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Officer, Poet, Spy:

The Many Lives of John André

by Brian Wages

“Major John André” self portrait. Sargent, *The Life and Career of Major John André*.

The story has characteristics worthy of a James Bond novel. It includes a spy discovered with secret military plans hidden in his boot. The incriminating documents, intended to guarantee safe passage, were complete with the traitor’s signature. There is also a love triangle with a woman, her traitor husband, and the handsome spy. All of these events led up to the spy’s capture, trial, and hanging. For students of the American Revolutionary War, these are the salient facts of the career of John André. However, there is a great deal more to this complex man than his ignominious demise.¹ In addition to being a highly respected military officer, he was a man of letters and refinement, of poetry and pencil sketching.

John was the oldest child of Anthony and Marie, both of whom had a number of Continental connections. John’s father was a Swiss gentleman born in Geneva, who became a moderately successful merchant and later moved to England. His mother, the former Marie Louise Girardot, was English by birth, but her ancestry was French.² While historians have now established the date of John’s birth on October 2, 1750, the location remains a mystery. The André family owned homes in Southampton and London, leading scholars to speculate that John’s

¹ For more complete biographical treatments of John André, see Robert McConnell Hatch, *Major John André: a Gallant in Spy’s Clothing* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), and Winthrop Sargent, *The Life and Career of Major John André, Adjutant-General of the British Army in America* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1861).

birth could have been at either location. Anthony and Marie had another son and three daughters, and indications are that John enjoyed his childhood, most of which was spent at the London home.³

Anthony's business success and wealth brought a number of educational opportunities. John's early schooling began nearby in Westminster.⁴ In the late 1760s, he moved to Switzerland and attended the University of Geneva, where his studies focused on mathematics and the military arts and sciences. He acquired a "remarkable fluency in the German, French, and Italian languages."⁵ It was also during this time that he acquired the skills of sketching, particularly for military drawings. In addition to these pursuits, he cultivated other interests in literature, poetry, and the arts. However, in the spring of 1769 his father died and John, at the age of eighteen, was forced to return to England where he was given the reins of the family business.⁶ This proved to not be a very successful move, either professionally or personally, for the young man.

Following his time on the Continent and his exposure to a wide variety of arts, André sought out persons with similar artistic interests. Within a few months of returning to England, he had joined a Lichfield literary group, led by the poet Anna Seward. Often referred to as the "Swan of Lichfield," she was a significant poet and correspondent in a number of literary circles. She also surrounded herself with many young people who enjoyed writing and discussing contemporary literature. Another intimate of Anna was the young and strikingly beautiful Honora Sneyd. She had come to live with Anna at age five and stayed for fourteen years. She would come to have a profound effect on young André's life. The two quickly fell in love, encouraged by her benefactor, Anna. During their time together, he wrote a number of poems and even considered making a living by writing plays and poetry. However, while attending a Christmas party sponsored by Anna in 1770, Honora unexpectedly rejected him for another man, thus bringing an end to their serious courtship of nearly a year and a half.⁷ Honora returned to live with

³ Winthrop Sargent, *The Life and Career of Major John André, Adjutant-General of the British Army in America* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1861), p. 7.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Henry Stanton Tillotson, *The Beloved Spy: The Life and Loves of Major John André* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, 1948), p. 16.

⁶ Anthony André died on April 17, 1769. *American National Biography* s.v. "André, John."

her father in 1771; she left to prepare for an impending wedding without the blessing of Anna.⁸ André's failure in romance mirrored his attempts to manage the family business. He was soon looking for another career path.

Honora's departure from André's life precipitated the resumption of his military career. With what societal position and funds he had at his disposal, he became an officer in the pre-Revolutionary War British Army. For the next two years, he found success employing his martial skills. He moved through the ranks and established his future. By the time he arrived in British North America in 1774, he was a First Lieutenant.

With his position in the army secure, André continued his educational and literary interests. In 1772, he took a leave of absence and traveled back to Europe with his close friend, George Rodney. For nearly two years, André stayed and studied in Göttingen, Germany. Among the important subjects he studied at the University of Göttingen were mathematics and military science. He also joined the literary society called the *Göttinger Hainbund*, or simply the *Hain*. Reportedly founded at midnight September 12, 1772, the *Hain* met in a grove of oak trees not far from the university. This "Grove League of Göttingen" was a group of nature-loving literary men of some renown. It counted as members Johann Heinrich Voss, who translated the *Iliad* into German, and Ludwig Holty, a noted poet of the time. In some significant ways, this group of academics and dreamers were precursors of the Transcendentalists of the next century.⁹ Although his association with the *Hain* lasted less than two years, André began to display an affinity for composing comic poetry.

André's time on the Continent and leave of absence came to an end in 1774. By the end of the year he reported to Philadelphia where he stayed until his posting to Quebec in September 1775.¹⁰ In these early stages of the American Revolutionary War, he served under Gen-

⁷ John André, *Major André's Journal: Operations of the British Army Under Lieutenant Generals Sir William Howe and Sir Henry Clinton, June 1777 to November 1778* (Tarrytown, NY: William Abbatt, 1930), p. 18.

⁸ *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. "Seward, Anna."

⁹ Heinz Jansen, *Aus dem Göttinger Hainbund Overbund und Sprickmann: Ungerdruckte Briefe Overbecks* (Munster: Regensbergsche, 1933).

¹⁰ Dave Richard Palmer, *George Washington and Benedict Arnold: a Tale of Two*



"Peggy Shippen" pencil sketch by John André. Courtesy: Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

eral Guy Carleton at the Fort of St. Jeans, Lower Canada, which is now located in southern Quebec just north of Lake Champlain, New York. It was during this posting that an interesting coincidence arose between John and Benedict Arnold. In early 1775, General Arnold was ordered to reconnoiter the area around the fort and assault it if he thought his troop strength sufficient. While Arnold declined to battle the British, later that year General Philip Schuyler laid siege to the fort. André was captured when Carleton's forces surrendered, and he spent time as a prisoner of war in the interior of Pennsylvania.¹¹ While as a captive he wrote "Stript of everything, except the picture

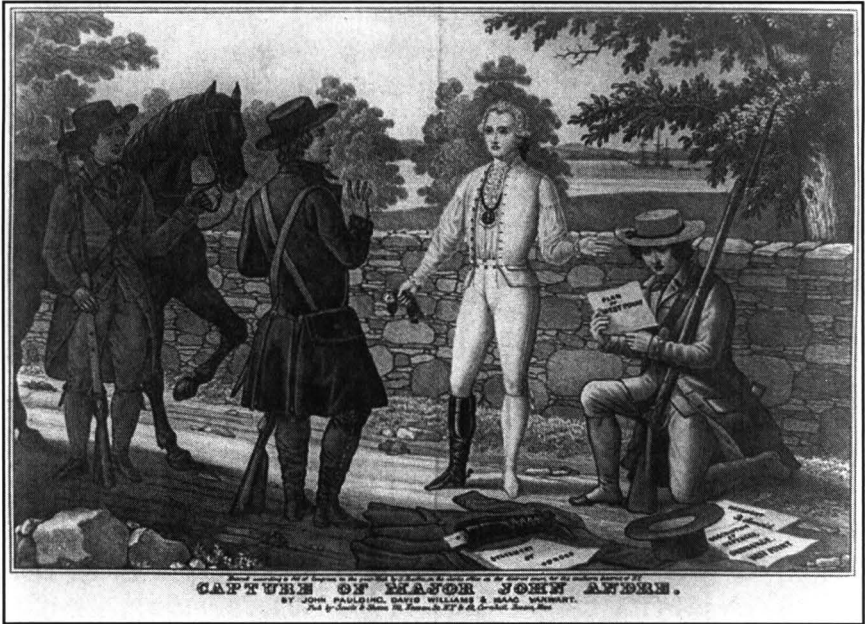
of Honora which I concealed in my mouth," indicating how much he still thought of her.

For nearly a year, he remained a prisoner of the Americans, but before Christmas 1776, he was exchanged and returned to active service in the British army.¹² Throughout 1777 he served in eastern Pennsylvania, fighting in the Battles of Brandywine and Germantown.¹³ His renown grew at that time and indications from his own account, along with those of his contemporaries, show associations with the leading men of the British forces, including General William Howe and Lord Cornwall-

¹¹ Ibid, pp. 119-120.

¹² André, *Major André's Journal*, p. 19.

¹³ Ibid.



"Capture of Major John André." Courtesy: Library of Congress.

lis.¹⁴ By the end of 1777, he was living in Philadelphia as part of the British occupation.¹⁵ It was there he met Peggy Shippen.

During the occupation of Philadelphia, many British officers found a semblance of the social conventions to which they were accustomed back in England. "The Shippens were among the most prominent Philadelphians to open their doors to the British officers stationed in the city."¹⁶ Throughout the occupation, the family maintained a neutral position between the revolutionaries and the British. Peggy's father Edward even turned down an offer of employment by the English government.¹⁷ The young and beautiful Peggy was seventeen at the time and attracted the attention of many officers, including the dashing André. As Peggy's biographer argues, she helped maintain the family's strict non-alignment by associating with anyone of wealth who could help her. However, André's interest went beyond mere association. It was during

¹⁴ Ibid, pp. 26-29.

¹⁵ Palmer, *George Washington and Benedict Arnold*, p. 95.

¹⁶ Katharine Lee, *Peggy Shippen Arnold: Philadelphia Belle, Military Wife, and American Exile* (Tulsa: University of Tulsa, 2007), p. 31.

this period of his life that he sketched pencil drawings of her, wrote poetry addressed to her, and accompanied her to various balls and socialite events around the town. While their relationship was a matter of considerable speculation as to how serious, the evidence indicates a continuing friendship over the last two or three years of his life.¹⁸

On May 10, 1779, British General Henry Clinton, staying in New York City, received word that a high-ranking American general was ready to switch sides.¹⁹ Benedict Arnold, the rebel ready to change sides, was anxious to receive accolades denied him by the Americans. Over the next year and a half, Clinton and his newly appointed spymaster, John André, worked to bring the treason to full fruition. While her exact role in Arnold's treason has been left to some conjecture, Peggy alone knew all the principals involved and provided a key connection between the American general and his British contacts.

The basis of Benedict Arnold's treason, while based on a number of issues which simmered over the course of more than a year that culminated with his escape to British held New York City, may have been fanned by his wife, the former Peggy Shippen.²⁰ Her marriage to Arnold in 1779 raised a number of eyebrows. Rumors swirled around Philadelphia's socialites, as they wondered how a woman of her surpassing beauty could marry a man more than twice her age. He was 38 and she was 18.²¹ Yet, she provided the direct connection between Arnold and André. It was unknown to what extent Arnold knew of her previous relationship with André before or after their marriage, but she joined in his treasonous plans. In October 1779, after a number of fruitless exchanges between Arnold and the British, Peggy wrote a social note to André indicating that the idea of Arnold's treason was "not dead."²²

André was sent by General Clinton to meet with Arnold on September 21, 1780. He traveled aboard the HMS *Vulture* up the Hudson River and was rowed to shore in the evening. There he met with Arnold where the general provided André with plans for the defense of West Point. The two anticipated that André would return to the *Vulture*, but

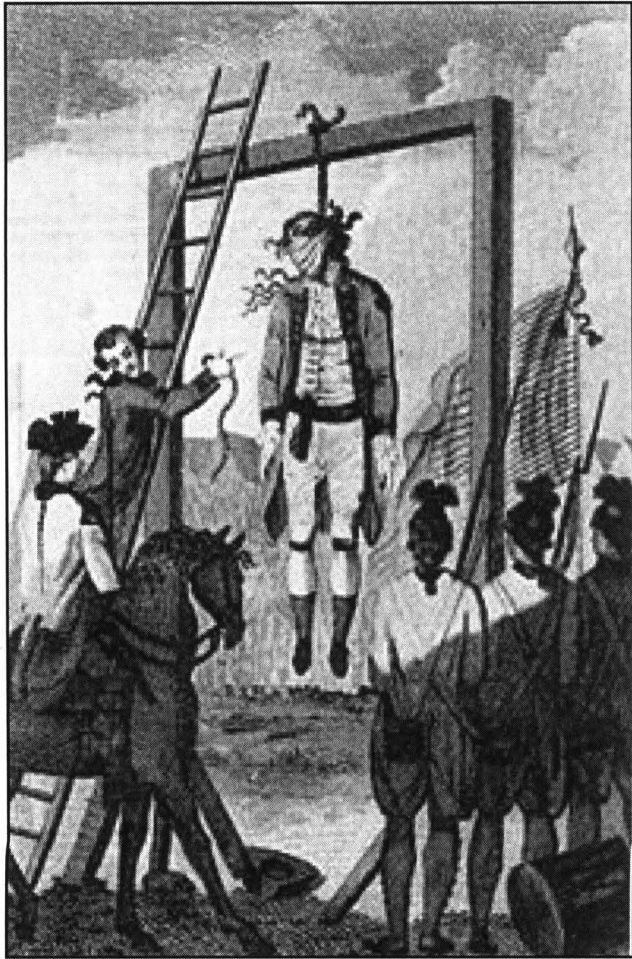
¹⁸ Ibid, pp. 31-33.

¹⁹ Palmer, p. 301.

²⁰ For a fascinating narrative see Ron Chernow, *Washington: a Life* (N.Y.: Penguin Press, 2010), pp. 371-387.

²¹ Ibid, p. 380.

²² Palmer, p. 310.



"The Unfortunate Death of John André."

Courtesy: Clements Library, University of Michigan.

the ship came under fire by Americans on the other side of the river. The ship was sufficiently damaged to force its withdrawal back toward New York City. It also left the young major without safe transport back to British lines.

The unfolding of events leading to André's end has been termed an unfortunate tragedy.²³ This was largely because of the way in which he was branded a spy. The orders issued by General Clinton were to meet Arnold on neutral ground, thus obviating the need to remove his

uniform. However, after the withdrawal of the *Vulture*, Arnold pressed André to travel to his headquarters near the Robinson House, immediately south of West Point. On the way, Arnold instructed him to remove his uniform and assume the name of John Anderson. Once at his residence, Arnold gave him more incriminating papers, which contained troop strength and the artillery positions of West Point. The papers also included the minutes of a September 6 war council forwarded to Arnold by General Washington. Arnold also provided André with a pass that stated: "Permit Mr. John Anderson to pass the guards to White Plains, or below, if he choose. He being on public business by my direction."²⁴ Unfortunately, it was the removal of the major's uniform which made him a spy and warranted his execution.²⁵

After completing his meetings with Benedict Arnold, André rode back toward the British army. His chosen course took him near Tarrytown, New York, where three American militiamen, one dressed in a Hessian coat, unexpectedly stopped him. The coat led André to think the men were Tories, and he correctly identified himself as a British officer. They took him into immediate custody, even after André produced the pass signed by Arnold. A search of his body revealed the damning documents hidden in his boot. The Americans took him first to Sands Hill in Armonk, New York, and then on to the army headquarters in Tappan, not far away. The investigation quickly revealed Arnold's treason, but not before the traitor escaped to the British lines. At the same time, General Henry Clinton attempted to secure André's freedom, but the general refused to exchange Arnold for André. In a trial by generals that included Nathanael Greene and the Marquis de Lafayette, André was found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging.

In 1780, the New York town of Tappan was held by the Continental Army, and it was here that André was taken and incarcerated in the "Old '76 House" also called "Mabie's Inn." Although this notable tavern, built in 1686, was sometimes referred to as "André's Prison" it was nothing of the sort. Washington and most of his generals of the Continental Army stayed at the place at one time or another during the war as it provided adequate lodgings. In this case, it was merely used as a holding location for the prisoner. On the day of his execution, André walked the mile from the tavern, in the midst of his guards, with "a long

²⁴ Chernow. *Washington*, p. 385.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.



Self portrait.

Courtesy: Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.

and beautiful head of hair.”²⁶ The major had appealed to Washington for execution by firing squad, but the general denied him that means of death, and the gallows were hastily constructed. André died on October 2.²⁷ It was a death he did not seek, but he also did not shy away from it. It was said that he secured the rope himself and even offered a handkerchief to the executioner to secure his hands.²⁸

The site of the execution was marked by the Major John André Monument. The story of its placement added yet another interesting and dramatic element to the André narrative. Constructed by communication millionaire, Cyrus W. Field, it was dedicated ninety-nine years to the day after the execution. The single piece of stone stands just under five feet high and is forty inches on each side with an inscription that includes the hope that: “in token of those better feelings [between the United States and Britain] which have since united two nations ... will

²⁶ Bruce A. Rosenberg, *The Neutral Ground: the André Affair and the Background of Cooper's The Spy* (London: Greenwood Press, 1994), p. 5.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

never be broken.” The plot of the monument is only thirty-one feet in diameter. Yet the monument was not placed without controversy. In the first decade following its placement, three separate attempts were made to destroy it, including two with explosive devices. When the heirs to Field’s estate refused to pay the taxes on the property, it reverted to the ownership of Rockland County, New York.

The last months of André’s life were marked by his continued interest in poetry and sketching. During 1780 he composed a three-canto poem, titled “The Cow Chace.” It dealt directly with the American generals who led the rebellion. It made fun of their battlefield mistakes and charged them with gross ineptitude. He leveled the charge that they were all cowards and drunkards. In a circumstantial irony, “The Cow Chace” was published in New York City on the very day of his execution. While incarcerated, he also wrote his last poem. It was written two days before he approached the gallows and was reportedly found in his pocket immediately after the hanging. Composed of nine stanzas, it is reproduced here.

Hail sovereign love, which first began,
The scheme, to rescue fallen man!
Hail matchless, free, eternal grace,
Which gave my soul a *Hiding Place*!

Against the God who built the sky
I fought with hands uplifted high,
Despis’d the mention of his grace,
Too proud to seek a *Hiding Place*.

Enwrap in thick Egyptian night,
And fond of darkness more than light;
Madly I ran the sinful race,
Secure, without a *Hiding Place*.

But thus the eternal council ran,
“Almighty love, arrest this man!”
I felt the arrows of distress,
And found I had no *Hiding Place*.

Indignant justice stood in view,
To Sinai’s fiery mount I flew,
But Justice cry’d with frowning face,
This mountain is no *Hiding Place*.

Ere long a heav'nly voice I heard,
 And mercy's angel soon appear'd,
 He led me in a placid place,
 To Jesus as my *Hiding Place*.

On him Almighty vengeance fell,
 Which must have sunk a world to hell,
 He bore it for a sinful race,
 And thus became their *Hiding Place*.

Should sevenfold storms of thunder roll,
 And shake this globe from pole to pole:
 No thunder bolt shall daunt my face,
 For Jesus is my *Hiding Place*.

A few more rolling suns at most,
 Shall land me on fair Canaan's coast,
 Where I shall sing the song of grace,
 And see my glorious *Hiding Place*.²⁹

A final self-portrait was also found with the victim of the noose. Sketched in pencil, it too is reproduced here.

Placed within the larger narrative of Benedict Arnold's treason, John André's story gets lost and often overlooked. He was a well-educated young man who loved literature and poetry. He was creative and artistic. He was well-traveled and everywhere he went he was familiar with prominent ladies. It was this last aspect of his life, his penchant for the company of beautiful women, which led to the dramatic and interesting story around which the Arnold-André narrative revolved. It also lent a sense of tragic fate to André's demise. Regarding this intriguing man who became the sole person to pay for the spying affair with his life, George Washington was reported to have said that André, "was more unfortunate than criminal."³⁰

~ Brigham Young University

²⁹ Roger Lamb, *An Original and Authentic Journal of Occurrences During the Late American War, From Its Commencement to the Year 1783* (Dublin: Wilkinson and Courtney 1869), pp. 335-6.
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³⁰ André, *Major Andre's Journal*, p. 13.