BOOK REVIEWS


Few Pittsburghers have known much about Major Robert Stobo, a Scot, who once trod the ground of our “Point.” He has been described by a famous writer as a man who “surely had the most extraordinary adventures in the world.” That sounds like a reference to a Munchhausen, but this book is far from a work of fiction. It is not illuminated with imaginary conversation or improbable events, but it involves a continuity of history whose documentation carries the conviction of fact. It follows our hero from his association with Washington against the French at Fort Necessity to a Canadian vantage point from which he saw the French side of many important events related to our early history. This came about when he volunteered and was designated by Washington as one of two hostages to the French. They were given to guarantee the safe return of some twenty Frenchmen captured a few days earlier at the Jumonville engagement and sent to Virginia. Stobo’s reception by the French varied from one of cordiality to hatred, but in the end he paid his respects by emerging as an important factor against them, contributing valuable intelligence to the British. This was in connection with one of history’s decisive battles — the capture of Quebec.

Major Stobo, who had become a successful young Virginia merchant, turned soldier at the scent of adventure. His company joined Washington and was engaged at Fort Necessity. Under the terms of surrender he and Captain Von Braam both were offered as hostages. They were immediately taken to Fort Duquesne, where Stobo shortly proved one of the most indigestible morsels the French ever swallowed. Disillusioned by what he regarded as French violation of the surrender terms, Stobo, under the very noses of the garrison, prepared an accurate plan of the fort, incorporating suggestions of how best it could be captured. He dispatched these by Indians to the British command. Rumors of the existence of such a plan reached the ears of the French, suspicion was directed toward Stobo and he was sent to Quebec. After Braddock’s defeat in July 1755 the actual map, bearing Stobo’s signature, was found among Braddock’s effects. Stobo’s fortunes now suffered an adverse turn. He had been sent to Quebec.
only under suspicion; now from having relative freedom of movement he suffered solitary confinement in a dungeon after a trial in Montreal, where he was convicted and actually sentenced to beheading. The local French command was furious at him, but in its broader aspects his case was controversial, because he was not a spy nor had he taken any oath which would justify the charge of treason. Stobo was not informed of the facts, but the King of France himself seems to have dictated trial, conviction and suspension of sentence. It was natural that Stobo, still under apprehension of the death sentence, should make every effort to escape. Perhaps fear of international censure of the French handling of the case led to less rigorous confinement and aided his endeavors. He escaped twice and was recaptured. On his third attempt, resorting to murder and piracy, he negotiated the hazards of bitter weather, storms and turbulent waters to reach Louisburg via the St. Lawrence, just after Wolfe had sailed to besiege Quebec. He was immediately sent to join the siege and there is reason to believe his knowledge of Quebec was of much value to Wolfe in its ultimate capture. He later served at the reduction of Montreal, Martinique and Havana.

Meanwhile Major Stobo had returned to England and had obtained a commission in the regular army as Captain in the 15th Foot Regiment. Many details of his life are missing, but we know that in Cuba he received a severe head injury from artillery fire from which he never fully recovered and on Tuesday, June 10, 1770, in the Chatham barracks, England, Captain Robert Stobo took his own life with his service pistol.

This book lends itself to reading aloud and it is a credit to the author's artistry that interest never lags. It is heavily documented, but never in a way which detracts from the story. The author, himself an able researcher, graciously acknowledges deserved credit to Dr. Agnes Starrett, recently retired as Director-Editor of the University of Pittsburgh Press. She has long been regarded as the dean of Stobo fans and contemplated a book on Stobo herself. But on hearing that her friend Mr. Alberts was writing on the subject, she generously turned over to him the results of her twenty years' work on Stobo. She thus contributed much important material for which she receives credit on page 341.

The casual student of Western Pennsylvania colonial history is familiar with the campaign during which Washington cooperated with the British to oust the French. It covers Jumonville, Fort Necessity, Braddock's defeat and Forbes' expulsion of the French. The action
which implemented British success after Braddock's defeat is to be found along the St. Lawrence, beginning with the fall of Louisburg, the capture of Niagara, the fall of Fort Frontenac, the capture of Quebec and the surrender of Montreal. This book on Stobo contributes much of the background for our own success. It offers a detailed index to simplify the work of students. It has biographical material on the principals encountered by Stobo, an extensive bibliography, pictures and maps. It should long be of use to amplify our local history.

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When the first settlers of the Ohio Valley began to clear their lands, they found that the forest had hidden hundreds of strange earthworks. The commonest were conical mounds like huge anthills — most of them low and sprawling, so that they might not be noticed until the plow began to rake out human bones, but some as big as the Grave Creek Mound at Moundsville, West Virginia, or the Miamisburg Mound in Ohio, both about seventy feet high. Others were walls of heaped-up earth that took the shape of geometric figures, like the mounds that gave Circleville, Ohio, its street plan and name, or animal forms, like the famous Great Serpent Mound.

Western Pennsylvania had its share of the smaller mounds. The McKees Rocks Mound was partially excavated by Carnegie Museum in 1896, and until recently was almost our only source of information about the local mounds and their builders. Another stood on Grant Hill, and was destroyed when the present Courthouse was built. Most of the others were demolished by farmers, builders and treasure-hunters, although one small but complex mound was spared in Oakmont until members of Allegheny Chapter No. 1 of the Society for Pennsylvania Archaeology excavated it in the summer of 1964.

The Indians of the Ohio country could tell nothing about the builders of the mounds. Most of them — Delawares, Wyandots,