth, op. cit., II, 245f.
40 Ibid., pp. 249f.
41 Ibid., p. 250; also "Connolly's Narrative," Pa. Mag. of Hist. and Biog., XII, 413.
43 Ibid., pp. 412f; also Smyth, op. cit., II, 252.