



Grace Tomkinson

JANE McCREA:

A MARTYR OF THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR

IT SEEMS A STRANGE STORY that a young woman could become a heroine to both sides during a war. It happened to Jane McCrea, whose tragic death made her revered as "the one maiden martyr to the American cause" in the Revolutionary War. It was the subject of sombre discussion in the British House of Commons; historians credit it with being one of the chief reasons for the tide turning against the English; and there are some who maintain that it was she who defeated General Burgoyne at Saratoga Springs in 1777. The General himself, shrewdly planning his campaign, may hardly have known that she existed, but later he heard more than enough about her.

The news of her brutal murder by "Burgoyne's Injuns", spreading like a brush fire, aroused a rather lukewarm countryside. "Her innocent blood crying from the ground" made most effective anti-British propaganda. Her name became a rallying-cry which rang along the Eastern Seaboard and reached as far as the wild Green Mountain Boys in Vermont. It made men seize their muskets and rush to defend their own wives and daughters from such atrocities.

The event was commemorated by poets, playwrights, and artists of the period. A painting, "The Death of Jane McCrea", by the nineteenth-century artist, John Vanderlyn, is still much admired in the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut. It depicts a lovely young girl about to be scalped by two ruthless savages. But the last thing that poor Jane McCrea would have wanted to be, even accidentally, was an American heroine. Her sympathies were entirely with the British, a fact conveniently overlooked by the Patriots at the time. She would have been far better pleased to know how sincerely she was mourned by the Loyalists who were forced, soon after her death, to abandon their homes and treasured belongings to set out for an unfamiliar wilderness.

There are no monuments to her in Canada, and she never figures in our folklore. Too many calamities struck the unhappy Tories at the time of what they called "The Troubles" to allow them to keep written records of them all. If any writing was done in those struggling days it is hard to find now. But

in Wallace Bay, Nova Scotia, where a group of refugees from New Province finally settled, Jane McCrea was lovingly remembered. And the members of the Tuttle clan in particular, who proudly claimed kinship with her, handed down the sorrowful tale to their descendants and named their children for her.

My first acquaintance with her story came through notes set down by my grandfather, in spidery Victorian handwriting, a century after it happened. He had had it from his grandfather, the Loyalist Stephen Tuttle. The occasion in which Stephen Tuttle had found time to write his recollections had not appeared, and since family traditions are often touched up along the way I was inclined to discount this one. As Canadians, we do not preserve orally I was inclined to discount this one. As Canadians, we are not too familiar with early American history and we had no tangible proof that Jane McCrea was more than a legend. She seemed too highly coloured a bird to be on our family tree—this “beautiful maiden” who had so recklessly defied her family and ventured to cross the British lines to marry a young officer, only to be waylaid and slaughtered on the way.

The separation between the exiles and those who chose to remain behind was often complete. Nova Scotia was a long way from upstate New York. Travelling was hazardous and mails uncertain or non-existent. By the time the old resentments had cooled and communication might have been resumed, memories of Jane McCrea had faded. In my day she had become only an intriguing family mystery that might never be cleared up, but was solved so easily that it should have been done before. When the New York Historical Society reproduced the Vanderlyn painting in their scholarly Quarterly, I began looking her up in their research library. It was a slight shock to find that Jane McCrea was no myth but a very real character.

It took a little time and patience to uncover more references to her in musty old books and papers, but I finally learned more than a little about her and incidentally about my own ancestor, Stephen Tuttle, who had married Jane McCrea's cousin and eventually landed in Ramsheg (now Wallace), Nova Scotia. In my search for Jane, I came across a small set of yellowed pamphlets which proved to be the Memorials, or claims for compensation from the Crown, made by several prominent residents of the Province of New York who had lost everything in the Revolution. The documents had been compiled from the State Paper Office in London nearly eighty years ago, one of them being Stephen Tuttle's notebook. No record of it has survived in Wallace Bay.

The details of any dramatic chapter in history are invariably distorted or embroidered, and it is hard now to get Jane McCrea's story straight. The

Americans had their version, in which the British were unquestionably guilty. The Tories called the catastrophe a case of mistaken identity. There must have been some truth in both. Later and less biased accounts, written after the hysteria had died down, agree astonishingly with those told and retold, like ancient sagas, around pioneer fireplaces in Wallace Bay.

Jane McCrea was the daughter of a Scottish-born Presbyterian minister who emigrated to New Jersey in the mid-eighteenth century and married a local girl. After her mother's death, Jane came to live with a brother near Saratoga Springs. All of her family were violently opposed to the British and were far from pleased when Jane fell in love with David Jones, a young lieutenant on the other side. He had moved from New Jersey when her brothers did, and they were all old friends. But now John McCrea was a Colonel in Washington's army and he did everything possible to discourage his sister's romance.

Jeanie, as some writers called her, seems to have been an exceptional girl, high-spirited and with a mind of her own. Reports agree basically about her looks. She was said to be "finely formed, distinguished by her profusion of dark and shining hair and celebrated for her more than common beauty". She must also have possessed more than common courage.

It was not easy for her to break away from her family, but when she finally succeeded she set out alone to cross the Hudson "dressed", as a writer of the period tells us, "so nice she attracted the attention of the ferryman". At that time General Burgoyne's troops were advancing, and many settlers had left their homes and moved farther down the river for protection. Jane went first to a friend whose house must have seemed a fairly safe shelter. This woman was not only a cousin of the British General Fraser but a rather formidable character herself. She is described as "an uncommonly fat Scots woman whose voice raised in anger would scald a hog".

Jane's journey had been carefully arranged by Lieutenant Jones. She was to make her way secretly to an abandoned cabin where she would meet a party of friendly Indians led by his friend, Duluth. They were to conduct her to Burgoyne's camp, where the couple were to be married. Unlike the heroines of the old Greek tragedies, who knew that there was no way of escaping their doom, she seems to have had no fears or premonitions. She had met Duluth and began riding towards the British lines when a man who happened to be in the woods nearby heard a shot ring out. Peering cautiously through the bushes he saw the girl fall from her horse. Just here the Canadian Indians enter the picture.

Both sides had their Indian allies in the war, and General Burgoyne had recruited a band of Iroquois under the half-breed Le Loup to help in his campaign. They appear to have been getting somewhat out of hand and over-eager for the bounty paid for enemy scalps. David Jones had preferred to have his bride-to-be escorted by Western Indians whom he could trust. At this point the stories vary slightly. The one generally accepted is that Le Loup, scouting around for some profitable adventure, spied Duluth and his braves with what appeared to be a captive. He and his company had decided greedily to step in, and had fired the shot.

When the girl had fallen they rushed up, driving off the other Indians, and took her scalp. Her body, stripped of her gay wedding clothes, was pushed down an incline into a ravine where it came to rest against a pine tree. Le Loup and his savages appeared at the British camp "with the girl's beautiful tresses dangling from one of their belts" and triumphantly demanded their reward. According to the Wallace Bay tradition, David Jones's "hair turned white in a single night". Since the rest of that account has proved reasonably accurate there may perhaps be some basis for this belief.

The terrified witness of the crime crept out of the woods and reported it, but no one dared to go near the spot until the next day. Then the young woman's mangled body was found and hastily buried. The whole country was shocked and outraged, but no one had more reason to be distressed than General Burgoyne. He angrily called a council of the Iroquois and ordered those who had murdered Jane McCrea to be handed over for punishment. The Indians threatened not only to desert him and go home but also to rape and pillage Eastern Canada. He desperately needed their help and the matter had to be dropped. But from that time things began to go against him.

During an inquiry in the British Parliament in 1779 into the causes of Burgoyne's defeat, Jane McCrea's death was acknowledged as a vital factor. The General was severely criticized for not being able to control his Indians, but war was war and he was known to have been in a difficult spot. By that time the revolt of the Colonies had gone so far and so many mistakes had been made that it was a little late for recriminations.

When I learned that a six-foot marble slab had marked Jane's grave in Hudson Falls, New York, I was determined to make a pilgrimage there to see if any trace of it could be found. Hudson Falls is a prosperous small town but its monuments are not widely known, and ancient tombstones have a way of disintegrating. It seemed unlikely that sufficient interest would still be taken in a rather obscure figure to ensure that this one would be well cared

for. I was agreeably surprised. We were directed first to the well-kept cemetery. When we entered its main gates the first thing we saw was the marble slab, not lying broken or weed-covered on the ground, but standing proudly erect, protected by a high iron fence. The inscription read:

Here rest the remains

of

Jane McCrea

Aged 17

Made captive and murdered

By a band of Indians

While on a visit to relatives in this neighbourhood A.D. 1777

To commemorate one of the most thrilling incidents in the annals of the American Revolution, to do justice to the fame of the gallant British officer to whom she was affianced and as a simple tribute to the departed, this stone was erected by her niece Sarah Hannah Payne AD 1852

The unlucky girl had to wait seventy-five years for this recognition, but as the country grew more prosperous and aware of its past she was remembered again. Half a mile from the cemetery we found a fairly large cairn inscribed:

Memorial to Jane McCrea

Massacred on this spot

By the Indians

July 17, 1777

Erected by the Jane McCrea Chapter of the Daughters of the Revolution, 1901

We looked down the ravine where her body had been thrown and then went on soberly to find a third marker, indicating where she had originally been buried. This one had been placed there in 1912 by the American Legion.

Any Canadian who happens to pass through Hudson Falls (roughly half way between Montreal and New York) may see the phenomenon of a Revolutionary War heroine, who really belongs to Canada, being honoured by such staunch patriots as the members of the Daughters of the Revolution and the American Legion. The thrilling drama was played so long ago that most of the actors are forgotten. It would be interesting, for example, to know what happened to young David Jones with his prematurely white hair. Perhaps his name, like that of Stephen Tuttle and many other Loyalists, does not appear on any records. But his story and Jane McCrea's are part of our national heritage and should be remembered and cherished.