

Liberty University

Victim of a Revolution

Nicholas Cresswell's American Odyssey, 1774–1777

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by

Matthew C. Exline

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Introduction

The diary of Nicholas Cresswell, a young Englishman who traveled in America from 1774–1777, has long been an important primary source on the American Revolution. Historians have often quoted Cresswell as evidence on topics ranging from the Battle of Trenton to social trends among travelers on the Ohio River to the price and availability of salt in Alexandria, Virginia. Despite Cresswell’s popularity as a cornucopia of useful quotations, historians have written almost nothing about Cresswell himself, nor have they examined his diary simply for its own sake.

This lack of focus on the author is a grave oversight, since Cresswell’s diary is capable of standing on its own as a detailed and intimately personal record of a crucial period of American history. Cresswell had strong opinions and frequently confided them in his diary, documenting his struggle against his own emotions and external circumstances to resist involvement in a conflict that came to dominate American society. The sheer sweep and scope of his experiences over a mere three years is astonishing. He personally experienced—or perhaps endured—many important aspects of the early American Revolution, such as the Committees of Safety, western land speculation, frontier Indian culture, revolutionary social upheaval, and the defense and occupation of New York. While he paints a detailed, albeit fragmentary, portrait of the American Revolution from the perspective of the “common man,” he also crossed paths with a surprising number of the famous and infamous figures of the Revolution: John Connolly, George Rogers Clark, Thomson Mason, Francis Lightfoot Lee, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, and General William Howe. In short, Cresswell’s diary is worth studying for two reasons. It can help shed light on important aspects of the Revolution that historians have long struggled to understand, and it is an exciting yet moving story in its own right.

It is helpful to examine some important historiographic and textual considerations that challenge prior understandings of the diary. Samuel Thornely, a descendant of Cresswell who inherited the

manuscripts, first published Cresswell's diary in America in 1924.¹ This is the edition that so many authors have quoted over the years. What those authors did not realize is that they were using a corrupted, inaccurate text of the diary. In 2009 Harlod B. Gill, Jr. and George M. Curtis III published an unabridged edition of the diary, based on a fresh transcription of the original manuscript. Their work revealed that Thornely had abridged and edited the 1924 text without telling his readers. Although the changes were often slight and consisted mostly of omissions, the cumulative effect on the text is to dampen the vigor of Cresswell's political views and leave out crucial details.² The diary has now been available for almost a century, yet no historian has written a biography of Cresswell or tried to examine his American journey for its own sake. The new edition provides an accurate version of the text with helpful footnotes, but does not provide a detailed explanation of his life beyond an article-length introduction.

This new edition reveals an important fact about the way Cresswell wrote his diary. He did not write the entire text as it happened, but rather in at least two stages. He made initial notes in small notebooks that he carried with him throughout his travels. Parts of this first draft were dishearteningly brief and cryptic, consisting only of fragmentary notes.³ On June 1, 1777, only a few weeks before he returned to England, he wrote about his fear that his journal might incriminate him in the wrong hands. To protect himself, he deliberately left part of his journal "mysterious." He also recorded his intention "at some future period" to "Revise and Correct the many errors [*sic*] that frequent[ly] occur." He thought he would put it off until he was "an Old Man, for at present I have no thoughts of turning author."⁴ True to his intentions, Cresswell eventually transcribed his original notebooks. In the process, he added numerous details and crafted a semi-coherent narrative out of his original fragmentary notes.

It is not known what percentage of the final text is from his original notes, but if the few surviving pages of those original notebooks are representative, the later changes were pervasive and

¹ Samuel Thornely, Forward to *The Journal of Nicholas Cresswell, 1774–1777*, by Nicholas Cresswell (New York: The Dial Press, 1924), vii. Over the years, Thornely's edition has been reprinted many times. Since it is in the public domain, it will remain perpetually available to all on the Internet.

² Harold B. Gill, Jr., and George M. Curtis III, editors, *A Man Apart: The Journal of Nicholas Cresswell, 1774–1781*, by Nicholas Cresswell (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), ix.

³ *Ibid.*, xxvii.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 162.

substantial.⁵ This fact fundamentally alters prior understandings of Cresswell's work. His "diary" may be only partly a diary and more a memoir, based upon facts recorded at the time but fashioned into a narrative after he returned to England, with many details and opinions written with the benefit of hindsight. The notebooks containing the final version of the diary support this theory of authorship. They are written in ink in a clear, neat hand without many changes or mistakes, indicating they are the product of careful thought and painstaking effort—something Cresswell could not have accomplished while he was traveling.⁶ In the completed text it is often impossible to tell which parts come from the rough draft and which parts he added later. Nevertheless, for simplicity's sake this work will still refer to the text as his diary.

Another textual difficulty is the confused chronology of the narrative itself. When Cresswell re-copied and enlarged his rough draft, he left the diary entries in the order in which he originally wrote them. This is problematic for the reader. Each entry is dated, giving the illusion of chronological order. But the farther a casual reader progresses through the text, the more confused he or she will become. Sometimes Cresswell did not record important events until long after they happened, near the end of the diary text, when he no longer feared that his notebooks might be used against him. In order to make Cresswell's fascinating tale more accessible, a detailed narrative retelling is needed to restore chronological order to the story while also providing necessary historical context and analysis. That is the task this work will attempt to achieve.

Cresswell's multi-stage writing process, and the chronological confusion it causes, may raise doubts about the reliability of the final text. If important details were added afterwards from memory, is the text a reliable account? While some details are unverifiable, the diary plainly aspires to be a true account. As he put it in his first entry, he was "determined to keep a dayly and impartial Journal . . . to square my future Conduct."⁷ Cresswell did not make use of any of the fictional genres of his day, nor did

⁵ Ibid., xxvii.

⁶ Nicholas Cresswell, "Nicholas Cresswell Journal," Manuscript 61.2, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg, VA.

⁷ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 2.

he make obvious factual mistakes or indulge in anachronisms, as an author might who was deliberately creating a work of fiction. He apparently wrote for himself alone, and never expressed any desire to publish his diary, or even to have it published after his death. Consequently, he had no discernable motive for altering or concealing the truth. The fact that the diary lay forgotten in obscurity for over a century after his death lends further credence to its status as a private, candid, and factual narrative.

Furthermore, it is possible to verify from an independent source the truthfulness of a portion of the text. One of Cresswell's travelling companions on his journey west, James Nourse, also kept a diary, portions of which have survived.⁸ It is possible to compare the two diaries side-by-side for the period during which they traveled together. The two men did not always record the same events and facts from day to day. When they did record the same events, however, their accounts always agreed down to the smallest and most insignificant details. There is no indication the two collaborated in writing their diaries. Based on this comparison, it seems reasonable to assume that the rest of Cresswell's diary can serve as a reliable, factual account of his experiences.

Some historians, in dealing with texts of this kind, prefer an approach that draws on postmodern literary theory. For example, in an article analyzing the captivity narrative of Mary Rowlandson—a text its author clearly intended to be taken as a factual account—historian Steven Neuwirth argues that the historical “Mary Rowlandson, the woman who actually lived the experience, is external to the tale and does not exist within the text.”⁹ By contrast, this work assumes there is no division between the Cresswell of the text and the historical Cresswell, that the diary tells a true story about the actual experiences of a real person, despite the unanswered questions that still surround the text. The benefit of such an approach is that, instead of worrying about identifying and categorizing various versions of the author's literary persona, the author may concentrate on providing a clear narrative of Cresswell's experiences,

⁸ Nourse's diary was published serially over three separate numbers of the *Journal of American History*. See [James Nourse,] “Journey to Kentucky in 1775: Diary of James Nourse, Describing His Trip From Virginia to Kentucky . . .,” *Journal of American History* 19, no. 2 (1925): 121–138; no. 3: 251–260; no. 4: 351–364. Hereafter Nourse's diary will be cited by journal number and page number (e.g. 2:121).

⁹ Steven Neuwirth, “Her Master's Voice: Gender, Speech, and Gendered Speech in the Narrative of the Captivity of Mary White Rowlandson,” in *Sex and Sexuality in Early America*, edited by Merrill D. Smith (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 57.

accompanied by the historical context necessary to appreciate the insight those experiences can give into the early years of the American Revolution.

The only other historians to have shed light on the diary as a whole are George M. Curtis III and Harold B. Gill, Jr., in their introduction to the new edition. Their efforts have provided a good foundation for further examination of Cresswell, especially the helpful footnotes they include identifying obscure names and locations that occur in the text. While they are able to provide context for portions of the story, they do not delve into sufficient detail or engage in narrative retelling in the constricted space of an introduction or footnotes. Nor are their conclusions about Cresswell definitive. For example, they argue in the introduction that he was “A Man Apart” politically, neither Loyalist nor patriot and therefore apparently neutral in the American Revolution.¹⁰ This interpretation is debatable. Historian Kathy O. McGill argues that he was actually a Loyalist after all.¹¹ Beyond these few articles, however, no other literature yet exists on Cresswell specifically.¹²

There are several possible explanations for this deafening silence. Some passages that might have attracted more attention were among those altered in the 1924 edition. In particular, Thornely redacted a lengthy misogynist diatribe near the end of the diary text that can give important insight into Cresswell’s views of women and marriage, views that are significant given what one author calls “the dearth of private, self-contemplative sources” about “the interior life of early Americans”—and Englishmen, too.¹³ Perhaps historians have thought that Cresswell was, as Eric R. Seeman said of another obscure figure, ‘too atypical to be worthy of study.’¹⁴ This work intends to show that, no matter how atypical he may have been, he is still worthy of study. Indeed, perhaps he is worthy of study precisely because he is atypical.

¹⁰ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, x, xxiv;

¹¹ Kathy O. McGill, “Man of Mystery: The Loyalism of Nicholas Cresswell,” paper presented at the Virginia Forum, Lexington, VA, March 26, 2011.

¹² Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, ix; Kathy O. McGill, e-mail message to author, December 22, 2011.

¹³ Richard Godbeer, “William Byrd’s ‘Flourish’: The Sexual Cosmos of a Southern Planter,” in *Sex and Sexuality in Early America*, 136.

¹⁴ Eric R. Seeman, “Sarah Prentice and the Immortalists: Sexuality, Piety, and the Body in Eighteenth-Century New England,” in *Sex and Sexuality in Early America*, 116.

Any thorough study of the diary must attempt to place it within a broader historical context. Various general histories shed light on the areas Cresswell visited. He spent more time in Virginia than anywhere else. In particular, Leesburg in Loudoun County became, with brief interruptions, his home base from November 1775 through April 1777. John Selby's *Revolution in Virginia* gives a comprehensive explanation of the political situation in Virginia as a whole during this time, while Woody Holton and Michael A. McDonnell help provide important context about local events in Loudoun County during Cresswell's stay there. Early in his travels he visited Barbados. Hilary Beckles provides helpful context on the island's slave culture at the time of Cresswell's visit in *A History of Barbados*. Cresswell visited New York City twice, first when it was under patriot occupation in 1776 and again when it was under British occupation in 1777. The defense and surrender of New York has attracted a great deal of attention, thanks to the presence of luminaries such as George Washington. Many of those works focus either on the leaders and their strategies or on the combat itself. Less has been written about New York City during the civilian evacuation and under the subsequent British occupation. The most detailed description comes from the magisterial *Gotham* by Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace. Also in 1777 Cresswell witnessed a small battle between American and British forces in New Jersey. *The Philadelphia Campaign, 1777–1778* by Stephen R. Taaffe and *Washington's Partisan War, 1775–1783* explain the larger strategic context of that skirmish, including the so-called Forage War in New Jersey and the opening weeks of Howe's Philadelphia Campaign.

An important interpretive question is whether Cresswell was a Loyalist. In the twentieth century, a wide body of literature has gradually developed on the Loyalist experience. Authors such as Robert McCluer Calhoun, Wallace Brown, and William H. Nelson have examined loyalism on a national, or rather trans-colonial, scale, and established various categories of analysis. Other historians such as William Buckner McGroarty and Adele Hast have managed to narrow their focus on loyalism to Virginia and surrounding colonies. The history of the obscure land scheme that Cresswell briefly joined fascinated an earlier generation of scholars. The best explanations of the Illinois Company are still to be found in accounts by Clarence Walworth Alvord and Thomas Perkins Abernethy from the early twentieth century.

The majority of Cresswell's experiences of Indian culture on the frontier were among various groups of Delaware Indians living in the Ohio Valley. Michael A. McConnell gives a helpful overview of the history of Indian settlement in the Ohio Valley in *A Country Between: The Upper Ohio Valley and Its Peoples, 1724–1777*, while C. A. Weslager provides a comprehensive history of the Delaware Indians in *The Delaware Indians: A History*. Cresswell also encountered the smaller subgroup of Delaware Indians who had been converted to Christianity as a result of the work of Moravian missionary David Zeisberger. Earl P. Olmstead gives helpful background in his authoritative account of Zeisberger's life and ministry, *David Zeisberger: A Life Among the Indians*, while Aaron Spencer Fogleman helps to demystify Moravianism as a whole in *Jesus is Female: Moravians and the Challenge of Radical Religion in Early America*.

Cresswell's experience of Indian sexual hospitality played an important role in shaping his perception of Delaware culture. The contributing authors of *Sex and Sexuality in Early America* help to shed light on the difficult question of European perceptions of Native American sexual mores. Addressing Cresswell's sexual experiences requires historical context from both sides of the Atlantic, since he was an Englishman consorting with American-born Indian and white women. Lawrence Stone, Anthony Fletcher, and Elizabeth Foyster help to explain British attitudes toward marriage and sexuality that likely shaped Cresswell's upbringing and worldview, while Thomas A. Foster, Ruth H. Bloch, and Sharon Block focus on distinctively American views of these subjects that Cresswell encountered and, to a certain extent, absorbed during his stay.

Cresswell frequently got in trouble with local Committees of Safety, especially in Alexandria and Leesburg. The phenomenon of the Committees of Safety has long been a neglected topic, save for a brief period of interest during the 1970s. Certainly it is not a facet of the Revolution that figures prominently in the average textbook or general history of the era. T. H. Breen's recent work *American Insurgents, American Patriots* has not only helped to illuminate this element of Revolutionary history, but has also re-established the concept of the Revolution as a grassroots insurgency. In some ways, Cresswell's diary supports Breen's interpretation. His argument, when applied to Virginia, is perhaps the latest word in a

longstanding debate about how unified Virginians were in support of the Revolution. Perhaps as a way to explain the absence of overt loyalism across much of the Commonwealth, some historians have argued or at least implied Virginians were relatively united in their support of the Revolution.¹⁵ Michael A. McDonnell has recently challenged this prevailing orthodoxy in *The Politics of War*. He invokes long-ignored passages from Cresswell and other obscure sources to show that, at times, Virginia was not always quite as unified as some historians have claimed.¹⁶

Cresswell's story shows that, at the macro level, both Breen and McDonnell are right. The Revolution in Virginia (and elsewhere) was marked by an insurgency of the common people. Yet many of those common people found themselves, for a variety of reasons, excluded from that grassroots revolutionary network. Nicholas Cresswell was among those excluded, but for reasons so unusual that no amount of generalization about Loyalists, patriots, or the disaffected masses can fully describe him. Coming to grips with the paradoxical Cresswell requires close attention to his own words, examined within the context of his experience.

¹⁵ John E. Selby, *The Revolution in Virginia 1775–1783* (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation 2007), xi, 59; Adele Hast, *Loyalism in Revolutionary Virginia: The Norfolk Area and the Eastern Shore* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1982), 3; Wallace Brown, *The Good Americans: The Loyalists in the American Revolution* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1969), 129; Calhoun, *Loyalists*, 458.

¹⁶ Michael A. McDonnell, *The Politics of War: Race, Class, & Conflict in Revolutionary Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 3.

Chapter 1

First Impressions Maryland, Virginia, and Barbados, March 1774–March 1775

“What I Have Undertaken is with a Good Design.” (April 6, 1774)

Nicholas Cresswell began the chronicle of his trip to America while he was still in England. For him, as for so many other immigrants, America was both a concept and a place, a virgin continent where he could escape the economic restrictions of life in England. The early pages are full of youthful optimism about his plans and eagerness to begin his new life, in stark contrast to the tone of bitter disappointment and disillusionment that would later dominate the text. Yet these early hopes were also tempered by fear of the unknown and concern that he would somehow sabotage his own plans. These forebodings take on added significance given how quickly his plans began to unravel. Almost from the start his plans for an idyllic life in British North America began to crumble because of the rapid depletion of his money and the deteriorating political situation between the colonies and the British government.

Cresswell was born in 1750 in Edale, Derbyshire, the son of Thomas Cresswell and Elizabeth Oliver. All that is known of his early life comes from passing references in his diary. At one point Cresswell complained of his “slender” formal education. He was probably underestimating his own abilities. The text itself shows that (at a minimum) he knew how to read, do basic arithmetic, and write using a clear, even script of his day. He could also read and understand Latin sufficiently well to be able to translate simple phrases and mottos.¹ Most importantly, he clearly had a writer’s knack for expressing himself, using a rough, serviceable style that occasionally borders on eloquence.

His father was a reasonably prosperous independent farmer, so he spent his youth working on the family farm. He lamented that he was “brought up to no business,” meaning that he had never been apprenticed to learn a trade.² Agriculture was the only formal skill he had, but he could not see any opportunity to get land of his own in overcrowded England. Without a marketable skill or land to farm, he

¹ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 100.

² *Ibid.*, 5.

saw no way that he could strike out on his own or achieve the economic independence necessary to marry and establish his own household.³ Later events would show, however, that Cresswell was no mere tiller of the soil. He was interested in machinery and had an ability to work with his hands by envisioning a design and then building it with whatever materials he happened to have.⁴

At the time of his trip to America Cresswell was ambitious, energetic, impatient, a hard worker, and headstrong to the point of rebelliousness, but also plagued at times by self-doubt and insecurity. He was kind and empathetic toward others, and even though he was used to the harshness of life in the pre-industrial era, he could seldom stand to see another in need without trying to help them, sometimes at great personal inconvenience. He had a strong temper, probably of the variety that flares up into a towering rage when provoked, and then subsides almost as quickly. Occasionally he wrote about trying to hold a grudge, but never reported acting on one. He was highly opinionated and sometimes felt socially awkward and out of place. He also enjoyed socializing and partying, provided he was with people he liked—either other men with whom he could establish rapport, or with young ladies he considered attractive. As his journey wore on, he would develop a taste for binge drinking, but always with other men, never alone. He was a nominal Anglican without strong religious convictions beyond a vague belief in an almighty God who more-or-less had a plan for everything. Politically, he was a loyal subject of the Crown with implicit faith in the wisdom of the King and his ministers to run the British Empire as they saw fit.

On March 1, 1774, he opened a notebook and wrote his first diary entry. He recorded his “determined resolution” to travel to America, purchase land, and become a farmer. He had, he wrote, been dreaming of “going to America” since “infancy.” He thought he would be able to “live much better and make greater improvements . . . in the Farming way” in one of Britain’s North American colonies than in England. He had other motives for wishing to leave England as well. He commented cryptically that he had “Substantial tho private reasons, that rather obliges me to leave home, not altogether on my

³ Elizabeth A. Foyster, *Manhood in Early Modern England: Honour, Sex and Marriage* (London: Longman, 1999), 65.

⁴ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 54, 112, 137, 143.

own account, But in hopes it will be for the future peace and quietness of those for whom I shall always have the greatest esteem.”⁵ Aside from a few other equally mysterious references, Cresswell never explained what these additional motives were that had to be kept so secret.

The very first obstacle he had to overcome in his journey was the opposition of both of his parents. He portrayed his father as a cold, unfeeling man with whom he was barely on speaking terms. He seems to have had a better relationship with his mother, occasionally viewing her as an ally against his father. He was able to win her approval for the trip, albeit with “a great deal of Difficulty.” In order to secure his father’s permission, however, he appealed to one James Carrington, a neighbor in Edale, to petition his father on his behalf, lamenting, “I dare not do it myself.” Carrington managed to convince the elder Cresswell to grant permission “with very great reluctance.” Having obtained permission, Cresswell busied himself with the “disagreeable business” of packing, securing a berth for the sea voyage, and saying good-bye to other family and friends. Everyone he talked with at this point, from his father and grandmother to his friends and acquaintances, were all “uneasy” and made it clear they disapproved of his plans. In particular, the sight of Nicholas’s preparations made his father “heartily vexed and very uneasy.” Although his father did eventually give his son some money for the trip, there is no indication of any true reconciliation between the two before Nicholas set off for Liverpool on March 31.⁶

The eager Cresswell arrived in Liverpool to discover that the ship would not depart for over a week. He passed the time in observing the ships coming and going in the harbor and attempting to learn the basics of navigation. He also took the time to reflect further on the plan of action he had chosen. Behind the youthful bravado, he felt deeply insecure: “if I am unsuccessful not only my friends, but every Rattlescull will condemn me, put on a wise countenance and say they knew my plan would never answer” He seemed worried, not about hindrance from outside circumstances, but rather that he himself would sabotage his plans through his own mistakes. Consequently he listed “short rules, to govern and direct my proceedings.” Some of the rules were:

⁵ Ibid., 1.

⁶ Ibid., 1–14.

First, to act Honestly and pay my debts as far as I am able . . . never to contract any debts that I can possibly avoid.

Secondly, Not to be over Hasty in making any purchase or engageing with any one for any length of time Til I have considered the Temper and disposition of the people, The Climate, Their trade and Commerce, The fertility of the soil, with the nature, quality and quantity of the produce, Their form of Government and Colonial or Provincial Polity.⁷

Cresswell had indeed laid down some excellent principles for himself that he would have done well to follow. In the coming months he would proceed to violate all of these principles, with disastrous results for his plans to settle in the New World.

Cresswell's ship, the *Molly*, finally set sail from Liverpool on April 9. The voyage was uneventful except for Cresswell's first experience of the severe seasickness that would plague him on subsequent voyages.⁸ The *Molly* made landfall in Virginia and anchored in the Rappahannock River on May 17. There he disembarked and took another boat to the small town of Nanjemoy, Maryland.⁹ He stayed with friends of a Captain Knox, a local who may have been one of Cresswell's fellow passengers on the *Molly*. Cresswell only intended to stay in Nanjemoy until he could obtain passage on a boat going up the Potomac to Alexandria, but the wait proved longer than he expected.¹⁰ He spent the next two weeks meeting the neighbors and touring the Maryland tobacco country. He was disdainful of the farms and plantations he saw, commenting that "they know very little about Farming, Tobacco and Indian corn is all they make and some little wheat." Here also he heard the first rumors of impending political trouble: "nothing talked of but the Blockade of Boston Harbor[.] The people seem much exasperated at the proceedings of the Ministry and talk as if they were determined to dispute the matter with the Sword."¹¹

Before Cresswell could find a boat going to Alexandria, events took a turn he had not anticipated. On June 6 he recorded a "Violent" headache, followed by high fever. Soon he was bedridden and dangerously ill. For over a week Captain Knox, a local doctor, and other acquaintances in Nanjemoy

⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁸ Ibid., 7.

⁹ A small settlement near the shores of the Potomac, opposite what is now Quantico, Virginia.

¹⁰ Ibid., 9–10.

¹¹ Ibid., 11.

nursed him through his illness.¹² By June 18 he was up and about again and felt impatient to resume his journey.¹³ When the doctor sent him a “box of pills” on June 20 to finish off his treatment, he began taking them immediately in the hopes that they would speed his full recovery.

Two days later he was back in bed again, complaining that the “confounded pills” had “poisoned” him.¹⁴ The next morning the doctor appeared and sheepishly admitted that he had made a terrible mistake. Instead of sending “cooling” pills, as he had intended, he had accidentally sent “Mercurial” ones instead! Cresswell’s temper flared and, despite his weakened condition, he punched the doctor as hard as he could in the face. The doctor took it graciously and tried to calm his distraught patient, but the panicked Cresswell would not listen and continued to shower the doctor “unmercifully” with verbal abuse. For the rest of the day Cresswell writhed in agony, “full of pain, and much swell’d, Spiting and Slaving like a Mad Dog” with his “teeth loose and mouth very sore.”¹⁵ He finished his entry with the dismal entreaty that “if I happen to Die” his description of his agony be used as evidence against the doctor.¹⁶ Contrary to his expectations, Cresswell did not die. Within a few days he was sufficiently recovered to be up and about again. Remarkably, he seems not to have suffered any permanent injury.

On July 8 Cresswell boarded a small schooner and sailed up the Potomac toward Alexandria. Along the way, the ship stopped at Mount Vernon to pick up a load of flour from George Washington’s mill. Cresswell took the opportunity to tour the mill and remarked that it produced “as good flour as I ever saw.” The next day, July 11, he finally arrived in Alexandria. That afternoon he presented a letter of introduction to his contact in the city, James Kirk. Kirk had originally been a neighbor of the Cresswell family in Derbyshire, but had immigrated to Virginia sometime before 1762. By 1774 he had already

¹² Perhaps either malaria or a water-borne illness such as dysentery.

¹³ Ibid., 13–14.

¹⁴ Ibid., 14.

¹⁵ All of these symptoms indicate acute mercury poisoning.

¹⁶ Ibid., 14–15.

risen to become a prosperous merchant and a prominent citizen.¹⁷ He welcomed Cresswell with great kindness and insisted that he stay at his house.¹⁸

The next couple of days Cresswell spent exploring Alexandria. Kirk proved to be an excellent source of information about the local economy. He explained how Alexandria served as a shipping point for wheat and flour from farther inland, and encouraged him to tour the country west of Alexandria as the most likely spot to find good farmland for sale. Two days later, Cresswell had the chance to observe an election for the Virginia House of Burgesses. The polling took about two hours, he wrote, and was “conducted with great order and regularity.” Three candidates were running for two seats; the winners were George Washington and Charles Broadwater, the latter a justice of the peace in Fairfax. After the election was over, Cresswell attended a ball sponsored by Washington and Broadwell. He commented on the notable absence of tea among the refreshments, since “this Herb is in disgrace amongst them at present.” Before he had been at the ball for very long, however, Cresswell began to feel ill and had to go back to Kirk’s house with the festivities still in full swing.¹⁹

For the next several days he was once again bedridden with “excruciateing pain,” possibly a relapse of his original illness. The doctor Kirk brought in could do nothing and urged him to take a short sea voyage “as the only method of reestablishing my health.” In desperation he penned what he feared might have been his last entry, providing a rare glimpse of his personal religious beliefs. “I believe my Death is approaching very fast. I am wholly resigned to the will of Heaven . . . My Conscience does not accuse me with any wicked or unpardonable crimes, therefore I hope to find mercy in the sight of a Just and merciful God.”²⁰

Once again, Cresswell cheated death. Nevertheless he and Kirk feared that the recovery was only temporary, so he determined to follow the doctor’s advice and go on a voyage. Cresswell booked a round-

¹⁷ When Cresswell arrived in mid-1774, Kirk’s greatest accomplishments still lay ahead of him. He would go on to become a member of the Fairfax Committee of Safety 1774–1775, and would be elected mayor of Alexandria in 1785. *Ibid.*, xxix.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, xi, 16–17.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16–17, 45n.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

trip passage on the schooner *John*, bound for the Caribbean island of Barbados. He paid for his berth with money he borrowed against his father's credit. He also sold the "hardware"²¹ he had brought from England to Kirk in exchange for thirty-three barrels of ship's biscuit, a kind of unleavened bread commonly used as provisions for sailors on long voyages. He intended to take this bread with him to Barbados, where he hoped to resell it.²²

The *John* departed Alexandria on July 21, with Cresswell and his barrels of ship's biscuit on board. He was no longer in pain but complained that he was still very weak. The voyage passed uneventfully aside from the usual seasickness.²³ The *John* arrived in Bridgetown, Barbados on September 1. By now he seemed to have fully recovered from his illness and made no further complaint about his health. He immediately began looking for a buyer for his ship's biscuit. He soon discovered that the local market was flooded with ship's biscuit sent by merchants in Philadelphia. As a result, he could not find a buyer willing to pay enough to cover his original investment, much less for him to earn a profit. Nevertheless, he refused to give up. He spent his first week alternately exploring the island and chasing down rumors of prospective buyers. On September 9 he finally found a buyer. He sold part of the bread at a loss, and traded the rest of it for two bags of cotton, which he intended to take back with him to sell on the theory that cotton would be worth more in Virginia than ship's bread was worth in Barbados. By now his goal was just to make back his original investment.²⁴

With the problem of the ship's biscuit dealt with, Cresswell spent his final week in Barbados touring the island.²⁵ He paid particular attention to slave culture and the slave trade on the islands. He had made a few matter-of-fact observations on the slave culture he witnessed during his brief stay in Maryland, without any indication that the slavery he witnessed there moved him one way or another. But he reacted in genuine horror to the kind of slavery he saw in the Caribbean. He came face to face with the reality of the slave trade on September 13 when he saw a cargo of about four hundred slaves being

²¹ This may have been farming equipment.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 18–20.

²⁴ Ibid., 20–21, 25.

²⁵ Some entries also contain detailed descriptions that he probably wrote as part of the later revisions.

unloaded in Bridgetown harbor. All of these men, women, and children were “naked except for a small piece of Blue Coath about a foot broad,” and appeared “much dejected.” Along with this “shocking” sight came the stinging realization that these slaves had been “Brought from their native Country deprived of their Liberty and . . . become the property of cruel strangers without a probabillity of ever enjoying the Blessing of Freedom again, Or a right of complaining be their sufferings ever so great.” One view of the British slave trade in action was all it took to evoke a ringing moral judgment: “The idea is Horrid and the Practice unjust.”²⁶

As he continued to explore the island, he found that the plight of the slaves who survived the passage across the Atlantic was no less troubling than that of new arrivals. Other observers at the time believed that the larger number of white women on Barbados, in comparison to other islands, helped to moderate the “brutish frontier mentality” of the planters.²⁷ Based on his limited observations, Cresswell painted a far less flattering portrait. Family structures among the planters were something of a sham, since many slave owners, even those who were married, kept “a Mulatto or Black Girl in the house or at Lodgings, for certain purposes.”²⁸ The institution of slavery in Barbados remained unimaginably brutal. “The Cruelty exercised upon the Negroes is at once shocking to Humanity and a disgrace to human nature,” he exclaimed indignantly. He personally witnessed slaves being punished and was appalled by the barbarity and capriciousness of what he saw. “I have seen them tied up and flog[g]ed with a twisted piece of Cow Skin till there was very little signs of Life then get a dozen with an Ebony sprout,” often for “the most trifling faults.” Slaves often died as a result of these “Barbarities,” while others committed suicide rather than endure such torture.²⁹ He viewed the masters who dealt out such punishments with utter disgust, calling the planters “a set of Dissipateing Abandoned and Cruel people” whose treatment of

²⁶ Ibid., 22.

²⁷ Hilary Beckles, *A History of Barbados: From Amerindian Settlement to Nation-State* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 42, 57.

²⁸ Ibid., 23.

²⁹ Ibid., 24.

their slaves “tarnished” the good name of “the British nation famed for [its] humanity,”³⁰ echoing one of the arguments against slavery by the growing British abolitionist movement.

On September 17 Cresswell left Bridgetown on the *John* with his two bags of cotton lashed down firmly on the deck. The first half of the voyage was relatively uneventful with mostly pleasant weather. Then on the evening of October 3 the *John* encountered a powerful storm. The gale forced the captain to drop most of the sails and turn the ship into the wind. The next day the storm continued to rage, with large waves battering the small ship. One particularly powerful wave tore away the part of the deck railing to which Cresswell had tied his bags of cotton. He was forced to watch helplessly as what remained of his trading assets disappeared over the ship’s side into the Atlantic Ocean. “This is a stroke of fortune I can bad[ly] bear,” he lamented, then added with resignation, “but I must submit.” With the loss of all his money, he was left to contemplate his gloomy future as “a Beggar.”³¹

The *John* anchored at Port Tobacco, Maryland on October 15. After a delay of a few days, Cresswell succeeded in obtaining a horse and made his way overland to Alexandria, arriving at James Kirk’s house on October 19. Kirk listened sympathetically to Cresswell’s tale of commercial woe, but was mostly just relieved to see his young guest alive and healthy again, since (he now admitted) he had expected Cresswell to die on the voyage. The trip had worked miracles for Cresswell’s health, but his finances had collapsed. Between the loss of the cotton and additional funds he had borrowed in Kirk’s name just to pay for his return to Alexandria, he found himself indebted for the substantial sum of almost fifty pounds Virginia currency, and “without one sixpence in my Pocket.”³² He decided that he preferred being in debt to his father rather than being in debt to a friend, so he again borrowed against his father’s credit.³³

³⁰ Ibid., 23–24.

³¹ Ibid., 24–25.

³² Fifty pounds Virginia Currency is approximately equivalent to £4,000 in 2010 money. Ibid., 41; Lawrence H. Officer and Samuel H. Wilson, “Purchasing Power of British Pounds from 1245 to Present,” www.measuringworth.com/ppoweruk/ (accessed April 7, 2013). This is only a rough estimate since historic currency conversions are not precise.

³³ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 26, 28. The text is ambiguous as to whether Cresswell borrowed against his father once or twice during this period, and whether he borrowed fifty or one hundred pounds sterling. It seems

While Cresswell was in Barbados, political relations between the thirteen colonies and the British government were deteriorating. On September 5, the First Continental Congress convened in Philadelphia, and efforts to boycott the importation of tea and other British goods spread rapidly. Now it was late October, and Cresswell found Alexandria buzzing with patriot fervor and “Committees” forming to enforce the non-importation movement. The military preparations he witnessed seemed to him an ominous sign. “Independent Companies are raiseing [*sic*] in every County on the Continent . . . as if they was on the Eve of a War” As a loyal British subject, Cresswell took a dim view of the patriot cause from the very start. “The King is openly Cursed and his authority set at defiance. In short every thing is ripe for Rebellion.” He felt confident that “the Government will take such salutary and speedy measures, as will entirely Frustrate their abominable intentions.” He decided to remain in America despite the turmoil because he thought the “affair” would be over by spring and because he did not wish to return home empty-handed.³⁴ Contrary to his hopes, the unfolding events of the coming Revolution would indelibly shape his experience in America and ultimately ruin all his well-laid plans.

The next few weeks were a period of great confusion for Cresswell. Although he knew he did not want to go back to England yet, he admitted that he was at a loss “what to do or in what manner to proceed.” He also struggled to orient himself to this new political atmosphere in which the work of the Continental Congress had suddenly become so important, just since his departure for Barbados a few months earlier. He would soon discover that even his mentor James Kirk favored the patriot cause—or as Cresswell put it, was of “Rebell[i]ous principles”—a fact that would drive a wedge in their otherwise cordial relationship.³⁵

On November 1 Cresswell went to a tavern where he heard a reading of the Resolves of the Continental Congress. His response to this event served to crystallize his opposition to the patriot cause, as well as his complete inability even to try to understand their point of view.

likely that he borrowed one hundred, half to cover his current expenses in Alexandria and half to pay off Kirk. This additional loan brought his total indebtedness to either £80 or £130 sterling, the approximate equivalent of £8,000 or £12,000 in 2010 money. Officer and Wilson, “Purchasing Power.”

³⁴ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 26–27.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

I look upon [the Resolves] as insults to the understanding and Dignity of the British Sovereign and people. Am in hopes their petitions will never be granted. I am sorry to see them so well received by the people and their sentiments so universally adopted, it is a plain proof that the seeds of rebellion are already sown and have taken very deep root. . . . I am obliged to act the Hypocrite and extol these proceedings as the wisest productions of any assembly on Earth. But in my heart I Despise them and look upon them with contempt.³⁶

Within six months of his arrival in America, Cresswell found himself separated from many Virginians, still fellow British subjects in late 1774, by an unbridgeable chasm of politics. He seemed to realize the wisdom of concealing his true opinions, as when he pretended to be “a little Whigified” in letters to friends in England.³⁷ Yet in subsequent encounters with patriots he forgot to pretend and freely expressed his unpopular political opinions. For example, around this time he got into an argument with a Presbyterian minister named Thomson to whom he revealed his true political opinions—words that would later come back to haunt him.³⁸ His quarrel with Thomson may have been the first political argument of his American journey, but it certainly would not be his last.

He spent most of November paralyzed by indecision. By the end of the month he was tired of waiting and anxious to form a new plan. After admiring the quality of the wheat arriving by wagon in Alexandria from the “back Country,” he decided to investigate the wheat-growing areas for himself. He left Alexandria on November 26 in the company of William Buddecomb, a friend of Kirk’s. Buddecomb was originally from Liverpool and was the captain of a ship sailing the trade route between Alexandria and Liverpool.³⁹ Over the next two weeks Cresswell and Buddecomb toured Loudoun and Frederick Counties, making it as far west as Winchester before turning back. In Winchester he stayed with a Mr. Gibbs, with whom he quickly struck up a friendship. Cresswell did not care much for the area around Leesburg, but was “exceedingly pleased” with the quality of the land on the western side of the Blue Ridge, between the Shenandoah River and Winchester. He wrote that he was “determined to settle” in that area. Unfortunately, he was still low on funds, and even if he had had the money, the political situation

³⁶ Ibid., 27.

³⁷ Ibid., 27–28.

³⁸ Ibid., 163.

³⁹ Ibid., 17, 28, 45n.

gave him pause: he himself would settle only “if ever these times are settled.”⁴⁰ He retraced his steps eastward, arriving in Alexandria on December 14. His plan now was to spend the winter in Alexandria “in hopes that the differences between the Mother Country and the Colonies will be settled in the Spring.”⁴¹

As 1775 rolled around, the new year did indeed produce a change in Cresswell’s plans, although not one that he had expected. On January 6 Kirk and a business associate named William Sydebotham presented him with a proposition. Kirk and Sydebotham had obtained a “share in a large purchase of Land in the Illionois [*sic*] Country” orchestrated by land speculators in Philadelphia. Finding themselves owners of land hundreds of miles away that they had never seen, they offered Cresswell some of their land if he would travel west and look at their land for them. Since their ownership consisted of a certain portion of a larger tract that had never been surveyed, they also offered to have Cresswell appointed as an official surveyor, despite his apparent lack of formal training or experience. They gave him a week to think the matter over.⁴² To modern sensibilities such a business deal may seem highly speculative, if not absurd. To Cresswell, however, the proposal seemed attractive and not at all far-fetched.

He spent the next few days making the rounds of Alexandria’s business community, looking for anyone who could give him information about land in “the Illinois Country.” He finally found two men who had lived somewhere near what is now the town of Cairo, Illinois. They spun for him tales of fertile virgin lands and untapped natural wealth. “The Lands are exceeding rich, Produces Tobacco, Indigo, and Wheat . . . abound[ing] with Lead and Mines of Copper[,] But very few inhabitants.” Accompanying warnings about the “risque” of the long voyage down the Ohio River did not seem to concern him, nor did he seem curious about why these men were back in Alexandria instead of enjoying their share in this uninhabited Eden. He was hooked.⁴³

He immediately found Kirk and Sydebotham and told them he wanted in, so long as they could get him a position as surveyor in addition to the promised share of their own land. The promise of five

⁴⁰ Ibid., 30.

⁴¹ Ibid., 31.

⁴² Ibid., 31.

⁴³ Ibid., 32.

thousand acres at least of premium western land, combined with an expected surveyor's salary of "some Hundreds a Year" and additional opportunities to use his position as surveyor to obtain additional land, made him feel as if he were already wealthy. He also justified it in the context of the current political situation: "I can do nothing here till times are settled and am in hopes that I can get Bac[k] before September next [1776] and go home in the fall. By that time I expect this affair [i.e. the patriot movement] will be settled upon a permanent footing." He also told himself that this was the only way he would ever be able to make back the money he lost on the Barbados trip.⁴⁴

Kirk and Sydebotham were only minor participants in one of several western land schemes underway in the early 1770s. The particular scheme they had invited Cresswell to join was known as "the Illinois Company." The Illinois Company was a subsidiary of David Franks & Company, a well-known Pennsylvania trading firm. Franks & Co. was backed by a group of prominent Philadelphia merchants, including the eponymous David Franks, William Murray, and Bernard and Michael Gratz.⁴⁵ In the late 1760s Franks & Co. had been one of several Pennsylvania merchant groups competing for the opportunity to conduct trade in the "Illinois Country," a vast area including not only the modern state of Illinois but also portions of what are now the states of Indiana, Ohio, and Kentucky. The merchants of Franks & Co failed to make as much money from the Illinois trade as they had hoped, so in the early 1770s they turned to land speculation in the expectation of greater profits.⁴⁶

The Franks group was not the only Philadelphia merchant company to see an opportunity for vast profits in the resale of western lands. In order to resell the land, however, speculators would first have to buy the land from its current "owners," the Indians. This prospect raised the legal question of whether or not the Indian tribes were sovereign nations with whom private businessmen could conduct legally binding land transactions. In the early 1770s William Murray, an agent of Franks & Company, obtained a

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Otis K. Rice, *Frontier Kentucky* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky 1975), 137–138; Thomas Perkins Abernethy, *Western Lands and the American Revolution* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1937), 117.

⁴⁶ Clarence Walworth Alvord, *The Mississippi Valley in British Politics: A Study of the Trade, Land Speculation, and Experiments in Imperialism Culminating in the American Revolution* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1917), 2:202.

copy of a legal commentary on the rights of the East India Company written for the Privy Council by Charles Pratt (Lord Camden) and Charles Yorke in 1757. The corrupted version of the “Camden-Yorke opinion” in Murray’s possession implied the Indian tribes were sovereign nations able to dispose of their lands however they chose, and that individual citizens could purchase legal titles to Indian lands directly from the Indians.⁴⁷

The partners of Franks & Company seized upon the Camden-Yorke opinion as the legal permission they needed to launch a vast land scheme. In the spring of 1773 they sent William Murray west to purchase land for them. He arrived at the remote British outpost at Kaskaskia in May and showed a copy of the opinion to the British commander, Captain Hugh Lord. The commander was not convinced that this opinion gave Murray the right to start buying land, but Murray pushed ahead with his plans anyway. In June he invited the Indians to a conference at Kaskaskia, and on July 5, 1773 succeeded in negotiating the purchase of two large tracts of land, one between the Ohio River and the Mississippi River, and the other along the shores of the Illinois River, both within the boundaries of the modern state of Illinois.⁴⁸ Murray and his partners then established the Illinois Company to administer and resell the land they had bought.

In April 1774 Murray petitioned the governor of Virginia, Lord Dunmore, for his approval of their title to the land. Dunmore, who planned to participate in the scheme himself, forwarded Murray’s request for approval to Lord Dartmouth, secretary of state for the colonies, with his own glowing recommendation. Dartmouth and the rest of the British ministry, however, were highly displeased. To them, these land schemes were just a symptom of the larger problem of how properly to administer

⁴⁷ Jack M. Sosin, “The Yorke-Camden Opinion and American Land Speculators,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 85, no. 1 (January 1961): 38–40, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20089359> (accessed October 17, 2012). The origins of the Camden-Yorke opinion are controversial. Thomas Perkins Abernethy and Clarence Walworth Alvord provide a slightly different explanation, but Sosin’s version is better researched and more plausible. See Abernethy, *Western Lands*, 117–118; Alvord, *Mississippi Valley*, 2:200; Clarence Walworth Alvord, Introduction to *The Illinois-Wabash Land Company Manuscript* (N.p.: Cyrus H. McCormick, 1915), 12–13.

⁴⁸ Abernethy, *Western Lands*, 118; Alvord, *Mississippi Valley*, 2:202–203.

Britain's vast western lands.⁴⁹ Dartmouth sent Dunmore a letter of censure for his involvement in the scheme, and also ordered the British commander at Kaskaskia to nullify Murray's purchases. This order probably arrived in Kaskaskia in early 1775, about the time Kirk and Sydebotham invited Cresswell to participate in the scheme. When the Indians heard the sale they had made to Murray was illegal and the land still belonged to them, they said they had sold the land to Murray "not for a short time, but for as long as the sun rose and set," that Murray had paid a fair price, and that as far as they were concerned, the sale still stood.⁵⁰

There is no indication that Cresswell was aware of any of this history behind the Illinois land scheme he had so enthusiastically joined. Matters of legal title and imperial politics were not important to him. He trusted His Majesty's government to run the empire, administer western lands, deal with the Indians, and quickly stamp out the signs of revolt he could see around him. He simply saw an opportunity to obtain the land he thirsted for without having to pay for it, along with the opportunity to obtain the lucrative position of surveyor. The fact that he had apparently never surveyed an inch of land in his entire life seems not to have troubled him or anyone else.

On January 11, the day after announcing his intention to join the Illinois scheme, he decided to return to Nanjemoy, Maryland to visit his friend Captain Knox. Apparently Knox was or had been a surveyor, since Cresswell intended to "get some instructions in Surveying from him." With the optimism of youth, he viewed surveying as a simple skill that could be picked up easily, almost in his spare time. He arrived in Nanjemoy on January 15 and reported that Knox was "glad" to see him and promised to teach him everything he knew about surveying, however much that was. Cresswell spent the next few weeks alternately practicing surveying and making the rounds of the local social circuit—although he seems to have spent more days socializing than he did surveying.⁵¹ Yet his visit to Nanjemoy was not entirely pleasant, for it was also during this period that he had his first encounter with a revolutionary

⁴⁹ Alvord, *Mississippi Valley*, 2:202–203. Parliament would soon try to solve this problem on a broader scale with the passage of the Quebec Act of 1774.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*; Alvord, Introduction to *Illinois-Wabash*, 15–19.

⁵¹ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 33–34.

Committee of Safety.

The Committees of Safety were a recent development in American political life. On October 20, 1774 (a few days after Cresswell returned from Barbados), Congress endorsed the Continental Association, which spelled out a program for organizing the growing nonimportation movement to boycott British goods. Article 11 of the document provided for local enforcement of the Association by urging “That a committee be chosen in every county, city, and town, . . . whose business it shall be attentively to observe the conduct of all persons touching this association,” expose those who revealed themselves as “foes to the rights of British-America,” and arrange for them to be publicly shamed “as the enemies of American liberty.”⁵² Enforcement committees sprang up in counties and towns all over British America where they quickly became the primary form of local government.⁵³ As T. H. Breen has pointed out, in addition to merely enforcing nonimportation, many Committees of Safety soon arrogated to themselves the authority to “identify and punish persons deemed enemies of the country.” These enemies were often anyone who expressed dissenting political opinions. Committees had the power, if not exactly the authority, to fine, jail, or otherwise punish Loyalists, but often preferred to extract public confession and conversion by means of persuasion or coercion when possible.⁵⁴

Given their mission and Cresswell’s outspoken support of the British government, it is small wonder that he ran afoul of the Committee in Nanjemoy. They must have already known his Tory sympathies from his indiscrete neighborhood socializing, and suspected him of darker motives for all his surveying and exploring.

I understand the Committee are [*sic*] going to take me up for a Spy. I will save them the trouble by decamping immediately. The Committees Act as Justices, if any person is found to be Inimical to the Liberties of America, they give them over to the mobility [*sic*] to punish as they think proper, and it is seldom they come of[f] without Taring and Feathering. It is as much as a persons life is worth to speak disrespectfully of the Congress. The people are arming and training in every place. They are all Liberty Mad.⁵⁵

⁵² “Continental Association (Oct. 20, 1774),” in *Colonies to Nation, 1763–1789: A Documentary History of the American Revolution*, edited by Jack P. Greene (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), 249.

⁵³ Calhoun, *Loyalists*, 460–461.

⁵⁴ T. H. Breen, *American Insurgents, American Patriots: The Revolution of the People* (New York: Hill and Wang, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 162, 164.

⁵⁵ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 34.

Taken at face value, Cresswell seems to indicate that by February 1775 local Committees were already taking over the functions of local government, far beyond their original mandate. But this entry is one that he certainly added to the diary later, perhaps for fear of that very Committee.⁵⁶ It is possible that his opinion here on the Committees in general, written after the fact, reflects his later encounters with other Committees and not just his experience in Nanjemoy.

Throughout his diary Cresswell paints the growing American Revolution as having a broad, enthusiastic base of support among the ordinary citizens of Virginia. Cresswell would cross paths with some of the “Founding Fathers,” but in his view the writings and example of these leaders did not play a significant role in creating a philosophical foundation for the Revolution. At most, patriot leaders were “designing Villains” who used their “artifices” to deceive the common people.⁵⁷ In his experience the Revolution was mainly a grassroots movement that grew organically out of the public outrage and civil disobedience in response to the “Intolerable Acts” of 1774. Without referring to Cresswell, T. H. Breen has recently argued the same thing. The American Revolution began with a broad-based popular “insurgency,” which transformed frustrated but loyal British subjects into rebellious patriots. This insurgency began in mid-1774 in response to the “Intolerable Acts,” fuelled by the civil disobedience of the nonimportation movement and policed at the local level by the newly created Committees of Safety.⁵⁸ September 1774 was the precise moment that Cresswell happened to return from Barbados to discover a once-peaceful realm of the British Empire turning into an armed camp.

Cresswell left Nanjemoy the day after learning of the Committee’s intentions. Presumably he felt that he had learned enough about surveying to suit his purposes.⁵⁹ Upon his return to Alexandria, he found out from Kirk that he had been given a “Surveyors deputation” from the organizers in Philadelphia (Franks & Co.) but that his appointment as surveyor would also require the approval of “proprietors” back in England. Because of the slowness of communications, Cresswell could not afford to wait for this

⁵⁶ Ibid., xxvii.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 181.

⁵⁸ Breen, *American Insurgents*, 4, 36.

⁵⁹ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 34.

permission. He decided to press ahead with his plan to go west, despite the “risque” that he might not receive the position after all.

Around this time Cresswell also met a merchant in Alexandria named John Finley, who had been a traveling peddler and Indian trader. On Finley’s advice, he decided to take some “silver trinkets” to trade with the Indians along the way. He optimistically commented that he thought he would make at least a small profit on such trade—conveniently forgetting the outcome of his last experiment with trading in exotic markets. He had a local silversmith make him some trinkets according to Finley’s instructions. He also spent days searching Alexandria for a suitable traveling companion or guide, but could not find one. He decided to proceed alone to Winchester and try to find a guide there.⁶⁰

The ensuing tour of western Virginia, Pennsylvania, and the Ohio Valley removed him far from the main current of colonial politics and introduced him to experiences that would alter the course of his plans and indelibly shape him as a person. Yet, even on the frontier politics was partly the undoing of his grand scheme. Cresswell found himself, against his better judgment, repeatedly engaged with his traveling companions in heated arguments about politics. Nicholas Cresswell had no idea what he was in for.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 35, 48n.

Chapter 2

The Illinois Expedition Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Kentucky, March–July 1775

“I have now a prospect of making money without advancing any.” (April 22, 1775)

Cresswell had been in Virginia for less than a year, yet his optimistic plans for establishing a new life were already falling apart because of poor decisions and circumstances beyond his control. The illness that struck him down in the summer of 1774 made him decide to take a voyage to Barbados. The attempt at making money on the trip by selling ship’s biscuit flopped, and the effort to salvage his money ended in complete disaster when the cotton he bought washed overboard on the way back to Virginia. As a result, when he finally found land he liked in the Winchester area, he was already in debt and had no money left. To add to his worries, political relations between the colonies and Great Britain appeared to be deteriorating rapidly, although he still expected the British ministry to solve everything and quell the brewing rebellion. He had been at a loss what to do until Kirk and Sydebotham offered him land in Illinois.

After writing a final letter to his father, Cresswell set out from Alexandria on the long trek to the Illinois frontier on March 26, 1775. His friend Captain Buddecomb accompanied him as far as Leesburg before returning to his ship anchored at Alexandria. At Snickers’ Gap¹ Cresswell heard of a guide named George Rice, then staying in Winchester. When he arrived in Winchester, he received a warm welcome from Mr. Gibbs, his host on his prior trip to the area. Gibbs also recommended George Rice as “an honest man and a Good hunter.” Cresswell met Rice and discovered that he was planning to leave on a trip west the very next day. He thought the coincidence “very lucky” and soon they had an agreement. Rice would accompany Cresswell to Illinois in exchange for 500 acres of Cresswell’s promised land. Cresswell was excited about finding Rice but did not say what he thought of Rice on a personal level. He spent the rest

¹ Now known as Bluemont, Va., on the western edge of Loudoun County.

of the day buying supplies, including powder, lead, and flints for the gun he had brought with him from Alexandria.²

The next day Cresswell and Rice set out for Fort Pitt (modern-day Pittsburgh) on the first leg of their trip. After picking up two other travelers, also bound for Fort Pitt, they left civilization behind. Cresswell recorded with awe his first night camping “in the open Air no other Covering [than] the Heaven’s and our Blankets.” Although it was now early April, the night was still freezing cold in the Appalachian mountains, and Cresswell was grateful for the warmth of “a good fire.” Before long, however, adventures such as open-air camping became routine and ceased to be worthy of comment. He did continue to marvel at the rugged scenery, including the track of destruction left through the virgin forest by a tornado, and the spent cannonballs and bullets left over from Braddock’s campaign during the French and Indian War, still visible twenty years after the fact.³

On April 15 they arrived at Fort Pitt. The next day he met Major John Connolly, the commandant of the fort. Cresswell took an immediate dislike to Connolly, describing him as “a Haughty imperious man.”⁴ He spent the rest of the day touring the fort and the nearby town, a ragged settlement that he estimated consisted of only thirty houses. After making the rounds of the neighborhood, Rice found a group of travelers also bound westward, down the Ohio River, and arranged to join them. The group spent the next week building dugout canoes and purchasing supplies. Because of the unexpected expense of provisions, Cresswell found himself once again in need of money. He solved the problem by conducting yet another complex and absurdly speculative business deal with one of the men who had accompanied them from Winchester, a Captain William Douglass. According to the terms they finally negotiated, Douglass would loan him all the money he needed for supplies in Fort Pitt, interest-free for five years. In exchange, Douglass would receive half of any land he *might* purchase, over and above the five thousand acres he was already getting from Kirk and Sydebotham. In other words, he was securing a loan with land that he might (or might not) purchase in the future, with money he had not yet been paid, from a

² Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 35–36.

³ *Ibid.*, 37–39.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

surveying job he did not yet have. Cresswell, with almost pathological optimism, boasted “I have now A prospect of making money without advancing any.” There is no indication of whether Douglass was really so foolish as to expect this arrangement to turn out as planned, or whether he walked into the deal with his eyes open, knowing he would probably never see his money again.⁵

Cresswell and Rice had been staying with a man named V. Craford, who lived on the shores of Jacobs Creek, a small tributary of the Youghiogheny River.⁶ Here Cresswell left some of his spare clothes, intending to retrieve them on his way back to Alexandria after claiming his land. Cresswell and Rice loaded their supplies aboard the canoes, and on April 28 finally set out on the next leg of their trip west. Their canoes were simple dugouts, made of whole Walnut trees, each thirty feet long and a little less than two feet wide. In a moment of levity they christened them the *Charming Sally* and the *Charming Polly*, no doubt savoring the irony of giving such fine names to the rough, unwieldy craft.⁷

The next morning Cresswell and Rice joined the other men who had agreed to travel with them. Cresswell briefly listed each man’s name and planned destination. First on the list was James Nourse, an Englishman originally from Herefordshire. Nourse was about twenty years older than Cresswell and had already established himself in Virginia, having arrived from England with his wife and nine children in 1769. He was bound for Kentucky to claim some land on behalf of his brother. Nourse was also a diarist, and surviving portions of his account provide an interesting second perspective on the journey down the Ohio.⁸ Next on the list was Benjamin Johnston, former town clerk of Fredericksburg, Virginia; and Captain Edmond Taylor and Reuben Taylor, brothers, about whom almost nothing is known. All these men were also bound for Kentucky. In addition, Nourse, Johnston, and Reuben Taylor each had an accompanying servant. Nourse’s servant was named Tom Ruby, and Taylor’s servant was named George

⁵ Ibid., 39–40.

⁶ Cresswell, spelled Youghiogheny phonetically, as “Yough-a-ga-ney.”

⁷ Ibid., 40.

⁸ Nourse appears to have been in charge of cooking for the expedition, and his account primarily revolves around what the group ate each day.

Noland. This brought the total number of travelers to nine. Cresswell, Nourse, Ruby, and Edmond Taylor paddled the *Charming Sally*, while the other five formed the crew of the *Charming Polly*.⁹

Since they were starting from V. Craford's house on Jacobs Creek, they had to paddle for several days just to get back to Fort Pitt. They followed Jacobs Creek to the Youghiogheny River, then followed the Youghiogheny until it emptied into the Monongahela River,¹⁰ and then followed the Monongahela until it merged with the Allegheny River at Fort Pitt to become the Ohio. Just getting back to Fort Pitt proved no easy undertaking. First they were hindered by having to drag the boats across shallows in the Youghiogheny, a small stream without much water. When there was enough water to float, the craft proved difficult to steer, as the crew of the *Charming Sally* discovered when they struck a rock in the middle of the river. Fortunately the canoe sustained no damage, but Edmond Taylor went tumbling overboard and had to be rescued.¹¹ Then once they reached the deeper waters of the Monongahela, they discovered that their boats were so overloaded they were in constant danger of being swamped. These dangers made Cresswell "uneasy," but he found some consolation in his growing friendship with James Nourse. Nourse had brought a tent with him and invited Cresswell to share it for the duration of the trip.¹²

The men finally made it back to Fort Pitt on May 2. After pausing briefly to purchase yet more supplies (including trinkets for bartering with Indians), they continued to float downstream, now on the deeper waters of the Ohio River. Some nights they lashed the canoes together and floated for at least part of the night in order to make better progress. On May 4 they stopped briefly at Fort Fincastle, a small outpost built the prior year during Dunmore's War. Here another traveler bound for Kentucky joined them—none other than Captain George Rogers Clark. Cresswell seemed to like Clark, calling him "an intelligent man" after Clark showed him an Indian herbal remedy for snakebite.¹³

⁹ Ibid., 40–41, 50n; [Nourse,] "Journey to Kentucky," 2:122–123, 128, 3:256.

¹⁰ Cresswell spelled Monongahela as "Mon-in-ga-ha-ley."

¹¹ The precise quote from Nourse says that as a result of the accident, Taylor "was in much danger." Given the context, it seems safe to assume that Nourse meant that Taylor fell overboard and had to be rescued, perhaps because he could not swim.

¹² Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 51; [Nourse,] "Journey to Kentucky," 2:123.

¹³ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 52–53; [Nourse,] "Journey to Kentucky," 2:124.

On May 9 the group arrived at Fort Blair, at the confluence of the Ohio and Great Kanawha Rivers.¹⁴ They gratefully accepted an invitation to dine with Captain William Russell, the commandant of the fort, and a few other senior officers. Russell confirmed a rumor they had heard the previous day that Indians had killed four men and wounded two others on the Kentucky River. The company was dismayed at the news and anxiously discussed among themselves whether they should continue as planned, try to find an alternate route, or turn back. In the end, they decided to continue. Captain Russell, who was personally eager to see the Kentucky frontier settled as soon as possible, did his best to calm their fears and assure them they were not in any danger.¹⁵ While all of them were afraid, none were willing to speak up in favor of abandoning the journey. “My companions [are] exceedingly fearful and I am far from being easy,” Cresswell commented, “but [I] am determined to proceed as far as any one will keep me company.” For his part, Nourse admitted that he was “undetermined” whether or not they should continue, “but having come so far [I am] loath to return without my errand.” And so the company returned to their boats and floated on into the darkness.¹⁶

Not all of the men were as determined to continue, so on May 13 the company held another “council” to decide whether or not to go back. Once again, they decided to proceed “after much Altercation.” By now Cresswell was becoming frustrated with the group’s indecision and fearfulness, even going so far as to call them “a set of Damed cowards.” He was also frustrated with the canoes, which he considered awkward and dangerous. During the long days of floating with the current he had conceived of a plan for improving them. “With much perswation [*sic*]” he managed to convince the group to let him try his plan to improve the boats “for their safety.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Near what is now the town of Point Pleasant, West Virginia.

¹⁵ About a month after meeting Cresswell’s party, Russell wrote that he had tried “to calm the Minds of several Comp[anies] who have gone down this River, so that I hope, the new Country about Kentucke will Settle quickly.” William Russell to William Fleming, June 12, 1775, in Reuben Gold Thwaites and Louise Phelps Kellogg, editors, *The Revolution on the Upper Ohio, 1775–1777* (Madison, WI; Wisconsin Historical Society, 1908), 16, <http://archive.org/details/revolutionuppe01thwa> (accessed March 13, 2013).

¹⁶ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 53, 92n; [Nourse,] “Journey to Kentucky,” 2:126–127.

¹⁷ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 54; [Nourse,] “Journey to Kentucky,” 2:127.

As soon as they made camp the next day he set to work. His plan was to lash the two canoes together permanently, to improve their stability and make them more navigable. He positioned the canoes side-by-side, about a foot apart. First he took two beams and laid one across the bows of the two canoes and the other across the sterns, lashing them in place to create a single rectangular-shaped vessel. Then he lashed a vertical pin to the aft crosspiece, halfway between the two boats, to which he attached a paddle to serve as a rudder. Cresswell was obviously delighted with his handiwork. He christened the redesigned craft the *Union*.¹⁸ Predictably, some members of the group laughed, particularly at the makeshift rudder system. But two days later it was Cresswell who had the last laugh when his companions admitted that the new design was, in fact, a vast improvement.¹⁹

The good feelings towards Cresswell did not last long. After breakfast the following morning he had a discussion about politics with Edmond Taylor that ended with “high words,” including a threat from Taylor that he would “Tar & Feather” Cresswell for his pro-British views. Cresswell worried that he would become “torified” in the eyes of his fellow travelers if he discussed politics further with “these red hot Libertymen.”²⁰ On May 17 the group made camp a few miles upstream from the mouth of the Licking River, near what is now Cincinnati, Ohio. The men were hungry for fresh meat and scattered into the woods with their guns. Cresswell, Rice, and Johnston were hunting together and came upon a large bull buffalo. Rice fired the first shot, which momentarily downed the huge beast. Rice reloaded and all three fired. Their shots only enraged the beast, which leaped to its feet and ran off, but the men gave chase and shot it again, finishing it off. Meanwhile Clark had shot a buck deer, and Ruby caught some fish. The next day was occupied in butchering, cooking, and curing, while the men gorged themselves on the fresh meat.²¹

¹⁸ There is no indication that he ever realized the irony of picking such a name, given his vehement opposition to American independence.

¹⁹ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 54; [Nourse,] “Journey to Kentucky,” 2:137.

²⁰ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 54.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 55; [Nourse,] “Journey to Kentucky,” 2:137.

A few days later they reached the mouth of the Kentucky River, near the area where the recent Indian attack had supposedly occurred.²² The plan was that the group would go down the Kentucky as far as a place called Harwood's Landing, where the others intended to find land. Then Cresswell and Rice would return to the Ohio River and proceed west to Illinois. Soon they were again fighting against rapids and shallow waters similar to those they had encountered in the early stages of the voyage. At noon on May 24, Clark parted ways from the expedition to continue his journey overland. Cresswell reiterated his high regard for Clark and was probably sorry to see him go. That evening they made camp near a place where buffalo crossed the river. In the night they were awoken by wild splashing and cries for help from Johnston, who was sleeping in the boat. When they rushed to his aid with guns drawn they discovered that Johnston and the *Charming Polly* were fine, but the *Charming Sally* had been trampled by a buffalo in the dark and was sinking into the river—with all their flour on board.²³ They pulled the “shattered” *Sally* out of the water but could not assess the damage in the dark. The next day they took stock of their situation. The canoe had a large crack in it, which they repaired using caulk they made by pounding the bark of the white elm tree into a sticky paste. A good deal of the flour had been ruined by river water. Consequently, after “great quarreling among the Co[mpany],” they decided to begin rationing it, giving each man a pint a day.²⁴

The departure of Clark's sensible influence and the loss of the flour seemed to mark a turning point for the worse. Cresswell noticed the change immediately, commenting that the mood among the entire group had soured. He feared that relationships would only deteriorate “as Bread grows scarce.” By now he also suspected that Rice was planning to renege on their agreement by staying in Kentucky instead of proceeding with him to Illinois. His prediction proved to be correct, although in some ways it may have been a self-fulfilling prophecy. Cresswell, who was never very good at hiding his feelings, probably allowed his suspicions of Rice to show, and the dislike apparently became mutual. The next day

²² Near what is now the town of Carrollton, Kentucky.

²³ Cresswell does not specify here which boat was damaged, but it was probably the *Charming Sally* since he mentioned later that she was leaking. Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 41, 60.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

he complained that Rice was trying to pick a quarrel with him, but was determined “not to give the first affront.”²⁵

Unfortunately his determination was to no avail. His relationship with Rice came to a spectacular end on May 29. The group broke camp early that day and started paddling about six o’clock. Nourse later remembered that Rice was “Vulgar & ill behaved” all morning. The group stopped to rest at about ten o’clock. Then, for reasons known only to Rice, he suddenly snapped. Cresswell described what happened next: “George Rice (without any provocation) began to abuse me in a most Scurrilous manner, [and] threatened to Scalp and Tomhawk [*sic*] me. I was for bestowing a little manual labour upon him, but he flew to his Gun & began to load swearing he would sho[o]t me. I did the same” At this critical moment Nourse came running up to separate them. The two men still continued to trade “a good deal of abusive Language,” presumably with Nourse standing in between trying to calm them. Cresswell believed that without Nourse’s intervention one of them would have killed the other.²⁶

Cresswell was probably right that Rice started it. Although Nourse missed the beginning of the argument, his servant Ruby saw the whole thing and reported that “Rice [was] first to blame.” Neither diary records what Rice said to elicit such a violent reaction. Since Cresswell’s political opinions were probably known among the group after his earlier argument with Taylor, it is possible that some of the insults hurled were political ones. In any case, Cresswell did not seem surprised that matters had come to a head. “I have expected this for some time,” he concluded smugly. “He did it on purpose to get off his engagement to go down the Ohio which it has eff[f]ectually done.” Whatever Rice’s motivation, the partnership between the two was now at an end. Cresswell’s grandiose plan for claiming land in Illinois had fallen victim to circumstances and the irrepressible tempers of both men.²⁷

With the quarrel over, the group continued on their way up the Kentucky River. The men continued to bicker among themselves off and on, but Cresswell reported that he remained friendly with all of them—except Rice, of course, with whom he was no longer even on speaking terms. On June 4 they

²⁵ Ibid., 57–58.

²⁶ Ibid., 58; [Nourse,] “Journey to Kentucky,” 3:251.

²⁷ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 58; [Nourse,] “Journey to Kentucky,” 3:251.

finally arrived at Harwood's Landing, the furthest they intended to go by water. Their final destination, Harwoodstown, lay about fifteen miles from the River. Earlier that same day, Cresswell managed to injure his foot while "bathing in the river." Since he could hardly walk, Nourse, Johnston, Edmond Taylor, and Rice set out for Harwoodstown the next day while Cresswell and the others remained behind.²⁸

Cresswell spent a miserable night, in pain and without much to eat. According to Nourse, the others did not fare much better. Harwoodstown turned out to be a tiny frontier outpost, consisting only of a handful of crude log cabins. Their host, an acquaintance of Johnston's, "treated" them to a lunch of bread and bear fat, with nothing but hominy for supper—and breakfast the next morning. They had hoped to speak with the local surveyor about obtaining land, but to Nourse's disappointment this surveyor was "out a Surveying," and nobody could say when he would be back. Even worse, they heard news that Indians had recently killed four men less than ten miles from Harwoodstown.²⁹ The next day the group returned to Harwood's Landing. In a last attempt to salvage his plan, Cresswell pleaded with the men to see if one of them would be willing to go down the Ohio with him to Illinois, but none of them would. Bitterly disappointed at the failure of his plan, Cresswell concluded that he had no other alternative than to return eastward. At least his foot was healing.³⁰

The men spent the next day hunting in a desperate effort to bolster their dwindling food supply, but caught nothing. The day after that, June 8, a man named Jones and his servant arrived to pick up Johnston's baggage. The company prepared for their final parting by dividing the remaining provisions equally among themselves. Cresswell's share consisted of a mere two quarts of flour, half a peck of corn "sprouted as long as my finger," a gallon of salt, and about two pounds of bacon. These supplies, along with whatever game he could shoot, would have to last him at least until he reached the half-settled area in what is now West Virginia.³¹

²⁸ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 59; [Nourse,] "Journey to Kentucky," 3:256.

²⁹ Cresswell does not say whether these were the same four deaths they had heard about back at Fort Blair.

³⁰ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 59; [Nourse,] "Journey to Kentucky," 3:256.

³¹ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 59.

The only remaining question was how Cresswell would manage the return journey alone. The question resolved itself that afternoon with the arrival of another group of travelers. Cresswell questioned the four men and soon found that they were bound back up the Ohio to Fort Pitt. They offered to allow him to come with them and share their provisions. Cresswell took an immediate dislike to these new men, commenting that he did not “like their looks [*sic*]” and calling them “a confoun[d]ed raged Crewe,” but lacking other options he decided to go with them.³²

After having divided the supplies, Cresswell’s original group spent one more night camped together at Harwood’s Landing before going their separate ways the next morning. Jones and his servant agreed to stay the night as well, and the four new men were camped not far away. During the night, events took a bizarre turn. About three o’clock in the morning a great splashing in the river awakened everyone. The four new men were camped closest to the water’s edge, and they called out that they could see two figures in a canoe trying to paddle across the river to the opposite shore. Cresswell’s group conducted a swift roll call among themselves and discovered that two of their number were missing: Jones’s servant, and Reuben Taylor’s servant, George Noland. One of the men ran down to the river to give chase, only to discover that the other canoes were gone—they had all been set adrift. As the runaway servants tried to make their way across the river in the *Charming Sally*, they struck a rock in the darkness. In desperation, the two men flung themselves into the water, swam the rest of the way across the river to the far shore, and disappeared into the woods. Their pursuer was too late to catch the runaways, but spotted the canoe in the middle of the river, swam out to it, and brought it back to shore. The runaways had stolen part of the remaining flour, including Cresswell’s share, but fortunately they left it in the canoe, so Cresswell got it back again once the canoe was brought back to shore.³³

The next day brought about the final breaking of the fellowship of travelers who had come through so much since first leaving Fort Pitt six weeks earlier. Cresswell was especially reluctant to part from his friend Nourse, whom he praised as having treated him “with the greatest Civility”—one of

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 59–60; [Nourse,] “Journey to Kentucky,” 3:256.

Cresswell's favorite compliments for men he admired. The less emotional Nourse also recorded their parting, but without any hint at his feelings toward Cresswell. Cresswell and his new companions took over the battered *Charming Sally* and set off down the Kentucky River toward the Ohio. Cresswell identified his new companions by name and nationality: Henry Tilling was an Englishman, Thomas O'Brien was an Irishman, and John Clifton and Joseph Boassier he identified as "Americans."³⁴ Cresswell and Tilling, the two Englishmen in the group, were also the only ones wearing European-style pants and shirts. The other three men were dressed like frontiersmen, or even Indians, in loincloths, "legings" and deerskin "hunting shirts"—which, he complained, had "been washed only by the Rain since they were made." No doubt these eccentricities of wardrobe contributed greatly to his mistrust of the men. Nevertheless he soon found that, despite their rough appearances, they treated him with kindness.³⁵

On their way back down the Kentucky River, the group soon encountered more settlers, busy surveying land under the leadership of a Captain Hancock Lee at the site of what would become Leestown, Kentucky. Lee was a surveyor for the Ohio Company, another land scheme similar to and in competition with Cresswell's own Illinois Company. In a tone of scathing mockery, he commented that this particular land purchase was the work of men from "Carolina . . . who pretend to have purchased the Land from the Indians but with what truth I cannot pretend to say, as these Indians affirm they have never sold these lands." He seemed blissfully ignorant that his own Illinois Company could have been described in similar terms. After describing the complicated mechanism by which settlers were to be allowed to claim and rent the new lands, he marveled at the "numbers" who had agreed to claim land "on these terms." He even went on to castigate those so foolish as to participate in such a land scheme as "of the most profligate sort," calling the new settlement "an Assylum of rascals of all Denominations." The delicious irony of all this, given his own willingness to head west on the basis of absurdly speculative

³⁴ Cresswell spelled Joseph's last name as "Boassier," but according to Gill and Curtis his name was actually Brashier. Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 93. Similarly, Cresswell first spelled the Irishman's name as "Thomas O. Briant," but always referred to him as "Tom O'Brien" thereafter. By calling Clifton and Boassier "Americans," he meant that they had been born in North America, as opposed to being born in England. The term is ironic, however, given that he would soon be embroiled in America's struggle to create a national identity separate from that of England.

³⁵ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 60; [Nourse,] "Journey to Kentucky," 3:256.

deals with Kirk, Sydebotham, Rice, and Douglass, was apparently completely lost on him.³⁶

One problem the group encountered as they continued toward the Ohio was the deteriorating condition of the *Charming Sally*. After all that she had gone through, including surviving being trampled by a buffalo and crashing into a rock, she was now “very Leakey.” Fortunately, they discovered an abandoned canoe caught in a large pile of driftwood, which they managed to disentangle “with great Labour.” This new canoe also leaked, but by cutting the *Charming Sally* apart and splicing her stern onto the bow of the new boat with caulking, they managed to create a single new canoe that no longer leaked.³⁷

The day after rebuilding their canoe, the group again made camp in order to replenish their supply of fresh meat. They encountered another group of travelers who had also stopped to hunt on their way back to Fort Pitt. The two groups agreed to combine, and on June 15 the newly enlarged company of fourteen set out for the Ohio River. Cresswell once again listed the nationalities of each man. Including himself and his four original companions, the company now included two Englishmen, two Irishmen, one Welshman, two Dutchmen, two Virginians, two Marylanders, one Swede, one “African Negro,” and one “Mulatto.” Since neither group had sufficient provisions to feed everyone for the remainder of the trip, he thought it “foolish” for them to combine. Given that they were, in his eyes, a “Motley Rascally & Raged Crew” he dreaded the inevitable quarrels once true hunger began to set in. He hoped the fact that they were paddling in three different canoes would minimize strife.³⁸

The next day they reached the Ohio River and began the long struggle upriver to Fort Pitt. In order to make headway against the strong current, they used long poles to push the boats along. Cresswell managed to get himself appointed steersman for the *Charming Sally*, thus avoiding this laboriously backbreaking task. As he had feared, within a few days provisions ran low and the men began to argue among themselves frequently. He claimed that he managed to remain above the fray and even act as a peacemaker on occasion. Another problem facing Cresswell personally was that his shoes were wearing out. To prepare for the inevitable, he bought a piece of deer leather from one of the other men, so he could

³⁶ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 60.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 60–61.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

make a pair of “mockeysons.”³⁹

On June 24 they succeeded in temporarily solving their food problems by killing a buffalo. Unfortunately, in the course of the day’s hunting, Cresswell’s worn shoes finally disintegrated, forcing him to limp through the rest of the hunt, barefoot and burdened with his gun, ammunition, and what he thought was seventy or eighty pounds of meat. It seems probable that he had already been working on his moccasins and was able to begin wearing them the next day, since he made no further complaint about having to go barefoot. If it occurred to him that he was gradually losing his distinctively European appearance and looking more like the “motley” frontiersmen around him, he was not willing to admit it.⁴⁰

During this time, Cresswell, by his own account, was at least partly responsible for saving the life of one of his new companions. When the men returned to camp from the buffalo hunt, they discovered that one of their number was missing. The majority of the group immediately jumped to the conclusion that Indians had killed the missing man. Cresswell and Tilling disagreed, suggesting that the man had only gotten lost and was bound to turn up soon. They finally managed to convince the others to camp until morning. The next morning dawned without any trace of the missing man. The men were more insistent than ever that the poor man had been murdered by savages and wanted to leave immediately. Once again, Cresswell and Tilling managed to convince them to wait until evening. They could not, however, convince anyone to go out looking for the man. As the sun began to sink below the horizon there was still no sign of the missing man, and the rest of the group began to load the canoes, despite the protests of Cresswell and Tilling. But “just” as the men were getting into the canoes, they saw a lone figure coming toward them along the riverbank in the dusk. The group greeted their lost companion with “great joy” and he told his sad story. Just as Cresswell and Tilling had suspected, the poor man had gotten lost in the woods during the buffalo hunt and had wandered all the previous night and all the next day, desperately searching for the river. Had the group abandoned him, Cresswell commented triumphantly, the lost man “must have perished.” It is not clear whether the man ever realized the true peril of his

³⁹ Ibid., 62–63.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 64.

situation, or how much he owed to Cresswell and Tilling.⁴¹

Although Cresswell and his various companions had been in almost constant fear of attack from Indians, up to this point in the journey they had not laid eyes upon so much as a single squaw. The wilderness had remained suspiciously empty, save for isolated groups of worried Europeans hurrying up and down the rivers that served as highways through the frontier. All that changed a few days after the buffalo hunt when the group finally encountered a party of Indians—but not in a way that any of them could possibly have imagined. The morning of June 28 brought a heavy fog down over the surface of the river, cutting visibility and creating confusion. The group had been trying to stick close to the shoreline, but sand bars and extensive shallows forced them to search for deeper water in the middle of the wide channel. Rounding a sandbar, they suddenly encountered four canoes “full of Indians about two hundred yards” upstream. The travelers turned their canoes and began to paddle desperately for shore, only to spot six more canoes, also “full of Indians,” between them and the nearest riverbank. After weeks of anxiety about Indian attacks, the men were gripped with complete terror. They never considered the possibility that the Indians might be harmless, or even friendly, but immediately jumped to the conclusion that they were under attack. Using the familiar language of naval warfare, Cresswell painted the ensuing scene in vivid detail.⁴²

Finding themselves thus “surrounded,” the men immediately prepared for battle. Cresswell described himself as being in “Command” of the rebuilt *Charming Sally*, while Jacob Nulen (the Swede) commanded the second canoe and Williams (the Welshman) commanded the third. As Cresswell described it, each commander proceeded to attempt to prepare his canoe for battle, just as British naval captains of the era would have cleared a ship of the line for battle by calling men to their battle stations, stowing away hammocks and personal belongings, and loading and running out guns. But while this process was usually conducted with speed and efficiency on most British warships, the panic and inexperience of Cresswell’s group meant that their attempt to prepare for battle did not go quite so

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid. It seems almost certain that Cresswell wrote this particular passage once he returned to England, using language that drew on the experiences he would have aboard British naval vessels during 1777.

smoothly. Since there was no way to stow their firewood and supplies out of the way, the men simply threw all the wood and “a great part of our provision[s]” overboard. Next they attempted to load their guns, with varying degrees of success. Aboard the *Charming Sally*, Commander Cresswell and Tilling managed to load their guns, Cresswell loading with both a bullet and birdshot. Tilling and another shipmate, John Clifton, refused to show any sign of fear, and Tilling in particular inspired Cresswell with his calm courage. Cresswell’s other two shipmates, however, crumbled in the moment of crisis. O’Brien attempted to load his gun, but in the confusion proceeded to drop it into the river. Giving up in despair, he then cowered in the bottom of the canoe and began to finger his Rosary beads and “pray & Howl in Irish.” Their fourth shipmate, Joseph Boassier, whose gun was also wet, joined O’Brien in the bottom of the canoe, “Weeping, praying, and [saying] Ave Mary’s in abundance” while “hugging” a small wooden crucifix “most hearty.” Cresswell and his fellow commanders paddled their canoes together and held a brief and “confused” council of war. They decided to attack the Indians in the six canoes between them and the shore, with Nulen in the lead, Cresswell next, and Williams in the rear.⁴³

While all this was happening, the Indians in the six canoes between them and the shore had been leaning on their paddles and poles, watching the Europeans with great interest. Cresswell’s group could see these poles and paddles but, he wryly admitted, “our fears had converted them into Guns.” Meanwhile, the Indians in the four other canoes were rapidly approaching, swept downriver toward them by the swift current. Cresswell ordered O’Brien to steer and Boassier and Clifton to paddle, while Cresswell and Tilling manned their guns. Clifton obediently lifted his paddle “with the greatest resolution.” O’Brien and Boassier, however, “lay crying in the bottom of the Canoo and refused to stir.” In desperation, Cresswell “set the mussel of my gun to O’Briens head threatening to blow his Brains out if he did not immediately take his paddle[.] It had the desired effect, he begged for his life, invoked St Patrick, took his paddle and howled most horrible.” The sight of O’Brien’s terror struck Cresswell as so ridiculous that, despite the gravity of the situation, he could not help laughing for a moment. Boassier continued to hide in the bottom, and even “pretended to be in a Convulsion fit.” Tilling began to throw

⁴³ Ibid., 64–65.

water on the cowering Boassier, but he still refused to get up, while Cresswell compulsively loaded his gun with four extra bullets, in addition to the bullet and bird shot with which he had already loaded it.⁴⁴

Cliffton paddled the *Charming Sally* after Commander Nulen's canoe, toward the six Indian canoes. When they had come "within thirty yards" of the Indians, one of Nulen's crew hailed the Indians (before opening fire), and the Indians responded—that they were friends. It turned out they had bumped into a party of friendly Delaware who were simply on a hunting expedition and meant no harm to anybody. The Indians had watched the "confusion" unfold among the Europeans and "laughed at us for our feares." Immensely relieved, the Europeans gave the Indians some salt and tobacco as a token of friendship, and the two groups parted on friendly terms. As Cresswell's group resumed their journey upriver, relief gave way to laughter and joking "at the expense of our cowardly companions." Boassier tried to brazen it out by bragging "what he would have done had his Gun been in order," and each gave "some excuse or other to hide their Cowardise." In the privacy of his diary, Cresswell himself confessed that in the last moments before the confrontation he had "felt very uneasy," but had apparently done his best to follow Tilling's example and conceal his fears from his companions. Presumably he succeeded, although the compulsive loading and re-loading of his gun might have betrayed him, had the others not been too preoccupied with their own fears.⁴⁵

During this time of wandering in the wilderness, Cresswell had lost touch with political events in the rest of the thirteen colonies. Then on June 30, a few days after their encounter with the Indians, he heard an alarming rumor from some settlers that "New Englan[d]ers have had a Battle with the English troops at Boston," and that they had killed "seven thousand." He was incredulous that American colonists could possibly defeat the renowned British military: "I hope it will prove that the English have kiled seven thousand of the Yankeys."⁴⁶ Unfortunately for Cresswell, the rumor was mostly true, although he was right to be skeptical about the absurd casualty figure. On June 17, British troops under General William Howe attempted to take the fortified American position on Breed's Hill, near Boston, by frontal

⁴⁴ Ibid., 65.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 66.

assault. Howe finally succeeded in taking the hill on the third attempt at a cost of 1,054 casualties, not seven thousand as Cresswell was told. Even a thousand casualties, however, was a crushing blow to Britain's military strength and reputation.⁴⁷

Cresswell and his companions had but little thought to spare for the growing American Revolution. They faced a much more immediate problem—hunger. After days of steady rain the men's feet were suffering so badly from being constantly wet that they could no longer hunt, and they had broken their fishing lines and hooks. By June 30 the last of their flour was gone, and on July 1 they ate the last of their Indian corn. The next day they discovered a large fish that had just been killed by an eagle. The fish weighed about six pounds and was large enough to feed everyone. After eating their fill of the fish, they examined the last of their preserved beef and found it so “stinking” and “full of maggots” that “in a passion” they “hove it overboard.” It was easy to throw away the rotten beef when they were full of fish. But this had been the very last of their provisions, and the next day, July 3, they had nothing to eat. By noon on July 4, 1775, Cresswell was so hungry he could hardly stand it, so he went ashore to forage. The only thing he could find was a ginseng plant. He dug up a root and chewed on it, and found that it “refreshed me exceedingly,” temporarily relieving his hunger pangs.⁴⁸

The party pressed on through the afternoon. Fortunately they had now come far enough east that they began to see isolated houses and farms along the banks of the river. At dusk they reached a plantation belonging to a Dr. John Briscoe.⁴⁹ When they reached the house they found that nobody was home. An initial search of the premises revealed nothing living or even edible. After stumbling about in the rainy darkness, they finally found the garden. They searched it with desperate intensity, hoping against hope for vegetables of any kind. Finally Cresswell discovered a patch of potato plants. Digging eagerly, he discovered to his joy that there were indeed potatoes (probably small ones) buried in the muddy soil. He was so hungry that he ate “about a Dozen of them.” Despite the fact that he devoured

⁴⁷ Gordon S. Wood, *The American Revolution: A History* (New York: Modern Library, Random House, 2003), 54.

⁴⁸ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 66.

⁴⁹ Near what is now Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

them “raw,” he “thought them the most delicious food I ever eat in my life.” He did not say whether there were enough potatoes for the other men as well, or if he ate them all himself. Exhausted and soaking wet from the continual rain, the men made a fire and collapsed in the vacant house.⁵⁰

The next day the men made a more careful search of the plantation and found more vegetables, including cabbage and squash, which they made into stew. The day after Cresswell once again went hungry except for some more ginseng. The following day, July 7, they found another plantation where a woman agreed to give them as much corn meal mush as they could eat in exchange for some of their gunpowder. Before they could eat the mess of pottage they had bought, they first had to grind the corn into meal themselves using a hand grinder, a laborious task that seemed to take an “age.” Finally they had ground enough meal, the woman made the mush, and the men attacked it voraciously. It seemed that they might have gone on eating “till we had kiled ourselves,” but the woman eventually decided that they had eaten enough.⁵¹

The hardships of the journey had not improved Cresswell’s opinion of most of his traveling companions; with the exception of the Englishman Tilling, he had only become further alienated from his fellow-travelers because of their roughness, constant bickering, and their cowardice during the Indian scare. Thus when he met a man named Captain David McClure who was not only going the right direction but also treated Cresswell “civilly,” he immediately accepted McClure’s invitation to ride in his canoe as far as Wheeling. He regretfully parted ways with Tilling, whom he admired for his courage during the Indian encounter. The next day Cresswell and McClure paddled separately from Cresswell’s old group. He rejoined them briefly that evening when they arrived at Fort Fincastle, near Wheeling. He soon regretted it when the rougher men in the group managed to buy some whisky at the fort. Soon a drunken brawl broke out, forcing Cresswell to seek the safety of a barn loft for the night.⁵²

The next day the fighting and arguing among Cresswell’s old group continued. Thus it was no surprise that Cresswell agreed to leave the Ohio River entirely and travel overland with McClure. By

⁵⁰ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 66.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵² *Ibid.*

doing so Cresswell would not only be rid of his quarrelsome, drunken companions, but would also cut off a great looping bend in the Ohio River, bringing him back to Fort Pitt more quickly. On July 12 he and McClure left Fort Fincastle and arrived at McClure's destination. There Cresswell obtained a horse in order to continue by himself. After months of wandering in the wilderness, and with his immediate destination only a few days away, he was now willing to risk travelling alone.⁵³

The next day he wandered through "woods & wilds" before staying the night at a Delaware Indian village called Catfish Camp.⁵⁴ Ironically, this was probably the home village of the group of Indians Cresswell and his companions had encountered on the river. It seems he was now over his fear of the Indians and made no indication that staying in a Delaware village was at all extraordinary, although he noted that there was a "great scarcity of provisions." The next day he rode as far as Redstone Fort, on the Monongahela River south of Fort Pitt. Here he discovered that one of the local storekeepers was busy recruiting a company of frontier riflemen with the intention of marching to Boston, as he sarcastically put it, "for the humane purpose of killing the English Officers." Cresswell quickly aroused the suspicions of some of these rebel riflemen, who began to ply him with "so many impertinent questions" that he feared they thought he was a spy.⁵⁵ On July 17, Cresswell finally returned to the home of V. Craford on Jacob's Creek from whence he and Rice had set out in the *Charming Sally*. The first part of his western expedition lay behind him, but the second part was only beginning.⁵⁶

⁵³ Ibid., 67–68.

⁵⁴ Near what is now Washington, Pennsylvania.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 65, 68.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 68.

Chapter 3

Pioneers and Indians Pennsylvania and Ohio, July–October 1775

“I have conceived a great regard for the Indians.” (October 1, 1775)

In less than three months, Cresswell had traveled hundreds of miles, endured hardship and starvation, encountered Indians, and survived the rough ways of the frontier and its inhabitants. His grand scheme for land in Illinois had collapsed along with his relationship with Rice, leaving him without a plan, penniless, and in debt. Cresswell was already a very different person from the young man who had first arrived in America a little more than a year earlier. Before he returned east, however, he was destined for more adventures in the west that would further change him, leaving an impression that would remain for the rest of his life.

Although Cresswell was beyond the circulation of any newspaper, troubling rumors of a growing conflict between the Americans and British at Boston reached him with growing frequency via word of mouth. On July 15, the day after he left Redstone Fort, he heard that there had been two “very severe engagements” near Boston with “great numbers kiled on boath sides,” presumably referring to the Battles of Concord and Bunker Hill. The following day, at Stewart’s Crossing on the Youghiogheny River, he heard further confirmation of the events at Boston, and a few days after that he heard a rumor that the British soldiers had been driven back to their ships. This was probably a reference to the British evacuation of the city because of the cannon the Americans had brought down from Fort Ticonderoga and mounted overlooking the British positions in Boston.¹

He also heard an equally troubling rumor that Lord Dunmore had “abdicated” and fled Virginia for the shelter of a British warship off the coast. Just as the Battles of Concord and Bunker Hill marked a crucial turning point in Massachusetts, the flight of Lord Dunmore also marked an important turning point for Virginia. Throughout the early months of 1775 Dunmore

¹ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 68–69, 94n.

had been increasingly concerned about the growing signs of rebellion, including the Virginia Convention's call for the colony to assume a "posture of defense." Then on April 21, while Rice and Cresswell were busy buying provisions at Fort Pitt for their trip west, Dunmore sent men to seize the municipal powder stores from the Williamsburg magazine to prevent them falling into the hands of rebels. Dunmore had underestimated the effect his preemptive strike would have and was taken by surprise when the town erupted into confusion. When a delegation of city fathers formally protested, he did his best to placate them with vague promises. News of the seizure of the powder spread throughout Virginia, galvanizing the citizens into action. Companies of men (including one group led by Patrick Henry) only halted their march on the capital once a Dunmore supporter paid for the missing powder.²

During the month of May, while Cresswell was floating down the Ohio River toward Kentucky, revolutionary fervor back in Virginia seemed to subside a little. Dunmore issued a call for the Assembly to meet on June 1, and things seemed to be going well until three young men tried to break into the magazine, only to discover that it had been booby-trapped with a shotgun. The incident threw the city into turmoil. The following weekend, the city fathers demanded the keys to the magazine from Dunmore so they could investigate the shooting. Dunmore bluntly refused. Volunteer companies marched for Williamsburg, and some of them even mounted guard over the magazine. Dunmore pretended to relent and offered to give up the magazine keys. Secretly, however, he concluded that the situation had spiraled out of control. On June 8, instead of handing over the keys, he and his family fled the Governor's palace to the safety of HMS *Magdalen*. Thus it was that Virginia's Royal governor "abdicated" his power. The news of this remarkable turn of events spread throughout the colonies, until it finally reached Cresswell's ears as he approached Fort Pitt in mid-July, some five weeks after the fact.³

Cresswell now knew the differences between Britain and her colonies were resulting in

² John E. Selby, *The Revolution in Virginia 1775–1783* (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2007), 1–6.

³ Selby, *Revolution in Virginia*, 41–43; Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 68.

an increasing breakdown of royal authority—not to mention actual warfare. Nevertheless, events in faraway Boston and Williamsburg did not yet affect him directly. He was still on the frontier, with more immediate problems to confront. After his long journey he suffered from exhaustion and malnourishment. He needed a place to rest and recover. Another problem arose when he arrived at V. Craford's house on Jacobs Creek, where he had left his spare clothing. When Craford gave him his clothes back, he discovered to his dismay that one or more unnamed persons had been wearing his clothes in his absence, and in less than three months' time had practically worn them all out. Despite his frustration at what he considered this betrayal of trust by his host, he had nowhere else to go, so he decided to stay with Craford to rest and recover.⁴ Furthermore, he began to suffer from an internal sickness he referred to as "gravel." For several days he suffered in "violent pain," desperately dosing himself with various herbal remedies "prescribed" him by Craford's housekeeper. Then his symptoms began to subside and soon vanished as unexpectedly as they had begun.⁵

While he was sick he received a visit from a young Irish girl whom he referred to, very primly, as "Miss Grimes." Although this is the first mention of her name in the text, the fact that she came to visit him suggests that they might have already met back in April, probably because Miss Grimes was a friend of Craford's daughter.⁶ This visit was notable because she "Cried most abundantly to see me in so much pain." Cresswell then drew on an ethnic stereotype to dismiss this display of emotion from his visitor, cryptically commenting that he "believe[d] she has too much of the Irish in her." Perhaps he meant that he suspected her of being insincere, or at least of being generally over-emotional (because she was Irish) so that her outburst should not be interpreted as revealing any personal feeling for him. A closer reading, however, suggests that Cresswell may not have been as unfeeling toward Miss Grimes as he pretended. At the beginning of that day's entry he reported that he was "something easier," meaning that he was beginning to

⁴ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 68.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 70.

feel better, in contrast to the “violent pain” he had suffered the last two days. Yet if he was feeling better, then why did Miss Grimes start crying because he was in “so much pain”? Perhaps he was still in significant pain, just not as much as before. Perhaps she cried when he told her how bad the pain had been the day before. Or could it be that he pretended to be in more pain than he actually felt to elicit sympathy and attention from his pretty young visitor?⁷

Once he had recovered from his illness, his next priority was to devise a new plan of action. Because he still had the various “Silver Trinkets” that he had ordered from the silversmith back in Alexandria, he decided to go on a trading trip through “Indian Country” in order to “dispose” of them. Apparently he was unwilling to give away the trinkets he had spent so much money to buy. A few days after reaching this decision, he heard a rumor of an experienced Indian trader named John Gibson living near Fort Pitt. Cresswell’s informant, a Major Craford (not the same person as Cresswell’s host, V. Craford) promised to take him to see this trader so he could get more advice about trading with the Indians.⁸

While waiting for Major Craford to take him to see the Indian trader, Cresswell socialized and explored the neighborhood. He was struck by the rough and ready nature of life in this half-civilized area of the frontier. In contrast to more settled areas, organized Christianity was virtually non-existent in this area. While he was in Maryland and the Alexandria area, Cresswell recorded attending church almost every Sunday, even if the preacher was sometimes from a denomination he disliked, such as Methodist. During his trip to Kentucky all thought of church going had gone by the wayside. Even here in the vicinity of Fort Pitt, however, religion played very little role in the lives of the locals. Then on Saturday, July 29, he heard that Alexander Belmain, the minister, had arrived and would be preaching the next day. Since Belmain was the sole Anglican curate for the entire county, he traveled around the large, sparsely populated area in the manner of a circuit rider. On Sunday Cresswell joined the congregation “under a large tree” to

⁷ Ibid., 68–69.

⁸ Ibid., 69.

hear Belmain. The sermon, to his disappointment, turned out to be “a Political discourse,” for although the Reverend was a minister of the Church of England, he was also a patriot and probably preached on the evils of British tyranny and the need to support the patriot cause.⁹

Not only were churches and religious instruction in short supply, but the area around Fort Pitt was known for its lawlessness and immorality. Social mores already stretched thin by the rough, transient nature of frontier life and the absence of an established religious structure were stretched even further by the almost complete lack of civil government. In 1772 General Gage withdrew the British garrison from Fort Pitt as part of the efforts to concentrate British forces on the eastern coast, leaving the Fort abandoned and creating a local power vacuum. Into this vacuum rushed Lord Dunmore, eager to annex the area the Indians had ceded to the British under the Fort Stanwix Treaty. At Dunmore’s behest, Major John Connolly seized control of Fort Pitt in early 1774 and declared West Augusta County part of Virginia. Pennsylvania, however, also continued to claim the area.¹⁰ The practical result of these overlapping claims was the creation of a kind of lawless no-man’s-land. Dunmore’s government, hundreds of miles away in Williamsburg, had not established any effective civil government to administer Fort Pitt or West Augusta County. At the same time, Connolly’s military occupation of the Fort prevented Pennsylvania officials from exercising power in the area. Consequently, as one historian put it, “such unseemly diversions as street fights and tavern brawls over concubines” were common.¹¹ In the absence of civil government, every man did what was right in his own eyes.

Cresswell saw the moral and social chaos around him and found it troubling. A few days before Belmain arrived, Cresswell commented darkly that there were “nothing but Whores and Rogues in this Country.” The following week he uncovered an even more shocking example of local immorality when he went to meet Major Craford, still in the hopes that he would take him to

⁹ Ibid., 69, 94–95n.

¹⁰ Michael N. McConnell, *A Country Between: The Upper Ohio Valley and Its Peoples, 1724–1774* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 268–270.

¹¹ Abernethy, *Western Lands*, 137.

see the Indian trader. He found the Major at the home of his mistress. This mistress, he wrote in horror, was not just a mistress, but was in fact a sort of concubine held “in common” by Major Craford and Major Craford’s brother, half-brother, and son. To make matters worse, the woman herself was a relative—Major Craford’s own niece!¹² “A set of Vile brutes,” Cresswell concluded in disgust. It is difficult to know exactly how Cresswell found this out. Perhaps he heard it directly from someone in the family, or else he guessed it through observation, or heard it from the neighbors.¹³

For some reason, Major Craford seemed to be in no hurry to fulfill his promise to take him to meet Gibson at Fort Pitt. Cresswell was losing patience. Summer was wearing away and he was no closer to his goal of trading among the Indians. On August 10 he decided that if Major Craford did not turn up in a few more days, he would go to Fort Pitt and find Gibson himself. In the meantime, he did his best to find agreeable ways to pass the time. One day he visited a neighbor who was working on harvesting his wheat. After observing what he clearly considered the inept way in which the farmer and his servants were managing the harvest, he could not resist taking the opportunity to give them some advice. He clearly reveled in his superior knowledge of agriculture. “Farming [is] in a poor uncultivated state here,” he remarked condescendingly. Another day he went with V. Craford’s daughter to visit a neighbor. Miss Grimes, the Irish girl, also accompanied them. As they made their way through the woods they had to ford a small creek. He was shocked to see the young ladies hold up their skirts and petticoats and wade across “with the Greatest indifference.” Having to wade a muddy creek would have been a major obstacle to the sort of young ladies he knew back in England, but here on the frontier, such things were just part of everyday life.¹⁴

Up to this point Cresswell had said very little about Miss Grimes. In particular, he had

¹² In other words, if Cresswell was right, the woman was involved with two of her uncles, her half-uncle, and her first cousin.

¹³ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 69–70.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

given no hint of any personal interest in her. He did not describe her with any of the favorite adjectives he used to describe other girls he found attractive. Nor had he mentioned any definite indication that she was interested in him. Underneath the surface, however, emotions were probably in play that he either did not notice or was unwilling to admit. Then, on August 11, he penned a brief but startling entry: “Last night Miss G. came to bed to me. A fine blooming Irish Girl. The Flesh overcame the spirit.” How many questions these few cryptic lines raise. Was Cresswell watching her from the start, or was he suddenly smitten with her on the spur of the moment? Why was Miss Grimes’s Irish heritage, used as a pejorative a few weeks earlier, suddenly transmuted into a lovely attribute that now made her irresistible?¹⁵

Perhaps the most obvious point is that Cresswell was willing to shake his head in self-righteous indignation at the moral failings of the crude frontiersmen around him, and then immediately proceeded to sow some wild oats of his own. His intriguing phrase “the flesh overcame the spirit” draws on the uniquely Christian concept of a deep-seated division between the flesh, representative of sinful human nature, and the spirit, representing a Christian’s righteous spiritual identity as a believer.¹⁶ More specifically, the allusion is probably to Christ’s command to his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”¹⁷ The reference was a fitting one for Cresswell, since his hour of temptation did indeed come by night. Another significant aspect of his choice of words is the implied moral condemnation of his own actions. He was sufficiently familiar with the teachings of Christianity to know that fornication, sex outside of marriage, was wrong. Yet he decided to take advantage of the morally permissive atmosphere in which he found himself to do as he pleased.

A more difficult question is how to determine who was responsible for the encounter. At first glance Miss Grimes clearly seems to be the initiator: she “came to bed to me.” But on closer

¹⁵ Ibid., 69–70.

¹⁶ Rom. 7:14–8:13.

¹⁷ Matt. 26:41 (KJV).

examination the text becomes more ambiguous. Did she initiate, allow herself to be prevailed upon, or did Cresswell use force? All he actually wrote was that she came to bed, but he only implied that she came of her own free will. If, in fact, Cresswell did use coercion or force, then his description could be read differently, as a classic example of a “blame the victim” mentality. It is important to note that in some ways Cresswell fit one of the stereotypes of his day of a potential rapist, that of a transient bachelor. Although he was not yet old enough to be considered a confirmed bachelor, the fact that he was still unmarried in his mid-twenties at least identified him as being on the edge of bachelorhood, a young man who should be searching for a wife, not sexual adventure.¹⁸ A bigger problem was his status as a traveler, a man of relatively low social status far from his social and geographic roots and therefore not under the watchful eye either of his own father or of a community patriarch.¹⁹

Nevertheless, the fact that it was eighteenth-century America does not rule out the possibility that Miss Grimes was the one who came after him. In terms of sexual mores, West Augusta County in 1775 probably had more in common with London—well known at the time for its flagrant immorality—than it did with Puritan New England.²⁰ Colonial Americans themselves often had difficulty drawing fine distinctions in classifying various kinds of deviant sexual behavior. Proving that a woman had not consented to a sexual encounter was exceedingly difficult. As one historian put it, “coerced and consensual sex existed on a continuum . . . for early Americans. The borders of one were saturated with the other.” Even a woman who was really consenting might feign reluctance in order to play “the role of a chaste lady.”²¹ Given

¹⁸ Thomas A. Foster, *Sex and the Eighteenth-Century Man: Massachusetts and the History of Sexuality in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 102.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 59–60.

²⁰ Trevor Burnard, “The Sexual Life of an Eighteenth-Century Jamaican Slave Overseer,” in *Sex and Sexuality in Early America, 172–173*; Roy Porter, “Mixed Feelings: The Enlightenment and Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century Britain,” in *Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, edited by Paul-Gabriel Boucé (Manchester, England: University of Manchester Press, 1982; reprint, Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes & Noble Books, 1982), 16, 20.

²¹ Sharon Block, “Coerced Sex in British North America, 1700–1820” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1995), 6. In ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, <http://media.proquest.com> (accessed November 9, 2012).

Cresswell's tight-lipped description, and without any access to Miss Grimes's side of the story, it is not possible to tell what happened with complete certainty.

What does seem certain is that whatever happened that night was strictly a one-night stand. Just three days later Cresswell bade farewell to his hosts and made his way to Fort Pitt on a borrowed horse.²² Remarkably, he did not mention seeing Miss Grimes again before he left or saying good-bye to her. In fact, he never mentioned her again. Did he tell her good-bye without recording it? Or did he leave so hastily because of the weight of guilt he felt? Missing from this story, of course, is any indication of her feelings. Did she return to Craford's house only to discover that he had gone without even bidding farewell? Did she pine for her lost lover once he was gone? Or did she breathe a sigh of relief that she would never see him again?

After a two days' ride, Cresswell arrived at Fort Pitt, in the ragged remains of his European clothes and with only two dollars in his pocket, which immediately went to pay for his lodging at the local inn.²³ The next few days were intensely frustrating. He visited every man in town he could think of who might possibly lend him money against the credit of James Kirk, back in Alexandria, but entirely without success. He also tried to sell his watch, and the buttons and buckles from his clothes (which had silver in them), but nobody would give him "more than half" their value. Then on the third day he finally met with John Gibson, the Indian trader he had been hoping to see. The conversation quickly devolved into a "political dispute" with the result that he could get no help or advice at all. His two dollars were now gone and he had no way to pay for further lodgings at the inn. He begged the innkeeper for credit. Initially the innkeeper also was unwilling to give him any credit because he needed "ready money" to pay for supplies.

²² Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 70.

²³ The dollar was a Spanish silver coin, also known as a "piece of eight." It was widely used in North America during this time (in addition to paper colonial currency). At face value it was worth approximately one-fourth of a pound, but it was often accepted at a premium above its face value because of the scarcity of silver coins. Robert A. Selig, "The Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route in the State of New York, 1781-1782: An Historical and Architectural Survey" (Poughkeepsie, NY: Hudson River Valley Institute, 2001), 154.
http://www.hudsonrivervalley.org/themes/pdfs/rochambeau_revolutionary_route.pdf (accessed March 9, 2013).

Fortunately, the innkeeper's wife was a "Tory" who felt sympathy for Cresswell and interceded on his behalf with her husband, finally convincing him to offer credit. This was one of the few times when Cresswell's political views worked in his favor on the frontier.²⁴

Cresswell went to sleep that night discouraged and at his wits' end, "with a mind as much confused as a Skein of Silk pul[l]ed the wrong way." In the night, however, he had a dream "that there was a Friend that would relieve me neare at hand." Although he did not normally place "any confidence in Dreams," he awoke from this one "with a Gleme of hope" and began to go over once again all the different men he had asked for help. Then he remembered that there was one other man in town who might help, another Indian trader named John Anderson. He hurried off to find Anderson and discovered that he did indeed have a friend at hand. Not only did Anderson agree to lend him the money he wanted, but he also invited Cresswell to come with him on his next trading trip. He also told Cresswell that he had been watching him from afar and had already made up his mind to help the young man. He had just been waiting for Cresswell to approach him.²⁵

With Anderson's money jingling in his pocket, he hurried back to the inn to settle up with the greedy innkeeper. Now that he had Anderson's backing, the innkeeper sang a different tune, protesting that it was fine if Cresswell did not pay him until later. Cresswell insisted, however, taking great delight in throwing the innkeeper's words from the day before about needing "ready money" back at him. He spent the next few days purchasing and gathering supplies for his trip, in a near-replay of the preparations he had made for his Kentucky trip, with Anderson playing the role that Rice had filled back in April. This time, however, there would be no clumsy canoes; the two planned to go overland, on horseback.²⁶

Although Anderson was an experienced Indian trader, the actual beginning of the expedition played out as a comedy of errors. They left Fort Pitt late in the day on August 21 and

²⁴ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 71.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 71-72.

camped on the other side of the Allegheny River, about two miles from the fort. There they discovered they had forgotten to bring the kettle with them, so Cresswell went back to Fort Pitt to get it. By the time he had retrieved the kettle and crossed the river again it was night. He soon lost his way and blundered about in the darkness until he saw a campfire and made for it. It turned out not to be Anderson, however, but an Indian camp with two squaws. Not knowing their language, he resorted to sign language. After much pantomiming they finally guessed what he was looking for and helped him find his way back to Anderson.²⁷

Then things got worse the next day. The two awoke, wet and shivering, to discover their camp shrouded in a thick fog. They had brought two bottles of rum with them, and soon convinced themselves that they both ought to have a shot to keep from catching colds. One drink turned into several. By the time they broke camp the pair were already so drunk they “most stupidly” left all their provisions behind! That night they stayed with none other than John Gibson, the Indian trader with whom Cresswell had argued. Here they could have asked for more provisions, but they were so embarrassed that they said nothing about their predicament “for feare of being laughed at.” Consequently, in the morning they left Gibson’s house (the last outpost of civilization in the area) with “not one morsel of provision.”²⁸

The next few days the pair made their way northwest from Fort Pitt deeper into Indian country. They lived off of berries, wild black cherries, and especially wild plums, which Cresswell compared favorably with English white plums. He was quickly becoming friends with Anderson, whom he commended as “a good hearty companion.” By now they were encountering at least one or two Indians every day. All of these encounters were with friendly Delaware, further belying the fears that had plagued him during the trip to Kentucky. On August 23 they stumbled across a small Indian camp with one man and three squaws.²⁹ One of the squaws

²⁷ Ibid., 72.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ This camp was along Beaver Creek, somewhere between the modern cities of Beaver Falls and New Castle, in western Pennsylvania.

“invited” him “to sleep with her” but he politely declined. The next day they lost their horses, but an Indian found them and brought them back, “for which we gave him a pair of Leggings.”³⁰

The following day passed uneventfully, without any Indian encounters. As dusk was falling they stopped to pick some berries for their supper. Anderson finished eating and rode ahead to make camp, while Cresswell lingered behind to pick more berries. When he was done, he mounted his horse and followed Anderson. When he reached a fork in the path, he guessed which way to go and rode onward. Soon darkness fell without any sign of Anderson. Cresswell was about to give himself up for lost when he spotted the light of a campfire. Thinking it must be Anderson, he hurried towards the welcome glow. Relief turned to disappointment when he discovered, not Anderson, but three women and a young boy sitting by the fire. The Indians were as surprised to see him as he was to see them. Neither could speak the other’s language, but he kept repeating the name “Anderson.” Once they understood his connection to the well-known trader, they immediately became more friendly and hurried to show him hospitality. The youngest of the three women hurried to take care of his horse, while the oldest cooked him some venison for supper.³¹

After he finished eating, he lay down near the fire on blankets they had spread out for him and tried to go to sleep. He could not help noticing, however, that the three women “held a consultation” lasting “some time.” Old fears gripped him as he lay there. Were they planning to do him harm? Finally the “consultation” finished, and the two older women and the boy lay down on the opposite side of the fire, some distance away. The youngest, however, came around to Cresswell’s side of the fire and lay down “very near” him. By now he had concluded that the women did not intend to harm him, or else they would already have done so. The increasingly familiar behavior of the youngest girl began to make him wonder instead whether “she had some Amorous design upon me.” After a pause that seemed to him about half an hour, she slowly eased

³⁰ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 72.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 73.

nearer to him, and then tugged on his blanket. By now he was certain that she was offering to sleep with him, and this time, he did not refuse. "I found what she wanted," he continued, with remarkable directness, "and lifted it up. She immediately came to me and made me as happy as it was in her power to do."³²

Why did he cooperate in response to this latest proposition, after having rejected a similar offer only three days earlier? A close comparison of the two episodes reveals that his earlier rejection was not as virtuous as it might seem. Although he did not provide a clear description of the squaw who propositioned him earlier, based on what he did say it seems clear he rejected her because he thought she was ugly.³³ By contrast, he provided a detailed description of the second girl: she was "young, Handsom[e] & Healthy, Fine regular Features & Fine Eyes had she not painted them with Red before she came to bed." Not only did he find her attractive (or at least not ugly), but the decision to describe her immediately after admitting that he slept with her implies that her appearance was the reason he slept with her.

It is also interesting to compare his description of this encounter with the description of his affair with Miss Grimes just a few weeks earlier. In that instance he described his actions using language that carried connotations of moral judgment and self-disapproval. This time, however, he described his actions in morally neutral terms, then immediately hastened to justify his actions by describing the girl's appearance. Diarists of Cresswell's day seldom referred to sexual activities by any but the most roundabout euphemisms and metaphors, making the mildly graphic phrase "I . . . lifted it up" an unusual example of daring frankness. One of very few comparable texts is the diary of Virginia planter William Byrd II of Westover, a far more adventurous and promiscuous womanizer than Cresswell. One of Byrd's favorite euphemisms for sexual penetration was the phrase "to give [her] a flourish." As one historian has pointed out, in the eighteenth century the verb "flourish" meant "an elaborate physical gesture or rhetorical

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 72.

expression, a mark of one's social grace and sophistication." By using this term to describe his actions, Byrd was presenting sex "as an expression of cultured panache, as a stylish parade of his ability to perform as an accomplished gentleman."³⁴ Byrd, the cultured Virginia aristocrat, engaged in sexual conquest of his equally aristocratic wife and many other women with a cultured "flourish." Cresswell used a similar euphemism to describe sleeping with an Indian girl, but instead of Byrd's aristocratic "flourish," he used the simpler verb "lifted," perhaps befitting his lesser status as a poor commoner.

The next morning, his "Bedfellow," as he called her, caught and saddled his horse for him, as well as a horse for herself. After breakfast of more venison, Cresswell and the young girl set off in search of Anderson. His young guide led him confidently through the pathless woods, all the while talking steadily in Indian. Cresswell could not understand anything except for the occasional word "Anderson." Nevertheless he attempted to repeat some of the words he heard her saying, "which diverted her exceedingly." After about "an hour," they arrived at Anderson's camp. Cresswell gave "his Dulcinea" a new coat as a parting gift before she returned to her camp.³⁵

Anderson had already sent an Indian out to look for Cresswell and was relieved to see him reappear. They resumed their journey, and at about noon arrived at an Indian town called Welhik Thuppeek.³⁶ This was no ordinary Indian settlement, but rather a special town belonging to Indians who had become Moravian Christians. The Moravian sect had its origins among the pietist followers of Count Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf in the early 1700s, in turn drawing on the far older legacy of the Hussite movement from the fourteenth century. Moravian doctrine emphasized the "femaleness" of the Trinity and encouraged an almost sensual personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Moravians under Zinzendorf's leadership emphasized the importance of living a godly life in the context of a community knit together by an active daily

³⁴ Godbeer, "William Byrd's 'Flourish,'" 139.

³⁵ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 73–74.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 96n. Cresswell spelled it phonetically, as "Whale-hak-tup-pake."

liturgy. This liturgy included common Protestant rites such as communion, baptism, and church services with congregational singing, as well as more unusual observances such as love feasts and foot washings.³⁷

From the early eighteenth century on, many Moravians also pursued a fervent desire for missions. One of those missionaries was a zealous evangelist named David Zeisberger who devoted over sixty years of his life to work among the Indians.³⁸ He founded Welhik Thupeek, or Schoenbrunn as it was known among the German-speaking Moravian missionaries, in 1772 after abandoning an earlier mission village because of friction between his converts and the surrounding non-Christian Indians.³⁹ By the time Cresswell arrived, Welhik Thupeek was prospering under Zeisberger's leadership, representing the culmination of his many decades of experience founding mission towns among the Delaware.

Zeisberger's objective was not to convert the Indians into Europeans, but rather to "reach an accommodation" between the two cultures while still maintaining the distinctive doctrinal and cultural features of Moravian Christianity.⁴⁰ Anderson and Cresswell began to notice this "accommodation" as soon as they arrived. Welhik Thuppeek stood in stark contrast to other Indian villages they had encountered so far. Cresswell described it with something approaching awe. It was a "pretty town" with "about sixty" log cabins that had clapboard siding fastened over the logs to make them look more like normal European houses. These houses were arranged in an orderly fashion along three streets converging on a central square. In the square, the focal point of the town, stood the Moravian meetinghouse. Although the meetinghouse was made of logs, it also had such civilized refinements as "Glass in the windows," "a Bell," "a good plank floor" instead of the usual dirt, and two rows of benches down each side of the long room. In contrast to the filth

³⁷ Aaron Spencer Fogleman, *Jesus is Female: Moravians and Radical Religion in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 4–5.

³⁸ Earl P. Olmstead, *David Zeisberger: A Life Among the Indians* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1997), xvii.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 173, 179, 192.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, xviii.

that normally characterized frontier settlements, the area around the meetinghouse was “very clean.”⁴¹

That evening Cresswell attended one of the Moravian meetings, and was “astonished” at what he saw. He had expected “Anarchy and Confusion,” he admitted, because he had “been taught to looke upon these beings with contempt.”⁴² Instead, he observed “the greatest regularity[,] order, and Decorum” he had ever seen “in any place of Worship in my life.” The men and women sat neatly on the backless benches, with the children in front, men on one side of the room, and women on the other. The “parson” stood at the front of the room and preached a sermon in English, with an Indian interpreter translating sentence by sentence as he went.⁴³ The congregation then proceeded to sing in its own language, presumably translated Moravian hymns. Cresswell was particularly impressed with the “Solemnity of Behavior and Modest, Religeous [*sic*] deportment” of the congregation, which, he exclaimed, “would do Honnor [*sic*] to the first religeous [*sic*] Society on earth” and “put a Bigot . . . out of countenance.” Even the food was surprisingly European: supper that night included bacon, coffee, and tea sweetened with maple sugar.⁴⁴

During the following day, Cresswell and Anderson passed through another smaller Moravian village, which Zeisberger called Gnadenhutten. They also saw a non-Christian Indian village called Newcomers Town that had formerly been the primary Delaware village in the area. Cresswell found the village mostly abandoned, however, because many of the inhabitants had moved west to Coshocton only a few months earlier.⁴⁵ Cresswell and Anderson spent the night at a tiny settlement called White Eyes’ Town. Having left the Moravian villages behind, they found

⁴¹ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 74.

⁴² In this instance it is unclear whether by “these beings” he meant Indians, or Moravians, or both. In the context of similar statements later in the text, however, he was probably referring to Indians in general.

⁴³ The speaker was probably not Zeisberger himself, since Zeisberger could speak the Indian language fluently. Olmstead, *Zeisberger*, xvii.

⁴⁴ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 74.

⁴⁵ C. A. Weslager, *The Delaware Indians: A History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1972), 295; Olmstead, *Zeisberger*, 237.

themselves once again in the midst of typical frontier filth and squalor. Their host for the night was a Dutch blacksmith who lived with an Indian squaw. Cresswell was in a foul mood over their accommodations, calling their hosts “Dirty people” and “very Disagreeable companions” and complaining that it was “impossible to keep myselfe free from Lice.”⁴⁶

The following day they arrived at Coshocton,⁴⁷ the primary village for Delawares living in the area who were not part of the Moravian group, and a center for trade between Indians and Europeans. The pair unloaded their trade goods, and within a few hours Cresswell sold some of his trinkets in exchange for furs at what seemed like a profitable rate. That evening they lodged at an Indian cabin a short ways outside the village. Their host, a Mohawk, was eager to be as hospitable as possible. He offered them each a woman to sleep with that night. Cresswell could have the host’s sister, and Anderson could have the host’s daughter. This time Cresswell did not choose to provide details of what happened next, commenting only that “we were obliged to accept.” In other words, they feared offending their host if they refused. Perhaps, beneath the surface, their reluctance may not have been entirely sincere.⁴⁸

By now Cresswell realized that these various “encounters,” as he put it, were not isolated incidents and did not reflect on his masculine charms. Instead, they were a common feature of Indian hospitality that he would continue to encounter “often” on his journey. He was not the first white man to come to this conclusion. From as far back as the days of the Conquistadores and the early Catholic missionaries, various accounts include the reactions of European travelers who discovered the seeming willingness of Indian women to dispense sexual hospitality to visiting white men. How those men reacted depended on their objectives for being in the New World. For example, in Canada during the seventeenth century, Catholic missionaries took a predictably dim view of Indian sexual customs, while traders described those same customs with glee “as if made

⁴⁶ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 74–75.

⁴⁷ Cresswell spelled it phonetically, as “Coashoskin.”

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

for their own use and abuse.”⁴⁹ Some European travelers even went so far as to paint the New World as an unrestrained sexual paradise—from the male perspective, of course.⁵⁰ Other authors, however, took a more realistic view of the situation. John Lawson, an Englishman who traveled to the Carolinas in the early eighteenth century, described how English traders usually maintained one or more Indian mistresses, or temporary wives. He claimed that they did so to improve their relations with the Indians in general, as a way of more easily obtaining provisions, and in order to learn the Indian language more quickly.⁵¹

Cresswell and his new bedfellow had a pleasant night together. The next morning he reported that she was “very fond of me” and “wants to go with me.” After considering her request, he decided to take her with him as a mistress or temporary wife. For one thing, he had decided that he liked her: she was young, “sprightly,” “tolerable handsome,” and could even “speak a little English.” Yet for Nicholas Cresswell, as well as for the Carolina traders John Lawson described more than sixty years earlier, there were other motives as well. Cresswell now knew that he would continue to be plied with favors from random Indian women “if I do not take a Squaw to myselfe.” Some of these future encounters might involve women who were unattractive in situations where he felt he could not say no for fear of offending an insistent host. He decided that he would be better off taking with him a woman he liked in order to avoid future encounters with women he might not like.⁵²

Nevertheless, he never felt entirely comfortable with this decision. Later he would revisit the question of taking a “temporary wife,” writing defensively, as if he were arguing with an invisible challenger. Traveling with a girl was “odd,” he admitted a week and a half later, but

⁴⁹ Gordon Sayre, “Native American Sexuality in the Eyes of the Beholders, 1535–1710,” in *Sex and Sexuality in Early America*, 47.

⁵⁰ Stephanie Wood, “Sexual Violation in the Conquest of the Americas,” in *Sex and Sexuality in Early America*, 12–13.

⁵¹ John Lawson, *A New Voyage to Carolina . . .* (London: n.p., 1709), 29, <http://archive.org/details/newvoyagetocarol01laws> (accessed March 14, 2013).

⁵² Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 75.

nevertheless he was “obliged to submit to it.”⁵³ A few weeks later he again defended his decision, insisting “however base it may appear to conscientious people, it [is] absolutely necessary to take a Temporary Wife if they travel amongst the Indians.”⁵⁴ Clearly, although he had decided intellectually that the circumstances justified his decision, he was never able to convince his heart that it was right. As a result, he continued to wrestle with his conscience over the issue for the remainder of his time among the Indians.

Anderson, Cresswell, and Cresswell’s new “Squaw” returned to Coshocton, where they stayed for the next several days. By now Cresswell seemed to be sliding much more easily into his assumed role of Indian trader. The morning after they returned to Coshocton, he sold the rest of his trading goods, again in exchange for furs. In the afternoon he explored the town, spent some time smoking with the Indian men who had come to trade, and generally “did every thing in my power to make myself agreeable to them.” He also visited the chief elder of the village, whom he called the “King” of the Delawares, just as other English traders had done since the early eighteenth century. The term “King” was misleading to Cresswell, just as it had been for other traders before him.⁵⁵ He imagined some Indian equivalent of George III, surrounded with native splendor, and was deeply disappointed to discover this “King” in “a poor house,” wearing clothing as “poor” as that of any common Indian, and completely lacking in any “emblems of Royalty or Magesty [*sic*].” The “King” had already heard that Cresswell had taken an Indian mistress, for he treated him with great kindness, “called me his good friend,” and urged him to “be kind” to his “Squaw.” He also gave Cresswell some wampum “as a token of friendship.” Although he was disappointed not to have received an audience with true royalty after all, he was pleased at his ability to make friends among the Delaware.⁵⁶

The following day, Cresswell went even farther in his attempts to blend into his new

⁵³ Ibid., 78.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 85–86.

⁵⁵ McConnell, *Country Between*, 13.

⁵⁶ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 75.

surroundings. At the urging of “his Squaw,” he decided to participate in an “Indian Dance” being held that day. He allowed her to decorate him with Indian paint “in the most Ellegant manner” and even unbent so far as to put on an Indian loincloth and moccasins for the occasion, although he insisted on keeping his shirt. To his European eyes, the dance was a strange and confusing ritual in which the Indians cavorted around a fire “with little order whoping and hollowing [*sic*] in a most frightfull manner.” The music, combining the cries of the dancers with the beating of drums and shaking of rattles, sounded to him “the most unharmonious Concert, that human Idea can possibly conceive.” He described the moves of the dance itself as consisting of “violent Distortion of Features, Writhing and twisting the body in the most uncouth and Antic postures imaginable.” Although he could not discern any order or method to the dance and gave no indication that he understood what it was for, he did his best to join in by imitating those around him. Predictably, the efforts of this clueless Englishman only made the Indians laugh, yet they thought the better of him for trying, or at least for providing them with such excellent entertainment.⁵⁷

Now that Cresswell and Anderson had successfully sold their trade goods for furs, they were ready to begin the journey back to Fort Pitt. His Squaw, whom he named “Nancy,” continued to accompany him. When the party reached Newcomers Town, Cresswell fell sick of an unspecified ailment. Nancy, full of concern, hurried off to get help. She returned late that evening with an old Squaw, who immediately set to work to cure the sick Englishman. She prepared him a potion of chopped roots and water that she ordered him to drink, but instead of swallowing it, he spat it out while her back was turned. She also took some of the same root that she had chewed and smeared it on various parts of his body, then ordered him to lay down. After she left, Cresswell convinced Nancy to help him take some other medicine that Anderson had with him as well. The next day Cresswell felt miraculously better, a result the old Squaw took

⁵⁷ Ibid., 75–76.

credit for, although Cresswell secretly believed it was Anderson's medicine instead.⁵⁸

A few days later, the group returned to the smaller of the two Christian villages, Gnadenhutten, where Cresswell again attended a Moravian service. The meetinghouse in Gnadenhutten impressed him as being even neater than the one in Welhik Thuppeek. In particular, it was decorated inside with beautiful Indian basketwork, and the congregation sang their hymns to the music of a spinet, played by an Indian. They then pushed on to Welhik Thuppeek, where he witnessed an Indian child being baptized as a Moravian, but could not understand the service, which was conducted in an Indian dialect. During these return visits to the Moravian villages, Nancy refused to come with him but remained on the outskirts of the village. Cresswell thought this was because "the Moravians will not allow any one to cohabit with Indians in their town," perhaps another way of saying the Moravians disapproved of concubinage.⁵⁹

Over the next few days the party continued to make their way back toward Fort Pitt. On September 10 they stopped at an Indian camp where Anderson found a Squaw "who was an old wife of his." He asked her to rejoin him for the rest of their trip, and she agreed to come. The following evening as the four were riding through the woods at dusk, Anderson pointed out a "panther" crouched in a tree not far away. Cresswell's gun happened to be loaded, so he pulled it out and fired at the cat without even bothering to dismount. To his great surprise his aim was true and he killed the panther dead with a single shot. This "exploit" impressed Nancy "exceedingly," although he admitted that it was due only to a lucky shot.⁶⁰

By now the men were both becoming used to having the women with them. In particular, Cresswell had discovered for himself how nice it was to have an Indian woman intent on serving his every need: cooking, tending the fire, saddling and caring for the horses, and "every other thing" she thought would "please" him. The group arrived back at Fort Pitt a few days after he shot the panther. At the same time they arrived, Indians from many different tribes were

⁵⁸ Ibid., 76–77.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 78.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

converging on Fort Pitt for a treaty conference scheduled to begin on September 10. This treaty would be different from previous ones, for instead of negotiating with representatives of His Majesty's government, the Indians would be meeting with commissioners from the Continental Congress and delegates from the revolutionary state conventions of Pennsylvania and Virginia.⁶¹ Not only was Cresswell interested in seeing the treaty negotiations, but some of the furs he purchased had been delayed for some reason, and he was waiting for them to arrive.⁶²

With the arrival of the various commissioners who planned to meet with the Indians, Fort Pitt had quickly expanded far beyond its normal size. With the sudden increase in population came an increase in lawlessness as well. The revolutionary governments of Virginia and Pennsylvania were more at odds with each other over their competing claims of jurisdiction than ever, and tempers flared as delegates from the two competing colonies rubbed shoulders in the small settlement below the Fort. Possibly out of concern for Nancy's safety, Cresswell thought that she should stay with other Indians camped a short distance away. Nancy was unhappy at the idea of being temporarily parted, and made Cresswell promise that he would come find her again soon. His fears were soon justified as within a few days "quarreling and fighting" broke out "in every part of the town."⁶³

Then on September 26, more than two weeks after the conference was scheduled to start, a large group of chiefs and elders representing the Shawnee, Delaware, and Ottawa Indians finally arrived at Fort Pitt. Cresswell provided a detailed description of what happened next, implying that he was an eyewitness to some of the negotiations. The Indian chiefs were met by an honor guard of Virginia colonial troops from the garrison of the Fort. The Indians formed a ceremonial procession and made their way to the council house, "Danceing, Beating the Drum, and Singing the Peace Song" as they went. Inside the council house the Indians and colonial delegates found their seats, after which "a profound silence ensued for the space of ten minutes."

⁶¹ Ibid., 70; Thwaites and Kellogg, *Revolution on the Upper Ohio*, 20.

⁶² Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 79.

⁶³ Ibid.

Finally the renowned Delaware chief Cornstalk rose and broke the silence with a brief introductory speech hoping that “they should brighten the Chain of Friendship.” Several other chiefs said something similar, and then the Indians and delegates smoked a peace pipe together, passing the pipe from man to man until everyone had had a puff. Next it was the turn of the colonial delegates. Andrew Lewis rose on behalf of the Virginia delegation and made “an artfull speech,” then abruptly adjourned the meeting until the next day, leaving the Indians “a little confused.”⁶⁴

The following day the Indians and delegates resumed their meeting in the council house, with Cresswell once again in attendance. Now that preliminaries were out of the way, the delegates began making speeches on more serious matters. The highlight of the day, from Cresswell’s perspective, was a speech delivered by the Ottawa chief Shaganaba, son of the great chief Pontiac. Cresswell was greatly moved by the eloquence of this chief. His style was “bold” and “Figurative,” “accompanied with violent gestures tho exceedingly natural and well adapted to what they are saying,” while the “Dress, Attitude, and Firmness of Countenance” of the speaker imbued the listener with “ideas” that were “great and Noble.”⁶⁵ In short, the speech struck him as “one of the best speeches I ever heard,” one that “would do honor to an Orator of the first magnitude.” A few days later he succeeded in obtaining a written copy of this speech, which he dutifully copied into his diary notebook.⁶⁶

Cresswell’s attendance at the first two days of the council had not gone unnoticed. After returning to the inn from hearing Shaganaba’s speech, the innkeeper’s Tory wife pulled him aside and told him that some of the delegates thought he was a spy and that he was likely to be arrested. After hearing this dire warning Cresswell decided that caution was more important than curiosity, and for the most part stayed away from the council house. The next day Cresswell’s furs finally

⁶⁴ Ibid., 80, 97n.

⁶⁵ Technically Cresswell was also describing Indian speakers in general at this point, but it seems likely that he was thinking primarily of Shaganaba’s speech as the most impressive example of native eloquence he had ever heard.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 81–83.

arrived and he sold them for money. To his disappointment, he discovered that he had actually lost money on his trading venture after all. At least this time he succeeded in getting part of his money back, instead of losing everything as he had after the Barbados trip.⁶⁷ He did not blame his trading partner Anderson for his losses. Instead, he commended Anderson as being “more like a Father” than “a common acquaintance.”⁶⁸

By now Cresswell had finished his trading business and seen as much of the treaty conference as he dared. The time had come for him to leave Fort Pitt and return to Alexandria. That, however, meant taking leave of Nancy. Several days before he finally departed she had already become upset. When it came time for them to part, she wept “plentifully” to see him go. For his part, Cresswell was no less sorry to leave her. With a tone of deep regret, he wrote that he was “unhappy that this Honest Creature has took such a Fancy to me.” He felt guilty about having built such a deep attachment to Nancy when he had known from the start that their relationship was only temporary. Leaving her was the saddest and most emotional thing he had ever done, aside from leaving his parents when he departed for America.⁶⁹ Beyond his feelings for Nancy individually, his attitude towards Indians in general had undergone a dramatic change. “I have conceived a great regard for the Indians,” he readily admitted, “and really feel a most sensible regret in parting from them.” He then launched into a long disquisition on the virtues and advantages of Indian family structure, society, morality, tribal government, physical appearance, and individual moral character. His experience among the Indians left him a very different man from the fearful European immigrant who had prepared to defend against an Indian “attack” on the Ohio River.⁷⁰

Having said his farewells, he now had to find a way to get back to Alexandria with little money and no horse. After walking for three days he arrived back at V. Craford’s house on

⁶⁷ Ibid., 81.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 85.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 82, 85.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 82–85.

Jacobs Creek. Craford initially promised to get him a horse, but it soon became evident that he intended to charge his unfortunate guest a large sum for the favor. After spending several fruitless days asking around the neighborhood for a horse, he encountered one of the Virginia delegates returning from the conference. The delegate agreed to lend him a horse and allow him to accompany the delegates over the mountains. The next day Cresswell left V. Craford's for the last time. If he had any thought to spare for Miss Grimes as he left, he did not mention it. He and the delegate soon joined together with some of the other Virginia delegates.⁷¹ Although he was now in the company of a rather important group of Virginia officials, as always the frontier proved to be a great leveler of persons—these delegates of the great Commonwealth of Virginia took all the beds at the inn for themselves, leading him to call them “a set of nigger[d]ly beings.”⁷²

The next few days the men made their way southeast as quickly as possible. The trip went by without incident, aside from a chance meeting with “a woman with two small Children in great distress” to whom Cresswell gave his “last Shirt” beside the one he happened to be wearing. Later that day he arrived at William Gibbs's home, near Winchester, with nothing but a single penny in his pocket and the shirt on his back. He had hoped to borrow some money or at least a horse, but Gibbs was not at home. Instead he found two unidentified young women who “gaze at me as if I was a wild man of the Woods.” Once it became apparent that Gibbs would not be back in time to help him, Cresswell turned to his former traveling companion, James Nourse, whose home was not far from Gibbs's plantation. By this time Nourse had returned from his journey to Kentucky and was glad to see his friend.⁷³ After Cresswell rested there for a day, he rode on to Leesburg on a horse he borrowed from Nourse. In Leesburg he visited the Captain Douglass who had loaned him some of the money for the Illinois trip. Cresswell managed to arrive at some sort of agreement with Douglass about the money, but did not write down the details. The next day he

⁷¹ These delegates were Zacharia Connel, Henry Lee, Richard Lee, Francis Peyton, Josias Clapham, and Thomas Blackburn. *Ibid.*, 98n.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 86.

⁷³ [Nourse,] “Journey to Kentucky,” 4:364.

borrowed a horse from Douglass and finally arrived back in Alexandria. For almost seven months Cresswell had been wandering the American frontier. Although he had failed in his objective to get free land in Illinois, he had instead experienced an adventure that would shape his interests and personality for years to come.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 87.

Chapter 4

King's Friends and Rebels Loudoun County, Virginia and Patriot New York City, October 1775–September 1776

“Nothing but war is talked of.” (October 20, 1775)

“This Cursed Rebellion has ruined all forever.” (April 13, 1777)

Nicholas Cresswell returned to Alexandria from his western expedition on October 19, 1775, after an absence of almost seven months. He again received a warm welcome from his host and mentor, James Kirk, who feared his young protégé had been “kiled by the Indians.” Cresswell was glad enough to see Kirk again, and no doubt enjoyed the luxury of sleeping in a bed, eating regular meals, and no longer appearing ragged or unkempt. Nevertheless, his return to civilization proved unpleasant for other reasons. During his absence, he had been largely unaware of political developments on the east coast, except for occasional rumors that he frequently discounted as unreliable or mistaken. Now he was in for a rude awakening. Less than forty-eight hours after returning to Alexandria, Cresswell was listening in horror as men in the marketplaces and taverns discussed the latest news. Affairs between the thirteen colonies and Great Britain had spun out of control. In addition to the patriotic boycott of British goods, many American merchants were also participating in the nonexportation movement. As a result, commerce in the port of Alexandria had ground to a halt.¹

Nor was this all. What to him had seemed a civil and economic rebellion in early 1775 had now transformed into an actual war. “Nothing but War is talked off [*sic*],” he complained. American and British soldiers had died in the Battles of Concord and Bunker Hill, and the British had evacuated Boston, leaving it in the possession of “a large Army” of patriots. He also heard rumors of more “large” patriot armies “in Canada, and at or about Norfolk in Virginia.” Furthermore, the colonies were busy “raising men and making every millitary preparation.” The entire dynamic of the situation had shifted dramatically. “This cannot be redressing grievances,”

¹ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 87.

he insisted with seemingly remarkable foresight, “it is open Rebellion and I am convinced if Great Britain does not send more men here and subdue them soon they will declare Independence.” Earlier frustrations against the actions of Parliament had now changed into widespread animosity toward King George III himself: “The people here are ripe for a revolt nothing but Curses and imprecations against England. . . . The King is publicly cursed and Rebellion rears her horrid head.” Although Cresswell must have been aware of the reasons the patriots themselves offered to justify the revolutionary movement, he insisted that the root of the trouble in Virginia was the desire of the planter elite to escape their financial obligations: “The people in this Colony . . . are in general grea[t]ly in debt to the Merchants in England and think a revolt would pay all.”²

In these instances—and throughout the diary—what he does and does not say about patriot motives speaks volumes about his own prejudices. Although he had participated in many political arguments and had probably heard every possible patriot argument many times, he never saw fit to attempt to summarize any of these arguments, even for the sake of disagreeing with them. For all his keen observation and perceptive insight about American culture, he completely missed the broader ideological motivations of the growing revolutionary movement. As a loyal British subject, he was unwilling to admit to himself that there could be any legal, philosophical, or ideological motivation for rebellion. Perhaps admitting the existence of motives deeper than simply the agitation of “pre[s]byterian Rascals”³ or a desire to avoid repaying lawful debts would have been too painful a challenge to his political views.

This new understanding of the seriousness of the growing breach between Great Britain and the thirteen colonies caused an important shift in Cresswell’s plans and views of America. Despite the hardships, Cresswell seemed to enjoy many aspects of his time on the frontier. In particular, he had developed a tremendous admiration and respect for the Indians, aided, no

² Ibid., 88.

³ Ibid., 26.

doubt, by his close relationship with Nancy. He had seemed reluctant to return east, and particularly reluctant to leave Nancy. Yet his scheme to acquire free land and the trip to Illinois had been a complete failure, and he had never intended to stay among the Indians for long. The disappointment of all his plans, combined with the shock of further news about the growing revolutionary conflict, proved to be too much for his natural optimism. From this point on, Cresswell no longer seriously wished to stay in America. His plans had failed, and the political situation was deteriorating by the day. It was time for him to go home, yet the cessation of export trade from America to England meant the ships that might have borne him away over the ocean were instead rotting at their moorings in the harbor, or else bound for other destinations. The decision to leave was immediately followed by the realization that he could not leave. He was trapped.⁴

The realization that he was now trapped behind enemy lines caused him to change the way he wrote in his diary. Although he would still continue to write with remarkable frankness, he began at least to be aware of the idea that his notebooks might someday be used against him. He began to insert cryptic strings of initials and numbers at the end of certain diary entries, presumably using some rudimentary code of his own devising.⁵ Up to this point, he had recorded events in strictly chronological order, providing a straightforward narrative. From this point on, however, he would begin to leave out certain key events, for fear they might incriminate him. Once he finally escaped from patriot-held areas, he wrote out descriptions of many of these events in order to bring his diary up to date.

Cresswell's return to Alexandria soon became even more unpleasant as a result of the first of these incriminating events, which had already taken place months earlier, without his knowledge. Back in March 1775, shortly before he left Alexandria for the frontier, he wrote a

⁴ Ibid., xxiii, 87, 89.

⁵ Sadly, the meaning of these cryptic letters and numbers has never been uncovered. Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, xxviii; Kathy O. McGill, "Question About Travel Diaries," H-Net Discussion Networks, <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=H-Travel&month=1002&week=d&msg=xV0WfgH4AJ0K9RIx3QYPhw> (accessed March 18, 2013).

letter to friends in England in which he “freely declared” his opinions about “the present Rebellion, indeed I then called it by no other name to my Friends.” Unfortunately for him, Cresswell had forgotten about the local Committees of Safety.

Congress had originally intended the Committees simply as a mechanism for enforcing the boycott on British goods. The Committees viewed themselves as the primary guardians of patriot spirit and arrogated to themselves authority far beyond their original mandate from Congress, including the power to open and read mail.⁶ Members of a local Committee boarded and searched the ship carrying Cresswell’s letter. Which Committee is not specified; it could have been the Committee of any town along the shores of the Potomac, including Cresswell’s old friends from the Committee of Nanjemoy, Maryland. The searchers read Cresswell’s incriminating letter and indignantly forwarded it to the Committee of Safety of Alexandria as being the work of one “Inimical to the rights and liberties of America.” The members of the Alexandria Committee were suitably horrified at Cresswell’s frank and heretical sentiments, but by this time he had embarked upon his western journey, blissfully unaware of the mess he had left behind. Undaunted, the Alexandria Committee promptly met to conduct some kind of trial. With blithe disregard for any notion of “due process,” they convicted him *in absentia* and sentenced him to prison. At this juncture another of his friends in Alexandria, Thomson Mason, brother of the famous George Mason, stepped forward of his own volition and posted bail for Cresswell. By doing so he personally guaranteed that Cresswell would not leave Virginia without permission for six months.⁷ The first Cresswell learned of any of this was in a letter he received from Mason explaining the whole situation, which he probably found waiting for him at some point on his return journey to Alexandria.⁸

⁶ Calhoun, *Loyalists*, 461.

⁷ Technically Cresswell may never have left Virginia during his western expedition. Virginia’s royal charter theoretically granted the colony control of western lands including what is now Kentucky and West Virginia. To further complicate the question, as explained earlier, Lord Dunmore had also laid claim to the area around Fort Pitt for Virginia.

⁸ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 162.

Why did Mason, a supporter of the patriot movement, step forward to help Cresswell in this way? Cresswell himself wondered the same thing. After emphasizing that he could think of no way that Mason could profit by helping him, he concluded that he must have simply been acting as “a generous mind helping a stranger in distress.” Perhaps Mason, who complained of loneliness after the death of his wife, was reaching out to Cresswell from a simple desire for friendship.⁹ Whatever Mason’s motives, because of his kindly rescue, Cresswell’s return to Alexandria was not as unpleasant as it otherwise would have been. As a result of this conviction, he was now “suspected as a spy” and “narrowly watched” by the Committee.

Nevertheless, he appears not to have learned his lesson. On October 23, he heard news that Lord Dunmore and his combined army of British troops and Loyalists were sailing up the Potomac with the intention of invading and destroying Alexandria. Many of the inhabitants fled as quickly as possible, but Cresswell chose to remain since he suspected that the news would “proove a fals[e] alarm.” He was correct in his guess; Dunmore’s intended target soon turned out to be Norfolk instead. Nevertheless, the scare put the Alexandria Committee even more on edge than it had been before. A few days later, Cresswell found out that he was “suspected of being. . . a Tory. . . and am threatened with Tar, Feathers, Imprisonment and the Devil knows what.” Instead of frightening him, this knowledge only deepened his contempt for the local Committee: “Curse the scoundrels.”¹⁰ The Committee’s suspicion is understandable since he continued to argue about politics with no more circumspection than before. More than once he resolved “never to enter into Political disputes again.”¹¹ But the arguments continued.

Cresswell’s situation in Alexandria was becoming more and more awkward. Without a definite plan, beyond the basic desire to escape to England, he hung about town listening to the fleeting rumors of far-away war, including Dunmore’s seizure of patriot arms at Norfolk and the

⁹ McGill, “Man of Mystery.”

¹⁰ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 89.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 90.

British destruction of Falmouth, New Hampshire.¹² Conversation with local patriots led to arguments, and these arguments only deepened the suspicions of the local Committee. At this juncture, Kirk suggested that Cresswell should move to Leesburg and assist with bookkeeping for his trading operation there, in exchange for room and board, but no salary. As historian Kathy McGill points out, this arrangement was for Cresswell's own good; earning an actual salary would make him a Virginia resident at risk of being drafted into the militia.¹³ Since it was no longer safe or desirable for him to remain in Alexandria, he agreed to the arrangement. On November 17 he left Alexandria and the following day arrived in Leesburg, which would become his "home" for the rest of his time in Virginia. He soon became good friends with his new roommate, a young man named Patrick Cavan, and made himself at home.¹⁴ He was already familiar with the area from previous visits and knew various people who lived in Leesburg. Cresswell made no further mention of his bookkeeping work for Kirk, although he must have done some since Kirk apparently paid the bills for his accommodations, at least at first.¹⁵

The failure of the Illinois scheme and lack of regular gainful employment seems to have taken a heavy personal toll. He had already begun to drink occasionally before the Illinois trip, as a way to combat boredom.¹⁶ The lack of access to alcohol on the frontier had helped him break the habit. Starting in early 1776, however, he spiraled down into a vortex of depression, which he tried to combat with heavy social drinking and all-night merrymaking. In mid-January, the drinking stopped temporarily when he heard a rumor of a ship leaving Alexandria for London. Full of hope, he hurried to Alexandria, only to discover that the Committee had forbidden the ship to leave port.¹⁷ With his hopes dashed, he returned to Leesburg and his drinking companions. Yet no matter how many times he got "feloniously drunk," as he put it, his problems were still there

¹² Ibid., 88–89.

¹³ McGill, "Man of Mystery."

¹⁴ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 101.

¹⁵ Ibid., 99n, 101, 121n.

¹⁶ Ibid., 29.

¹⁷ Ibid., 103–104.

when the alcohol cleared. His spirits sagged under the failure of all his schemes, the difficulty of escaping from America while under observation, and the possibility that he might be jailed or pressed into service in the Continental army or the Virginia militia.¹⁸

Up through late 1775, Cresswell seems to have succeeded in remaining fully neutral in the growing conflict. Whatever the various Committees chose to believe, he had done nothing to actively oppose the patriot cause. His “crimes” so far consisted solely of expressing pro-British opinions and refusing to subscribe fully and enthusiastically to the patriot cause. Beginning during his stay in Leesburg, Cresswell’s neutrality began to falter as he found himself gradually drawn into the affairs of Loyalists who were working with the British. One Loyalist in particular whom he had already met was John Connolly, the commandant of Fort Pitt.¹⁹ Connolly was the proprietor of large land grants along the Ohio, which he had received from Lord Dunmore, giving him ample motive for remaining loyal—if the colonial government of Virginia were overthrown, he would lose his land grants.²⁰ That summer, while Cresswell was wandering in the wilderness, Connolly had travelled east to meet with Dunmore, in exile off the Virginia coast aboard a British warship. Together they hatched an elaborate plan. Connolly would travel as far as Detroit and then return east via Fort Pitt, raising along the way an army of Indians and Loyalists who could help secure the backcountry for the British. Connolly made it as far as Hagerstown, Maryland before an American officer recognized him and the local Committee detained him and his companions. The event made news throughout the region, and Cresswell himself noted Connolly’s arrest in his diary on November 24.²¹

Cresswell’s impression of Connolly during their meeting at Fort Pitt had not been a good

¹⁸ Ibid., 103.

¹⁹ Ibid., 39; Doug MacGregor, “The Ordeal of John Connolly: The Pursuit of Wealth Through Loyalism,” in *The Other Loyalists: Ordinary People, Royalism, and the Revolution in the Middle Colonies, 1763–1787*, edited by Joseph S. Tiedemann, Eugene R. Fingerhut, and Robert W. Venables (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2009), 164.

²⁰ MacGregor, “Ordeal,” 166–167.

²¹ Ibid., 169; Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 101.

one.²² Despite this initial negative impression, in December 1775 Cresswell traveled the twenty-five miles from Leesburg to Frederick, Maryland to visit Connolly in jail. He did so with the knowledge and consent of Leesburg authorities, as he was “obliged to get one of the Committeemen to go with me, [since] they would not trust us alone.” Cresswell reported that Connolly was in “good spirits” and summarized the basics of Dunmore’s plan.²³ The trip was a dangerous one for Cresswell, since he risked trouble with the Leesburg Committee of Safety for consorting with a known accomplice of Lord Dunmore.

Why did Cresswell undertake the risk and inconvenience of visiting Connolly, a man he barely knew and personally disliked? Possible explanations range from impetuous curiosity to sympathy for a British official in distress to a desire to aid the British cause. No evidence exists that Cresswell aided Connolly and his fellow prisoners in any tangible fashion. One of Connolly’s fellow prisoners, John Smyth, escaped a few weeks after Cresswell’s visit, bearing letters written using pen and ink that had been smuggled into the prisoners’ cell.²⁴ The fact that Cresswell visited at such a strategic time presents an intriguing coincidence. As Kathy McGill notes, it may also be significant that Cresswell showed an abiding interest in Smyth’s escape—in 1777 he would spend an entire day with Smyth in New York City, listening to Smyth read aloud from a narrative of his escape.²⁵ Even if Cresswell did not provide tangible aid to Connolly, the trip nevertheless shows that his sympathy for the British war effort and disdain (perhaps even hatred) for the patriot cause were slowly beginning to overwhelm his efforts to remain neutral.

During the following six months, Cresswell was a witness to an unusual set of events in Leesburg that would pose a serious threat to the efforts of Virginia’s new state government to

²² Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 39.

²³ *Ibid.*, 102.

²⁴ MacGregor, “Ordeal,” 169–170; John Ferdinand Smyth, *A Tour in the United States of America* . . . (London: G. Robinson, 1784), 2:255, 260, http://archive.org/details/cihm_41223 (accessed March 28, 2013).

²⁵ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 160; McGill, “Man of Mystery.” Cresswell also went on to purchase several copies of that same narrative when it was published in England. Smyth, *Tour*, vol. 1, “Subscribers Names,” http://archive.org/details/cihm_41222 (accessed March 28, 2013).

prepare the Commonwealth for her role in the Revolution. In the lull months of early 1776, recruitment efforts were underway to build up the American army to prepare for the resumption of hostilities that summer. But as Cresswell witnessed, these recruiting drives were not always smooth or successful. Virginians could not agree over the proper approach to organizing the Commonwealth's military forces.²⁶ Furthermore, authorities in Loudoun County, particularly the Leesburg Committee of Safety, had no money to pay their soldiers. On January 29, Cresswell noted that when the Committee met to choose officers for the new independent militia companies they planned to raise, they could not even pay for their own refreshments.²⁷ Nor did money troubles end there. On February 12, it seems that local soldiers were pressing for immediate payment, but the Magistrates could only promise to pay them in the future, since, as Cresswell sarcastically remarked, "their paper money is not yet ar[r]ived from the Mine." Promises of future pay only infuriated the soldiers, who created such an uproar that local business in the marketplace and at the courthouse ground to a halt.²⁸

Soldiers and recruits were not the only ones to participate in the near-riot on February 11. Poor tenant farmers in Loudoun County had been growing more and more desperate because the nonexportation movement and the closure of the port in Alexandria in September 1775 meant they had been unable to sell most of their fall crops. Rapid inflation further reduced profits from what they were able to sell. Consequently, when annual rents began to come due around Christmas, many farmers in Loudoun and Fairfax Counties refused to pay.²⁹ The ringleader of the growing rent strike was a man named James Cleveland, a former overseer of George

²⁶ Michael A McDonnell, *The Politics of War: Race, Class, & Conflict in Revolutionary Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 258–259.

²⁷ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 104.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 105.

²⁹ McDonnell, *Politics of War*, 187–189; "Petition of Sundry Inhabitants of Loudoun County" [to the Fifth Virginia Convention, June 8, 1776], *Revolutionary Virginia: The Road to Independence*, edited by Brent Tarter and Robert L. Scribner ([Charlottesville, VA:] University Press of Virginia, 1983), 7:325.

Washington's who had suffered as a result of being paid in inflationary paper money.³⁰ He began demanding that tenants be relieved of the obligation to pay rent while serving in the army, and that officers and men receive equal pay. Cleveland also complained about the waiting and inaction, which was interfering with the ability of poor farmers to make a living. Matters seemed serious enough that one observer feared "the first Battle we have in this part of the Country will be in Loudon."³¹

The rent strike continued through March. Local authorities attempted to hold another militia muster on March 22, but once again "confusion" prevailed.³² By now the situation had become serious enough that the Virginia Committee of Safety ordered a company of minutemen into Loudoun County, and made preparations to send additional militia from nearby Prince William County if necessary.³³ Authorities in Williamsburg felt the crisis had passed by early April, although as late as May Loudoun County remained in a "torn and distracted" condition, and the local Committee of Safety denounced a man named Richard Morlan for publicly refusing to report for militia duty.³⁴ Certainly by summer the rent strike and accompanying social turmoil had blown over without bloodshed or lasting consequences for any of the participants.³⁵

Throughout January and February, Cresswell continued to spend considerable time drinking and partying. The party ended on March 2 when he was forced to abandon his drinking companions in the tavern and go home sick. From March 3 until April 10 he was sick with some

³⁰ Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves & the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 177–178; McDonnell, *Politics of War*, 192–193.

³¹ Lund Washington to George Washington, February 29, 1776, in *The Papers of George Washington: Revolutionary War Series*, edited by W. W. Abbot, vol. 3 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988), 395–396.

³² Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 106.

³³ "Proceedings of the Virginia Committee of Safety," March 2 and April 2, 1776, *Revolutionary Virginia*, 6:163–164, 306; Holton, *Forced Founders*, 181–182; McDonnell, *Politics of War*, 194–195.

³⁴ Andrew Leitch to Leven Powell, May 15, 1776, in *A Biographical Sketch of Col. Leven Powell, Including His Correspondence During the Revolutionary War*, edited by Robert C. Powell (Alexandria, VA: G. H. Ramey & Son, 1877), 87; "An Enemy to the Public's Rights and Liberties," [Leesburg Committee of Safety,] May 14, 1776, *Revolutionary Virginia* 7:138; "In Committee, May 14, 1776," *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie), July 5, 1776, Accessible Archives, www.accessible.com (accessed April 8, 2013).

³⁵ McDonnell, *Politics of War*, 195–196.

unidentified illness that a doctor, rather unhelpfully, diagnosed as “Nervous Fever and Rheumatism.”³⁶ This illness caused him to miss the climax of the Loudoun rent strike during March. On April 11 he was finally able to leave his bed and resume a normal life, although he continued to suffer from exhaustion and occasional severe headaches and backaches for another three months.³⁷ Starting shortly after his recovery, he participated in a venture to make “Saltpetre,”³⁸ an ingredient in gunpowder needed for the war.³⁹ This project gave him something to do instead of drinking, and the sense of accomplishment helped dispel his depression. It also allowed him, by dint of hard work, to earn enough to pay for food and lodging.⁴⁰ If the contradiction between his unwillingness to serve in the American army and his willing efforts to help make gunpowder for that same army ever occurred to him, he did not note it in his diary. In fact, he might even have embraced the contradiction as a way to ingratiate himself with local authorities, or at least to deflect some of their suspicion.⁴¹

Despite his willingness to make saltpeter, Cresswell continued to plot his escape from patriot-controlled America. As 1776 wore away, he feebly toyed with various escape plans, none of which amounted to anything. News of the signing of the Declaration of Independence found him still in Loudoun County, busy making saltpeter. On July 9, 1776, he noted grimly, “News that the Sanhedrim [Congress] had declared the thirteen Colonies, Free and Independent States. That this was intended by the Northern Colonies from the first I am well convinced.” Abortive escape plans continued to parade through his diary. Finally on August 1 the news that Lord Dunmore had abandoned his schemes and put out to sea seemed to galvanize him to action. Armed with the knowledge that the British had recently invaded New York, he declared that he

³⁶ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 106.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 107–112.

³⁸ I.e. Potassium nitrate.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 106–107.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 107, 110, 112.

⁴¹ It is difficult to say whether this work would have made him more or less likely to be drafted for militia duty. On one hand, he was now working for a living, which made him a Virginia resident. On the other hand, he was performing work that already contributed to the war effort.

was “determined to go to New York to get to the Army.”⁴² Animated with unusual decisiveness, he at once set about preparing for his journey. He claimed that he kept his plans secret from everyone except his friend Patrick Cavan, a Loyalist. Thomson Mason gave him letters of introduction to several members of the Continental Congress, but Cresswell did not tell Mason the real reason for wanting the letters. This deception bothered Cresswell, but not enough to hinder him from continuing with his plan.⁴³

On August 28, 1776, he arrived in Philadelphia, and the following day he presented letters to, of all people, Francis Lightfoot Lee and Thomas Jefferson. For once Cresswell seemed to grasp the importance of keeping his political opinions to himself, and presumably Lee and Jefferson had no idea what sort of man they were talking with. They promised to obtain for him a pass from the Continental Congress that would permit him to travel freely throughout the newly independent states. Three days later he met again with Jefferson, who presented him with a pass written by John Hancock, the President of the Congress. Thus armed with his travel pass from the “great and mighty Sanhedrim,” as he put it, Cresswell spent another two days exploring Philadelphia before resuming his odyssey north toward New York and, he hoped, a joyful return to British-occupied territory.⁴⁴

While Cresswell made his way northeast, events in New York had taken a dark turn for the patriot cause. On August 22, British forces under William Howe had successfully landed on the southwestern end of Long Island, which then became a staging ground for the next phase of the assault on New York. On the night of August 26-27, British troops moved west toward the city, famously outmaneuvering American forces and penetrating the natural barrier of Brooklyn Heights by means of the narrow but unguarded Jamaica Pass. Washington’s army was only saved

⁴² Ibid., 113.

⁴³ Ibid., 113–114.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 115–116.

by the desperate, and equally famous, evacuation across the East River to New York City itself.⁴⁵ Cresswell arrived on September 7 to find the ragged and dejected remnants of Washington's army desperately attempting to fortify the city, while frightened civilians fled in droves.⁴⁶ Not all the citizens were frightened, however, for the city and surrounding countryside was far from unified in its support of the Revolution. Many New Yorkers, including prominent citizens and leaders, were staunch Loyalists who planned to welcome the British with open arms.⁴⁷

Certainly it seemed as if they, and Cresswell, would not have to wait long. Just across the East River on Long Island, and in plain sight on hundreds of ships anchored in the surrounding waters, lay the mighty British Army. Cresswell, however, had no intentions of waiting for the British to come to him. He was determined to find a way to cross over to them. At this stage, however, he encountered an unexpected problem. After searching the city, "no boat or canoo was to be found."⁴⁸ His objective was within sight, yet he lamented "it is utterly out of my Power to get to them."⁴⁹ He tried to console himself with the idea "never till now thought of" that Mason had made the New York journey possible by personally vouching for him, and that if he were to disappear so close to the British lines Mason might get in trouble for it.⁵⁰

There was another reason for Cresswell to abandon his escape that he did not mention in his diary at the time. Almost a year later, safe behind British lines, he revisited the episode to explain the rest of the story. As he wandered among the American troops that day in New York City, by a remarkable coincidence he happened to meet an American army chaplain named Thomson who was from Alexandria. Unfortunately for Cresswell, they had met and quarreled over politics back in Alexandria in November 1774—before the outbreak of war, when Thomson had been a Presbyterian minister and Cresswell had been trying to decide what to do after

⁴⁵ Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 235–239.

⁴⁶ At the time, New York City consisted solely of lower Manhattan.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁴⁸ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 163.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 163.

returning from Barbados. Thomson, who must have had a good memory, suspected that Cresswell was a Loyalist trying to escape to the British. Thomson treated him with “the greatest politeness” but had him placed under guard that night. The next day he told Cresswell that he knew his “sentiments” and that he could choose between returning to Virginia under guard or going to jail in New York. Cresswell protested that he was motivated only by “Curiosity” and had “no intention of going to the Enemy.” But Thomson would have none of it and remained adamant. Cresswell therefore acquiesced to the inevitable and chose to return to Virginia, asking only that he not be forced to return as an obvious prisoner. Thomson, who may have felt sorry for Cresswell, agreed.⁵¹

In the company of his new “companion,” Lieutenant Moland, Cresswell sadly retraced his steps to Loudoun County. Moland played the role of companion so well that “had it not been for the thoughts of him being as a guard over me, he would have been an excellent companion.” Although they returned via Philadelphia, there is no indication that any members of Congress were notified that the bearer of their pass had been caught trying to escape. Perhaps Cresswell had managed to keep his congressional pass secret from Thomson.⁵² On September 18 they arrived back in Leesburg.⁵³ Moland submitted his report to the Committee of Safety, and Cresswell faced an immediate trip to the Leesburg jail. But once again Thomson Mason came to the rescue from Alexandria. It is unclear whether this time he posted a monetary bail for Cresswell, but somehow he did manage to save him from prison. Instead Cresswell was placed on parole for the next four months, no doubt meaning that he promised not to escape or attempt to aid the British in any way.⁵⁴

Once again, Cresswell had managed to sabotage his own plan—in this instance, by accidentally meeting a man with whom he had had a political argument a year and a half earlier.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 118–119.

⁵³ Ibid., 120.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 163.

Now he found himself back in Loudoun County, still technically free but under greater suspicion and closer supervision than before. His one consolation must have been the repeated arrival of news of one American defeat after another as the British steadily pushed Washington's dwindling forces out of New York and across New Jersey toward Philadelphia. The Americans were growing increasingly desperate for additional troops. Cresswell found himself under constant pressure to join the army, although he continued to refuse.⁵⁵ His friend and protector, James Kirk, urged him to remain at least through spring 1777, insisting that "these disputes" between the colonies and England must end soon. Cresswell was loath to disappoint Kirk, who had done so much to help him and worked hard to keep him "out of Jail." More than ever, however, Cresswell feared that "every rascal looks on me as an enemy" and consequently insisted on trying to find a way to escape as soon as possible.⁵⁶

In addition to the stress and anxiety caused by the danger of being arrested or impressed into the army, he was once again without any kind of job to keep him occupied. Boredom and depression set in. He resumed his heavy social drinking, occasionally with spectacular results, as on November 19: "A very mad frolick this evening, set the house on fire three times, and broke Mr. Dreans [Dean's?] leg. . . got drunk and committed a number of foolish actions."⁵⁷ Despite the fact that he was under closer watch than ever he still argued about politics on occasion, and continued to dream of escape, only to quickly discard one far-fetched plan after another.⁵⁸ As news of the British army's march on Philadelphia reached Virginia in November, Cresswell decided to try to escape to Philadelphia. Before he could leave, however, three members of the Leesburg Committee confronted him and forced him to either promise not to escape or go to jail. Again Cresswell promised, and was forced to abandon yet another escape plan. And so for Cresswell 1776 came to a weary end.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 129.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 120, 127, 131.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 119–132.

1776 was not ending well for the patriot war effort, either. The British had seized control of New Jersey, and Washington's army was dwindling steadily. As David Hackett Fischer puts it, "the six months since the British troops arrived on Staten Island had been a cataract of disaster. Many on both sides thought that the rebellion was broken and that the American war was over."⁵⁹ But as the new year dawned American fortunes revived with Washington's surprise victory over the Hessians at Trenton. The further American victory at Princeton threw the British occupation of New Jersey into confusion. Cresswell recorded the remarkable effect of this news: "A few days ago [the people] had given up the cause for lost. Their late successes have turned the Scale, and now they are all Liberty mad again. Their Recruiting parties could not get a man. . . [but] now the men are coming in by companies. . . . Damn them all."⁶⁰ The unexpected victory vindicated the war effort and renewed flagging patriot spirits.⁶¹ General Washington was suddenly the hero of Virginia, and Cresswell could only vent to his diary at his sarcastic best:

[After Trenton] Washingtons name is extoled to the clouds. Alexander, Pompey and Hanibal were but pigmy Generals, in comparison to the Magnanimous Washington. Poor General Howe is rediculed in all companies and all my Country men abused. I am obliged to hear this daily and dare not speake a word in their favor. It is the Damed Hessians that has caused this. Curse the scoundrel that first thought of sending them here.⁶²

As Fischer argues, both Americans and British recognized the dramatic "reversal of fortune" in the war in the span of just a few months, starting with Washington's victory at Trenton.⁶³ If cruel fate, or luck, or Providence had thwarted Cresswell's plans and left him marooned in America, with the war now going badly for the British, at least he could blame the Hessians for everything.

Although Cresswell was far from the fighting in New Jersey, effects of the war nevertheless made themselves felt in tiny Leesburg. Cresswell continued to pay little attention to the threats of the Committee in his determination not to help the patriot cause. On January 27 a

⁵⁹ David Hackett Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 137.

⁶⁰ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 136.

⁶¹ Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, 259, 262.

⁶² Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 137.

⁶³ Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, 363.

group of British prisoners of war arrived in Leesburg and Cresswell was “summoned to mount Guard over them, but absolutely refused.” He recognized that his defiance might result in a trip to jail, but was willing to take the risk to avoid guarding a British prisoner of war. Yet there was still some measure of tolerance left in the citizens of Leesburg; after Cresswell refused a second request, the captain of the local militia changed his mind and released Cresswell from duty. Within a few days Cresswell was having supper with one of the prisoners, a man named John Gee whom he apparently already knew.⁶⁴ The evening ended with Cresswell giving Gee two shirts, a jacket, and a blanket.⁶⁵ For a second time Cresswell had comforted a British prisoner, and his claim to “neutrality” was becoming weaker.

Less than two months later, Cresswell managed to get into even more trouble when he found himself caught in the middle of a major public disturbance. One of Cresswell’s acquaintances named Dean owned a store in Leesburg. On March 26 “Six Waggoners” invaded Dean’s store and attacked him with “Whips.” Cresswell grabbed a stick and waded into the fight along with his friend Cavan. During the fight “Cavan . . . broke one of the mens arms” while Cresswell “bared anothers Scull for about six Inches long, and hurt another very much.” “Two of the ring leaders” each posted bond for “future good behaviour” and also paid for Dean’s medical bill and property damage to the store. Cresswell escaped the battle with nothing more serious than bruises. Dean suffered serious injuries, primarily a large loss of blood. Cresswell felt “uneasy” about having hurt one of the men so badly, but expressed no regret or remorse for his involvement in the fight. Indeed, the next day he seized the opportunity to draw a political moral from the story: “This is the happy fruits of Independanc[e], the populace are grown so insolent if you do not Tacitly submit to every insult. . . , Immediately [they] call you a Tory and think. . .

⁶⁴ Cresswell specifically mentioned being surprised at meeting Gee, as if he were an old friend. He also identified Gee as “he that married Miss Nancy Worthington,” further implying that he had known Gee or his wife back in England. Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 137, 199n.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 137–138.

they have the right, Nay even take it a meritorious Act, to knock your brains out.”⁶⁶ The fight may have begun as a simple attempt at assault or robbery, but perhaps it also grew out of yet another political quarrel.

Around this time Cresswell’s friend Mason suggested a new escape plan to him. The well-connected Mason offered to give him yet another letter of introduction, this time to Patrick Henry, who had recently been elected Virginia’s first republican governor. With Mason’s introduction, Cresswell would request permission to go aboard one of the British warships off the Virginia coast. Cresswell decided to act on the plan once warm weather arrived.⁶⁷ He considered the thought of leaving Virginia for good with mixed emotions. On one hand, he continued to believe that “I could have lived much better and made more money, As a Farmer in this county, With Five Hundred Pound[s], than I can in England, with Two Thousand.” That dream could never be, however, and he felt “happy in leaveing a Country where almost every one looks upon me with an Eye of jealousy and distrust,” and where he could find no way to avoid being pressed into the American army, which would have made him a “Paricide, Rebel, Murderer, Plunderer, and an open Enemy to the Country that gave me Birth.” Because of his “Plaguey, Squemish conscience” he felt he would never be able to live with himself if he were forced to fight against the British. His original plan to become a farmer in British America had been a good one, he insisted, “but this Cursed Rebellion has ruined all forever.”⁶⁸

Leaving Virginia meant leaving the friends he had made. He took a brief, final trip to the Winchester area to say good-bye to Gibbs and James Nourse. He mentioned his “regret” at parting from Gibbs, “a Friendly, Hospitable, Honest man.” He was equally reluctant to part with James Nourse and his family, commenting wistfully that the family had “so much good nature, affability, and harmony . . . amongst them that I am afraid I shall never see the like again.”⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Ibid., 142.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 141.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 144–145.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 143–144.

After returning to Leesburg, he then spent a final evening with his friend Thomson Mason. This farewell was marred by a “promise” that Mason “extorted . . . that entirely oversets all my intended schemes”⁷⁰ The promise had nothing to do with the plan to call on Governor Henry; that plan would still go forward. The promise Mason extracted was that Cresswell would not enlist in any army during the coming twelve months. His reaction to this promise speaks volumes about the evolution of Cresswell’s political opinions. After having lived in America for almost two and a half years, his loyalty to Britain was so strong and his hatred of the patriot cause so great that, once he reached the British, he intended to enlist in the army. But Mason, who seems to have had remarkable insight into Cresswell’s thoughts and character, had forced him to make the promise. Because Mason had previously saved him from jail by posting “a very large Sum” for his bail, he felt bound to honor this promise under any circumstances.⁷¹

News of Cresswell’s impending departure spread through the neighborhood. Unfortunately, it also came to the ears of the members of the Leesburg Committee of Safety. They decided to wish him farewell in their own way by sending two men to conduct an unannounced search of his belongings and papers. For some time Cresswell had been concerned about the possibility of his diary falling into the wrong hands and had left certain parts of his story untold, to be filled in once he had escaped.⁷² He now sometimes classified those he met as either “sleber” or “Sgnik Sdneirf”—“rebels” and “King’s Friends,” spelled backwards. He thought that these simple devices would protect him from the small, inquisitive minds of any Committee of Safety. According to Breen, merely using a word with such a strong “negative connotation” as “rebel” would have marked Cresswell as an enemy of the American cause. A rebel was a “criminal” resisting “lawful authority.”⁷³ Fortunately for Cresswell the strength of his code was not put to the test on this occasion, for he had advance warning of the Committee’s plan

⁷⁰ Ibid., 141.

⁷¹ Ibid., 158.

⁷² Ibid., 162.

⁷³ Breen, *American Insurgents*, 42.

to search his belongings and succeeded in hiding most of his papers before the search party arrived. The searchers found only one of his numerous small notebooks and took it back to the Committee. The Committee examined this one notebook carefully but, as he noted with relief, they found “nothing that amounts to treason against the States of America in my papers.” With a shudder at the thought of his narrow escape, Cresswell was free to go on his way.⁷⁴ Soon, he hoped, he would be beyond the clutches of Virginia’s rebellious inhabitants for good.

⁷⁴ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 148.

Chapter 5

Homeward Bound

Williamsburg, Virginia and British New York City, September 1776–October 1777

“This was a Paradise on Earth . . . Tis become the Theater of War,
the Country of . . . Lawless Oppression.” (July 19, 1777)

Nicholas Cresswell was a very different person from the optimistic young man who had arrived in Virginia less than three years earlier. Those early expectations of a new life in an agricultural paradise were dashed with the unfolding of events. In relatively quick succession he lost his money and his chance to buy land with the failure of the Barbados venture, lost his chance to obtain land for free with the failure of the Illinois venture, and became a pariah and virtual prisoner with the outbreak of the American Revolution. By the summer of 1776 he had given up on America entirely and wanted only to find a way to return to England, or at a minimum to some part of America under British occupation. His attempt to escape behind British lines in New York had been thwarted. But now it was 1777, the “year of the hangman” as some called it at the time, and Cresswell was determined that this year he would make good his escape. He would indeed make his escape, albeit in a way he could never have anticipated, but not before finally declaring himself an active, full-fledged supporter of the British cause and making himself a wanted man across the state where he had lived, yet never felt at home.

His new plan was to go to Williamsburg and use the letter of introduction he had from Thomson Mason to Governor Patrick Henry in order to petition for permission to leave Virginia.¹ Cresswell arrived in Alexandria for the last time on April 20. He booked passage on a pilot boat called the *Sally*, bound for Hampton, Virginia. He spent his last few days in Alexandria saying good-bye to his friends there. His parting from James Kirk was particularly difficult. Cresswell still owed Kirk money, which he repaid with yet more money borrowed against his father’s credit. He particularly admired and respected Kirk for the “great Friendship” and “Hospitality”

¹ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 141.

he had shown.² This was in fact a great understatement, for over the course of his stay in America, Kirk had gone far beyond the bounds of ordinary hospitality by lending Cresswell money, providing him with food and lodgings on numerous occasions, and helping to shield him from the Committees of Safety. He had done all these things despite the fact that he and Cresswell were poles apart politically, and Kirk was risking his reputation as a patriot by helping a known Loyalist sympathizer and suspected spy.

Just before and during his brief voyage to Hampton, Cresswell would participate in an adventure that signaled the end of his neutrality and his decision to dedicate himself to the British cause. On board the *Sally* Cresswell met another Loyalist named Collin Keir. Although Keir was a “stranger,” Cresswell took an immediate liking to him, describing him in unusually glowing terms as “a good hearty joyous companion and a good Christian.”³ Keir told Cresswell about a number of English prisoners who were being held in the Alexandria city jail. Keir wished to help these prisoners escape to New York, probably because they had all been soldiers together. He asked for help and Cresswell agreed. On either April 22 or 23 Keir and Cresswell succeeded in obtaining firearms, ammunition, and extra supplies. Neither Keir nor Cresswell were involved in the actual jailbreak, but both of them worked hard to help the prisoners make their getaway once out of jail. After hiding the arms and ammunition where the prisoners could find them, the two brought the extra supplies aboard the *Sally* on the 24th and sailed down the Potomac.

Once Cresswell and Keir were safely out of Alexandria, the time had come to implement the escape plan. At about midnight on the night of April 25–26, about a dozen British prisoners of war broke out of Alexandria city jail and made their way down the shores of the Potomac, possibly on stolen horses.⁴ According to the plan, the escapees were to rendezvous with the *Sally*

² Ibid., 149.

³ Ibid.

⁴ “One Hundred Dollars Reward,” *Maryland Gazette*, May 1, 1777, *Maryland Gazette Collection*, MSA SC 2731, M1282, Maryland Archives Online, <http://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc4800/sc4872/001282/html/m1282-1275.html> (accessed April 8, 2013). Some of the names of escaped

at a place called Cedar Point, near the mouth of the Potomac. There they would come aboard the *Sally*, hence the need for extra provisions.⁵ On April 26 the *Sally* dropped downriver from Nanjemoy to Cedar Point, and Keir attempted to row ashore and pick up the escapees, but could not because of contrary winds. The *Sally* lay hove-to that night, and the next morning was forced to sail on her way to Hampton with Cresswell and Keir but without the escapees.⁶ When the fugitives reached Cedar Point and found no *Sally* waiting for them, two of them were so discouraged that they retraced their steps to Alexandria and turned themselves in.⁷ The rest of the fugitives, as determined as Cresswell to reach New York by any means necessary, stole first a sloop and then a pilot boat. Then they traveled overland by night across Maryland into Delaware. Upon reaching Delaware Bay they stole another boat, made their way out into the bay, and were picked up by HMS *Roebuck*, which brought them to New York.⁸

Cresswell and Keir, who did not find out what happened until later, disembarked at Hampton on April 27. Cresswell traveled inland to Williamsburg, and on the morning of April 30 presented his letter of introduction to Patrick Henry at the Governor's Palace in Williamsburg. The two had breakfast together, and then Cresswell was interrogated in the Council Chamber of the Williamsburg Capitol building, where he presented his plea to be allowed to go on board a British ship. He remembered he "was examined very strictly" and was at least partly honest about his "sentiments . . . tho very imprudently." Not surprisingly, he was denied permission to go aboard a British ship, and was instead given vague promises about being allowed to sail on a ship called the *Albion*.⁹

While Cresswell was in Williamsburg being interrogated, Keir had gone to Norfolk,

prisoners listed in this advertisement do not match the names Cresswell recorded, but they both clearly refer to the same group of escaped prisoners.

⁵ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 168.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁷ *Virginia Gazette* (Dixon and Hunter), May 30, 1777, Accessible Archives, www.accessible.com (accessed April 8, 2013).

⁸ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 168

⁹ *Ibid.*, 152–153.

probably to learn anything he could of the fate of the escapees. News of the prison break was spreading rapidly from Alexandria. When he rejoined Cresswell at Hampton on May 2 he brought news that “the English prisoners have made their escape,” probably after having seen a report of the escape in a newspaper. Thus encouraged, it was time for Cresswell and Keir to plot their own escape from Virginia to British-occupied New York. With his earlier plan yet again frustrated by an impudent statement of his opinions, and having now irreversibly involved himself in the war, Cresswell was determined not to miss another opportunity to escape. This time he had what he had lacked the year before in New York—a boat.

Early on the morning of May 4, Cresswell and Keir made ready to set out in the *Dorothy*, a small sailing boat crewed only by a man and a boy. They hoped to evade the look-out boats and sail into the Chesapeake Bay to make contact with the British fleet. Their activities aroused the suspicion of the “Commodore” in charge of some of the look-out vessels, who asked them to ferry two of his men across the Bay—meaning that he was placing them under guard for the duration of their voyage. Cresswell and Keir feigned agreement. Soon the six of them were sailing up Hampton Roads, with Cresswell playing the part of an enthusiastic patriot to lull the guards into complaisance. Under cover of a bout of seasickness¹⁰ Cresswell and Keir made plans for subduing their guards and crew. Cresswell crept into the hold of the boat and knocked the stopper out of the water barrel, then a moment later pretended to notice the leak and raised the alarm. The two guards leaped into the hold to save the water, and the ship’s boy leaped in after them with the replacement stopper that Cresswell had “found.” Cresswell and Keir then slammed the hatch down and had “three of the fools secure.” They then ordered the master of the ship below with the others. When he refused, Cresswell put a pistol to the sailor’s head and Keir shouted “Dam his soul, Blow his brains out.” This awful threat had the desired effect, and the

¹⁰ Probably the seasickness was genuine. Cresswell was almost always sick the first few days of any sea voyage.

sailor meekly complied.¹¹

All that night, the *Dorothy* made her way out into the Chesapeake Bay. The next day, with no British fleet in sight, Cresswell and Keir had a great disagreement as to what they should do next. Keir wanted to sail farther out to sea in hopes of spotting the fleet. Cresswell feared to stray too far from shore in a small boat with only three days' provisions and no navigation instruments of any kind. He wanted to sail directly for New York, hugging the coastline. Keir won the argument, and fortunately just as the shore was disappearing from sight he spotted a sail. It turned out to be HMS *Phoenix*, a ship of the line with forty-four guns, bound for New York in convoy with a smaller ship, HMS *Bell and Mary*.¹² Keir and Cresswell were welcomed on board the *Phoenix*, where they explained their story to the captain. In a fit of goodwill, they reported their erstwhile guards merely as innocent civilians, and the captain promised to set them free on shore. The master of the *Dorothy*, as a seaman with knowledge of local waters, was promptly pressed into service as a pilot on board the *Phoenix*.¹³ Cresswell and Keir transferred to the *Bell and Mary* for the voyage to New York.¹⁴

Cresswell and Keir arrived in New York harbor on May 14, 1777. It had taken Cresswell nine months to travel what should have been the brief distance from lower Manhattan to the British fleet in New York Harbor, but he had finally done it. The sight of so many British ships and troops reminded Cresswell of his desire to enter the army, and his promise to Mason that he would not. He was now beyond the reach of any American Committee and would probably never see Mason again, yet because of the great respect and debt of gratitude he owed to Mason, he determined to keep his promise not to join the army, even though he wanted to.¹⁵

¹¹ Ibid., 154–155.

¹² Cresswell was told that *Bell and Mary* had originally been a British ship, the *Lady Juliana*. She had been captured by the Americans in summer 1776, who named her the *Billy and Mary*. The *Phoenix* had then re-captured her only a week earlier, re-named her the *Bell and Mary*, and was escorting her back to New York so the captain and crew of the *Phoenix* could receive their prize money. Ibid., 156, 200n.

¹³ Ibid., 155–156.

¹⁴ Ibid., 156.

¹⁵ Ibid., 158.

Two days later, Cresswell had an interview with General Howe himself. Howe, who was isolated in New York with minimal sources of information concerning American affairs, was probably delighted to be able to talk to a recent arrival. In answer to his questions about Virginia and whether there were “a great many friends to [the] Government there” Cresswell responded “with truth to the best of my knowledg[e].” That truth was that he had encountered very few Loyalists during his time in Virginia and had found the people there relatively united behind the patriot cause, especially after Washington’s triumphs in New Jersey in early 1777. Cresswell’s impression was that Howe was ill-informed about the true state of affairs in America and had unrealistic expectations about the number of Loyalists in Virginia. Cresswell’s pessimistic report was not what Howe wanted to hear. Cresswell also had to explain his reasons for not joining the army, which Howe accepted without argument.¹⁶ Although he felt bound by his promise not to fight, in his interview with General Howe he still affirmed his British loyalties by truthfully answering all of Howe’s questions about America. Cresswell’s political journey was now complete. Many times over the past two and a half years Cresswell had been accused of being a spy—someone pretending to be an innocent civilian, gathering information to aid the British. Although there is no indication that Cresswell ever intended to be a spy, at the end of it all he was willing to summarize what he knew for General Howe’s benefit, even though his information was probably of little direct strategic value. Were it not for his promise to Mason, he would have joined the army and taken up arms against America. In fact he did the next best thing in proving his loyalty to the British cause by becoming an informant for General Howe. The Committees of Safety had been right; he had left political neutrality behind.

Although Cresswell seems to have had no qualms about answering Howe’s questions, he did feel uncomfortable about having broken his parole “with great reluctance only one day.” The occasion for breaking his parole was almost certainly the day (April 22 or 23) when he and Keir had rounded up the supplies and firearms for the escapees in Alexandria. Cresswell finally

¹⁶ Ibid.

learned the whole truth of what happened to the fugitives when on June 18 he met some of the escapees. They had with them a copy of an advertisement by the Commonwealth of Virginia offering “a reward of 200 Dollars for takeing Collin Keir, and Nicholas Cresswell, as the two Villains that contrived aided and assisted, the Torys, Sailors and Soldiers that were confined in Alexandria jail to make their escape.” Although the advertisement loaded the two with “every scandalous Epithet that scurrility Malice and reveng[e] can invent” Cresswell mostly seemed relieved that the advertisement said nothing about him having broken his parole. Looking back on the affair from the safety of New York City, Cresswell regretted his willingness in “Risquing Life, Character or Fortune in doing friendly acts for strangers” not because it was against the law, or because it made him an enemy of America, but because it required him to break his parole and because the surviving escapees who made it to New York seemed to Cresswell “a set of ungratefull Scoundrels.”¹⁷ On their part, they may have appeared ungrateful because they held him responsible for the failure of the *Sally* to appear as planned at Cedar Point.

Cresswell spent June and most of July waiting idly in British-occupied New York City for a British warship to leave for England. Time hung heavily on his hands. He did his best to occupy himself by bringing his diary up to date while events were still “fresh in my memory.”¹⁸ He also spent time exploring the city, finding it greatly changed. When he was there in 1776 the physical city had not yet suffered any significant damage from the war, although most of the civilian occupants had evacuated, with only patriot troops and a few residents remaining. Now, a year later, he found that the factors of population and damage had been reversed. British-occupied New York in 1777 was crammed to overflowing with both civilians and soldiers, while the physical infrastructure of the city had suffered terribly under the strains of war and occupation. In particular, he found that the city was actually more than twenty-five percent smaller than it had been the year before.

¹⁷ Ibid., 168–169. The author is unable to find any surviving publication in which the advertisement for Cresswell’s arrest appeared.

¹⁸ Ibid., 162.

At about midnight on September 21, 1776, less than a week after Washington's abandonment of the city and the arrival of occupying British troops, fire broke out in the Fighting Cocks Tavern in lower Manhattan. Fanned by high winds, the flames raced through the city, leaping from one wooden building to another. Some buildings were saved by hastily organized bucket brigades, but the fire continued to rage for almost nine hours until it finally reached open fields on the northern edge of town and burned itself out.¹⁹ Cresswell would later repeat the common wisdom among the British, that Americans had set the fire deliberately as the result of a "hellish design."²⁰ In reality, although the fire certainly seemed to work to the patriots' advantage, no proof has ever been found that American troops or sympathizers started it. Washington himself summed up patriot feelings about the fire: while watching the far-off glare from his new headquarters on Harlem Heights, he is reported to have said, "Providence, or some good honest fellow, has done more for us than we were disposed to do for ourselves."²¹

As a result of the Great Fire and the recent influx of Loyalist refugees from surrounding colonies, Cresswell found the city in the throes of an acute housing shortage. After coming ashore from the *Bell and Mary* on May 15, he and Keir took lodgings at "a little dirty pot-house" because it was the only place they could find on short notice.²² After spending two miserable nights there, Cresswell could not stand the "nasty stinking Blackgaard [*sic*] place" any longer, so he ventured out into the city, desperately looking for better accommodations. He found new lodgings at the home of a Quaker named John Titus.²³ By the time he had stayed there a week, he decided that Titus and his wife were "two of the greatest Jews . . . and . . . Hypocrites" he had ever known, because "they make, what they call their Sacred Religion, a Cloke to cover the vilest of crimes." He did not choose to elaborate what those crimes might have been; perhaps he meant that they were patriot sympathizers, or even that they were secretly spying on the British for the

¹⁹ Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 241–242.

²⁰ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 172.

²¹ Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 242.

²² Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 158.

²³ *Ibid.*, 159.

Americans. Nevertheless the accommodations at the Titus home seem to have been comfortable enough, albeit expensive.²⁴ After about three weeks, a Captain Park of the HMS *Edward*, whom Cresswell had asked about passage back to England, invited him to come live on board his ship until it was ready to sail. Since this would be much cheaper than paying for lodgings on shore, Cresswell readily agreed.²⁵

While waiting for the *Edward* to sail, Cresswell spent hours exploring the city's fortifications and even ventured as far afield as Governor's Island and Jamaica, Long Island. While visiting Long Island, he particularly noted that he and his fellow sightseers were "now and then regaled with the stink of a dead Rebel," American casualties left unburied after the fighting almost a whole year earlier.²⁶ The more he explored the city, the more grim he found it to be. Washington's troops had dug countless ditches, trenches, and fortifications in their futile effort to defend the city the previous summer. Cresswell now found that these ditches and trenches were perpetually full of "stagnate water" and "filth of every kind," doubtless a veiled reference to raw sewage. Because of the housing shortage and the lack of sanitation, diseases of all kinds ran rampant through the population, especially among those who remained homeless after the fire. The combined stench of stagnant water, dead bodies, garbage, sewage, and unwashed humanity was so overpowering that Cresswell, himself a man of the eighteenth century who was well accustomed to unpleasant odors, dramatically declared that "if any author had an inclination to write a treatise upon stinks and Ill smells, he never could meet with more subject matter, [than] in New York." The damaged, burnt, festering condition of the city seemed to him a fitting symbol for the entire Revolution—the city, like the thirteen colonies as a whole, had once been a triumph of commerce and a fitting symbol of the greatness of the British empire, now reduced to a charred shadow of its former self, scarred by the effects of warfare, and brim-full of human misery.²⁷

²⁴ Ibid., 161.

²⁵ Ibid., 164.

²⁶ Ibid., 165.

²⁷ Ibid., 172–173.

Cresswell himself witnessed a particularly shocking example of that suffering. He spent the evening of June 17 at a tavern in the company of a man named Furnival, the commander of the HMS *Bell and Mary*. After drinking their fill they left the tavern together to return to their respective ships. As they picked their way through the charred rubble of one of the burned areas, they heard a woman crying out in pain. After a brief search among the blackened ruins, they discovered the source of the cries—a woman in labor. Between contractions, she told them she was the widow of a soldier and begged them to help her. The two men picked her up and carried her out of the burned area to the nearest house, which belonged to a saddle-maker. They roused the sleeping owner, explained the situation, and asked whether he would take the woman in. At first he flatly refused, insisting that his house was not “a Lying-in hospital” for a whore.²⁸ Cresswell and Furnival would not take no for an answer, alternately threatening and cajoling, while the woman insisted she could not move again. The saddle-maker realized these people were not going to go away, so he grudgingly led them behind the house to his shop, but still refused to do anything further to help. Cresswell and Furnival made the woman as comfortable as they could on some old blankets. Then Furnival hurried off to find a midwife, while Cresswell remained behind to make sure the saddle-maker did not kick the woman out. The woman begged the saddle-maker for help “in the [most] pitifull tone,” but the hard-hearted man ignored her and went back into the house, leaving Cresswell alone with the woman. Her labor was growing steadily more intense. Soon he began to fear that the baby would arrive before the midwife, and that he would be “under the disagreeable necessity [of] trying my skill in the Obstetric way.”²⁹

Just when Cresswell felt he could stand the suspense no longer, Furnival arrived, dragging with him a woman who looked more like “an old Drunken W[hore]” than a midwife. Despite the poor woman’s intense labor, the midwife insisted that Cresswell and Furnival pay her

²⁸ Cresswell was unwilling to spell out the word “whore,” instead conveying the idea with the abbreviation “W-r.”

²⁹ Ibid., 167.

two dollars³⁰ before she would do anything. Each of the men gave her a dollar, whereupon she “fell to work,” implying that despite her seedy appearance, she must have known what she was doing. Cresswell was particularly aghast at the laboring woman’s increasingly piercing screams. After only “about ten minutes,” the baby finally arrived—a girl—and was wrapped in her mother’s apron and the men’s handkerchiefs, since there were no swaddling clothes to be had. The men spent two more dollars to buy the mother some food and drink, and stayed with her until she was sufficiently recovered to begin thanking them for “saving her life.” They never saw the saddle-maker again, but they could hear the saddle-maker’s wife inside the house cursing at the poor woman.³¹

Finally, about midnight, Cresswell and Furnival took their leave and made their way back to the ships, after promising to return the next morning. Furnival gave the woman two dollars, and Cresswell gave her a dollar and a quarter—the last of his money, leaving him penniless. He summed up his narrative of the experience by saying that he felt glad he had been able “to relieve such real distress,” then immediately followed that sentiment with the seemingly harsh comment that he hoped the baby would be “dead before morning,” by which he meant that he thought the child would be better off dead than have to endure the harsh, bleak existence he knew must lie ahead of her. Early the next morning, however, an opportunity unexpectedly arose for Cresswell to see the British encampment at Brunswick, New Jersey. He seemed almost relieved to have an excuse to put off having to visit “the Girl in the Straw,” as he now called her.³²

Cresswell chose an interesting moment to observe the British army in action. Ever since Washington’s surprising victories at Trenton and Princeton in January, Howe’s forces had frequently skirmished with American militia in the New Jersey countryside in a series of indecisive actions known as the “Forage War.” By June, Howe was impatient to force Washington’s army into a decisive battle. He decided to march his forces from their winter

³⁰ About half a pound.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 167–168.

quarters in Brunswick out into the countryside, as if he intended to strike overland at Philadelphia, in the hopes that Washington would be lured out of hiding. Washington reacted cautiously, sending light forces to harass Howe's army while keeping most of his troops in their fortified positions, in order to avoid a major battle. Howe soon realized that Washington was not going to take the bait. He decided to retreat to New York and instead move on Philadelphia by sea. Howe's army returned to Brunswick on the morning of June 19, without receiving significant damage from pursuing American skirmishers.³³

For the next two days Howe's forces lingered at Brunswick to destroy the fortifications they had built.³⁴ During that time, on June 20, Cresswell left New York to see the British Army. On the way up the Raritan River he heard rumors that the British had suffered a terrible defeat, and was glad to discover the Army intact when his ship arrived in Brunswick. He spent the next day, June 21, visiting with Colin Keir, who had already rejoined the army. He also toured the British encampments on the heights surrounding Brunswick. The sight of the splendid British army renewed his desire to become a soldier so that he could "have an opportunity of revenging myselfe upon these ungratefull Scoundrels." That evening he accompanied the 71st Highland Regiment, under the command of Brigadier General Alexander Leslie, and a detachment of Hessian Jägers, to take up a position as an advance guard near Bonham Town, between Brunswick and Amboy. Cresswell spent a short, miserable night tormented by mosquitoes and the stench of nearby American casualties buried in shallow graves.³⁵

³³ Mark V. Kwasny, *Washington's Partisan War, 1775–1783* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1996), 145–148, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), <http://web.ebscohost.com> (accessed April 7, 2013); Stephen R. Taaffe, *The Philadelphia Campaign, 1777–1778* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 36, 39–40; William Howe to George Germain, July 5, 1777, in *The London Gazette*, August 19, 1777, <http://www.london-gazette.co.uk/issues/11798/> (accessed April 7, 2013); Johann von Ewald, *Diary of the American War: A Hessian Journal*, translated and edited by Joseph P. Tustin (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 64–65; John Andre, *Major Andre's Journal: Operations of the British Army . . . June 1777 to November 1778* (Tarrytown, NY: William Abbatt, 1930; reprint, n.p.: Arno Press, 1968), 28–29.

³⁴ Taaffe, *Philadelphia Campaign*, 40.

³⁵ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 169–170; Kwasny, *Partisan War*, 150; Andre, *Journal*, 29; Ewald, *Diary*, 65. Using modern place names, Cresswell's camp was near Metuchen, NJ, between New Brunswick and Perth Amboy.

In the pre-dawn darkness of June 22, the main body of Howe's forces back in Brunswick struck their tents and set out for Amboy, only about fifteen miles distant. They caught up with Cresswell and the 71st Highlanders at about eight o'clock. "At that instant" shots began to ring out as an American scouting party clashed with British sentinels. When the shooting first began Cresswell was only about three hundred yards from the action, but on the advice of one of the Highlanders he prudently retreated behind a breastwork on a small hill, giving him a good view of the unfolding skirmish. A company of Highlanders attempted to flank the Americans, but encountered a corps of about six hundred Americans that had been sent to occupy the Short Hills near Metuchen. The opposing sides then exchanged two volleys of musket fire, after which the Highlanders and Jägers launched a bayonet charge, forcing the Americans to retreat. The Americans were able to exact additional damage, however, when a small battery of field artillery hidden in the trees opened fire on the British flank. Nevertheless, the Americans were outnumbered and the British took possession of the field and captured their artillery. Cresswell thought the entire affair lasted about thirty-five minutes. He listed British casualties at 39 killed and 27 wounded, while the Americans suffered 150 killed and 40 captured.³⁶

As soon as the battle was over, Cresswell found "a shocking scene" where the two sides had exchanged musket fire. For the first time, he now stood face to face with the horrors of the battlefield: "Some dead, others dieing. Death in different shapes, some of the wounded making the most pittifull lamentations, others that were of different parties cursing each other as the author of their misfortunes." He noted one British soldier who had been shot through both legs busy cleaning the blood off of his gun and reloading it. Cresswell asked him why. "To be ready in case any of the Yankeys [come this] way again," he replied contemptuously.³⁷ Although the British had won this particular skirmish, Cresswell knew that the British attempt to occupy New

³⁶ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 170–171; Andre, 30; Ewald, *Diary*, 65, 68. Ewald confirms Cresswell's estimate of the number of Americans captured.

³⁷ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 171.

Jersey was a failure and that the army was planning to evacuate the area and open a new front elsewhere, although he did not know where.³⁸

Cresswell accompanied the army the rest of the way to Perth Amboy, then found a boat to take him over to Staten Island. On June 23 he found another boat to take him back to Manhattan, and resumed his old berth aboard the HMS *Edward*. He soon heard from Furnival that the infant daughter of the “Girl in the Straw” had died and that some British officers had taken steps to see to it that the mother was cared for. He was “glad” that someone had stepped forward to help the poor mother but recorded no emotion over the death of the child.³⁹

A few days later, however, he was presented with yet another chance to help someone in need. On the night of July 7, he was once again on his way back from the tavern late at night, this time alone. As he passed by one of the innumerable ditches, he heard what sounded like someone “floundering” in the darkness. He stopped to look, and by the light of the moon could see “something like a human being stir in the mud a little.” Without regard for his own cleanliness, Cresswell plunged into the muddy ditch and soon fished out a man, unconscious and with his mouth full of dirt. Cresswell cleaned the dirt out of the man’s mouth as best he could, then went to find help. Unfortunately, the nearest sentry turned out to be a Hessian who spoke only German. The two men “sputtered at one another for some time” without positive result. Finally the Sergeant of the Guard arrived. After discovering that the sergeant understood English, Cresswell repeated his story. The sergeant got a light and returned with Cresswell. They found that the poor man had now regained consciousness. He told them that his name was John Leydum⁴⁰ and that he had been “insulted by a Girl of the Town,” had in return treated her “rather indelicately,” and was then beaten up by “one of her Bullies”⁴¹ who threw him into the ditch and left him to drown or suffocate. Cresswell and the Hessian sergeant helped Leydum back to his lodgings, after which

³⁸ Ibid., 172.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Cresswell later spelled his name “Legdum.” Ibid., 191.

⁴¹ The woman was almost certainly a prostitute, meaning that the “bully” was probably her pimp.

Cresswell found a doctor to assist Leydum. For the second time in as many weeks, Cresswell received the thanks of a needy individual for having saved a life.⁴²

Cresswell's time in New York was now finally drawing to a close. The *Edward* was now ready to sail for England as soon as the other ships arrived to make up the convoy. Before he left New York, however, he had one final taste of the city's moral depravity. Two days after saving Leydum, Cresswell went into New York with one of his fellow passengers to purchase stores for the upcoming voyage to England. After finishing his errands, he went to a social tea with a group of ladies at the home of a Mrs. Bennet, without providing any explanation of who Mrs. Bennet was or how he came to be invited. He spent most of the tea deep in conversation with a "Mrs. L—s," the wife of an officer whom he described as "a handsome, polite Young lady." In particular, he listened attentively while she gossiped about another woman "in the neighborhood" who had been caught in the act of "fornication." Mrs. L—s was vehement in her denunciation of this woman and her "Heinous crime," no doubt with Cresswell nodding in polite agreement. After tea was done, Cresswell walked Mrs. L—s back to her house, where she "insisted" that he have supper and "spend the evening" with her. Cresswell did not require much convincing, so they had supper and then continued to converse for quite some time over "a Chearfull glass of good Wine." At this point in the text, Cresswell suddenly switched from his usual factual description into a long, rambling diatribe combining his opinions of her with philosophizing about the nature of women and marriage.⁴³ Based on hints he included, however, it is clear enough what happened next: Cresswell went to bed with the "handsome" Mrs. L—s and stayed all night.⁴⁴

Important details about the encounter remain unclear. Nevertheless, the way in which Cresswell chose to explain this episode and the language he used to describe Mrs. L—s reveal far more about his views on marriage and women than any other portion of the text. During his time

⁴² Ibid., 174–175.

⁴³ Thornely redacted a substantial portion of this entry from his edition of the diary text, meaning that few historians have ever even seen Cresswell's description of this episode as he originally wrote it. Cresswell, *Journal of Nicholas Cresswell*, 249–250.

⁴⁴ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 175–176.

in New York he had encountered several people he identified with contempt as “religious hypocrites.” In Mrs. L—s, however, he claimed to have found the ultimate example of hypocrisy: she had earlier spoken strongly against the sin of “fornication,” yet when they were alone together after supper, “I soon found she was made of warm flesh and blood.” He viewed her as a puzzling and contradictory person: “In publick she has all the apparent religion of the most rigid and Hypocritical Presbyterian Parson, the neatness and temperance of a Quaker with the Modesty of a Vestal. [But] in private the Air and behaviour of a professed courtezan, And in Bed the Lechery of a Guinea Pig.”⁴⁵

This last statement contains several different layers of meaning. On the surface, it is obviously a comment on her bedroom manners. It also seems to imply that she was the one who seduced him. By blaming her and calling her a lecherous “courtezan,” he was in fact drawing on a standard literary and cultural trope—the image of a deviant, sexually voracious woman who was just lying in wait to captivate or ensnare a willing victim.⁴⁶ This reveals a basic paradox in British views of female sexuality in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. At the risk of oversimplification, women were supposed to be submissive and obedient to the headship of their husbands, yet at the same time, they were also seen as dangerous and “sexually threatening” to men. Men, on the other hand, may have held a dominant role in society and the household, yet they were also vulnerable because their sexual desires could be manipulated and used against them by scheming, uncontrolled women.⁴⁷ Clearly Cresswell felt that this was precisely what had happened to him.

The reality underneath Cresswell’s perception is more complex. Lacking the woman’s perspective, it is hard to say who seduced whom. His resort to the common image of a lurking seductress was a cheap explanation, provided for him by the culture of his day, and designed to

⁴⁵ Ibid., 176.

⁴⁶ Ruth H. Bloch, “Changing Conceptions of Sexuality and Romance in Eighteenth-Century America,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, vol. 60, no. 1 (January 2003): 27.

⁴⁷ Foster, *Sex and the Eighteenth-Century Man*, 54.

soothe his conscience and justify, or at least excuse his actions. Clearly his conscience needed soothing. Even more than in the case of his relationship with Miss Grimes, he knew instinctively that what he had done was wrong. “Nicholas, if ever thou sined religiously in thy life, it has been this time,” he told himself, resorting to the archaic grammar of the King James Bible as if to emphasize the moral and religious nature of his crime.⁴⁸ Up until this time he had slept only with women who were unmarried—“fornication” in the language of his day, a serious enough sin. Now, however, he had gone one step further to commit adultery with a married woman whose husband was probably still alive, an even graver offense in the hierarchy of sexual transgressions. His regret did not translate into actual repentance, however, for when he received a love letter from her two days later he visited her a second time, though without recording what happened.⁴⁹

On July 19, the HMS *Edward* finally weighed anchor and set sail for England.⁵⁰ Cresswell was not his usual self on the voyage home; after having worked so hard and so long to escape to British lines, the actual thought of returning to England “a Beggar” cast him into deep depression.⁵¹ The *Edward* anchored at Portsmouth, England on August 22 in order to take shelter from a gale. Cresswell went ashore and spent the night in Portsmouth. By a remarkable coincidence, the next morning he encountered John Leydum, the man he saved from the ditch in New York. Leydum was a penniless Loyalist who had decided to flee to Britain to escape persecution. Cresswell and Leydum promptly went out on the town and had an “adventure” together. Cresswell did not record what this adventure was, saying only that he spent the last of his money, engaged in “very imprudent Conduct” and had a “very narrow escape.” Late that night he returned to the *Edward*, which set sail the following morning.⁵²

The *Edward* arrived in London and dropped anchor at Deptford on the evening of August 27. To Cresswell’s jaded eyes, England seemed small and quaint; in comparison with the broad

⁴⁸ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 176.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 191.

waters of the Ohio, the Thames was “a narrow crooked river.”⁵³ Instead of hurrying back to his family, he lingered for almost three weeks in London. In part he delayed out of a hope that he might be able to get a commission in the Marines, notwithstanding his promise to Mason. He spent most of the time seeing the sights of London and trying to have a good time, living on money borrowed from friends and traveling companions. At this point the text takes on a note almost of desperation. He admitted that he longed to be home, and yet feared having to face his family, his old friends, and most of all his own failure. For a while he occupied himself with a hectic round of sightseeing that included Vauxhaul Gardens, Haymarket Theater, the British Museum, Lever’s Museum, the Old Bailey courts, Newgate Prison, and Westminster Abbey. Eventually he tired of London, and with his funds long exhausted, he could delay the inevitable no longer.⁵⁴

Nicholas Cresswell finally returned home to Edale, Derbyshire on September 24, 1777. It was not a happy homecoming. Although his mother was overjoyed to see him, his father made no attempt to slaughter the fatted calf for the return of his prodigal son. Instead he left to go to a fair soon after Cresswell arrived, leaving instructions for him to start shearing or binding corn the very next day. Cresswell was sick and deeply depressed as he wearily resumed his old farm chores. His friends were glad to see him again, but he soon tired of “answering very silly questions.” He also discovered to his disgust that opinion in England was already turning against the war in America so that “the people are in general . . . prejudiced in favour of the Rebels.”⁵⁵ On October 13, he concluded in his last substantive entry, “there is such a sameness in my life at present it is not worth while to keep a Journal.” After a few more desultory remarks, he brought his journal to a close. No further diary manuscripts have come to light.

⁵³ Ibid., 191.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 192–194.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 195.

Little is known of the remainder of his life. On April 21, 1781, Cresswell married Mary Mellor at Wirksworth in Derbyshire, and they continued to live in Edale.⁵⁶ They had eleven children in all, only six of whom lived past childhood.⁵⁷ A small collection of surviving letters written in the early 1780s provide a few tantalizing additional clues. These letters were between Cresswell and two British antiquarians named William Bray and John Wilson. By then Cresswell had developed a great curiosity about the history of his native Derbyshire and nearby Yorkshire, perhaps growing out of his earlier fascination with American Indian culture. He was particularly interested in ancient ruins, such as Norman castles, the sites of Roman camps, and Druidical standing stones. He spent a considerable amount of time mapping and measuring some of these ruins, although the demands of “business” sometimes prevented him from doing so.⁵⁸ He never said what the nature of his “business” was, nor is it clear how he was able to support his wife and growing family. In the months leading up to his marriage he again enquired about obtaining a commission in the Marines, and once again met with failure.⁵⁹ In one letter he complained that he had been “very unlucky and met with many disappointments.” It is unclear whether he was referring to his time in America or other subsequent events, since unfortunately the rest of the letter has been lost.⁶⁰ Bray and Wilson both knew about his American journal.⁶¹ When Bray asked for more information on Delaware Indian war markings, Cresswell replied that he was happy to answer questions about “my most *favourite people*, the Indians.”⁶² Despite all the disappointments and failures, at least some parts of Cresswell’s American odyssey remained pleasant memories that he would cherish for the rest of his life.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 196.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 205.

⁵⁸ Cresswell to [William Bray], n.d., The National Archives of the UK (TNA): Public Record Office (PRO) D6230/9/4.

⁵⁹ Bray to [Cresswell], December 16, 1780, TNA: PRO D6230/8/2; Bray to Cresswell, February 15, 1781, TNA: PRO D6230/8/4; Bray to Cresswell, April 14, 1781, TNA: PRO D6230/8/8.

⁶⁰ [Cresswell to Bray], February 14, 1781, TNA: PRO D6230/9/12.

⁶¹ Bray to [Cresswell], November 14, 1780, TNA: PRO D6230/8/1; John Wilson to Cresswell, December 18, 1780, TNA: PRO D6230/8/16.

⁶² Bray to Cresswell, January 25, 1781, TNA: PRO D6230/8/3; [Cresswell to Bray], February 14, 1781, emphasis original.

The final return to England and readjustment to English country life was intensely anti-climactic. Returning to England, however, had never been part of the plan, but was rather the culmination of the failure of his plans to settle in America and establish a new life for himself. The story of Nicholas Cresswell began with hopeful expectation and ended with a bittersweet mixture of fond memories, regret, and sorrow.

Conclusion

The journal of Nicholas Cresswell can be read two different ways. At its most basic level, the text includes a fascinating narrative. Scenes such as the slapstick first encounter with Indians on the Ohio River, the pathos of his parting from Nancy, the ironic encounter with Thomas Jefferson, the daring escape into the Chesapeake Bay, and the bitter discouragement of his return to England, encompass the entire gamut of human emotion. This depth of emotional content, combined with the cinematic clarity of his descriptions, help the text to transcend its humble origins as a mundane catalog of daily events. Despite its rough edges, the diary-cum-memoir of Nicholas Cresswell qualifies as a forgotten gem in the annals of American history.

Beyond the narrative, however, a close study of the diary raises important issues of interpretation, such as the meanings and motives of Cresswell's actions. A crucial question is exactly how to categorize him politically. Was Nicholas Cresswell a Loyalist? Harold B. Gill, Jr. and George M. Curtis III, the editors of the new edition, argue that he was "A Man Apart," neither Loyalist nor patriot and therefore apparently neutral.¹ By contrast, historian Kathy McGill takes for granted that he was a Loyalist.² Clearly he was no patriot, and it is also true that, since he was a visitor from England and not a native-born American, he was technically not a Loyalist, at least as historians commonly define the term.³ He may have begun as a neutral, and made an effort to remain so. But as the Revolution consumed American society, remaining neutral proved difficult. In the end his total lack of sympathy or understanding for the American cause and his loyalty to the King drove him to support the British war effort.

The transition from bystander to active participant in the British cause occurred in three distinct stages, each marked by a particular event. His willingness to provide sympathy, but not tangible aid, to a Loyalist by visiting John Connolly in prison marked the first stage. His willingness to provide tangible personal aid to John Gee, the British prisoner-of-war, marked the second stage. His involvement in Colin

¹ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, x.

² McGill, "Man of Mystery."

³ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, x.

Keir's plot to help British prisoners-of-war escape from Alexandria jail marked the final stage, transforming him into an outlaw. Similarly, his determination to escape led him ultimately to become an informant to General Howe, thereby ironically confirming the baseless suspicions of being a spy that had dogged his footsteps across America. Above all, his loyalty to Britain made him want to join the British army. Cresswell arrived in America as a tourist, then became a neutral, and then ultimately a frustrated, would-be servant of the Crown.

If Nicholas Cresswell was not a Loyalist, then, that is only as a result of the narrow technical definition of the term. Indeed, he does not fit into any of the neat, pre-packaged categories of Revolutionary political involvement. As Gill and Curtis put it, Cresswell "steadfastly fails to fit easily into historical pigeonholes."⁴ Perhaps this is one of the reasons his story has been overlooked. The American Revolution was such a politically divisive event that even two centuries later, the historiography remains strongly divided along the basic fault-line of the conflict: America versus Britain. Biographers of Americans during this era tend to focus either on patriots or Loyalists. Political historians focus on the colonies and Congress or on the British ministry and the Crown. Military historians focus on either American or British officers and tactics. The division is based in historical reality. Cresswell himself had come to understand by the end of 1775 that there was no place for him in a sharply divided America. The historiographic landscape of the American Revolution remains almost as starkly black-and-white over two centuries later. Seemingly there is no room for a gray, anomalous figure such as Nicholas Cresswell. If current categories such as "patriot" and "Loyalist" are not sufficient, then Cresswell needs a new sub-category: that of loyal British transient. History is, after all, the study of particulars.

With occasional exceptions, histories of the American Revolution often ignore or de-emphasize the role of the Committees of Public Safety. Certainly they are not prominently featured in many textbooks or popular histories, and as a result are almost completely absent from public memory and discourse about the Revolution. By contrast, Cresswell's experience vividly illustrates the crucial role the Committees played in marshalling support for the Revolution and in filling the power vacuum created in

⁴ Ibid.

local communities by the collapse of British colonial administration. His descriptions of their role in American local government also serves to confirm T. H. Breen's argument that the early Revolution was marked by a grassroots insurgency, of which the Committees were one of the most visible manifestations. Cresswell's account stands as a reminder to future historians that no account of American political change in the mid-1770s can be comprehensive without taking into account the importance of these Committees in the daily lives of both patriots and Loyalists.

When Cresswell reflected on his time in America during his final weeks in New York, he did not dwell on his bad luck in losing his cotton, or the collapse of the Illinois expedition, or even on his time among the Indians. Instead his regrets revolved around the American Revolution. He felt that the American decision to rebel against His Majesty's lawful government precisely when he was trying to establish himself there was the reason for the failure of his plans. He held the American people as a whole, including the revolutionary leaders, responsible for ruining his life. Watching Howe's army in New Jersey filled him with a lust for revenge, and if his desire to join the Marines in 1781 is any indication of his state of mind, he intended neither to forgive nor forget. Yet as he reflected on the Revolution in the closing pages of his diary, he wrote more in sorrow than in anger of how "a few designing Villians" had deceived the American people "by horrid lies" to revolt against the Crown. This rebellion had not brought the promised "Liberty and Freedom," but rather "Tyranny, Oppression and Slavery" at the "Caprice of a Vile Congress." Nor had it brought peace and prosperity, but rather "the dreadfull horrors of War poverty and Wretchedness."⁵ The Revolution was a tragedy on two levels: a tragedy to him personally, since his plans were now "ruined . . . forever," and a tragedy of national scope, transforming "a Paradice on Earth" into "the Theater of War, the Country . . . of Slavery, Confusion, and Lawless Oppression."⁶

Concern over the Revolution necessarily looms large in any study of Cresswell's diary. Yet he also spent about seven months on the frontier, as far as possible from the unfolding conflict in

⁵ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 181–182.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 145, 188.

Massachusetts and coastal Virginia. While his time in Virginia and New York only strengthened prior views on the political situation, his time in Pennsylvania and the Ohio River Valley completely changed his perception of the American Indian. When he first arrived in the west, his ignorance of Indian culture in general was matched only by his terror of Indians as individuals. What little he did know about them was built out of mutually contradictory stereotypes. Indians were, on the one hand, profoundly dangerous, a lurking menace that might strike at any moment. Yet on the other hand, they were contemptible, uncivilized brutes.

Cresswell's perspective on Indians changed in two distinct stages. The image of Indians as wanton killers came crashing down in a single moment as a result of the farcical encounter between his comically multi-ethnic traveling companions and a friendly Delaware fishing party on the broad waters of the Ohio. After this episode, he rarely feared the Indians, although he still viewed them with a certain level of contempt. This attitude changed again after visiting the villages under the leadership of Moravian missionary David Zeisberger. Seeing Christian Indians worshipping according to European customs in a neat, orderly chapel destroyed his prior view of Indians as uncivilized brutes. Then, once he took "Nancy" as his "temporary wife" and made a conscious effort to begin integrating himself into Delaware culture, he came to realize that the non-Christian Indians were not uncivilized either, but actually had a culture and society of their own. His audience with the Delaware "King" and his participation in a dance ritual, along with his growing relationship with Nancy, marked his complete transformation from an outsider who cherished his status as a civilized European into an unabashed admirer of virtually every facet of Indian life as he understood it. He carried this admiration back to England with him, and it became one of the most abiding legacies of his time in America, perhaps even leading him in later years to spend considerable time and energy investigating England's own pre-historic past.

Any discussion of Cresswell's experience on the frontier naturally leads to a consideration of his relationships with women. Yet out of the entire diary text, this is one crucial aspect of his American experience that has been the most thoroughly overlooked. Cresswell mentioned in passing numerous occasions when he socialized with "agreeable" young women. But he also recorded four distinct sexual

episodes, three of which took place on the frontier: his encounter with Miss Grimes at V. Craford's house, his encounter with an unnamed Indian girl somewhere northwest of Fort Pitt, his initial encounter with "Nancy" near Coshocton, and his affair with Mrs. L—s in New York City. The circumstances under which each of these encounters took place and the ways he described the encounters provide important clues about the nature of gender roles and sexual mores at the time.

Cresswell was a normal young man in his mid-twenties, and based on the way he described the four women, physical attraction must have been an important motive. What is more interesting is his own interpretation of his sexual drives. In three of the four episodes he used language that conveyed moral disapproval of his own actions, along with an accompanying sense of guilt: for committing fornication with Miss Grimes, for committing adultery with Mrs. L—s, and for establishing a quasi-marital relationship with Nancy that he knew was only temporary and would result in heartbreak for them both. Only in the instance of sleeping with the unnamed Indian girl did he describe his actions without any hint of moral qualm or residual guilt.

While he was usually willing to admit a certain amount of guilt, in each case he also sought to justify his actions by attempting to shift the blame. In this context his relationship with Nancy is particularly interesting, since he supposedly agreed to sleep with her only out of an unwillingness to offend her brother, their host. This initial encounter then gradually grew into a relationship based on mutual affection they both found very difficult to break. This is by far the most believable of any of his excuses, since it is consistent with what historians know of Native American culture in general during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In each of the other encounters, however, he insisted that the woman herself was the primary initiator. This intriguing portrayal of gender role reversal—the woman as the sexual aggressor and the man as passive participant—draws on a British view of sexuality from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, prevalent both in England and America, in which sexual

relationships outside of marriage were the mirror image of those same relationships within marriage.⁷ To modern ears, this version of events sounds suspiciously like an example of the “she was asking for it” excuse, raising the possibility that Cresswell took a much more active role in the proceedings than he claimed. Given the complete lack of the women’s perspective in each of these episodes, it does seem likely that his claims to passivity in the face of invincible sexual onslaught needs to be taken with a pinch of salt.

It is also instructive to compare Cresswell’s diary with a few other published diaries of the time. The relative frankness with which he described his sexual encounters brings to mind the diaries of William Byrd II of Westover and Thomas Thistlewood. Byrd, whose diary is by far the more famous of the two, was a serial womanizer who chronicled decades of sexual encounters with women of many classes and backgrounds, from the wives of fellow aristocrats to London streetwalkers and his own slaves, as well as his stormy relationship with his first wife. Thistlewood, a slave overseer in Jamaica, chronicled his equally prolific sex life, which focused exclusively on the slave women under his authority and on neighboring plantations. Cresswell’s descriptions of his affairs pale beside the accounts of career philanderers such as Byrd and Thistlewood, which raises an important point. In the eighteenth century usually only men such as Byrd and Thistlewood, who frequently indulged their pursuit of unrestrained sexuality, were willing to write frankly about their sexual exploits. Cresswell is unusual in his willingness to provide details about his relatively few indiscretions, given that they were such an aberration from what we know about his life.

Cresswell’s willingness to provide rich, detailed descriptions is one of the hallmarks of his journal. What sets his journal apart from others, however, is not that he is willing to provide details, but rather the way in which he selected and molded those details into narrative vignettes when he transcribed his original notes. Other diarists of the time included details, but many did not use them to create stories in the same way. For example, in James Nourse’s diary of his trip with Cresswell and the others to

⁷ Bloch, “Changing Conceptions,” 27; Foster, *Sex and the Eighteenth-Century Man*, 54, 69–70, 75; Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex & Subordination in England 1500–1800* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 4–5.

Kentucky, he often recorded details of daily life that Cresswell omitted, but he did not craft those details into miniature stories. Instead he simply included lists of details with less narrative framework to give them significance. For example, on May 12, 1775, Cresswell's entry began, "This day held a council wheather we shou'd proceed or turn back, after much Altercation our Co determin'd to persevere tho I believe they are a set of Damed cowards."⁸ Nourse's entry for the same day began, "Bacon [fried] with the turkey eggs for breakfast. Capt. Cressop with 6 men arrived, wrote by Capt. Smith."⁹ In a single sentence, Cresswell at once sketches a scene with vivid clarity and also tells a miniature story, complete with suspense ("whether we shou'd proceed or turn back") and emotional reaction ("Damed cowards"). In approximately the same number of words, Nourse simply records a few disconnected facts: what he ate for breakfast, that they saw other travelers, and that he wrote a letter to his wife. These patterns are not always true of every entry. But in general, Nourse's style is closer to that of a typical diary, a mere catalog of mundane facts. By contrast, Cresswell had almost a novelist's ability to weave his facts into stories.

Even this brief overview of significant larger themes illustrates one of the most exciting and frustrating features of the text—it is a seemingly inexhaustible well of potential insights into what British America was like in the mid-1770s. The breadth and depth of Cresswell's experiences is staggering. Geographically he ranged from the eastern seaboard (and Barbados) to Kentucky and Ohio, and from Williamsburg to New York City. The people he met encompassed almost the entire political spectrum of the day, ranging from William Howe and Loyalist operatives such as John Connolly to closet Loyalists such as Patrick Cavan, grassroots patriot activists on the Committees of Public Safety, and even founding luminaries such as George Rogers Clark, Thomas Jefferson, and Patrick Henry. He rubbed shoulders with people from radically different social, ethnic, and cultural groups: prosperous merchants in Alexandria and Philadelphia; plantation elites and their slaves in Barbados, Maryland, and Virginia; struggling Scots-Irish pioneers on the frontier; peaceful Delaware Indians and Moravian converts; poor tenant farmers in

⁸ Gill and Curtis, *A Man Apart*, 54.

⁹ [Nourse,] "Journey to Kentucky," 2:128.

Loudoun County; and the wildly diverse inhabitants of British-occupied New York City, including naval captains and crews, redcoats and Hessians, Loyalist refugees, and the beggars and prostitutes that constituted the social dregs of a city under siege. Above all, he had adventures, described in vivid detail and with a wry humor. Words on the pages conjure up sights and sounds of frantic men in canoes, the wild thumping of Indian drums, the rising Babel of voices in taverns, in marketplaces, in courthouses, and the far-off rumble of war. For the average reader, it is a story of youth, the youth of a people that would become a new nation, and the youth of an Englishman taking in the wonder and excitement of a virgin continent, only to experience the frustration and despair of ruined plans and dashed hopes. For the historian, the diary of Nicholas Cresswell, often quoted but seldom read, can open a valuable window on the life of a remarkable individual and the remarkably ordinary people around him during the crucial early years of the American Revolution.

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