

THE INDIAN TRADER OF THE UPPER OHIO VALLEY¹

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FEW CHARACTERS in American history have been so universally condemned as the Indian fur trader. The majority of his contemporaries, including colonial authorities, travelers, writers, and the Indians, unhesitatingly cast reproach upon him, and later writers continued to dwell upon his faults. Nevertheless he was not entirely without worth, nor was he altogether wanting in the qualities that made others of our early pioneers interesting and colorful. Like them he was restless and venturesome, courageous to the point of recklessness, and disdainful of physical hardship. He, too, was a pathfinder for civilization, whose rôle, in the westward movement on this continent, was not unimportant.

A desire to control the fur trade was one of the chief elements in the intense rivalry between France and England in North America. The struggle was bitterly waged in every part of the continent where traders of the two nations met. In the region of the upper Ohio River, however, and in that just south of Lake Erie, it assumed its "most dynamic and significant" phase. Here, during the first half of the eighteenth century, "the British were either strong rivals of the French or were completely dominant."² In the early decades of the century this territory had been visited now and then by traders from Carolina, New York, and Virginia, but the credit for developing its "rich trading possibilities" belongs mostly to the traders from Pennsylvania.³ When the fur fields east of the Alle-

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² Albert T. Volwiler, *George Croghan and the Westward Movement, 1741-1782*, 20 (Cleveland, 1926); Clarence E. Carter, *Great Britain and the Illinois Country, 1763-1774*, 84 (Washington, 1910).

³ Volwiler, *Croghan*, 20; Reuben G. Thwaites and Louise P. Kellogg, *Documentary History of Dunmore's War, 1774*, 391 (Madison, 1905).

ghenies had been exhausted these daring adventurers crossed over to the little known regions lying on the western side. Each succeeding year found increasing numbers of them venturing farther into the wilderness, driving their pack horses before them, in search of trade. As early as 1725 they had penetrated to the forks of the Ohio. A quarter of a century later they were operating as far west as the Big Miami and Wabash rivers.⁴ They had been largely instrumental in the establishment of important trading centers at Logstown and Pickawillanee, and in almost every large Indian village along the Ohio and its branches "one or more Pennsylvania traders were to be found."⁵ A plentiful supply of cheap goods and their own initiative and resourcefulness had enabled them to gain "virtual possession of a great empire, which needed only to be protected in order to insure its eventual absorption into the territories of the existing colonies."⁶

Of the men who thus aided in the conquest of this extensive and fertile valley, it has been possible to learn the names of 251 who were actively engaged in trade with the Indians of this region at one time or another during the years from 1725 to 1776. In the records covering the period from 1725 to 1734 the names of 34 traders appear for the first time; from 1735 to 1744 an additional 34 are recorded; and from 1745 to 1754 as many as 112 new names appear. From 1755 to 1764 the number of new names dropped to 42, a decrease indicating, perhaps, that the French and Indian War interfered with trading; from 1765 to 1776 the number dropped still further to 29, a fact undoubtedly due to events in connection with the on-coming Revolution and the shifting of trade activities farther to the west. The addition of so many new names during the period from 1745 to 1754 indicates that the fur trade in the valley was then at its height. Other information of a general nature pertaining to the group shows that at least 7 were from the neighboring colonies of Maryland and Virginia; 53 were "licensed" or "unlicensed" Pennsyl-

⁴ *New York Colonial Documents*, 6: 872-876; Wayne E. Stevens, "The Organization of the British Fur Trade, 1760-1800," in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 3: 176 (September, 1916).

⁵ Frederick J. Turner, *The Character and Influence of the Indian Trade in Wisconsin*, 15 (*Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science*, vol. 9—Baltimore, 1891); Justin Winsor, *The Mississippi Basin: The Struggle in America between England and France, 1697-1763*, 249 (Boston and New York, 1895).

⁶ Charles A. Hanna, *The Wilderness Trail*, 1: 21 (New York and London, 1911).

vania traders; and 17 were merchants whose anxiety to share in the profits of the trade prompted them to go afield in search of peltry. Of the entire list, possibly a score were men noted for their good qualities; at least as many more were notorious for their evil ones; and the remainder were average individuals, neither outstandingly good nor bad.

The first group, according to the last classification, consists only of men whose intelligence, integrity, and energy enabled them to rise above the level of the ordinary woodsman. Some of them were men of considerable education, and the writings that they left have proved to be valuable as well as interesting. Their services in the interests of the colonies were freely given. A few of them were at times indiscreet in their behavior, but their faults were common to most men of their time and, therefore, are not to be judged too harshly. Of their services, the greatest was no doubt that of maintaining friendly relations between their own race and the Indians. In this capacity Hugh Crawford, George Croghan, Christopher Gist, and George Morgan stood head and shoulders above their colleagues. Concerning Croghan it was said that he was "worth more than a garrison in troublous times."⁷ Robert Callender, John Fraser, James Patterson, John Prentice, Thomas Smallman, and Alexander McKee were commissioned officers in the Pennsylvania militia. Joseph Spear was a justice of the peace in Westmoreland County. John Gibson found time between periods of trading to serve his country with distinction in several wars. Alexander Lowrey and Alexander Maginty rendered invaluable aid to Lewis Evans in drawing up his general map of the middle British colonies. Thomas Kenton held minor executive positions under both Forbes and Bouquet. John Baynton, David Franks, Joseph Simon, and Samuel Wharton were merchants of note. And finally, William Trent, because of the high type of his public services, stood out as a man of integrity in a period when the quality was not too common in his field.⁸

⁷ Winsor, *Mississippi Basin*, 408.

⁸ Thomas Balch, *Letters and Papers Relating Chiefly to the Provincial History of Pennsylvania*, 178-180 (Philadelphia, 1855); *Pennsylvania Archives*, first series, 4:606; Thwaites and Kellogg, *Dunmore's War*, 11, note 19; Lewis Evans, *Geographical, Historical, Political, Philosophical and Mechanical Essays. The First, Containing an Analysis of a General Map of the Middle British Colonies, in America*, 10 (Philadelphia, 1755); William M. Hall, *Reminiscences and Sketches, Historical and Biographical*, 47 (Harrisburg, 1890).

Unfortunately, the percentage of such able men engaged in the fur traffic was small, and the credit that they brought to it was more than offset by the actions of perhaps an equal number of traders who were their exact opposites. In this group were such men as Joseph Campbell, the two Cresaps, James Dunning, Matthew Elliot, the three Girtys, Gorsham Hicks, Hugh Parker, John Powle, Peter Shaver, and John Young. It was these, and as many more whose names could be mentioned, who brought upon traders as a class the hatred of the Indians and the unqualified condemnation of those in authority and who earned for themselves the constant censure of the better traders. Had it not been for the malicious and wicked behavior of these lawless few it is altogether unlikely that the mild-mannered Franklin would have characterized Indian traders as "the most vicious and abandoned wretches of our nation."⁹ It is reasonable to assume, also, that the actions of some of these men, who "swore they would trade where they pleased in Defiance of any Government," were a contributing cause to the poor opinion that Sir William Johnson had of traders in general. At any rate, in his review of Indian trade in 1767 he states that the majority of those engaged in the trade "absolutely required Inspectors" and that there were among them "the very dregs of the people" from whom "regularity, honesty, or discretion could not with propriety be expected."¹⁰ These condemnations, though severe, are typical of those expressed by other contemporary writers and were to a great extent justified; in many instances the infamous conduct of these despicable characters is their sole claim to a place in history. A detailed description of their activities would not, in a work of this kind, be practical; it will be sufficient to state that they were guilty of crimes such as murder, arson, perjury, rape, and theft, to say nothing of innumerable lesser offenses such as dishonesty, drunkenness, greed, and immorality. The records of all within the group were very much alike and justify the statement that "the monstrous barbarities of some of these men almost stagger belief, and force upon us the unwelcome truth that in civilized society, and within the

⁹ Benjamin Franklin, *Works*, 2:467 (edited by John Bigelow—New York and London, 1887).

¹⁰ The Papers of Sir William Johnson, 5:482 (Albany, 1927); New York Colonial Documents, 7:960.

sound of Christian bells, there may be bred and reared savages as fiendish in their cruelty as any the world has ever known.”¹¹

Existing contemporary records prove that the average trader, too, was often guilty of gross misconduct. The type of his offense, however, was different from that of the more depraved members of the trade; it was generally of a kind committed on occasion by even the better traders and, in fact, by most frontier men of that time. The most common of these offenses and the one most far-reaching in its evil effects, was lawlessness in peddling rum to the Indians. The trader's practice in this respect, however, is not astonishing, since rum was in many instances his only article of trade for peltry and since he was generally an habitual drinker himself. Of the bulk of the traders the Pennsylvania assembly declared, “These trade without Controul either beyond the Limits or at least beyond the Power of our Laws, debauching the Indians and themselves with spirituous Liquors, which they now make in a great measure the principle Article of their Trade in direct Violation of our Laws.”¹²

The traders of this average group would also be considered immoral, even though judged by the standards of their own time. Sargeant, a traveler, was told by the Indians that the traders would “debauch their young women, and even their wives, when the husbands were from home.” Other Indians informed Charles Beatty in 1766 that traders hired their squaws for immoral purposes and paid them with rum. And the Reverend David McClure, who lived among the Indians in 1772 and 1773, declared that “the greater part of the Indian traders” kept “a squaw, & some of them a white woman, as a temporary wife.”¹³

Another of the trader's undesirable traits was his all-round unreliability, a characteristic that manifested itself in a variety of ways. His tendency to lie, steal, and cheat, his unwillingness to obey laws that inter-

¹¹ Thomas M. Cooley, *Michigan, a History of Governments*, 92 (eighth edition, Boston, 1897).

¹² *Pennsylvania Colonial Records*, 5:749.

¹³ John Long, *Voyages and Travels of an Indian Interpreter and Trader, Describing the Manners and Customs of the North American Indians*, 32 (London, 1791); Charles Beatty, *The Journal of a Two Months Tour; with a View of Promoting Religion among the Frontier Inhabitants of Pennsylvania, and of Introducing Christianity among the Indians*, 62 (London, 1768); David McClure, *Diary, 1748-1820*, 53 (New York, 1899).

fered with his financial interests, his inclination to shirk responsibility, and his failure to justify the confidence of his superiors were all indications of a general lack of dependability. Closely allied with this weakness was a want of interest in things spiritual. Although instances of impiety are less frequently met with than examples of some of the characteristics heretofore mentioned, yet there are a sufficient number of such instances to indicate that irreligion was a failing common to most traders. It is clear that the irreligious ones were numerous enough to interfere seriously with efforts to Christianize the Indians. Evidence of this fact is found in the statement of Franklin that "the introduction of pure religion" among the Indians might be greatly facilitated "if we could . . . show them a better sample of Christians than they commonly see in our Indian traders." The truth of this assertion is borne out by the experience of the Reverend David Jones, who related that his reception by the Shawnee in 1772 was more enthusiastic when they discovered that he was "no trader, but was a good man."¹⁴

A final and widespread vice common to most traders, one that probably helped to create misunderstanding between the white men and the Indians, was that of greed. This fault will be discussed later in connection with trading methods; the following statements are given only to prove its existence. "The Indians hold the Traders in great Contempt as a Set of Mean Dishonest Mercenary Fellows," wrote Peter Wraxall in 1726. Sir William Johnson, in a letter of 1768, states that "the Much greater part of those who go a Trading are men of such circumstances and Dispositions as to venture their persons any where for Extravagant gains."¹⁵ Such statements, made by men who gained their knowledge at first hand, need no comment.

This group of average traders, however, was not made up entirely of undesirables; the records show that there were at least a few good men in it. For instance, the journal of a traveler along the upper Ohio in

¹⁴ Franklin, *Works*, 2: 467 (Bigelow edition); David Jones, *A Journal of Two Visits Made to Some Nations of Indians on the West Side of the River Ohio, in the Years 1772 and 1773*, 53 (Sabin's Reprints, no. 2—New York, 1865).

¹⁵ Peter Wraxall, *An Abridgment of the Indian Affairs Contained in Four Folio Volumes, Transacted in the Colony of New York, from the Year 1678 to the Year 1751*, 169, note 1 (Harvard Historical Studies, vol. 21—Cambridge, Mass., 1915); *Documentary History of the State of New-York*, 2: 905 (Albany, 1849).

1772 affords the information that "some of the traders were not only civil, but very generous" and, strange as it may seem, contains an account of one who had "preserved a good conscience so far in respect of the Sabbath" that he "refused to work at his trade . . . on that day." Another traveler relates that among the traders in the vicinity of Fort Pitt in 1773 there were a few who, despite their calling, continued to "live in the fear of God, & maintain their integrity."¹⁶ Some few letters, also, contained statements that reflect credit upon certain traders. In one of them a trader is designated as "an honest man"; another implies that one is faithful and reliable; a third states that a certain trader was a person of "good Character"; another describes one as "a man of sense and a faithful Pennsylvania"; while in a fifth letter the "honesty and veracity" of a trader are declared to be "unimpeachable."¹⁷ Such records, however, in comparison with those of a disparaging nature, are scarce, and their scarcity forces the unpleasant conclusion that the bad men far outnumbered the good.

Of the various factors studied in connection with the trader, none, perhaps, so clearly reveals his low character as his method of dealing with the Indian. In the entire history of the trade little can be found that is creditable to the white man. In comparison with the instances in which he unscrupulously cheated the red man out of practically everything that belonged to him, the ones in which he accorded him even a modicum of justice are almost negligible. As early as 1682 the province of Pennsylvania was obliged to pass laws designed to protect the savage against unfair trade methods. Despite these and later protective measures, however, he continued to be victimized by his more experienced white adversary. Some enlightenment on the shameful trade practices in vogue as well as on the average trader's attitude toward them, may be had from the following excerpt from a work published in 1766 as a special plea for the cause of the red man. In the ensuing conversation between two traders, M'Dole advises Murphey, who is new to the art of trading:

¹⁶ Jones, *Journal*, 58, 83; McClure, *Diary*, 53.

¹⁷ William H. Egle, ed., *Notes and Queries, Historical, Biographical and Genealogical, Relating Chiefly to Interior Pennsylvania*, 1: 251 (Harrisburg, 1894); *Pennsylvania Colonial Records*, 5: 706; 7: 548; *Pennsylvania Archives*, first series, 4: 556; Thomas Jefferson, *Writings*, 2: 312 (edited by Albert E. Bergh—Washington, 1907).

M'Dole. 'Tis very well: your Articles are good:
But now the Thing's to make a Profit from them,
Worth all your Toil and Pains of coming hither.
Our fundamental Maxim then is this,
That it's no Crime to cheat and gull an *Indian*.

Murphey. How! Not a Sin to cheat an *Indian*, say you?
Are they not Men? hav'nt they a Right to Justice
As well as we, though savage in their Manners?

M'Dole. Ah! If you boggle here, I say no more;
This is the very Quintessence of Trade,
And ev'ry Hope of Gain depends upon it;
None who neglect it ever did grow rich,
Or ever will, or can by *Indian* Commerce.
By this old *Ogden* built his stately House,
Purchas'd Estates, and grew a little King.
He, like an honest Man, bought all by Weight,
And made the ign'rant Savages believe
That his Right Foot exactly weigh'd a Pound:
By this for many Years he bought their Furs,
And died in Quiet like an honest Dealer.

Murphey. Well, I'll not stick at what is necessary;
But his Device is now grown old and stale,
Nor could I manage such a barefac'd Fraud.

M'Dole. A thousand Opportunities present
To take Advantage of their Ignorance;
But the great Engine I employ is Rum,
More pow'rful made by certain strength'ning Drugs.
This I distribute with a lib'ral Hand,
Urge them to drink till they grow mad and valiant;
Which makes them think me generous and just,
And gives full Scope to practice all my Art.
I then begin my Trade with water'd Rum,
The cooling Draught well suits their scorching Throats.
Their Fur and Peltry come in quick Return:
My Scales are honest, but so well contriv'd,
That one small Slip will turn Three Pounds to One;
Which they, poor silly Souls! ignorant of Weights
And Rules of Balancing, do not perceive.¹⁸

This description is not an exaggeration; concrete examples of these and even worse practices are plentiful, and they form an interesting though scarcely to be admired chapter in the history of the white man's subjugation of the Indian.

¹⁸ Robert Rogers, *Ponteach: or the Savages of America; a Tragedy*, 4 (London, 1766).

It would be unfair to those in control during the period under discussion to omit mention of their attempts to stem this plunder of the savage. Both civil and military authorities made determined efforts to regulate the lawless activities of the traders, but they met with indifferent success. The enactment of laws did little other than provide officials with the right to punish wrongdoers. The fault, however, lay not so much in the laws as in the difficulty of enforcing them. The vastness of the territory under surveillance, and the red man's custom of shifting about from place to place in order to obtain better hunting grounds, usually carried him beyond the protective arm of the law but not far enough to free him of the presence of designing traders. The guilt of the latter, moreover, was difficult to prove, since they usually dealt "privately . . . with the Indians, and very often back in the woods, out of the view of any but themselves."¹⁹ Even had each province been able to regulate the conduct of its own traders, those from the neighboring colonies would have constituted a problem; and regardless of laws prohibiting the sale of liquor within the colony it was comparatively easy for the Indians to obtain it elsewhere. Because of these things the protection of the red man was a difficult task and one frustrated, in not a few instances, by the very actions of the Indian himself. His inordinate love of fire water precluded the possibility of his taking just a "dram" to "refresh" himself, as he would have wished,²⁰ and soon after the first drink he was easy prey for the greedy and unscrupulous trader. At such a time laws were of little avail and the unfortunate red man was quickly relieved of practically everything that was worth carrying away.

This description of the trader would be incomplete without some reference to his nationality. What can be said in this connection, however, is not very definite, since there is a decided scarcity of contemporary material bearing upon the subject. It is, nevertheless, possible to establish the fact that there were several nationalities represented among the traders. Proud, a writer of the period, stated that "the *Indian* traders, and most of the inhabitants of the back counties" of Pennsylvania "and

¹⁹ Pennsylvania, *Statutes at Large*, 1682-1809, vol. 2, p. 169.

²⁰ Sassoonan, king of the Delawares, to the council, August 13, 1731, in *Pennsylvania Colonial Records*, 3:406.

the neighbouring provinces" were "of the lowest rank, and least informed, of mankind" who had "flowed in from *Germany, Ireland, and the jails of Great Britain*."²¹ That he was at least partly right is borne out by the depositions of Luke Arowin and Thomas Burk, who stated under oath in 1751 that they were natives of Ireland prior to becoming inhabitants of Pennsylvania. The latter also stated at the same time that John Martin was an Englishman.²² Post, another contemporary writer, stated in 1758 that there were among the Indians at that time "a great number of *Irish Traders*." Among these, according to the records, were George Croghan and the Girtys. According to one of the later writers, the traders who supplanted the French-Canadians in the territory west of the Alleghenies were Scotch-Irish. Not all of them, though, were of this descent, for the merchants Joseph Simon and Levy Andrew Levy were referred to as "Jewish,"²³ a designation that was hardly necessary, since one would not go far wrong in stating that men with such names were of Semitic origin. On the same basis one might classify men with names like Fitzpatrick, Kelly, Maginty, Obryan, Sullivan, and Teaffe, as Irish, especially if they were called Dennis, Michael, or Timothy. And it would not be unreasonable to surmise that men named Campbell, Douglas, Duncan, Ferguson, Moorhead, and Stewart were of Scotch descent. Similar conclusions regarding the nationality of other traders could no doubt be drawn, but since any such would be largely conjectural they would not be particularly valuable.

Another aspect of the trader, and one that should be considered when judging his actions, is that of his manner of living. To the average person his life must seem to have been a singularly carefree one with more than its share of exciting moments and not entirely devoid of its romantic ones. A closer study discloses the fact that it was a life fraught with

²¹ Robert Proud, *The History of Pennsylvania . . . till after the Year 1742*, 2: 312 (Philadelphia, 1798).

²² *Olden Times* 2: 181, 184 (April, 1847).

²³ Christian F. Post, "Journal," in Reuben G. Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846*, 1: 217 (Cleveland, 1904); Hanna, *Wilderness Trail*, 1: 323; Consul W. Butterfield, *History of the Girtys*, 1 (Cincinnati, 1890); Frank R. Diffenderffer, "Indian Trader Troubles," in Lancaster County Historical Society, *Historical Papers and Addresses*, 9: 306 (September, 1905); Volwiler, *Croghan*, 39.

many dangers and hardships. When the trader ventured beyond the settlements into the Indian country he had no assurance that he would ever return. The red man's nature made him a difficult person to deal with, and not a few traders were tomahawked and scalped for having, perhaps inadvertently, aroused the ire of the Indian. There was also ever present the possibility of concerted Indian warfare upon the whites, in which event the traders were the first to suffer. Referring to the English traders in the western country at the time of Pontiac's Conspiracy, Doddridge states: "Out of one hundred and twenty of them, among the different nations, only two or three escaped being murdered."²⁴ In addition to these dangers, which every trader accepted as routine matter, he was forced to undergo hardships beyond the endurance of any but the most rugged. Especially was this true of the early trader, who traveled far into the wilderness to reach the Indians. His journey was usually made easier through the use of pack horse or canoe, but often he was obliged to trudge long, weary miles through dense forests, his belongings packed on his back. His protection against the elements was, at times, nothing more than a friendly tree or rock. His food supply was largely dependent upon his knowledge of woodcraft and his skill with the rifle. When he reached an Indian encampment he found little change for the better. His comforts even here were meager; his food from meal to meal was generally the same; his companions from day to day were savages and other traders. Some idea of just what such company would mean to a person of finer sensibilities may be gleaned from a comment of Christopher Gist in 1750. "In the Loggs Town," he said, "I found scarce any Body but a Parcel of reprobate Indian traders . . . Tho I was unwell, I prefered the Woods to such Company & set out from the Loggs Town down the River."²⁵

In conclusion, attention is again directed to the classification of traders according to three groups. If for no other reason, this method is commendable because of its fairness to the trader. In the records consulted in the preparation of this paper, little or no attempt was made to differ-

²⁴ Joseph Doddridge, *Notes on the Settlement and Indian Wars of the Western Parts of Virginia and Pennsylvania from 1763 to 1783*, 165 (Pittsburgh, 1912).

²⁵ William M. Darlington, ed., *Christopher Gist's Journals*, 34 (Pittsburgh, 1893).

entiate in the type of men engaged in the fur trade. Some few, it is true, were recognized as men of worth, but aside from these, the stigma that devolved upon traders through the actions of the unprincipled and vicious ones, fell on all who traded with the Indians. In this manner were blackened the names of possibly many who were deserving of a better fate. It is known that some of these traders were good men and it is not unreasonable to assume that there were additional ones concerning whom other than evil could have been recorded. The writer is convinced that such was the case and that the Indian trader, though guilty of much evil, was yet deserving of more credit than has been accorded him.