



An Account of the Remarkable Occurrences in the Life and Travels of Colonel James Smith

(Events described: 1758)

James Smith was a white colonist from Pennsylvania. In 1755, at age 18, he enlisted to provide logistical support, as a road builder, for British troops fighting in the North American theater of the Seven Years' War. He was taken captive by indigenous allies of the French, carried into present-day Ohio, and adopted into a community of Kahnawake Mohawks, with whom he lived for the next four years. In 1759, during a visit to the Montreal area with members of his Mohawk family, Smith snuck away and boarded a ship that was transporting British prisoners of war, taken by the French, back to the British colonies; and thus he managed to return home to Pennsylvania.

In the following excerpt from his autobiography, Smith recounts conversations about religion he had with a 60-year-old Mohawk man named Tecaughretanego, a member of Smith's adoptive family. As the excerpt begins, Smith, Tecaughretanego, and Tecaughretanego's 10-year-old son are wintering by themselves at a remote campsite. Tecaughretanego has been temporarily disabled by rheumatism, and because Smith has had no success hunting, the three are in danger of starving.

In February, there came a snow with a crust, which made a great noise when walking on it and frightened away the deer; and as bear and beaver were scarce here, we got entirely out of provision. After I had hunted two days without eating anything, and had very short allowance for some days before, I returned late in the evening, faint and weary. When I came into our hut, Tecaughretanego asked, what success? I told him, not any. [...] He then said he had something of importance to tell me [...]

“Brother, as you have lived with the white people, you have not had the same advantage of knowing that the Great Being above feeds his people and gives them their meat in due season as we Indians have, who are frequently out of provisions and yet are wonderfully supplied, and that so frequently that it is evidently the hand of the great Owaneeyo* that doth this. Whereas the white people have commonly large stocks of tame cattle that they can kill when they please, and also their barns and cribs filled with grain, and therefore have not the same opportunity of seeing and knowing that they are supported by the ruler of heaven and earth.

“Brother, I know that you are now afraid that we will all perish with hunger, but you have no just reason to fear this.

“Brother, I have been young but am now old. I have been frequently under the like circumstance that we now are, and that, some time or other, in almost every year of my life; yet I have hitherto been supported, and my wants supplied in time of need.

“Brother, Owaneeyo sometimes suffers us to be in want in order to teach us our dependence upon him, and to let us know that we are to love and serve him, and likewise to know the worth

* This is the name of God in their tongue, and signifies the owner and ruler of all things.

[Footnote from the source publication]

of the favors that we receive, and to make us more thankful.

“Brother, be assured that you will be supplied with food, and that just in the right time; but you must continue diligent in the use of means. Go to sleep, and rise early in the morning and go a-hunting. Be strong and exert yourself like a man, and the Great Spirit will direct your way.”

The next morning, I went out, [...] and when I got about ten or twelve miles from our hut, I came upon fresh buffalo tracks. I pursued after, and in a short time came in sight of them as they were passing through a small glade. I ran with all my might and headed them, where I lay in ambush and killed a very large cow. I immediately kindled a fire and began to roast meat, but could not wait till it was done—I ate it almost raw. When hunger was abated, I began to be tenderly concerned for my old Indian brother and the little boy I had left in a perishing condition. I made haste and packed up what meat I could carry, secured what I left from the wolves, and returned homewards.

I [had] scarcely thought on the old man’s speech while I was almost distracted with hunger, but on my return was much affected with it [...] I also considered how remarkably the old man’s speech had been verified in our providentially obtaining a supply. [...]

When we were all refreshed, Tecaughretanego delivered a speech upon the necessity and pleasure of receiving the necessary supports of life with thankfulness, knowing that Owaneeyo is the great giver. Such speeches from an Indian may be thought by those who are unacquainted with them altogether incredible; but when we reflect on the Indian war, we may readily conclude that they are not an ignorant or stupid sort of people, or they would not have been such fatal enemies. When they came into our country, they outwitted us—and when we sent armies into their country, they outgeneraled and beat us with inferior force. [...]

We remained here until sometime in April 1758. At this time, Tecaughretanego had recovered so that he could walk about. We made a bark canoe, embarked, and went down Ollentangy some distance; but the water being low, we were in danger of splitting our canoe upon the rocks. Therefore, Tecaughretanego concluded we would encamp on shore and pray for rain.

When we encamped, Tecaughretanego made himself a sweat house, which he did by sticking a number of hoops in the ground, each hoop forming a semicircle. This he covered all round with blankets and skins; he then prepared hot stones, which he rolled into this hut, and then went into it himself with a little kettle of water in his hand, mixed with a variety of herbs, which he had formerly cured and had now with him in his pack. They afforded an odoriferous perfume. When he was in, he told me to pull down the blankets behind him and cover all up close, which I did, and then he began to pour water upon the hot stones and to sing aloud. He continued in this vehement hot place about fifteen minutes. All this he did in order to purify himself before he would address the Supreme Being. When he came out of his sweat house, he began to burn tobacco and pray. He began each petition with *oh, ho, ho, ho*, which is a kind of aspiration and signifies an ardent wish. I observed that all his petitions were only for immediate or present temporal blessings. He began his address by thanksgiving, in the following manner:

“O Great Being! I thank thee that I have obtained the use of my legs again—that I am now able

to walk about and kill turkeys, etc., without feeling exquisite pain and misery. I know that thou art a hearer and a helper, and therefore I will call upon thee.

“*Oh, ho, ho, ho*, grant that my knees and ankles may be right well and that I may be able not only to walk, but to run and to jump logs as I did last fall.

“*Oh, ho, ho, ho*, grant that on this voyage we may frequently kill bears, as they may be crossing the Sciota and Sandusky.

“*Oh, ho, ho, ho*, grant that we may kill plenty of turkeys along the banks, to stew with our fat bear meat.

“*Oh, ho, ho, ho*, grant that rain may come to raise the Ollentangy about two or three feet, that we may cross in safety down to Sciota without danger of our canoe being wrecked on the rocks.

And now, O Great Being! thou knowest how matters stand. Thou knowest that I am a great lover of tobacco, and though I know not when I may get any more, I now make a present of the last I have unto thee, as a free burnt offering; therefore, I expect thou wilt hear and grant these requests, and I, thy servant, will return thee thanks and love thee for thy gifts.”

During the whole of this scene, I sat by Tecaughretanego, and as he went through it with the greatest solemnity, I was seriously affected with his prayers. I remained duly composed until he came to the burning of the tobacco; and as I knew that he was a great lover of it, and saw him cast the last of it into the fire, it excited in me a kind of merriment, and I insensibly smiled. Tecaughretanego observed me laughing, which displeased him and occasioned him to address me in the following manner.

“Brother, I have somewhat to say to you, and I hope you will not be offended when I tell you of your faults. You know that when you were reading your books in town,^a I would not let the boys or anyone disturb you; but now, when I was praying, I saw you laughing. I do not think that you look upon praying as a foolish thing. I believe you pray yourself. But perhaps you may think my mode or manner of praying foolish; if so, you ought in a friendly manner to instruct me and not make sport of sacred things.”

I acknowledged my error; and on this, he handed me his pipe to smoke, in token of friendship and reconciliation, though at this time he had nothing to smoke but red willow bark. I told him something of the method of reconciliation with an offended God, as revealed in my Bible, which I had then in possession. He said that he liked my story better than that of the French priests,^b but

^a When Tecaughretanego says “in town,” he means back at their community’s home village, where, during the growing season, they cultivated their crops. Smith had two books with him during his captivity: a Bible and a collection of sermons.

^b Many of Tecaughretanego’s relatives affiliated, at least nominally, with Catholicism, an indication of their connection to the French. (Simultaneously, they continued to embrace traditional indigenous beliefs and practices.) Tecaughretanego, however, spurned Catholicism because, as he had earlier told Smith, the French priests “held notions that contradicted both sense and reason, and had the assurance to tell

he thought that he was now too old to begin to learn a new religion, therefore he should continue to worship God in the way that he had been taught; and that if salvation or future happiness was to be had in his way of worship, he expected he would obtain it, and if it was inconsistent with the honor of the Great Spirit to accept of him in his own way of worship, he hoped that Owaneeyo would accept of him in the way I had mentioned, or in some other way, though he might now be ignorant of the channel through which favor or mercy might be conveyed. He said that he believed that Owaneeyo would hear and help everyone that sincerely waited upon him.

[...] A few days after Tecaughretanego had gone through his ceremonies and finished his prayers, the rain came and raised the creek a sufficient height so that we passed in safety down to Sciota and proceeded up to the carrying place. [...] We proceeded from this place down Sandusky; and in our passage, we killed four bears and a number of turkeys. Tecaughretanego appeared now fully persuaded that all this came in answer to his prayers—and who can say, with any degree of certainty, that it was not so?

him that the book of God taught them these foolish absurdities. But he could not believe the Great and Good Spirit ever taught them any such nonsense; and therefore, he concluded that the Indians' old religion was better than this new way of worshipping God" (p. 30).

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