

The Life and Times of General John 'Gentleman Johnny' Burgoyne

Barry O'Brien

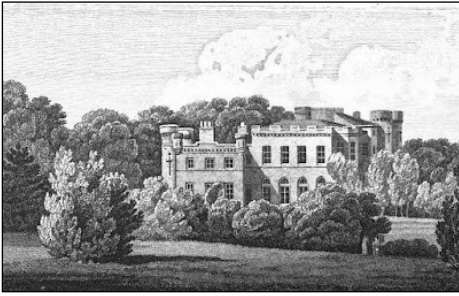
General John 'Gentleman Johnny' Burgoyne, was the father to Field Marshall John Fox Burgoyne, who gave his name to Dover's Fort. John Burgoyne was descended from the third Baronet, Sir John Burgoyne, and Anna Maria Burnstone, daughter of Richard Lucy, a wealthy merchant of Chalcote in Warwickshire. Born at the family home of Sutton Manor, Bedfordshire on 24th February 1722, Burgoyne attended the prestigious Westminster School from the age of ten where he was described as 'athletic and outgoing' and where he made numerous contacts and friends, most notable among them being James Smith Stanley, styled Lord Strange.

In August 1737, aged fifteen, Burgoyne purchased a commission in the Horse Guards where his duties were light, which allowed him time to cut something of a figure in London's high society. Through his association with school friend Lord Strange, Burgoyne was introduced to Strange's sister, the Lady Charlotte Stanley, daughter of Edward Stanley, the 11th Earl of Derby, an influential and powerful politician and a father who had somewhat set ideas as to who his daughter should marry. Sadly the likes of Gentleman Johnny did not feature in those plans and Lord Derby left the young Burgoyne in no doubt that he would never consent to such a match. However, news of her father's refusal left Charlotte devastated and in agreement to the suggestion that they should elope and marry. Furious at such scandalous behaviour, Derby cut off his daughter's inheritance causing Burgoyne to sell his commission in the 1st Royal Dragoons and use the money to finance the couple's first

years of married life. The newly wed Burgoynes travelled throughout Europe where John is said to have studied both French literature and continental military practices. With the birth of their daughter, Charlotte Elizabeth, in 1754, it was hoped that Derby's opposition to their marriage might soften and, with Lord Strange acting as an intermediary, they were accepted back into the family. Burgoyne soon became something of a favourite of his father-in-law, who used his influence to improve Burgoyne's prospects.

With the outbreak of the Seven Years War in 1756, Burgoyne became first a Captain and later Lieutenant-Colonel in the Coldstream Guards. In 1761, he became MP for Midhurst in Sussex and, the following year, won distinction serving as a Brigadier-General in Portugal during the defeat of the Spanish at the Battle of Vila Velha.

Elected MP for Preston, Lancashire in 1768, he gained a reputation for being outspoken, particularly for his attacks on Lord Clive, who had made many enemies among those who feared the corrupting influence of Indian wealth on English public life. When it appeared that Clive's system of government in Bengal had not been as successful as had been imagined, and with evidence emerging of corruption among the East India Company, Burgoyne became vociferous among those demanding an investigation. Such demands eventually lead to Clive's trial before Parliament where he was, however, fully absolved from every charge as it was declared that he did "render great and meritorious services to his country."



The Oaks

As well as a military man and politician, John Burgoyne established a reputation as a writer, firstly with his play, *The Maid of the Oaks*, produced by David Garrick and staged at Drury Lane Theatre. Originally written in celebration of the forthcoming marriage of Burgoyne's nephew, Edward Smith-Stanley, heir to the Earldom of Derby, and Lady Elizabeth Hamilton, daughter of the late James Hamilton, 6th Duke Hamilton and Brandon, *The Maid of the Oaks* was a lavish masquerade and garden fête, which took place at Lord Stanley's hunting lodge, The Oaks near Epsom, Surrey. This house gave its name to the English classic horse race still run on the same course as *The Derby*. The 12th Earl of Derby's horse, *Bridget*, won the first running of *The Oaks* in 1779. Such was the notoriety gained by reports of the performance, it was decided to maximise the publicity and transfer to Drury Lane, where *The Maid of the Oaks* became something of a success.

Promoted to Major-General, with the outbreak of the American Revolutionary War Burgoyne left England while his wife was "lying dangerously ill", arriving in Boston shortly after the first shots of the war had been fired in May 1775.

The following year Burgoyne petitioned for permission to lead a force from Canada along the Hudson River, where he planned

to confront the American Militia and take control of upstate New York, to which end Burgoyne duly assembled "what might have been the best armed and skilled army that Britain had ever put together". In all there were to be three British armies involved in this campaign, the intention being for them to merge in Albany, New York. However, only one, that commanded by General John Burgoyne, made the final push to its destination. Having enjoyed early success, Burgoyne's force made good progress but began to run out of supplies and sent Colonel St. Leger a message requesting support from his position to the west. Regrettably any supplies failed to arrive and by the time Burgoyne reached the American fortifications at Bemis Heights, New York, south of Saratoga, his army was short on both supplies and morale. Rather than retreat as his fellow officers proposed, on 19th September 1775, General Burgoyne led his forces into *The Battle of Freeman's Farm*, successfully driving off the Americans but suffering heavy losses in the process. Still awaiting supplies and reinforcements, General Burgoyne was forced to put his men on rations before ordering the attack on Bemis Heights, where they were roundly defeated before retreating to Saratoga, only to be besieged by the Americans. Finally, on 17th October, General John Burgoyne suffered the greatest ignominy when he was forced to surrender himself and his, almost, 6,000 men to the American patriots, handing them their greatest victory at that point of the Revolutionary War, a victory which



Surrender at Saratoga

proved to be something of a turning point, as France was soon prompted to enter into an alliance with the Americans.

The subsequent indignation felt toward Burgoyne in Britain was great and he was granted leave by his captors to return at once in an attempt to defend his conduct. Burgoyne demanded, but never obtained, a trial. Not only was he duly deprived of his regiment but now had to face the future without his wife, Charlotte, who had died during his absence in America.

Although some suggest Gentleman Johnny never remarried, he, nevertheless, went on to father four more children with the actress and opera singer Susan Caulfield, whom others say he married in 1781. Party politics as we know it today did not exist in the 18th Century, the so-called King's Friends, from whose ranks George III preferred to draw his ministers, coming from both Whig and Tory traditions and from neither. On his return from the Americas, Burgoyne chose to distance himself from his former Tory colleagues and associate more with the Whigs so that, when they achieved greater influence, Burgoyne was restored to his rank, given the colonelcy of the King's Own Royal Regiment, made Commander-in-Chief in Ireland and appointed a Privy Councillor.

Had it not been for the unwanted notoriety his role in the American War of Independence had brought him, Burgoyne may well be foremost remembered today as a dramatist as, following his success with *The Maid of the Oaks*, he went on to write *The Heiress* (1786) and assist Richard Sheridan in his production of *The Camp*, which he may also have co-authored. He also wrote the libretto for William Jackson's only successful opera *The Lord of the Manor* (1780), and translated a semi-opera version of *Richard Coeur de Lion* for the Drury Lane Theatre.

Often portrayed by historians and commentators as a classic example of the marginally competent aristocratic British General, who acquired his rank through political connections rather than ability, those that served under him noted that Burgoyne "shunned no danger, his presence and conduct animated the troops (for they greatly loved their General)".

John Burgoyne appears as a character in George Bernard Shaw's play *The Devil's Disciple*, first performed in 1897 and set in New Hampshire during the American Revolution, including the 1959 and 1987 film adaptations, when he was portrayed by Laurence Olivier and Ian Richardson respectively.

General John 'Gentleman Johnny' Burgoyne died at his house in Hereford Street, Mayfair 4th August 1792m bequeathing the bulk of his estate to his second wife, Susan (Caulfield) Burgoyne, with rotation to their son, John Fox Burgoyne and siblings. "The Right Honourable John Burgoyne, Lieut. General of His Majesty's Forces, Colonel of the Fourth Regiment of Foot, and one of His Majesty's most honourable Privy Council of the Kingdom of Ireland" was buried in the Cloister of Westminster Abbey near his first wife, The Lady Charlotte, and their daughter, also named Charlotte, who had pre-deceased him aged only ten years old. He appointed his brother-in-law by his first marriage, the former Lord Strange, now the 12th Earl of Derby, as guardian of his four surviving children, the eldest of which was the ten-year-old John Fox Burgoyne who, later, went on to enjoy an illustrious military career and give his name to Dover's Fort Burgoyne.

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