A Reinterpretation of Dunmore's War

BY JAMES CORBETT DAVID

(Editor's Note: The Journal of Backcountry Studies *announces the publication, by the University Press of Virginia, of a major biography of Lord Dunmore, the last Royal Governor of Virginia by Dr. James Corbett David. Dunmore's most famous exploit was his invasion of Native lands in the Ohio Valley, July to October, 1774. His depiction of the peace settlement is a distillation of the entire book, and, with the generous permission of the publisher and author, we offer this excerpt as an announcement of this landmark study in Backcountry history. RMC)*

By the terms of the treaty of Camp Charlotte, the Shawnees acquiesced to the Ohio River boundary established without their consent at Fort Stanwix in 1768. From now on, they would have to hunt on the northwest side of the river. They were also ordered to return all prisoners and stolen property, including slaves and horses, and hand over several hostages of their own to ensure their compliance pending the negotiation of a permanent peace at Pittsburgh the following summer. If all of these terms were met, Dunmore was "willing to bury the Hatchet" and once again protect the Shawnees "as an Elder Brother." He sought to discredit reports that the Delawares had caused the war through treachery, urging the Shawnees "to bury in oblivion these idle prejudices against your Grand Fathers the Delawares, & see each other on your former friendly terms." With the Fort Stanwix cession evidently secured, Dunmore thus sought to restore the political relations that, he believed, best promoted peace and order, albeit on Virginia's terms. He officially proclaimed the cessation of hostilities in January 1775. The Shawnees had agreed not to hunt south of the Ohio and to honor white navigation rights on the river. In return, they would "be protected from all injury" whenever they had occasion to pass through Virginia territory. "Any violence upon" Indians, no matter what their "Tribe or Nation," was now expressly forbidden.

The Camp Charlotte settlement was not perfect, nor could it have been. It did not involve the Cherokees, who were also deeply concerned in Kentucky, and did nothing to pacify the Mingoes. There were even a few Shawnees who refused to accept it. Virginians who wanted to exact revenge for Point Pleasant or to extend the Fort Stanwix cession thought it too forgiving. No settlement could have satisfied all these groups at once. Even so, the Camp Charlotte treaty was widely praised for what it did achieve. Thomas Gage, once critical of Dunmore's activities in the west, approved the "very Moderate Terms" of the peace. The Virginia council was also impressed by its "lenity." The Indians had likely braced for "the cruelty of the victor," the councilmen wrote, but Dunmore "taught them a lesson which the savage breast was a stranger to – that clemency and mercy are not incompatible with power." (That the Mingoes seemed not to appreciate this "lesson" went unacknowledged.) Even Arthur St. Clair, the leading Pennsylvanian in the region, was pleased. He conceded that the war had "come to a much better end than there was any reason to have expected."

Returning east from Indian country, the officers who had served under Dunmore stopped at Fort Gower. Out from under the governor's gaze (he went his own way

home), they drafted several resolutions strongly supporting the Continental Congress's impending boycott of commerce with Great Britain. The officers' patriotism did not prevent them from expressing gratitude to Dunmore. He had undergone "the great fatigue of this singular campaign," they wrote, "from no other motive than the true interest of this country." Others, then and now, have not been so sure.

An air of conspiracy has always surrounded Dunmore's War. Edmund Pendleton suspected that the Yellow Creek massacre was calculated to provoke Indian raids, which could then serve as a pretext for a war that would introduce white settlement *north* of the Ohio. Pendleton never revealed who he thought might be behind such a scheme, but the proprietors of the Grand Ohio Company were eager to believe any rumor implicating Dunmore, whom they blamed (improbably) for delaying approval of Vandalia. During the first Continental Congress, Patrick Henry allegedly discussed the "secret springs" of Dunmore's then-upcoming expedition with Thomas Wharton, a Company principal. Wharton said that Henry had told him that since "his Lordship was determined to settle his family in America, he was really pursueing this war, in order to obtain by purchase or treaty from the natives a tract of territory" *north* of the river. These men imagined that Dunmore had designs on what is now that state of Ohio in addition to the lands acquired at Fort Stanwix. The Camp Charlotte settlement likely disabused them of this notion, but the Revolution added new suspicions to the mix. Some colonists came to believe that Dunmore had pursued the war in order to distract them from the Coercive Acts. There were even those who thought that he had colluded with the Shawnees in their attack on Lewis. It was in the dim light of this delusion that Point Pleasant came to be known, in the nineteenth century, as the first battle of the American Revolution.

Dunmore has retained the role of villain in modern scholarship. One recent study holds that he manufactured the war with the Shawnees in order to enrich land speculators. The governor was clearly a savvier participant in western affairs than his reputation for incompetence allows, but it is doubtful that anyone could have orchestrated the remote and complicated series of events that led to Point Pleasant. Even if he had done so, speculators didn't gain anything worth the efforts from the Camp Charlotte settlement. Some, like Patrick Henry, viewed it as a disappointment – another example, according to Simon Schama, of "the Crown's suffocating determination to confine their territorial expansion." As whites in London and Virginia saw things, the land south of the Ohio River already belonged to the crown under the terms of the Treaty of Fort Stanwix. Dunmore merely forced the Shawnees to acknowledge this.

That he aggressively pursued Virginia's interest in the Ohio Valley, at times in violation of his instructions, is beyond question. He seized upon disorder in and around Pittsburgh to strengthen Virginia's position vis-à-vis Pennsylvania and Vandalia. And though he never made any grants to himself during this period, he was no innocent in the world of land speculation. In spite of all of this, there is no evidence linking either him or Connolly to the April 1774 murders that set Logan and his Shawnee allies on the warpath. Both men criticized those atrocities and, along with everyone else, proceeded to focus on the raids they provoked rather than the prosecution of Cresap and Greathouse. In the final analysis, Dunmore's War resulted not from a shadowy conspiracy but from the convergence of a number of powerful North American interests – the Six Nations, the Virginia government, independent settlers – in opposition to a loosely connected

collection of weaker interests, including the Ohio Indians, proprietary Pennsylvania, and the ministry in London.

Colonial governance required autonomy and improvisation from far-flung officials. The information lag alone – letters took anywhere from three weeks to three months to reach London from Williamsburg – made it nearly impossible to manage colonial affairs from Whitehall, where instructions often had to percolate through a variety of channels before being shipped across the Atlantic. Once the orders did arrive, ever-changing local circumstances often precluded their institution. Authorities in Williamsburg faced similar obstacles while trying to govern the backcountry. The importance of native diplomatic discourse, including scalping, made places like the Ohio Valley culturally as well as geographically remote from imperial centers. The state's dependence on people who could operate in this milieu – William Johnson, George Croghan, Alexander McKee, John Connolly – often compromised its goals. It was hard enough for these men to control events, let alone someone hundreds or even thousands of miles away who didn't speak the language. The state's principal leverage was its ability to grant legal title to land. The exercise of this power was both a sign and a source of weakness, for by promising grants in the acquisition of consent, the state encouraged colonists to move west well in advance of its ability to control them there. As all of this suggests, one need not focus on the progress of the colonial resistance movement to see that the imperial order was little more than a precarious illusion in North America by 1774.

On Christmas Eve, Dunmore wrote the most important letter of his life. A response to the accusations he encountered on his return home, it contained an exhaustive self-defense and related new developments in the mounting crisis over colonial rights. One of the letter's main themes was the troubling independence of colonists throughout Virginia. "The established Authority of any Government in America, and the Policy of Government at home," he wrote, "are both insufficient to restrain the Americans" in their movement west. He had observed this first hand; it was incontrovertible. Matters were also desperate at the capital, where "the Power of Government" was now "entirely disregarded, if not wholly overturned." Despite its pessimistic tone, the letter managed to restore the ministry's confidence in Dunmore's administration. The following March, Dartmouth reported that there was "no room in the Royal Bureau to doubt of the uprightness of your Lordship's Intentions."

Whitehall had very little reason to regret the outcome of Dunmore's War. It was unauthorized and risky, and if handled with less finesse, it might well have strengthened the prospects for a north-south native alliance. Instead, it affirmed the Treaty of Fort Stanwix while shoring up relations with the Indians at a time when the Empire badly needed friends in the backcountry. Strictly speaking, it did nothing to prevent the government from proceeding with its plans for Vandalia. There was a downside, as well, of course. Dunmore's War gave heart to settlers and speculators who had transgressed the Proclamation Line and probably encouraged others to do so. Like so much else in western affairs, it was at once complicating and clarifying. As the Empire tried in vain to manage its own growth, mixed signals were inevitable.