THE INFLUENCE OF JOHN HECKEWELDER, MORAVIAN MISSIONARY, ON THE LIVES OF WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA INDIANS AND SETTLERS

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There is a human disposition, once having become interested even in a relatively obscure character to acquaint others with his accomplishments. From his lineage and background this John Gottlieb Ernstus Heckewelder must have been a strong character.

He was born in Bedford, England, March 12, 1743, and died in Bethlehem, Pa., January 31, 1823—a life span of all but 80 years.

His father, David whose name was written Heckenwaelder, was one of the Moravian exiles who came to Herrnhut, the refuge village founded by Count Zinzendorf on his estate Bevthelsdorf, Saxony.

The Moravian doctrine descends from the ritual of the Greek Church which penetrated to Bohemia and Moravia before the year 900 and survived persecution for more than 200 years. Union in 1176 with the Waldenses driven from Italy and France preserved their ancient faith and resulted in a purer form of worship. Strife and dissensions prevailed until in 1536, a hundred years after the name United Brethren was adopted, their Confession of Faith was approved by Martin Luther. Another 200 years transpired before a little band emigrated to the Zinzendorf Estate and established Herrnhut where they were joined by many of the Brethren. Indeed Count Zinzendorf was accused of inducing people to leave Moravia and Bohemia and ironically, was himself banished for ten years from his own lands. Every persecution but increased strength and soon missions sprang up in other places, a colony going to Georgia late in 1733 followed in 1736 by another in a ship which also bore to America John Wesley, founder of Methodism. Their migration to Pennsylvania followed refusal to bear arms in the war between Great Britain and Spain, a service from which they were

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exempt by agreement.

This was the religious background of David Heckewelder, John's father who was sent as a missionary to England where his son was born. The son must indeed have absorbed much of the missionary spirit.

Heckewelder was eleven years old when he landed with his parents at New York. He walked with Bishop David Nitschman to Bethlehem, a then 15 year old mission, while others waited for wagons. Barring a brief interim in the Danish West Indies with his missionary parents, who died there, he grew up in the vicinity of what is presently Nazareth and Bethlehem. When barely 19 and still apprenticed to a cedar-cooper, he was chosen to join Christian Frederick Post who had built a log house at Tuscarawas on the Muskingum in Ohio about 75 miles west of Pittsburgh in preparation for a mission among the Delawares. The hardships on this 33 day journey in the spring of 1762 are vividly depicted in Heckewelder's own narrative, mentioning the names of many small places familiar to us, unexpected snow storms encountered, and floods not so different from those of today (now controlled by dams—then by forest verdure). He traversed in due course while pushing one evening to make Pittsburgh, the field of Braddock's defeat. His report reads "a dreadful sight was presented to our eyes. Skulls and bones of the unfortunate men slain here seven years before on the 9th of July 1755 lay scattered all around and the sound of our horses' hoofs continually striking against them made dismal music as with the Monongahela full in view, we rode over this memorable battleground."

But it is the mission to the Delawares that engages our attention. In a carefully written article by Paul A. Wallace, Editor Pennsylvania history, published in Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society Volume 96 #4 August 22, 1952, Professor Wallace comments on the neglect of Heckewelder's work which he regards as unfortunate considering what opportunities that missionary had to study the Indian while the latter's world was still pretty much intact and what an eager, inquiring mind this Moravian missionary brought to the task of reporting what he saw. True he regarded the Delawares as more honorable, more reliable than others, particularly the Iroquois, and according to Professor Wallace decidedly influenced the novels of Fenimore Cooper, without intent to do so as anyone understanding the missionary's char-
acter and career should know. During his most active sixty years (1754-1814) Heckewelder traveled more than 26,000 miles through the American forest, a tremendous feat in those days—a time of the greatest experimentation in the relations between Indians and white men when the former are said to have numbered twenty thousand or more. Professor Wallace well described those years as a time when Delaware Chiefs supported the Moravian attempt to save the Indians (body and mind as well as soul) by showing them how to adopt the white man’s religion and culture without surrendering their own identity. Those were also the years he adds when Pontiac and later Tecumseh sought to save the Indian race by quite opposite means: the violent expulsion of white men from Indian lands, and fierce reliance on their own native customs and traditions.

From studying Heckewelder’s own narrative based on keen observation of an exploited race, what do we find? We must conclude that the red man reacted much as other humans under like conditions. How do we regard aggressors? Our defences immediately come into play. Need we examine our own times to realize how history repeats itself. Does human nature change? In this atmosphere our missionary dealt with good and evil white and red men alike. His influence was strong on the natives with whom he lived and worked and communicated in their own language. Indeed since Moravian missionaries received no material aid they were forced to hunt, to fish and to clear and till fields with their converts.

In those days there appeared to be two distinct approaches to the Indian. People possessing but a veneer of Christian spirit yet professing religion advocated first imparting to these subjects the arts and graces, the so-called culture of civilization—something suddenly foreign to their whole experience, their life, their environment. And what was the effect on Indians in dealing with many of these whites? Settlers took their lands in sharp trades, sometimes appropriating (that’s what it amounts to) large areas in what they termed treaties. Professional traders, in addition to acquiring valuable furs for a pittance, introduced various vices. The approach of the Moravian missionaries, on the other hand was simply to expound Christ’s teachings and allow “civilization” to follow. Results proved in fair dealing, in mutual respect, the efficacy of this method. It was unfortunate indeed for many fine white settlers
and similarly for many decent red men to whom the name savages had been applied and stuck, that they constituted so small a minority. It is really pitiful also, to learn how numbers of Indians who had adopted Christianity, abided by its teachings through stress and strain. Perhaps no more telling example could be cited than the plight of those Christian Indians who had settled in the eastern section of Pennsylvania, many in and about Bethlehem under the aegis of the Moravian missionaries, and in 1763 became victims of reprisals inflicted by both sides, extending from the Ohio country and from Canada down through New England in efforts on the one hand to avenge murders and on the other to regain dispossessed lands. It was a sorry situation. An accusation was circulated that Indians were Cananites descended from the lost tribes of Israel and were to be destroyed. Fanatics are always to be found who, often in all sincerity, do almost irreparable damage. These Christian Indians joined in a petition to the Governor of Pennsylvania for protection, protesting their abhorrence of the cruelties committed by their countrymen. The situation was so tense and so fraught with danger from unbelievably cruel acts committed by both sides that though its seriousness was not at first recognized by the local missionary "Brethren," the Government of Pennsylvania (as related in Heckewelder's Narrative) ordered all baptized Indians brought to Philadelphia for safety. Their conduct was exemplary: their treatment by the authorities, especially soldiers and citizens over whom government had little and often no control, was shameful. Pennsylvania Colonial Records contains accounts of those dark days. It was heartbreaking for the good Brethren who never failed, however, to set a praiseworthy example to their charges.

In the more active 30 years following Heckewelder's first westward journey to the Western Pennsylvania-Ohio Country with Christian Frederick Post, he made numerous trips to and from missionary outposts, conveying important messages, interpreting Indian language and customs, promoting peaceful relations. Translated into results, the world might not appraise his accomplishments highly yet he undoubtedly exerted far-reaching influence for peace. He really was working persistently for honest co-existence without concealed weapons in a mailed fist. This was not a simple task. Critics spreading rumors and false accusations continually arose on all sides. And the task was immeas-
urably complicated by the seemingly never-ceasing Indian Wars, aided and abetted by characters like McKee, Elliot and Girty. Consider the example set by the English and the French each determined to wrest a continent from the other and employing every means at hand to exploit the red man in undermining the other. It is impossible not to develop deep respect for the ability of Heckewelder and his colleagues just to keep alive during these trying times. Not all did. Our subject recounts, not in a dramatic but rather a matter-of-fact way, a number of instances where his life hung in the balance. The appearance of aid at critical moments was regarded as providential. These Christians had consigned their welfare, their lives, to a higher power and were always ready to depart this world.

Specific events usually carry human interest. Even when these concern individuals only they leave their mark, they exert a certain influence. There could have been only good effects from dealings between Heckewelder and his associates, and Indians who, happily affected, spread good reports among their countrymen. A reasonable conclusion impresses itself on the reader of Heckewelder’s Narrative—that this peaceful influence more than once averted ill feeling, even bloodshed.

Taken individually, these Indians differed little in essentials from white men, says Professor Wilson. A specific event occurred in the fall of 1767 when the widely known and greatly respected missionary Zeisberger learned that some Indians living on the Allegheny River wanted to hear the gospel preached. He lost no time going there. Finding there was a field for his services, he returned amid many hardships to his base at Friedenshutten whence those Christian Indians, released from their unhappy experience in Philadelphia, had migrated from the Bethlehem area. Indian named—Wyalusing Friedenshutten, meaning Tents of Peace, had been established at the invitation of Papunhant, leader of a band of Monseys, with the approval of the Governor, as a missionary outpost in 1763 on the east fork of the Susquehanna at the mouth of Wyalusing Creek in Bradford County. It was in the path from the land of the Iroquois to the countries of the Catawbas and the Cherokees. The Iroquois informed the Moravians that the place was not suitable for a settlement because the land had been stained with blood. However, after proper negotiation agreement to stay was reached, although
interrupted for several years by troubles incident to the conspiracy of Pontiac. This settlement is described in some detail to point up the precarious position of the Moravian missionaries for although peace and friendship was again reestablished in 1768 between the English and the Indians through the exertions of Sir William Johnson, our friends' joy was lessened on learning later that the Six Nations had sold to the English a large tract of land which included their prized settlement. So it was to this settlement, more of an outpost, on the east bank of the Allegheny, then called Goschgoschuenk, a Monsey Indian town about eight miles below the mouth of Tionesta Creek in Forest County, hence just within what is now Venango County, to which these missionaries, the leader and three faithful families from Friendenshutten, made their way. Near their destination they were met by an embassy, Heckewelder termed it, of 20 captains from the Six Nations who by a belt of Wampum bid them return, having erred by neglecting first to inform the chiefs of their intentions. This uncomfortable situation was resolved only after very considerable negotiation.

In those days, too, it was essential to save face. The Indians were taught that stealing was a sin. One of them approached his teacher seriously saying that he never had been guilty of theft except for two sheep and a hen belonging to a white man, which was not regarded as a crime because white men had stolen from them ever since they first came into the country of the Indians. But so utterly miserable did their detractors, more particularly an Indian preacher, Wangomend, whom later Zeisberger actually succeeded in converting, make their stay in this locality, that the Brethren planned and in another year moved down river, still on the east bank about 15 miles to avoid the turmoil constantly being stirred up by hostile warriors and reflecting on the innocent. Courageous men like Zeisberger and Heckewelder could not be intimidated. Many plots had been laid for murdering them. But prominent enemies were "taken into camp" so to speak. An outstanding example was Glickhican, an extraordinary red man both admired and dreaded for his superior courage as a warrior, his talents in Council and his unequalled delivery as an orator—first counsellor to the Chief of the Wolf tribe at Cascaski on the Big Beaver. With the approbation of his Chief and the Council, Glickhican went to Lawanakhanek (in English, middle branch or stream), the name given the new location, purposely to dispute with
and confound Zeisberger on the doctrine he was preaching. As Heckewelder expresses it in his narrative, this man considered himself sufficiently armed at all points to withstand any white preacher. He had the good sense not to begin the contest but first to attend the preachings. The result was unexpected. He was so struck with conviction of the truth of what he heard that he returned a favorable report to the chagrin of Chief Papanke who after upbraiding him was indifferent, then hostile, but finally himself turned completely, accepting and advising his "children" to hear and believe; and actually inviting the Brethren to come to his country on the Big Beaver. At the height of their success on the Allegheny, and after extensive building in the hope of establishing a permanent abode, hostilities broke out between the Senecas, their neighbors, and the Cherokees, the former breaking their treaty in order somehow to obtain satisfaction for the large amount of land out of which they claimed the English had cheated them and had had confirmed in the treaty.

Hence in April 1770, the Brethren accepted the repeated friendly offer of the Chiefs of Cuskkushke and parting as friends from the Chiefs on the Allegheny who asked pardon for past injuries they had committed, set out in 16 canoes down the Allegheny past Pittsburgh, thence down the Ohio and up the Beaver about 20 miles where they settled and called the place Peace Village. None other than Glickhican and his men helped them over the Falls. We are reminded of Heckewelder's first trip to this region some eight years previously when in the swollen rushing Beaver, he nearly lost his modest equipment including horses. Again in 1772, he had nearly perished in crossing the Beaver, swollen by a torrent of rain. His canoe capsized and he was being borne rapidly to the falls not far below when two Indian brethren plunged in and rescued him. This is mentioned as a testimonial of the human qualities of friendly Indians, which was demonstrated to great purpose some six years later when Heckewelder was requested to visit via Pittsburgh the western stations extending to the Muskingum and north to Salem in Ohio, concerning the safety of which great anxiety was felt.

He recounts that on the way many deserted homes were seen on which had been written with coal "Good people avoid this road for the Indians are out murdering us." On nearing Pittsburgh, he
was informed of the secret departure from that place of McKee, Elliot, Girty and others for the purpose of stirring up the Indians against the whites all through that territory. These were dark days—some of the darkest during the War of Independence. Fear assailed settlers on all sides. Great was the consternation of the people of Pittsburgh at the dreaded Indian menace fomented by the deserters. Colonels Hand and Gibson at Pittsburgh were especially anxious to avoid having the Delawares deceived and drawn into a possible conflict. At this juncture Heckewelder’s aid was invaluable. Despite all dissuasion from incurring the unusual risk, he pushed west with his small party. This time the Beaver, again over its banks, was crossed on a raft and on the third day traveling day and night with hardly a pause, they reach Gnadenhütten, their mission post about 12 miles south of the present New Philadelphia. But on arrival they were asked to proceed at once about 30 miles to Goschochking (not the place on the Allegheny spelled with some of the same letters) where Capt. Pipe, an important Delaware chief under the spell of those evil deserters previously referred to, had circulated false reports and rumors and had stirred up active hostility to Capt White Eyes who stood staunchly for the Christian Indians. To hold them in line at that critical moment was imperative. Spied on as he was White Eyes dared not even be civil to Heckewelder and his emissaries. On being questioned White Eyes replied that they had been told by “those men” that red men no longer had a single friend among the American people and hence any delegation came only to deceive and take some further advantage of them. After more friendly exchanges, it came down to imparting the truth about what was happening east of the mountains. Heckewelder’s reputation was such that he was believed when he denied all the implications in such questions as:

“Are the American armies all cut to pieces by the English troops?
“Is General Washington killed?
“Is there no more a Congress; and have the English hung some members and taken others to England to be hung?
“Is the whole country beyond the mountains in possession of the English and are the few thousand Americans who have escaped, organizing to kill all the Indians in the country, even women and children?”
Heckewelder’s report of the meeting was received with unrestrained joy, and he was declared by the congregation at Lichtenau to have saved from utter destruction the Western Pennsylvania-Ohio missionary settlements, and indeed the nation. For while it was brought out later that the Indians were always counseled not to take up the hatchet against either side and as a Christian apostle he would have tried to prevent massacres of the English, his feelings were evidently enlisted on the side of American freedom.

This plain, simple, earnest man roamed this then western country teaching, preaching, trying to inculcate in his listeners the ways of peace and to prove that people of different races could coexist. Averting a major conflict in the case just cited was a genuine tribute to the dedicated men of whom he was an outstanding example. To have traversed over 26,000 miles of almost virgin country required many trips to and from missionary outposts and settlements. In an area westward from the Allegheny to the Muskingum he must have known about every Christian Indian. He knew many of the others, too. He knew how they were debauched by white traders—Indian agents. Imagine a few years hence seeing the latter bring about the destruction of much of this constructive labor, actually murder many who were literally led to the slaughter through trickery, and the pitiful remainder driven amid incredible hardships northwest to Sandusky and thence finding partial haven in Detroit. The humane efforts of the Governor of Pittsburgh (Colonel Gibson is called Governor in Heckewelder’s narrative) only incensed further those bent on extermination through the cruelest atrocities. Our narrator finally in 1786 at the age of 43 returned to Bethlehem. But it was not to settle down quietly as planned. The very next year and subsequently for several years he traveled to Pittsburgh on various missions. When Indian affairs were to be discussed, negotiations to be conducted, his services were sought as interpreter and counselor. Prior to the spring of 1791 the Federal Government exerted strong pressure to induce the Indians to conclude peace and restore quiet, but without success. Then General Rufus Putnam was appointed commissioner to treat with them. He enlisted Heckewelder in the enterprise. The latter’s account details the course of their journey as far west as Kentucky and Indiana, of their dealings with many chiefs, describes exchanges of prisoners and resultant happiness on both sides.
A year and a half later, the articles of peace were read to the assembled nations and signed by 31 chiefs. This expanded into an attempt to extend peace overtures by sending a formal embassy to the chiefs who were assembled on the Miami of the Lakes. President Washington entrusted this mission to General Benjamin Lincoln of Boston, Colonel Timothy Pickering of Pennsylvania, Postmaster General and Beverley Randolph, late Governor of Virginia. Again Heckewelder's services were enlisted. In spite of sincere and energetic efforts, the expedition failed of its object. One reason advanced was inability to get through to the Chiefs because the English had not yet relinquished the Detroit boundary according to the conditions of the general peace; but while marking time, it was clearly observed from the progressively hostile tone of messages received that those same evil advisors (McKee, Elliot and Girty) were again successfully at work. The unhappy consequences were complete punishment of the Indians the following year by General Anthony Wayne and an enforced peace.

The background for many of these untoward events undoubtedly was laid up to 40 years before in intrigues and consequent distrustful relations among English and Indians, French and Indians, English and French, and not the least between Indian tribes, so aptly described in Mrs. Lois Mulkern's penetrating article titled "Half King, Seneca Diplomat of the Ohio Valley" appearing in the summer 1954 issue of the Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine. Evidently even all the heavy sacrifices of dedicated and devoted individual members of Christian missions could not stem their force. But it is borne in on those who follow Heckewelder's Narrative that the approach of these men to their problem, their methods of truth and honesty in dealing with Indians whose sincerity in living what they were taught was sometimes unbelievable, exerted an influence more than once felt at the Council Table. The teller of the tale does not dwell on religious doctrines but rather shows by precept and example the value of a code of moral ethics prior to lessons in so-called civilization. To revert to a previous observation, a close study reveals that Heckewelder's Indians differed little in essentials from white men.

As a reporter, Professor Wilson regards Heckewelder as reliable a one as can be found in his day; that is, when he is recording what he himself has seen and heard in direct and in casual contacts. Nowhere
outside of his travel diaries is a better picture found of a period that has suffered, he thinks, some neglect in historical study, the transition of the border lands from native ownership to white. In Heckewelder’s lengthy “Narrative” personal experiences stand out confirming praiseworthy acts by Indians, even members of the Six Nations who contrary to the white man’s firmly imbedded belief, were not quick in revenge but whose custom was not to respond in kind unless bloody provocation was three times offered. To repeat, many who adopted the white man’s religion put most white practitioners utterly to shame in their sensitive response to its duties. How shocking then to read Heckewelder’s account of the massacre by none other than white men of the Christian Indians at Gnadenhütten whence they were scattered and driven, as related, to other lands, a disheartening reward for years of faithful labor and an abhorrent example to others of their race—one to encourage war rather than peace. Yet somehow through bad times and good, as he was commissioned to undertake other duties, to attend to other widely different affairs, as he counseled, interpreted and befriended, the influence of this quiet, humble, persistent servant of God and preacher of peace and good will on earth is borne in on the reader of his simple story. Perhaps I myself occupying almost a century and a half later the original stone house (somewhat remodeled) he built in Bethlehem am touched by the pervasive influence of John Gottlieb Ernstus Heckewelder.

Note—Contributed by Oliver Evans:

By deed dated 23 Nov. 1803, and recorded in the Office of the Recorder of Deeds of Allegheny County, Pa., on 24 Nov. 1806, in Deed Book Volume 14, Page 231—“Killbuck, alias Wm. Henry, then of the County of Washington, in the State of Ohio, deeded for $200 to Abner Barker, Merchant of the Borough of Pittsburgh, County of Allegheny and State of Pennsylvania—A certain island situate in the Allegheny River nearly opposite the point in the Borough of Pittsburgh known by the name of ‘Killbuck’s’ (or Smokey) Island, containing about thirty acres.”

Killbuck signed by his mark; the deed was sealed and delivered in
the presence of John Heckewelder, and acknowledged (in Ohio) before Aquilla Carr, Justice of the Peace.

Killbuck further assigned to the grantee "all the rents, prophets, issues, etc., that is due and to become due of my Island."

On 24 Nov. 1806, before Justice of the Peace E. (Ebenezer) Denny in Allegheny County appeared the Reverend John Heckewelder who was duly affirmed, and said that Killbuck in his presence signed, sealed and delivered the within deed, that the signature John Heckewelder as witness was in proper handwriting of affirmed and was subscribed by him on the date mentioned.