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Tears, Throat, Heart



One thing leads to another. Causes have their effects. But the wind blowing on one continent may ultimately be caused by a tiny shift in the air over another. The fall and rise of the wave may be influenced by the unperceived motion of a fish. Events may be connected by broken threads whose traces form strange, irrational patterns. Otherwise, the lives of an old Irishman and a young American Indian woman could not intersect in a way that would be, to both of them, inexplicable.

In January 1763 an obscure old Catholic man died on a quiet farm twenty miles west of Dublin and was buried amid the sonorous cadences of Latin prayers, the opulent aroma of incense and a haze of smoke from guttering candles wafting around his coffin. Christopher Johnson had lived for seventy-nine years in the lush pastures of County Meath, most of them as a tenant of his wife's family.¹ His public insignificance was not entirely a matter of choice. Throughout his adult life, people like him – idolaters and potential traitors who looked kindly on the claims of exiled pretenders to the throne of Britain and Ireland – were barred by law from public life, the professions and the armed forces. If he had ever aspired to glory, he had soon learned that such foolish dreams were incompatible with his place in history.

When he was still a child, his class of people – the respectable, well-to-do native Catholics of Ireland – had imagined for a while that their hour had come again, that the accession to the throne of Great Britain and Ireland of their co-religionist King James II heralded their resurrection. In what had seemed an almost miraculous deliverance, a Catholic king had been crowned and their hopes of being saved from oppression had been made flesh. They thought they would rise again

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and reclaim the lands and status that had been taken from them by the Protestant British colonists who had come to power in Ireland over the course of the seventeenth century. And then James had been deposed in a British coup and replaced by his impeccably Protestant daughter Mary and her husband William of Orange. For the last time, two men who had been crowned King of Britain fought a civil war for the throne, and this time Ireland was the battlefield.

As a little boy, Christopher Johnson had watched his older kinsmen ride out in all their pride and hope to fight in grand battles for King James, one of them on the River Boyne near his home. He had watched them ride back again in tatters from bloody disasters or from captivity, and the Jacobite cause gradually subside into a broken dream. He had learned how to live with the slow death of a defeated culture, how to keep his head down, how to hold his tongue, how to move amid undercurrents, how to survive. That he died at such a late age, and in such comfortable obscurity, was a testament to his mastery of those lessons.

Christopher Johnson's death was of no concern to anyone in Ireland beyond his family and his neighbours; but 2,000 miles away, across the vast Atlantic and through the dense forests of upstate New York, the word spread and was heard with great solemnity. It eventually reached Lake Oneida, about twenty miles north of present-day Syracuse, and the Tuscarora village at Oquaga, which was off the usual track along which messages travelled through the territories of the Iroquois nations.

In early June 1763, after a journey eastwards of about 100 miles, six young warriors from the village arrived at the grand new house of Christopher Johnson's son William about halfway between Albany and Utica, in the present-day city of Johnstown. They were gauche and nervous, hoping that they could remember the proper ceremony that would convey their condolences on the death of Christopher Johnson. Having fortified themselves with a dram of rum and a pipe of tobacco, they formally addressed William Johnson and asked for his forgiveness, 'as we are but Youngsters', for 'any mistakes which for want of knowledge we may make'.²

They spoke the Three Bare Words which banished the pall of grief from the son's body: 'Tears, throat, heart.' In their foundation myth, these were the words first spoken by the legendary Mohawk chief Ayonhwathah (Hiawatha) when he was stricken with grief at the

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death of his three daughters. The waters of a lake had then magically risen up, revealing the sacred shell beads that the Indians would call 'wampum'. The prophet Deganawidah had taken the shells, strung them together and performed a ritual to clear Ayonhwathah's mind of grief.³

These stories and rituals recapitulated the process by which five Iroquoian-speaking nations – the Mohawks, the Oneidas, the Onondagas, the Cayugas and the Senecas – came together in the Great League of Peace. (In late 1722 or early 1723, the Five Nations became the Six Nations when the Tuscaroras of North Carolina, who had fled northward into New York under intolerable pressure from European settlement were formally adopted into the league.) The confederacy was founded some time between 1450 and 1500, when, according to the myth, Deganawidah ('the Peacemaker', in colloquial usage), disturbed by the internecine wars between the nations, set out to preach peace. He converted Ayonhwathah from cannibalism, and then together with him confronted the wicked Onondaga wizard Thadodaho and transformed him into a humane chief whose people would be the 'fire-keepers' of the new order. Having created rituals of condolence and gift-giving through which the dead could be appeased symbolically rather than through blood-feuds, Deganawidah instructed the Five Nations to form a grand council under the Tree of Great Peace at Onondaga, which thus became the symbolic centre of Iroquois life.

The confederacy itself was likened in the orally transmitted Great Law of Peace to a longhouse, the typical common dwelling house of the Iroquois peoples. The Mohawks guarded the eastern door, the Senecas the western, and the Onondagas the fireplace in the middle, with the Oneidas and Cayugas securely housed under the roof. The confederacy was also imagined as a tree, the Great White Pine, whose branches sheltered the Five Nations and whose roots spread out to all peoples, regardless of their origins.

The Tuscarora boys, struggling to remember the right formula, now re-enacted for Christopher Johnson's son the same rites of condolence that Deganawidah had taught to Ayonhwathah. They wiped a string of sacred wampum beads over his face to brush the tears from his eyes so that he might look cheerfully and with friendship on his brother Indians again. They placed another string of wampum on his throat to clear the obstructions which might otherwise prevent him from speak-

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ing freely and in the tones of a brother. A third string stripped Christopher Johnson's death bed and wiped the blood from the dead man's eyes so that his spirit would rest and cause them no harm. With a white belt, they covered his grave so that he would bring his son no more grief. With another they collected all the bones of William's dead relatives and buried them deep in the earth so that they would be out of his sight for ever. 'As you now sit in darkness,' they said, 'we remove all the heavy clouds which surround you that you may again behold the light and sunshine.' Then they poured the clearest water into his body to cleanse his breast and remove the disturbance from his mind.⁴

These anxious youngsters from the west were followed in late July by twenty of their chiefs, or sachems, who repeated the ritual. They were the last in a line of Indians that had come to Johnson's house through that summer of 1763 to perform the rites of condolence for his father. On 12 May two chief warriors of the Onondaga nation from near what is now Syracuse, two of the Cayugas, from the area roughly north and south of what is now Auburn, and two of the Mohawks, who lived near him in the area drained by the Mohawk and Hudson Rivers, came to Johnson's house. Representing the entire Six Nations of the Iroquois confederacy, they had wiped his tears, cleared his throat and heart, covered his father's grave and buried the bones of his ancestors. A week later, a larger body of Iroquois, including several representatives of the largest and most westerly nation, the Senecas, from the region east of Lake Erie and south of Lake Ontario, had repeated the ceremony.

The repercussions of Christopher Johnson's death continued to resonate in the forests, swamps and hills of north-eastern America into the spring of the following year. In early March 1764, a party of Iroquois and allied warriors surprised a group of forty-one Delaware Indians on the Northern branch of the Susquehanna River, far to the south-west of Johnson's home.⁵ Among the captives they took was a young Delaware woman. They brought her north to the Mohawk valley and gave her to William Johnson as a replacement for his dead father.

They did this to lay Christopher Johnson to rest once and for all by filling the hole in the fabric of tribal and family life that had been left by his demise. It was an old custom. As the Jesuit missionaries who were among the first Europeans to penetrate Iroquois society had writ-

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ten in 1647: ‘These Barbarians are accustomed to give prisoners, whom they do not choose to put to death, to the families who have lost their relatives in war. These prisoners take the place of the deceased, and are incorporated into that family, which alone has the right to kill them or let them live.’⁶ But, however venerable the custom, it would have been hard to explain to that young Delaware woman why she was now the spiritual substitute for an old Irish farmer who had died so far away and with such little fuss.

William Johnson, on the other hand, understood these rituals very well. He knew how to greet the Indians who came to condole his loss and how to respond to their performances. He was well aware of what an important compliment had been paid to him in the presentation to him of the young Delaware woman. He had acted out these rituals himself.

Eight years earlier, Johnson had led one of the most elaborate condolence ceremonies of the period. It was a time of death, when the British and French empires and their respective Indian allies were struggling for control of the porous frontiers between New York and Quebec and ultimately of the entire continent of North America. The leading Onondaga sachem, Kakhswenthioni, known to the British as ‘Red Head’, had died. William Johnson journeyed to the neighbouring nation of Oneida to join the side of the Clear-minded, those whose place it was to commiserate with the Mourners. In this case, tradition demanded that two of the confederated nations, the Oneidas and Cayugas, would play the part of the Clear-minded, while the Mohawks, Senecas and Onondagas would be the Mourners. At Oneida he and the sachems prepared their wampum belts and their speeches and reminded themselves of their parts.

Five miles from Onondaga, they were joined by the Cayugas. In accordance with custom, they stopped for two hours to settle the formalities. Then William Johnson led them along the road again, singing out the song that recalled the ancestors who had founded the Iroquois confederacy and laid down the Great Law that governed it:

Ha-i ha-i-i ha-i ha-i ha-i ha-i ha-i ha-i ha-i ha-i
Ke ya da we des Ke na wero ne’I . . .

[Now then hear us
You who established it
The Great Law

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It has grown old
It is overgrown with brush
Hail, grandfather.]

When they came within sight of the Onondaga village, the Mourners came out and sat in a semi-circle 'in profound silence' at the edge of the woods.⁷ Johnson and the Clear-minded stopped their song, and the Mourners sang theirs:

*Oneh weni serah deh
Waga dyene goh wa
desa mena wera de
nege deyo ho do*

[Now today
I noticed your voice
Coming this way
Over the forest.]

For the next hour, the two sides exchanged the Three Bare Words, wiping each other's tears and clearing each other's throats and hearts. At the end of this ceremony, the Onondaga sachem Rozinoghyata and the other headmen stood and took Johnson by the hand to lead him into the village. As they followed, the Clear-minded again took up the song of the Great Law. Their hosts greeted them as they entered the village with a fusillade and they returned the salute by themselves firing into the air. They were conducted to a 'green bower' erected for the council beside Red Head's house. Johnson, as the head of the Clear-minded, waited outside while the others took up their places opposite each other on either side of the council fire. Then he was formally invited to enter the bower and greeted again with the Three Bare Words. This completed the day's ceremonies.

The next day, the Mohawk sachem Abraham acted as Johnson's spokesman, presenting in turn five belts of wampum to cover Red Head's grave, to comfort the Mourners, to admonish the survivors to stick to their old alliances, to dispel clouds and restore the sun, and, since it was now night, to restore the moon and stars. These words were reinforced with fourteen more strings or belts of wampum. The ceremony culminated in the presentation of an enemy scalp as a spiritual replacement for the dead man, and a glass of rum to wash down grief.

These fifteen concluding gestures – the presentation of the fourteen

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strings or belts of wampum and the scalp – symbolised the fifteen stages of the full speech of condolence. To wipe away tears. To unplug the ears. To unblock the throat. To restore the disturbed organs of the body. To wipe the blood from the mat. To dispel the darkness and bring the light. To make the sky beautiful. To bring the sun back into the sky. To level the earth over the grave. To bind the bones together. To gather the scattered firebrands and rekindle the fire. To raise up the minds of women and warriors. To dispel the insanity of grief. To put back in its place the torch that had been carried through the longhouse to announce the death. To restore the chief by raising him up again in the form of another man.⁸

On the following day, the Mourners performed the ritual replies and Johnson then led the Clear-minded away the prescribed distance of five miles. Over the next week, various diplomatic negotiations were concluded, but the condolence ceremonies did not culminate until ten days after they had begun. The scalp had replaced Red Head as a man, but he still had to be replaced as a chief in the ranks of Onondaga sachems. To do so, Johnson hung a medal around the neck of the unnamed Onondaga speaker who had carried their part of the ceremony, symbolising his elevation as a new sachem and marking the end of mourning for Red Head, who now formally joined the ancestors.

Even when he had left Onondaga, Johnson's journey home retained its ritual significance. He called at a village of the Tuscarora nation, and presented the scalps of two Frenchmen to a warrior, who grabbed them and carried them round the longhouses, singing the war song.⁹ That same evening, the Oneida sachems came out to meet Johnson to tell him that their chief had just lost his nephew. The condolence ceremony for the edge of the woods had to be performed again, and the appropriate songs exchanged. He then entered the Oneida village in the same way as before and took part in the same ceremonies to wipe away grief.

It was these ritual journeys and solemn performances that the Indians who came from near and far to mourn the death of Christopher Johnson in 1763 were reciprocating. In doing so, they were acknowledging that William Johnson had become a master of the living, the dead, and the dangerous borderlands that divided them.

In the world of the Iroquois, grief was a terrible force that must be appeased. The dead wished to take the living with them, to keep them in the grip of pain and loss so that their derangement would threaten

the order that was necessary for survival. Grief created paralysis, an inability to function. The bereaved covered their faces and clothes with ashes. They lay in the dark, unable to prepare food or hunt or tend children or go to war. Their senses became weak and their inner organs were poisoned and polluted. The rituals were necessary 'to dispel the insanity of grief'. Without them, in a culture that had known so much grief, it would be impossible to survive. Death would have its way.

William Johnson knew about grief and about the need to let it go. He owed his ability to understand and perform the Iroquois rituals of death to the fact that they were not entirely alien to the world of his youth. He, like the Iroquois, had grown up in a culture that felt itself in danger of extinction, and that responded with a system of ritual in which each individual death had to be treated as a moment of immense danger for the entire society. Just as the mourning half of an Iroquois village chanted death songs, the Irish Catholic culture of Johnson's childhood had a formal system of elaborate lamentation. The Iroquois had the all-female institution of O'gi'weoa'no' – the Chanters of the Dead – whose job it was to sing the songs that would release the earth-bound spirits of those who had died and allow them to depart from this world.¹⁰ The Irish had the similar all-female institution of keening.

As late as the beginning of the twentieth century, the nearest large town to William Johnson's home, Navan in County Meath, still had professional keeners – women who performed a display of woeful desolation on behalf of the bereaved community:

The lamentation was weird and frightful. The keeners (all women) went ahead of the funeral – that is before the corpse which in those days was carried all the way. When the cortège came in sight of the churchyard the lament began, first in a low murmuring chant and then rising to a mournful piercing wail. On entering the churchyard, it rose to the highest pitch of wailing – the writhing bodies and waving arms of the keeners keeping time with the lament. Usually when the funeral rites were over, the keeners and the relatives of the departed were in a state of collapse and had to be revived with drinks of water or mouthfuls of whiskey.¹¹

Coming from such a culture, William Johnson had been able to understand the Indian death ceremonies well enough to know that when they came to lift his grief at the death of his father in Ireland, the Iroquois leaders and warriors were acknowledging their fear that he would succumb to the terrible paralysis of sorrow. He had performed

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the ceremonies so well himself that it made sense to think that he would need them. Yet in that very assumption there was an acknowledgement too that this was a man with an extraordinary capacity to adapt and survive. They needed him to throw off the burden of grief because, in the way he had escaped the death of his own world, he had become necessary to their own survival.