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‘An attentive Ear, a watchful Eye, and a Calm judicious Pen’: William Samuel Johnson, the Colonial Agents, and the Transformation of the British Atlantic World

By Allison Hopkins

Since the 1960's, histories of the American Revolution and Georgian Britain have often been provincial in focus, examining local rather than imperial issues. Recently, however, there has been a return to studying the Atlantic world as a whole, building on the work done by scholars such as Jack M. Sosin and Michael Kammen, who focused on the political and economic influence of colonial agents as part of the institutional empire. A second wave of this type of history, particularly new British literature, is now looking at questions of identity and examining immigrants, slaves, and London merchants in a social context. By looking at Great Britain and the American colonies in conjunction with the larger British Atlantic Empire, historians can better understand the political, social, and cultural transformations that occurred when transatlantic actors met. However, the agents—one of the most politically astute groups integral to the management of the institutional empire—have been virtually ignored by these developments. The correspondence of Connecticut agent William Samuel Johnson (1727-1819) allows a re-evaluation of developments in the field since Kammen and Sosin, particularly on the issue of identity in the British Atlantic Empire. While there have been studies on famous agents and future Founding Fathers like Benjamin Franklin, it is just as necessary to take into account lesser-known agents, as well as those who differed in opinion from the Patriot elites.

William Samuel Johnson is an example of an “ordinary” agent who nonetheless had extensive contacts with numerous British and American thinkers. While acting on Connecticut's behalf in London between 1767 and 1771, he sent reports back to Connecticut governors Jonathan Trumbull and William Pitkin on parliamentary proceedings while corresponding with the people who traveled around the Atlantic world

during this critical period—merchants, seafarers, emigrants, soldiers, missionaries, radicals and conservatives, reformers, and politicians. As an Anglican who believed in political moderation, Johnson sought common ground and engaged with loyalists and Patriots, Tories and Whigs, and formed firm friendships with English elites across the political spectrum. His correspondents included both the pro-American merchant Nicholas Ray as well as the pro-government minister Benjamin LaTrobe.

He is also representative of the late eighteenth-century empire writ large. Agents, who had once been a source of stability in the far-flung colonies, became a destabilizing force as confusion and conflict grew over conceptual ideas of what constituted “the empire” and who was included in it. Johnson was a sane observer in the midst of the ideological and administrative upheaval of the 1760’s and 1770’s. His subsequent loyalism and political obscurity during the war years was in many ways a result of his attempts to reconcile various factional interests during his tenure as an agent. Finally, his eventual “redemption” and reintegration into the political fabric of the early United States—first as a Senator and signer of the US Constitution, then as president of Columbia University—points towards a recognition of his service and acceptance of a new conceptual framework for understanding the Atlantic world.

J.H. Elliott has written in an essay, “English history and American history have all too often gone their separate ways, without any consistent or sustained dialog between the two. Now...the mid-Atlantic is a good place to meet.”¹ This paper will take a comparative approach, taking into account both local issues in Connecticut and London as well as the systems that connected them together. This will be a study in the vein of

¹ J.H. Elliott, “Afterword: Atlantic History: A Circumnavigation,” in *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800*, ed. David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 238.

what David Armitage terms “trans-Atlantic history,” or, “the history of the Atlantic world told through comparisons.”² This methodology yields answers to questions about the character and transformation of the disparate territories of the Atlantic world, through the lens of an agent who was at the center of the debate. The first part of the paper will discuss the successes and failures of the agents as a whole. The second part will examine the relationships formed and the rhetoric exchanged between British and American radicals, who often used the same terminology of liberty and yet had profound gaps in their worldviews. Thirdly, I will analyze the rift between the colonial, provincial understanding of the empire (as loose, self-governing entities each with separate allegiances to the Crown) and the metropolitan understanding of centralized power in London, based on the constitutional authority of Parliament.³ Finally, I will evaluate the burgeoning nationalism in the Anglo-American world. If England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, and the American colonies were all seen as constituting separate entities within the empire, it is important to explain how and when the colonies fell beyond the “boundaries” of British national identity.⁴

At the same time, however, I acknowledge that William Samuel Johnson and his correspondents were, fundamentally, cogs in an interconnected system that they could not necessarily see. Trying to explain complex theoretical and ideological shifts in thinking is somewhat lacking when overlaid onto a real historical figure’s life. Johnson, although highly knowledgeable, informed, articulate, and insightful, had his own preoccupations

² David Armitage, “Three Concepts of Atlantic History,” in *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800*, ed. David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 18.

³ Eliga H. Gould and Peter S. Onuf, eds., *Empire and Nation: The American Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 24-25.

⁴ T.H. Breen, “Ideology and Nationalism on the Eve of the American Revolution: Revisions Once More in Need of Revising,” *Journal of American History*, LXXXIV (1997), 29.

and biases. What he mentions as well as does not mention about these issues has equal significance. Admittedly he also represents an elite, Anglicized point of view, and does not speak for the general public, although his ideas do reflect the dominant narrative of his society. Despite the shortcomings inherent in looking at what remains of a person's correspondence, "by stressing intentionality or agency, biography should allow the historian to see how individuals react to invisible forces."⁵ Johnson was an individual with both remarkable intentionality and yet little real authority. His career path differed sharply from agents such as Benjamin Franklin, who were radicalized by the American independence movement and were therefore compromised in their negotiations with Parliament. In contrast, Johnson was first and foremost an imperial agent who found his loyalties tested as the colonists and British government acted with increasing immoderation.

As a link between the two sides, however, Johnson was part of a dying breed and men like him were shunted aside as tensions mounted. P.D.G. Thomas even asserted that the agents became "obsolete" after the repeal of the Stamp Act.⁶ Certainly by the time Johnson left to go home to Stratford in 1771, diplomacy was left in the hands of increasingly radical men like Franklin. Although he did his best to reconcile various factions and provide an accurate account of the powerful nationalistic forces gathering on both sides of the Atlantic on the eve of the American Revolution, the agents' collective failures as transatlantic mediators helped bring about the collapse of an imperial community. This disintegration had dramatic effects on the whole of the Atlantic world.

⁵ David Hancock, *Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735-1787* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 5.

⁶ Peter D.G. Thomas, *British Policies and the Stamp Act Crisis: The first phase of the American Revolution, 1763-1767* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1975), 370.

“Agent, an American born, who sees and feels the worth of Liberty”⁷

Agents had been an integral part of the imperial Atlantic system since the early seventeenth century. As the position of the agent developed, they were given increased responsibilities and became important lobbyists and mediators in the governance of the colonies. Most of the agents had backgrounds in law and politics, and a large part of their duties centered on negotiating colony finances and regulating trade. Initially colonial agents went to London for specialized missions, but the eighteenth century saw the establishment of a bureaucracy of agents permanently stationed in London. Like other Enlightenment intellectuals, they frequented coffeehouses and moved in elite circles.

Often colonial assemblies would assign special agents to settle land disputes with Native American tribes. Johnson was an agent of this type. By profession and training a lawyer, and also active in Connecticut politics, in 1766 the General Assembly appointed him as a special agent representing Connecticut to the Privy Council. The dispute concerned lands deeded to the Mason family by the Mohegan Indians, which the General Assembly refused to ratify. The Masons then decided to place their claim before the Privy Council. Johnson would assist the regular agent, Englishman Richard Jackson. His stay in London was supposed to be short and focused on resolving the Mohegan case in favor of the colony. Instead, he remained there for five years.

The role of the agent was undergoing great administrative change during the 1760's. The Seven Years' War and the abandonment of salutary neglect increased their importance and broadened the scope of their activities beyond the Board of Trade and

⁷ William Pitkin to William Samuel Johnson, August 18, 1769, in “The Pitkin Papers: Correspondence and Documents during William Pitkin’s Governorship of the Colony of Connecticut, 1766-1769,” in *Collections of the Connecticut Historical Society, Vol. XIX* (Hartford: CHS, 1921), 204.

into Parliament, where they used their position to influence legislation. In a shift from the past, increasingly many of the agents were not colonists, but British civil servants.⁸ Of course, most of them had ties on both sides of the Atlantic, or had lived for several years in the colonies. The agents representing their home colonies, however—notably Benjamin Franklin, Jared Ingersoll, and William Samuel Johnson—felt a strain on their dual loyalties to their provincial governments and the central government in London by the end of the 1760's. This was a period of contradictions: at the height of the agents' importance and cooperation as a group, the colonial assemblies constrained their efforts by failing to provide instructions, authority, and funds.

In evaluating the conduct and successes of the agents as a whole, historians have asked two fundamental questions: how effective were they, and was their effectiveness hampered by the radical behavior of the colonists? Did this radicalization then cause them to misrepresent the situation in England to their constituents back home? Did they misrepresent the situation in America to Parliament? These questions have divided historians, and admit of no easy answers. In *Agents and Merchants: British Colonial Policy and the Origins of the American Revolution, 1763-1775*, Sosin concluded that although the agents ultimately failed in their responsibilities, they did succeed in several important areas, such as securing the repeal of the Stamp Act in the 1760's.⁹ Sosin attributed the repeal of the act to the arbitration of the agents rather than colonial pressure, but also noted that the agents were united with London merchants and dealing with a confused, divided British government. Thomas asserted that the Stamp Act repeal

⁸ Michael Kammen, *A Rope of Sand: The Colonial Agents, British Politics, and the American Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), 17.

⁹ Jack M. Sosin, *Agents and Merchants: British Colonial Policy and the Origins of the American Revolution, 1763-1775* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1965), 227.

was more the result of the political change of administration from Grenville to Rockingham, based on economic considerations, than because of any protest on the part of the colonists, merchants, or agents.¹⁰ These favorable conditions would not be repeated in the 1770's, when merchant support withered and the North ministry came into power and exerted tighter control.

The colonists also sometimes had a different agenda than their agents. During the 1760's, according to Sosin, colonial leaders did not listen to the advice of their agents and through their agitation confirmed to Parliament and the British public that they were seeking independence rather than the repeal of specific acts.¹¹ The colonists certainly did not listen to Johnson's advice from his British friends not to publicize the Non-Importation agreements. The agents, Sosin argued, were desperately trying to avoid the issue of parliamentary sovereignty, but their effectiveness was "seriously impaired and their position in British government circles jeopardized by political animosities in the colonies...linked with the developing revolutionary challenge to imperial authority."¹² Johnson experienced the difficulty in acting without his constituents' express permission; the agents wanted to draw up a petition to Parliament silent on the issue of the right to tax the colonies, but feared that it would be misconstrued as a "ground of declaration that the Colonies had, by their Agents, in effect receded from their claim of exemption from Parliamentary taxation as of right."¹³ By the 1770's colonial governments recalled agents with conciliatory views and ties with those in power (like Johnson) and replaced them with agents aligned with the independence movement. Sosin highlighted the close

¹⁰ Thomas, *British Politics and the Stamp Act Crisis*, 248-250.

¹¹ Sosin, 109.

¹² *Ibid.*, 141.

¹³ William Samuel Johnson to Jonathan Trumbull, March 23, 1769, William Samuel Johnson Papers, Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, CT.

relationship between merchants and agents, at least in the 1760's, and blamed the breakdown of relations primarily on the colonists and the administration. The agents, on the other hand, were true metropolitan figures.

When examining the actions of the colonists and Parliament, however, Sosin neglected to take into account that the agents were the primary source of news and channel of intelligence for colonial governments. Therefore, the agents must bear some responsibility for the failure to bring about a reconciliation and compromise. This is the view of Kammen in *A Rope of Sand: The Colonial Agents, British Politics, and the American Revolution*. In contrast to Sosin, who emphasized cooperation and connection, Kammen argued that the agents actually helped facilitate and increase the separation between Britain and the colonies. Their correspondence “fed the hungry discontented with provocative and sometimes distorted views that seemed to vindicate their own deepest suspicions...they reinforced the agitated provincials’ sense of alienation from Parliament and the Empire.”¹⁴ This is a bold assertion. It is certainly true that radical agents like Franklin (particularly towards the end of his tumultuous tenure in London) did abandon neutrality and voice his outright support for independence. He was certainly intentionally provocative. However, this was not the case for the majority of agents, though perhaps the restless and angry colonists overstated their honest appraisals of the political atmosphere in London.

In his personal letters and official reports to the governors, Johnson himself provided not only moderate opinions but plenty of ammunition against Parliament. His intention was never to deepen the chasm between the two countries, but his correspondence did reinforce discontent in the Connecticut assembly. Kammen

¹⁴ Kammen, 317.

overstated his case, however, when he argued that there was a significant break in the connection between the agents and the English, leading to a “waning influence of America and Americans in London.”¹⁵ Johnson, for example, does not fit Kammen’s model. On the contrary, whatever his own views were, and whatever he reported back to the colonies, the ties he formed in England proved to be the deciding factor in forestalling his political radicalization, culminating in his loyalist sympathies during the war. For Johnson, who left England in 1771 but remained in contact with numerous friends, his experience as an agent separated him from the provincial views of most other colonial leaders.

“An almost desperate game”¹⁶

The political turmoil and partisan politics in Parliament meant that the Mohegan case was not high on the government’s list of priorities.¹⁷ American affairs, too, distracted Johnson from the case. His attention was supposed to be focused on a specific case concerning a single colony, but instead he unexpectedly found himself as an advocate of American rights in general. As frustrating as he found the delay of the case, he spent his time wisely, acting as the eyes and ears for his employers. As Governor William Pitkin reassured him, “The Intelligence you are from time to time favouring me with, you may well conclude is acceptable in this critical Day. An attentive Ear, a watchful Eye, and a calm judicious Pen, are often helpful to others, in forming a Judgment, and regulating their Conduct.”¹⁸ For the most part this is an accurate

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ William Samuel Johnson to William Pitkin, January 3, 1769, WSJ Papers.

¹⁷ McCoughey, 80.

¹⁸ Pitkin to Johnson, November 1, 1768, “The Pitkin Papers,” 151.

description of Johnson, who certainly had an attentive ear and watchful eye, if not always a calm, judicious pen. Because Johnson gave intelligence during the critical upheavals leading to the American Revolution, he was aware of the worth of his observations:

I am very happy for the intelligence I am able to transmit home and attention to the interests of the Colonies gives many satisfactions while continuing here. I shall ultimately leave no stone unturned to discern as far as possible all the doings and Intentions, views, and connections of those who have it in their power to befriend or injure us, as well as to prevent as far as I am able any Mischief that may be designed us.¹⁹

Preventing that mischief, though, was a challenge. Johnson arrived in London shortly after the agents had reached the pinnacle of success in repealing the Stamp Act. By the time he left, the agents' heyday was over, their power and influence on a rapid decline.²⁰ They, along with merchants, were figures that bound the British Atlantic community together, but despite these connections (as well as political sway within Parliament itself), Johnson held little actual power himself. At best, he could work with the other agents to petition Parliament, try to sway popular opinion in the colonies' favor, and try to exert influence through dealings with sympathetic MP's. In addition, the agents faced two difficult problems. Firstly, they had to carefully guard the privacy of their work to maintain both their popularity back home and their trustworthiness in the eyes of Parliament. Secondly, they had to accurately report parliamentary proceedings in an extremely hostile and precarious environment.

Johnson was sensible of the delicacy of his position. In a postscript to Governor Pitkin, he reminded him,

¹⁹ Johnson to Pitkin, January 23, 1768, WSJ Papers.

²⁰ Peter D.G. Thomas, *The Townsend Duties Crisis: The Second Phase of the American Revolution, 1767-1773* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 219.

Though with regard to myself I believe it perfectly needless, yet it may not perhaps be amiss to mention to you, that very great offence has been taken here at the frequent publication in America of extracts of letters from agents and others residing here, especially when they have taken the liberty to mention the names of great persons in or out of administration. This has not often been done in Connecticut, and I doubt not all proper prudence will be used with respect to everything of this kind.²¹

Johnson's emphasis on secrecy and propriety extended even to private letters to his father. His fears were not misplaced. Perhaps he was thinking of the troubles faced by his close friend and fellow agent Jared Ingersoll two years before. Even though Ingersoll had petitioned Parliament against the legislation while in London, the people of Connecticut reviled him for his role as a Stamp Act distributor. After a mob attacked him and demanded that he resign his post, *The Connecticut Gazette* published some of his private papers, forcing him to make the entire correspondence public in order to prove his allegiance to the colony. As a further precaution, he suspended all correspondence to England. Privately, he wrote to Johnson that "in private Letters altho' there should be nothing wicked or offensive you know how disagreeable it must be to have ones own most free thoughts like tete a tete Conversations proclaimed aloud on house tops."²²

Indiscretions also made life difficult for agents. In 1774, Benjamin Franklin procured the private letters of Massachusetts lieutenant governor Thomas Hutchinson and secretary Andrew Oliver, which implicated them in urging Parliament to take a tough stance against the colony (without the knowledge of the agents). He sent them to Thomas Cushing and they spread to several Massachusetts patriots, who immediately printed copies and made them public to the Massachusetts government. The outcry against

²¹ Johnson to Pitkin, April 11, 1767, WSJ Papers.

²² Jared Ingersoll to Johnson, December 2, 1765, "A Selection from the Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers of Jared Ingersoll," ed. Franklin Bowditch Dexter, in *Papers of the New Haven Colony Historical Society*, 9 (1918), 362.

Franklin in England was considerable, and the scandal “effectively curtailed Franklin’s agency...his usefulness as a public lobbyist was at an end.”²³ Johnson seems to have anticipated this, warning Trumbull that

Indeed, all the correspondence with America is now so narrowly watched, and so much umbrage is taken at the communication of anything, either in point of fact or opinion, that they are pleased to call improper, that it is become more than ever necessary for all on this side to request of their friends the utmost degree of caution with respect to whatever they write, for this obvious reason amongst many others, lest by exposing them they occasion their being so guarded against as to render it impossible for them to obtain the intelligence they would wish to have communicated. Some imprudences of this kind in some of the other Colonies have been very prejudicial.²⁴

Nonetheless, Johnson did his best to uncover what was going on in Parliament even when he, as an American, was not welcome. For instance, he related to Ingersoll how he managed to “slip in at the last debate” in Parliament over a proposed tax on tea and the Mutiny Act in New York, even though “the American agents were expressly ordered not to be admitted.”²⁵ He managed to “escape” before being found out. The agents faced other difficulties beyond a lack of access. Johnson did not have an esteemed view of the parliamentary system and how it functioned in the late 1760’s. The government went through several changes of ministries, and Johnson noted the prevalence of party politics and a focus on electioneering. Parties, he believed, “threaten a dissolution of the whole political system, and the ruin of the empire.”²⁶ Johnson was equally suspicious of the motives of the Whigs and Tories. The only bright side he saw

²³ Kammen, 285 and David T. Morgan, *The Devious Dr. Franklin, Colonial Agent: Benjamin Franklin’s Years in London* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1990), 224.

²⁴ Johnson to Trumbull, August 20, 1770, WSJ Papers.

²⁵ Johnson to Ingersoll, May 16, 1767, WSJ Papers.

²⁶ Johnson to Jonathan Trumbull, October 16, 1769, “The Trumbull Papers: Letters of William Samuel Johnson to the Governors of Connecticut,” ed. David Trumbull, in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 5, 9 (1885), 376.

was that MP's spent most of their time campaigning and raising massive funds for elections, and therefore were too busy to cause more trouble towards the colonies.

Perhaps many of the disputes between Britain and the colonies arose due to the confusing and indecisive nature of Parliament's often ad hoc policies. Before discussing how Parliament was arguing over whether acquisitions made by the East India Company should belong to the company or the government, as well as debating a new tax on tea and china and figuring out how to respond to New York's refusal to billet troops, Johnson acknowledged that the complexity of British politics hindered him from providing useful intelligence:

Such has been the confusion amongst the Ministers in this country, and so great the uncertainty with respect to all public measures since I came here, that I have been in fear to write you at all upon public affairs, lest I should mislead, and give wrong notions; or lest, if I should give you the best intelligence that could be collected in the morning, the whole face of things should be changed before evening, and it would become necessary to contradict one day what I had wrote you on the other. Either the designs of government and their system is too complex, deep, and close to be discovered, not by my very weak and feeble penetration only, but by the whole body (and they are certainly a very numerous and respectable one) of those who are endeavoring, not only to discover, but many of them to counteract them too; or else they have very little design, and act without a plan, and only from the varying appearances as they arise...I fear it is rather the latter.²⁷

Johnson entered a political milieu that was highly politicized, and he despaired of ever divining the true intentions of the administration towards the colonies. He eventually came to the conclusion that neither party was concerned with the colonies' benefit, and that any support would come "so far as may serve the purposes of pure opposition, not upon the great principles upon which we stand."²⁸ Johnson had a particularly astute understanding of politics; though the Rockingham Whigs claimed to be "friends of

²⁷ Johnson to Pitkin, March 19, 1767, WSJ Papers.

²⁸ Johnson to Trumbull, February 3, 1770, WSJ Papers.

America” based on their opposition to the Stamp Act and efforts in securing its repeal, they insisted it was a matter of expediency and supported the passage of the Declaratory Act. The Chathamites similarly made claims that were not borne out by legislation like the Townsend Acts.²⁹ Johnson’s assessment of Lord Hillsborough, head of American affairs, was that he was a smooth-talking courtier, not a true ally despite his “pompous declarations of affection for the Colonies.”³⁰ Americans, Johnson concluded, could not rely on parliamentary or ministerial machinations. They had to rely on themselves. During the first two years of his agency, then, Johnson had fuelled the flames of resentment against the government in his reports to the governors. However, as he began to make contacts and friendships with those in England, his ideology shifted towards his eventual loyalist position.

“I persuade myself I have made a friendship with you”³¹

“America has few friends” in London, wrote Johnson to Pitkin in 1767.³² Yet at the same time he was reporting Parliament’s rhetoric against the colonies, he was forming partnerships and deep friendships with British radical thinkers and taking up a lively correspondence with those who questioned British imperialism in both North America and India. Johnson intended to make contacts with politicians from all sides of the political spectrum. As he admitted to Pitkin, discerning Parliament’s intentions towards America could be confusing “owing, I am sensible, to the different company I converse

²⁹ John Sainsbury, *Disaffected Patriots: London Supporters of Revolutionary America, 1769-1782* (Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1987), 6.

³⁰ Johnson to Pitkin, July 23, 1768, WSJ Papers.

³¹ Thomas Pownall to Johnson, July 30, 1772, WSJ Papers.

³² Johnson to Pitkin, June 9, 1767, WSJ Papers.

with (and I choose to mix with some of both kinds).”³³ He repeatedly made efforts to ingratiate himself with Lord Hillsborough on Connecticut’s behalf. Like many agents, his own reputation hindered his success. Years later a British friend confessed that Hillsborough “had for a long time taken you for an Independent, and as one who was as violent in the opposition as most of the Americans were, that as this was a general opinion, you was not so much attended to touching your person as you should have been.”³⁴ Hillsborough and the other ministers feared that an independence movement had begun to take root in the colonies. Hillsborough also seems to have had trouble understanding Johnson’s political views, since he (like most Americans) did not necessarily fit the Tory-Whig paradigm. Johnson’s difficulties were indicative of the constrained agency of the American-born agents as a whole. In addition, outright support for the American cause was not popular. Barlow Trecothick, a pro-American merchant and MP, found it difficult to get elected as the mayor of London due to his American sympathies.

As much as he tried to make contacts with those unfriendly towards the colonies’ interests, most of Johnson’s friendships developed with people who shared similar views. His social circle encompassed a surprisingly large radius, and he found a significant number of “Friends of America” outside the parliamentary system (notwithstanding Trecothick, Barre, and others). These included the country gentry, not usually considered a major demographic of colonial support. Yet Johnson wrote that

I have had the great pleasure, also, in several excursions I have made into the country in the course of the summer, to find that the cause of the Colonies has gained ground among the country gentlemen and the bulk of the substantial people, as it had before done in the city;--with many, I believe, from a rational

³³ Johnson to Pitkin, March 19, 1767, WSJ Papers.

³⁴ LaTrobe to Johnson, February 9, 1772, WSJ Papers.

conviction of the justice and equity of our claims; with more, perhaps, from apprehensions of the loss of those emoluments which they have derived from our connection with them.³⁵

Although Johnson contradicted himself here, complaining about the condescending treatment of Americans in London, but then (perhaps too optimistically) reporting of widespread support in the countryside, he was cynical enough to ascribe this support partly to commercial motives.

A particular country gentleman and friend was James Theobald, the owner of the country estate Waltham Place, in Berkshire. In 1768 Theobald wrote to Johnson to “favour me with any particular occurrences that may happen relating to our North American friends, the Sons of Liberty, as I am unhappily situated among a set of neighbours who are for correcting them for what they call Disobedience, though its my opinion that their perseverance will in the end be the saving of this Country from slavery.”³⁶ Johnson was not only a conduit for news heading back to the colonies, but a source of information for interested supporters in England. Though Johnson was in London at the time, Theobald apparently thought him well-informed enough to provide accurate information from his contacts back in Connecticut, another way in which agents occupied the space been popular politics and traditional political influence. Johnson replied to Theobald,

Your worthy neighbors I fear do not know the true state of things in their Country. They would surely not correct Chilson for Complaining and Remonstrating against any attacks upon essential Liberties, much less for maintaining those Principles of Liberty which they have been taught both by the precepts and example of this Country. They only wish to be as free as Englishmen are sought to be and to their equality in the Commonwealth of Britain, as your friends would

³⁵ Johnson to Pitkin, September 18, 1769, WSJ Papers.

³⁶ Theobald to Johnson, September 18, 1768, WSJ Papers.

not deny them this, and they ask no more. To enslave one part of the Empire is to prepare slavery for the whole.³⁷

Johnson's postscript showed his pride in his identity as an Englishman and his inclusion into the Empire and Commonwealth. Furthermore, he made it clear that a rupture of liberties in one part of the Empire would signal a lack of liberty in other parts—even Britain. These sentiments were perfectly in line with his other observations. Although he was often circumspect in his official reports, to his father he reflected on the high levels of poverty and the gap between the rich and poor in the country, and noted that

But alas! Amidst all this Magnificence how many things are amiss! Irreligion, Luxury, Dissipation, Fashion, Consumption, Vice, & Villainy are making horrible inroads, and unless corrected threatens to prostrate their Glory in the dust. The Vices of the Nation amaze you, while their splendor dazzles you—when you consider the Grandeur, Wealth, and Power of this People, they seem to be superior to everything and permanent as the Mountains; when you contemplate their Irreligion, their Factions, & their Vices they seem hastening to sudden & irretrievable destruction, and one is astonished that they exist. I have a thousand things to say to you upon the state of things here both Civil & Religious which would be endless to write & many of them improper to trust to Paper.³⁸

This is a theme taken up by British radicals: that England had lost sight of its republican principles, and the conflict with America was both a symptom and cure.

“The spirit of liberty is well-awakened, and in full glow here”³⁹

Radical thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic often exchanged ideas, support, and arguments in favor of increased political liberty. They often used the same vocabulary and shared a tradition of constitutional rights. Historian Eliga Gould writes that they were

³⁷ Theobald to Johnson, Johnson's postscript.

³⁸ William Samuel Johnson to Samuel Johnson, July 13, 1767, WSJ Papers.

³⁹ Johnson to Trumbull, October 16, 1769, “The Trumbull Papers,” 377.

both proud of the freedom enjoyed in the British Atlantic world.⁴⁰ However, American leaders often “overestimated British radical influence in England,” in large part due to reports from agents like Johnson.⁴¹ Merchants, for instance, were instrumental in repealing the Stamp Act, but acted primarily out of economic considerations and became less interested as their focus shifted to trade in the East Indies.

However, London merchants did have influence with American agents; one of Johnson’s most important correspondents was the staunchly pro-American merchant Nicolas Ray. Ray grew up in Boston, but, exhibiting the mobility of the age, moved permanently to London at age twenty-one. He was a British correspondent with the New York Sons of Liberty. In this and in other matters he was more radical than Johnson, who did not approve of the Son’s extremism and considered them a mob (based on fearful reports from loyalist friends). As a merchant and emigrant, Ray held close commercial and sentimental ties to the colonies, and was strongly in favor of the non-importation agreements. Ray’s status as a merchant in part drove his radical ideology. Continuing his correspondence with Johnson into the 1770’s, when Johnson had returned to Connecticut, Ray warned about the dangers of imperialism and luxury, which was a common focus of critique in the late eighteenth century.⁴² In his view,

England at present, Excels both Greece and Rome in Barbarity, Inhumanity & every Species of Villainy in India in pursuit of plunder...So that it is clear to me Asia by its Imaginary Wealth will strip this Kingdom of its Liberty. For these reasons I am determin’d to be no ways concerned in defusing or scattering the baneful goods of India th’o the Collonies, & for this Resolution I am sure I have your applause. You I think are of the Legislature, is it not possible to bring such

⁴⁰ Eliga H. Gould, *The Persistence of Empire: British Political Culture in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 3.

⁴¹ Robert E. Toohey, *Liberty and Empire: British Radical Solutions to the American Problem, 1774-1776* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1978), 143.

⁴² J.C.D. Clark, *The Language of Liberty, 1660-1832: Political discourse and social dynamics in the Anglo-American world* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 24.

goods in disrepute and the wearer of them contemptible whilst those of your own make should be Respectable and Honorable.⁴³

Johnson responded by praising homespun and the efforts of local manufactures within Connecticut. Ray was equally critical of Parliament, particularly the way wealth could “buy” seats and votes, noting that European states, particularly England, are “allow’d tha’o parliaments to put on their own chains, which, by being neatly filed & polish’d, they would persuade the people are not chains Till they are Effectually Rivetted...”⁴⁴ Ray contrasted this favorably to the obscurity, self-reliance, and lack of legislative corruption in the colonies, casting himself as someone who has seen “Tyranny and Slavery Tread underfoot the Natural Libertys of Mankind” in Europe and Johnson as someone living “in a colony where the Libertys of Mankind are better understood and Enjoyed than in any other spot on Earth.”⁴⁵

Seven years earlier, in 1766, Ray had published a pamphlet entitled “The Importance of the Colonies of North America, and the Interests of Great Britain with regard to them, Considered, Together with Remarks on the Stamp Duty.” In it he touched on many of the same themes, particularly American freedoms compared to Europe, but made the mercantilist argument that the colonies should focus on trade, centered around Britain, rather than developing their industry. It is significant that only a few years later he praises the non-importation agreements, recommends that the colonies cut off all foreign trade, and even suggests that it would be better for the colonies if Philadelphia,

⁴³ Ray to Johnson, June 16, 1773, WSJ Papers.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., April 4, 1774, WSJ Papers.

New York, and Boston were all destroyed.⁴⁶ Ray had become radicalized between 1766 and 1774.

Johnson, although warning the colonies not to loudly broadcast non-importation, saw their united firmness in the economic boycott as the only means to preserve public morality and guarantee parliamentary compliance. When the agreement fell through in 1770, he recognized that this would be a sign to Parliament that their coercive measures were working and would eventually force the colonies into obedience. Worse, it discouraged their European supporters. “Is this, it is said, your American firmness? Are these the examples you give us of your fortitude, your patriotism and perseverance?” Johnson wrote in disgust. “The eyes of all Europe were turned towards America, and on the issue of this controversy was to be formed their idea of your character. It is done; your character is now fixed; you will make a very contemptible figure in the eyes of all mankind, and disgrace the fair page of history.”⁴⁷ America had failed to live up to the claims of European supporters like Ray.

Though Johnson readily admitted that the British ideology of liberty informed American ideas of liberty, he hesitated to attribute influence in the opposite direction and denied any American influence on popular British politics and reform movements. A critic of the popular John Wilkes, Johnson believed him to be as partisan, self-serving, and hypocritical as other politicians. Like British “Real” Whigs, the colonists supported the Wilkite cause and saw Wilkes’s struggle for an expansion of representative government reflected in their own struggle for representation.⁴⁸ Johnson, however, pragmatically concluded that Wilkes would only support the colonies if it was in his own

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Johnson to Trumbull, August 20, 1770, WSJ Papers.

⁴⁸ Sainsbury, 18.

self interest. He decried how Wilkes stirred up the violent passions of the people, who rioted after he was jailed, complaining that “I have the mortification to hear many perversely impute them to the example (as they say) set in the Colonies, and the debility discovered by the government here in yielding to them and repealing the Stamp Act, which (being so totally without any manner of foundation) only serves to show how very ready those who make observations are to turn every circumstance to the disadvantage of the Colonies.”⁴⁹ Yet Johnson also recognized the deeper forces at work in the disturbance of the populace. He conceded that Wilkes, “accidentally not intentionally I fear” has released the “spirit of liberty” of people frustrated with both the king and Parliament.⁵⁰ Johnson put the blame for the disturbances in Boston and in London squarely on the shoulders of the ministry. Drawing the connection between the Middlesex election dispute and the situation in the colonies, he predicted a political revolution:

They have now a great and very important constitutional question of representation to agitate, which nearly affects all their rights, and is not totally unconnected with that of the Colonies, who may perhaps derive some material advantage from this litigation. The subject has attracted the attention, and excites the expectations of all the people of England; and if the freeholders and those who have espoused their cause persevere with the same fervent zeal by which they seem at present to be animated, the affair may, perhaps, be attended with very serious consequences.⁵¹

In fact, although the war initially forestalled parliamentary and commercial reforms, British and American interaction in this period laid the groundwork for future advancements. The war itself, along with the French Revolution, prompted a return to conservatism and the status quo, and set Britain more firmly on the path of heavy-handed

⁴⁹ Johnson to Pitkin, April 29, 1768, WSJ Papers.

⁵⁰ Johnson to Ingersoll, September 29, 1768, WSJ Papers.

⁵¹ Johnson to Pitkin, April 26, 1769, WSJ Papers.

imperialism in India.⁵² However, progress was made in extraparliamentary issues such as the abolition of the slave trade and the resurgence of social reforms with the rise of evangelical Christianity.⁵³ The swell of parliamentary criticism in this period also laid the groundwork for greater democratization in the 1830's.⁵⁴ The dire warnings of Ray, Theobald, and Johnson himself—that England was on a path to tyranny because of their conduct towards the colonies—proved unfounded, as they remained fixed on their system while recognizing that it needed reforms. The dialogue opened up by the convergence of colonial and metropolitan political thought reverberated not only in America but in Britain as well.

“The Crown they reverence and love”⁵⁵

Recently, some historians have argued that Americans right up until the moment of revolution were more monarchical than their metropolitan counterparts, who were justly proud of the supremacy of Parliament over absolute monarchy.⁵⁶ For the colonies, however, it was the king who bound them to the Empire. Brendan McConville argues that “before the Revolution, Americans wanted more patriarchy and more empire, not less, and strangely, such desires...helped unravel the imperial state.”⁵⁷ The Empire meant access to commerce all around the Atlantic. It meant protection by a benevolent monarch, safeguarding liberties and Protestantism. It meant a shared heritage and a common

⁵² Eliga H. Gould, *The Persistence of Empire: British Political Culture in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 182.

⁵³ Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture, and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 269.

⁵⁴ Sainsbury, 164.

⁵⁵ Pitkin to Johnson, May 25, 1769, WSJ Papers.

⁵⁶ Brendan McConville, *The King's Three Faces: The Rise and Fall of Royal America, 1688-1776* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 138.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 147.

identity. However, the “British Atlantic Empire” was an ideological construct rather than an inherent, real institution.⁵⁸ The provincial American view—of loose, self governing entities bound by commerce and loyalty to the monarch—did not correspond with the metropolitan understanding of the empire, with constitutional and parliamentary supremacy centralized on the metropolitan center, London.⁵⁹ Hillsborough pejoratively termed the American system “polytheism in politics...fatal to the constitution.”⁶⁰ Furthermore, while the two parts of the empire shared a common heritage of liberty, it differed sharply between “American popular sovereignty” and “British parliamentary sovereignty.”⁶¹ Not only was authority not vested in the same governmental body, there was disagreement over how many “bodies” there should be.

The “American conception of empire,” which posed a challenge to Parliament’s claims of absolute authority, came to a head in the debate over taxation without representation. British politicians saw it as a civil dispute; to Americans, the issue was as much about parliamentary sovereignty as it was about taxation. This kind of rhetoric was present in many of the petitions that colonial governments sent to the king, and was popular in pamphlets and propaganda as well. In a somewhat sycophantic petition to Hillsborough, Governor Pitkin made the odd claim that Parliament’s taxes deprive the colonies of “making a free Gift...or voluntarily complying with any Requisition of our rightful Lord and Sovereign” in bearing some of the financial burdens for the Seven

⁵⁸ David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 195.

⁵⁹ Eliga H. Gould, “Fears of War, Fantasies of Peace: British Politics and the Coming of the American Revolution,” in *Empire and Nation: The American Revolution in the Atlantic World*, ed. Eliga H. Gould and Peter S. Onuf (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 24-5.

⁶⁰ Johnson to Pitkin, January 3, 1769, WSJ Papers.

⁶¹ Toohey, 153.

Years' War.⁶² His argument, that only the king has the authority to tax the colonies according to their royal charters, was common. Johnson put it succinctly in a letter to Pitkin in 1768: "You are loyal only to the king, you are not so to the Parliament."⁶³

This larger debate played out in microcosm when in 1768 Johnson was granted an audience with Lord Hillsborough, who had been put in charge of American affairs earlier that year. Johnson tried to assure Hillsborough of Connecticut's tranquility and loyalty, but inadvertently entangled himself in a debate. In particular, he tried to convince Hillsborough that the charter granted to Connecticut by Charles II gave it the authority to make legislation for itself, rather than be subject to Parliament. Hillsborough did not agree, and Johnson bemoaned how little the ministers knew of the colonies, and the "loose, mistaken notions" great men in power had "of colony rights."⁶⁴

These problems were particularly acute in the Mohegan case and in Johnson's advice to the Susquehanna Company over their dispute with Pennsylvania. Johnson was frustrated with Mason for insisting that the Indians had not gotten justice from the colonial government, instead applying to the Privy Council. On one hand, in his list of arguments to the Privy Council, Johnson argued that Indians were "subjects of the Colony and as such of his Majesty." On the other hand, he continued, "and the Treaty of 1638 contains an express Subjugation to the laws of the Colony." His main arguments, then, relied on the rights of the colony "by virtue of the charter." In a letter to Trumbull concerning the Susquehanna Company's claims to land in Pennsylvania, Johnson warned that if the colony took up the company's claim it would "give much offense" and

⁶² William Pitkin to the Earl of Hillsborough, June 10, 1768, "The Pitkin Papers."

⁶³ Johnson to Pitkin, January 23, 1768, WSJ Papers.

⁶⁴ Johnson to Pitkin, February 13, 1768, WSJ Papers.

“umbrage” in London.⁶⁵ Parliament, he claimed, did not give credence to ancient charters. This posed a challenge to lawyers like Johnson who argued in the colony’s favor over land disputes with the Mohegans and Pennsylvania on the basis of the royal charter. Throughout the prolonged trial, Johnson never expressed much optimism that the Privy Council would ever decide in Connecticut’s favor, perhaps reflecting what he saw as a small example of the British government’s larger disdain for colonial rights.

Perhaps, like many Americans, he was also becoming disillusioned with George III when he opened his letter to fellow American agent Jared Ingersoll with “*Put not yr. trust in Parliaments nor in Princes* if I was you I would assume for my Motto.”⁶⁶ Many colonial governments, including Connecticut’s, sent petitions to the king and were dismayed to hear from their agents that the petitions were neither given to the king nor even acknowledged. Although Hillsborough repeatedly reassured Johnson that the king cared for all his subjects, including Americans, Johnson never fully trusted him. Just as he and Hillsborough could not see eye to eye, disagreement over this fundamental issue would prove insurmountable in the decade leading up to revolution. With condemnation rather than support from the king, Americans turned against him, portraying him as a tyrant to delegitimize his rule and provide a justification for independence.

Divergent British and American understandings of empire closely connected to two different conceptualizations of national identities. Americans steadfastly viewed themselves as English subjects, integral to the functioning of the Empire.⁶⁷ Loyalist Nathan Whiting clearly viewed revolutionary discontent in America and England as being part of a single, large system: “The times look very gloomy & there seem to be

⁶⁵ Johnson to Trumbull, February 26, 1770, WSJ Papers.

⁶⁶ Johnson to Jared Ingersoll, November 12, 1767, WSJ Papers.

⁶⁷ Eliga H. Gould, “Revolution and Counter-Revolution,” in *The British Atlantic World*, 209.

strong symptoms of a great revolution in the mighty Bh E—what will follow God only knows, America being part of the Empire and so connected with the head that any shock there must greatly affect it.”⁶⁸ In his pamphlet Ray emphasized that “the Colonies are our Bretheren and fellow-Subjects, free-born Britons equally as we are, and entitled equally with every right and privilege of Britons.”⁶⁹ Right up until 1776, this is in fact what the colonists were arguing themselves.

At the same time, British identity was becoming increasingly geographically-centered and restricted to the British Isles, with North America beyond the line of demarcation.⁷⁰ Johnson seems to have had an intuitive grasp of the transforming identity politics. Prior to meeting Hillsborough, Johnson suggested to Pitkin that “as a native of Ireland...it may be hoped that he has formed reasonable notions of the rights and liberties of the distant branches of this empire, and would not be disposed to confine all power and all political felicity to the shores of this island.”⁷¹ Pitkin’s own realistic assessment of the situation was that “it is painfull to hear the Colonies compared to Ireland who are subjected by Conquest and by their Conduct forfeited those Immunities which we are justly Intitled to.”⁷² Pitkin saw identity as based on political rights, making the colonies more entitled to representation than Ireland. Ironically, this was the time—partly brought on by the imperial restructuring and conflict with the colonies—that a larger “British,” as opposed to solely English, identity began to emerge.⁷³ Historian Eliga Gould concludes that with the American Revolution, “never again would the British think of any part of

⁶⁸ Whiting to Johnson, March 10, 1770, WSJ Papers.

⁶⁹ Ray, 362.

⁷⁰ Gould, “Revolution and Counter-Revolution,” in *The British Atlantic World*, 205.

⁷¹ Johnson to Pitkin, December 27, 1767, WSJ Papers.

⁷² Pitkin to Richard Jackson, June 10, 1768, *The Pitkin Papers*, 136.

⁷³ J.H. Breen, “Ideology and Nationalism on the Eve of the American Revolution: Revisions Once More in Need of Revising,” in *Journal of American History*, LXXXIV (1997), 23.

their empire as an extension of their own nation—at least not in the way they had before 1776.”⁷⁴

Historians have debated whether there was a corresponding emerging American patriotic nationalism prior to the war. J.C.D. Clark has argued that it did not exist, and that the ideology of liberty only “tied the colonists more firmly into the English Whig myth.”⁷⁵ True American nationalism, then, would not arise until after independence, certainly not until 1776. He is correct in that the colonies understood their rights primarily in terms of their status as Englishmen. However, a definite—if inchoate—sense of a separate American identity was beginning to take root well before the Declaration of Independence. In a profession dominated by Englishmen, Pitkin was confident of Johnson’s success and that “the Sum expended for the Maintenance of Agent, an American born, who sees and feels the worth of Liberty, has tasted its Pleasures, and is Expectant of enjoying its future happy Fruits, is well appropriated.”⁷⁶ To Pitkin, Johnson’s American identity was more important than his status as a trans-Atlantic figure. As Johnson wrote in 1769, “the controversy is not...between the prince and the subject, but between subject and subject, between the people of America and the people of Britain, which shall have the power over American property in the very important point of taxation.”⁷⁷ The idea that there are “people of America” and “people of Britain” emerged during this time period and became more acute in the aftermath of the American Revolution.

⁷⁴ Gould, *The Persistence of Empire*, 214.

⁷⁵ Clark, 57.

⁷⁶ Pitkin to Johnson, August 18, 1769, *The Pitkin Papers*, 204.

⁷⁷ Johnson to Trumbull, January 9, 1769, WSJ Papers.

“The true Christian is inconsistent with modern Patriotism”⁷⁸

One reason Johnson was able to so easily adapt into English society—a factor which should not be neglected—was his membership in the Church of England. As an Anglican, he had a wide breadth of contacts amongst the upper echelons of society. He was unimpressed, however, by the general lack of religiosity in the Church.⁷⁹ Perhaps this is why his closest friendships and most personal correspondence were with Dissenters, such as the Moravian Church at Fulneck. The rise of this church was part of the larger Evangelical revival movement in Britain and on the Continent, and Johnson’s Moravian friends conducted some of the first large-scale missionary work. One friend also set off for India as a writer with the East Indian Company, and another was in the Army. Johnson’s closest friend was perhaps the minister Benjamin LaTrobe, who was also extremely pro-government and favored coercion rather than conciliation with the colonies. Generally historians have considered the elite Anglican clergy to be the most coercive, and Dissenting clergy to be more pro-American, but this was not necessarily the case.⁸⁰ In America, although most loyalists were Anglican, the church was the most divided denomination and most laypeople supported independence.⁸¹ Johnson’s Anglican ties may have been part of the reason he was not able to fully support independence, but it was not the only reason.

Johnson’s British friends, particularly LaTrobe, bemoaned the fate that befell him as tensions mounted and he was no longer in a favorable position to receive lucrative job offers from the Crown—for being an American, as Latrobe saw it. As late as 1775,

⁷⁸ Conway Blizzard to Johnson, March 12, 1771, WSJ Papers.

⁷⁹ McConville, 75.

⁸⁰ Clark, 313.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 340.

LaTrobe praised Johnson: “If all thought as Dr. Johnson, we should soon be in peace and harmony...Britain would make conciliatory measures if they believed that there were not leading men on the other side of the Atlantic who aim at more than an exemption of taxation by a British Parliament.”⁸² LaTrobe understood, as did Johnson, that the Continental Congress was now calling for outright independence rather than representation in Parliament.

LaTrobe and the other Moravians thought Johnson too good a Christian for the politically dangerous times he found himself in. Although he received repeated offers from patriots such as Silas Deane to join the Continental Congress, Johnson refused. To LaTrobe, he wrote that he felt there would be little room in Congress for “Moderate Men or Moderate Measures and with no other will I be Concerned.”⁸³ Like Ingersoll before him, he was labeled a Loyalist for his moderate policies and unwillingness to make a final break with Britain. Unable to fully take part on either side, Johnson holed himself up in his Stratford home, isolated from all of his former colonial friends. In 1779, when the British threatened to bombard the town, his neighbors appealed to Johnson for help, asking him to negotiate with General Tryon. In some sense this episode recaptured the role Johnson played for much of his career: that of intermediary and go-between. As much as he was an outsider in the community because of his loyalist affiliations, he was also valued for his transnational connections. For the authorities, however, those connections made him a threat. In response to his agreement to petition on behalf of the

⁸² LaTrobe to Johnson, March 1, 1775, WSJ Papers.

⁸³ Ibid., July 25, 1774, WSJ Papers.

town, the Connecticut Council of Safety took him into custody and forced him to swear an oath of allegiance to secure his release.⁸⁴

His political future looked dim, but fortunately Connecticut suffered comparatively little upheaval in its transition from colony to state, and colonial officials such as Governor Trumbull—contemporaries of Johnson—remained in power throughout the war. It was essential for loyalists to have “powerful friends within revolutionary society” to support them after the war.⁸⁵ Even so, it is surprising that Johnson managed to take such an illustrious place in the new state government after his ignoble wartime past. In fact, only by recalling his prewar service in London could Johnson regain the trust and support of Connecticut voters, and “it seems ironic that the Susquehannah controversy, which had tried his patience and imperiled his political support so many times before the war, occasioned his return to public life.”⁸⁶ Conflict had broken out between Connecticut and Pennsylvania over disputed territory, but this time the Privy Council would not be adjudicating. In 1782, the state of Connecticut appointed Johnson as one of three agents to represent the state’s claim—in Congress. Although Connecticut lost the case, it did not end the controversy, and evidently Johnson advocated so well on the state’s behalf that in 1785 they elected him to Congress. He helped draft the Connecticut Compromise and signed the Constitution, his reacceptance into society complete. Later biographical sketches of his life and career would make no mention of his wartime record or define him as a loyalist in official lists and records.

⁸⁴ McCaughey, 188.

⁸⁵ Robert M. Calhoon, *The Loyalist Perception and Other Essays* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989),

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 189.

Yet strictly speaking, Johnson *was* a loyalist during the war, although perhaps his actual ideology was too complex for simple labels. Elizabeth McCaughey, his biographer, comes to the conclusion that he was “committed to American liberty and British rule, still convinced that no malign ministerial conspiracy had rendered the two incompatible.”⁸⁷ It may very well be true that, from his experiences with Parliament, Johnson did not believe there was a large scale attempt to deprive the colonies of their liberties. The widespread belief in the colonies, however, was that there *was* a malign ministerial conspiracy, with the king either unable or unwilling to control Parliament. Therefore, conciliation could no longer be possible. Although Johnson himself recognized that Parliament was reacting in the moment, unsure of how to best handle the situation and convinced in their own minds that they were right, his letters back to Connecticut do occasionally give the impression that the British government was no longer governed by liberty, and that Americans would have to unite, receiving no help from Britain, to preserve these liberties. Johnson’s correspondence, ironically, proved far more radical than he was. It is interesting to note that from the extant collection that we have, his letters to friends in Britain stop sometime during the 1780’s, when Johnson began to reintegrate into society and took part in Connecticut politics once again. The content of his letters also shifted to concerns regarding Congress and Columbia University. Even in the politicized environment of post-revolutionary Connecticut, Johnson was well respected because he took part in “the social community of polite letters” and his letters represented “the republican ideal...connected to the struggle for liberty.”⁸⁸ This transformation from a trans-Atlantic, imperial figure to a local state politician is symbolic of the transformation of the entire

⁸⁷ Ibid., 177.

⁸⁸ Christopher Grasso, *A Speaking Aristocracy: Transforming Public Discourse in Eighteenth-Century Connecticut* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 286-87.

Atlantic world. Johnson was in many ways the last of his kind. He had achieved one major success as an agent, however: he had left England in 1771 after—probably much to his surprise—winning the Mohegan case in Connecticut’s favor.

In 1795, Jeremy Belknap from the Massachusetts Historical Society contacted Johnson to ask his permission to publish his correspondence with the governors of Connecticut. His refusal—and reasons why—are illuminating: “[the letters] were generally written in much haste, as I accidentally heard a friend was going out, or a ship would sail at short notice...they must therefore unavoidably contain many trifling articles of intelligence, many insignificant remarks, many crude observations, must in a word be in all respects extremely incorrect and totally unfit for the public eye.”⁸⁹ This is somewhat disingenuous—Johnson may have been worried partly because he did not always tow the patriot line in his letters. With respect to his modesty, however, that is precisely why they are so interesting to historians. Johnson did indeed make many insightful and accurate observations, but because his letters are unedited we can get a glimpse of genuinely held beliefs and sincere—if ultimately unsuccessful—efforts to mediate the growing conflict without resorting to propaganda.

From his correspondence with the Connecticut governors we can better grasp how local colonial elites acted as intermediaries between the London bureaucracy and colonial governments. From his friendships with British radicals like Nicholas Ray we can see how British and American thinkers exchanged ideas and support, as well as where they fundamentally disagreed. The integration of the Atlantic community is represented through his contacts with missionaries and merchants, including Benjamin LaTrobe, the

⁸⁹ Oscar Zeichner, ed., “Jeremy Belknap and the William Samuel Johnson Correspondence,” *The New England Quarterly* 14, 2 (June, 1941), 367.

father of another famous migrant, American architect Benjamin Henry LaTrobe. Finally, we can also better understand the conflicting loyalties and dilemmas faced by many of the agents when Johnson formed friendships with both Patriot and loyalist Americans.

Further research still needs to be done on this topic, particularly concerning the experiences of people not captured as thoroughly as elites such as Johnson in the historical record. Women, enslaved people, and immigrants were also trans-Atlantic figures. The numerous people in early America who did not share ideological ties to Britain, such as Native Americans and European immigrants, also complicate questions of national identity. Looking at their integration into the American body politic is beyond the scope of this essay. Yet by looking particularly at the colonial agents historians can shed light on the shaping of identity for Anglo-American elites. Johnson's letters, written at a time of crisis, tell the story of the destabilization of the British Atlantic world and the agents' ultimately futile efforts to prevent it.

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