The Portrait of Robert Kerr
d. 1824)*

CHARLES G. ROLAND

The importance of Dr. Robert Kerr in Canadian history is not large, but he played a significant role in the early years of what is now Ontario. Though his Canadian years were spent largely in active military service and, after his discharge, at Kingston and in the Niagara peninsula, nevertheless, in the compact and sparse settlements and posts of the times he was widely known and influential. Moreover, Kerr had a significant connection with one of the founders of Toronto. As this discussion will show, a fateful conjunction of art and medicine lies behind a portrait of Robert Kerr.

ROBERT KERR: SOLDIER, SURGEON, AND ADMINISTRATOR

Robert Kerr was born in Scotland, about 1755. We know almost nothing about him until 1776, when he arrived in Quebec as a Hospital Mate with the British army. He was a member of Burgoyne’s ill-fated army, was captured at Saratoga in 1777, and was exchanged or paroled to Halifax the following year. From here the trail broadens, the blazes unmistakable. He became surgeon to the 2nd Battalion of Sir John Johnson’s King’s Royal Regiment of New York (KRRNY). It must have been at this time that he married Elizabeth Brant, daughter of Sir William Johnson and of Molly Brant; certainly his friendship with Joseph Brant was solidified by becoming a relationship through marriage. This alliance with Joseph Brant in particular, and the Indians of the Six Nations in general, was to be a lasting influence in Kerr’s life and a crucial element in his connection with the other major participant in the “fateful conjunction” of art and medicine to be described.

Charles G. Roland, History of Medicine, Faculty of Health Sciences, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario L8N 3Z5.

In mid-summer of 1783, the regiment was moved to Cataraqui, where it was disbanded in June 1784. Consequently, we find Kerr's name amongst those who received land there; he was entitled to 100 acres, and drew lot #15, on the east side of the Cataraqui River, First Concession. Kerr was appointed to be Surgeon to the Loyalists, 1 January 1785, by Governor Hamilton, at a salary of £50/year. He remained at Cataraqui until 1788, when, becoming Surgeon to the Indian Department, he was transferred to Niagara. He lived there the rest of his life. But I cannot whisk him away from Cataraqui/Kingston without an anecdote: in the account books of a Cataraqui provisioner, Samuel Sherwood, there appears an intriguing item. In March 1788, he billed Doctor Robert Kerr £6:2:6 for 196 pounds of beer at seven-pence ha'penny the pound. One hundred and ninety-six pounds of beer must be enough for a good party. Did he purchase this beer in the spring of 1788 for a going-away party? It seems a reasonable assumption, and if true it tells us something of the man—a beer-drinker who had many friends of similar tastes.

By the summer of 1788, Kerr was stationed in Niagara, or Newark, accompanied by his wife and children. His service in the KRRNY—or the fact that he was a brother-in-law—was evidently appreciated by Sir John Johnson, for in 1790 he recommended Kerr for appointment to the Land Board of the District of Nassau, within which Niagara lay. At this same time, Kerr was put forward for a much more prestigious plum; his name was suggested to John Graves Simcoe as a member of the Legislative Council of Upper Canada. To this post, unhappily for his dignity, he was not appointed. In September 1792, however, Simcoe appointed Kerr a Judge of the Surrogate Court. That same year, Kerr was one of the signatories to the Treaty with the Mississauga Indians, along with Simcoe, John McGill, John Butler, Robert Hamilton, Peter Russell, and D. W. Smith—several of these names well known in Toronto’s early history. Kerr’s prominence in the Niagara peninsula is not surprising given the small population and the fact that doctors, being amongst the literate minority, would have been obvious candidates to occupy public office. And Kerr was literate. He was a subscriber to the Niagara Public Library, begun in June 1800, and was elected a trustee. In one 18-month period, Kerr borrowed a History of Helena, Hinchley’s Fall of Venice, and several parts of a 25-volume set on the British theatre. These facts scarcely fit the stereotype of the rough, uneducated, ex-military surgeons supposed by some to be the founders of Upper Canadian medicine.

Numerous land applications were endorsed “Robert Kerr.” Nor was he backward in looking after his own interests with respect to that great Canadian specie, land. There is no need to overstate the case; he had no
more interest nor was he any greedier than any other Upper Canadian. These were times when Canada seemed, to the British government and crown, to have limitless acres, and they dispensed these acres generously as rewards for services of all kinds. Speculation in land was the norm. Every effort was made to acquire as much as possible by gift from the crown. By 1816 Kerr’s holdings had increased to 4,256 acres—between six and seven square miles—and it is apparent that amongst his many other activities, Kerr worked assiduously to expand his acreage as an estate for his family.¹⁰

We know lamentably little of Kerr’s domestic life. There is one description extant that lets us visualize Mrs. Kerr, however. William Ketchum wrote:

It is said the sons [of Sir William Johnson and Molly Brant] are somewhat wild and savor a little of the Indian; but that the daughters have the mild dispositions and manners of the Europeans. One of them is well married. I have often been in her house and been very genteely entertained. She is the best dancer I think I have ever seen perform. Her husband is a particular friend and countryman of my own, is Surgeon to the Indian Department in the District of Nossa [Nassau].…¹¹

The assimilation of native Canadians into regular society was not usual in the 1790s. This depiction seems to tell us something positive about the inhabitants of Niagara. But the phenomenon was certainly commented on.

Molly Brant was in Niagara during June 1793 for the marriage of her daughter Susanna to Lieut. Henry Lemoine.¹² So this must have been a happy time for the little family group—a short-lived happiness, because the following year Susanna died in childbirth, and seven months after the international party referred to above, Elizabeth was buried, her dancing days over at 34,¹³ leaving Robert a widower with five small children, the eldest not yet eight years of age. Their first son became the most prominent of these offspring; William Johnson Kerr married a cousin, Elizabeth Brant, and one of their children, W. J. Simcoe Kerr, was named Tekarihoken, or Peace Chief, of the Mohawks, in 1832.¹⁴

William Johnson Kerr was in charge of the Indians at the battle of Beaver Dam, and some historians have suggested that part of the credit for this victory might appropriately have been diverted from Fitzgibbon to Kerr.

When smallpox threatened the Niagara peninsula in 1797, Robert Kerr and his colleague, James Muirhead, were quick to offer their services. Their announcement of free inoculation for the poor is one of the earliest medical documents in Upper Canada.¹⁵

One duty that a physician has is the responsibility to teach. At least one of Kerr’s students is known to us: Dr. Cyrus Sumner. In those days,
no medical school existed in Canada and medical teaching was entirely
by apprenticeship, unless the student had the means to travel to the
USA or abroad. Most did not. Sumner related that he was taught by
Kerr, who “has assisted me with books, medicine and instruments and
his warm friendship...”

Although most of these references are to official or professional mat-
ters, I believe that some glimpses of the man come through. He seems to
have been both conscientious and hard-working, respected by his col-
leagues and liked by his friends. He looked after the economic interests
of himself and his family, and he served his community long and well
and in a startlingly wide variety of ways. We have a description by one
who knew him late in his life, recorded by John Ross Robertson:

A lady now [1900] living at Niagara has a distinct recollection of Dr. Kerr. She
states that he was a tall, finely built man, walked very straight, but from his
brown skin looked weather-beaten, as if he had seen much active service. He
was well educated, a pleasant speaker, interesting to converse with and full of
anecdote.16

Kerr served in the War of 1812, and had whatever distinction comes
from having his home at Newark burned by the Americans in 1813. In
1824 he died in Albany, where he was buried. Three months after his
death, and 11 years after the event took place, Kerr’s heirs were
awarded £306 on a claim of £1,227 for losses sustained when their home
was burned.17

Despite all his political and civic activity, Kerr’s first priority
remained medicine. He was a practitioner and remained one all his life.
And not just for humans, either. On 14 December 1792 he provided
medication for William Jarvis’s horses.18 There is no anomaly in this;
where populations were small and professional help scanty, the medi-
cal practitioner would have played the combined roles of physician and
surgeon, midwife on occasion, dentist, veterinarian, and pharmacist or
apothecary. Rarely is specialization possible on the frontier. His private
patients included the William Jarvis family (as well as their horses),
John White, Joseph Brant, and William Berczy, his wife, and the settlers
in Berczy’s group.

WILLIAM BERCRY: COLONIZING ENTREPRENEUR AND PIONEER ARTIST

The second participant in the fateful conjunction of art and medicine is
better known than Kerr, particularly in Toronto history. John Andre
subtitled the first of his two books about Berczy, Co-founder of Toronto.19
If that overstates the case, it does so only in degree. Andre has also writ-
ten that “William Berczy actually cemented Toronto’s fragile founda-
tion.”20
William Berczy was baptized in Wallerstein, Bavaria, as Johann Albrecht Ulrich Moll. The date was 10 December 1744. Wallerstein is northwest of Munich. The family was well educated for the time, and connected with the aristocracy, though by employment, not birth. In 1762 Berczy spent a year in an art school in Vienna, apparently his only formal training in his profession. In 1766 he studied at the University of Jena, probably remaining there for several years, though this entire period of his life seems to have been enlivened by adventures incurred while travelling in eastern Europe on various trips and assignments.

His painting seems largely to have been avocational until he visited Florence in 1781. While there he received an important commission, and also copied many works in galleries there, a common practice. He had patrons in Bern, Switzerland, where he spent much time in the 1780s, and where he married Charlotte Allamand. In 1790 Berczy moved to London where, he had been assured, his growing skill as a portrait artist could be used profitably. While in London he became enthralled with the prospect of land colonization, largely, it seems, as an idealistic expression of his desire to help his fellow man. He became connected with the Genesee Association. Eventually, by a tortuous route, this endeavor brought him through the United States to Upper Canada with his German settlers.

In April 1794 Berczy arrived at Newark (Niagara-on-the-Lake) to discuss with Simcoe the question of land for the German settlers. Berczy wanted vast tracts—say, a million acres; he was offered somewhat smaller amounts—64,000 acres. He wanted land in the vicinity of Lake Erie and the Thames River; he received land north of York at Markham. On this first visit to Newark he met Dr. Kerr and certainly had much to do with William Osgoode and William Jarvis. Moreover, at Kerr’s house, Berczy was introduced to the Mohawk chief, Joseph Brant, whom he came to admire greatly. In June, having spent some weeks back in the USA, Berczy returned to Upper Canada with 186 settlers, reaching Queenston 21 June 1794.

THE “FATEFUL CONJUNCTION” OF ART AND MEDICINE

When Berczy first entered Upper Canada in 1794 with his German settlers, Robert Kerr became their physician. Mrs. Berczy gave birth to Charles Albert Berczy (the future postmaster of Toronto) on 22 August 1794, and Kerr was the accoucheur. In the autumn, he submitted a bill for medical services to the family, including Mrs. Berczy, “during the summer and fall 1794.” The amount was £18:0:0 NYC, but an offsetting item was “Due by Dr. Kerr” for £7:0:0, leaving a balance of £11:0:0. I shall refer again to this account.
Although there is no evidence that Kerr and Berczy were acquainted before 1794, it is known that they began then to develop a relationship beyond that of physician and patient. In August 1794 Berczy mentioned in a letter to David Smith that he was dining with Dr. Kerr. Moreover, Berczy was attempting to buy land along the Grand River, and he made an arrangement with Joseph Brant and with Kerr that they would assist these efforts in return for an allowance of one pence per acre obtained. As L. R. Betcherman has pointed out, it was Kerr who arranged for Joseph Brant to sit for Berczy, who thus began in 1794 the sketches for one of his first and best known Canadian portraits. Brant had been ill and Kerr made the arduous trip to the Grand River to treat him and, apparently, to act as Berczy’s agent to arrange the sitting. Kerr alludes to this in a letter to Berczy dated 29 July 1794:

...on Saturday evening past [July 27] I received a letter from this place informing me that Captain Joseph Brant was taken dangerously ill, on Sunday morning I left my own house, and arrived here, the same evening[,] I found that he had got better, on Monday I went to the Grand River, I got there betimes, and arrived here tonight, after this long Detail, I have the pleasure of telling you that Captain Brant is perfectly recovered, and I have settled the business—I trust to your satisfaction.

THE PORTRAIT OF ROBERT KERR

In the John Ross Robertson Collection, housed in the Baldwin Room at the Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library, are two portraits of Dr. Robert Kerr. One is late nineteenth century, apparently by Sir Edmund Wyly Grier. The second, a watercolor, is unattributed. I wish to present circumstantial documentary evidence that the artist who created this painting was William Berczy.

Item #4395 in the Robertson Collection is described as a watercolor, 5 × 6 inches. It shows a man perhaps in his 40s, seated and in profile, facing to the viewer’s left. Kerr’s hair is long, below shoulder height, and is tied in a queue. He is wearing a dark coat and a gold-fringed apron over his trousers. (See Figure 1.)

The apron is an indication of Kerr’s Masonic activities. William Jarvis was the founding Grand Master of the Provincial Grand Lodge, at Newark, in 1793. Kerr had been a Mason since his initiation in 1790 at Quebec. From 1797 until 1802 he was Provincial Deputy Grand Master under Jarvis, who was also his patient. Later, early in the nineteenth century, Kerr was Provincial Grand Master of the Schismatic Grand Lodge. The gold-fringed apron Kerr is wearing in his portrait signifies that the wearer is a grand lodge officer, and the fact that the portrait does not show Kerr with a collar indicates that he was not yet Deputy Grand Master. Thus the evidence supports the inference that the por-
trait was painted before 1797, the year he became Deputy Grand Master.

According to John Andre, in Berczy's portraits "strong men preferably look to the right, ladies and elderly gentlemen to the left." Moreover, as Andre points out, most of the extant portraits are oval. In the Robertson portrait, Kerr looks to the left, and the painting is rectangular. But neither point is decisive, since exceptions exist in the Berczy corpus to both practices. Also, if the Kerr portrait was indeed painted by Berczy in 1794, relatively early in Berczy's career as a portrait artist, these conventions may not yet have hardened in his mind.

There seems little likelihood that two portraitists would have been competing for business in Newark in 1794, and the evidence of the Masonic regalia seems to establish that Kerr was portrayed at about this time. The numerous relationships that unite the names of Brant, Kerr, and Berczy, plus the highly circumstantial point of the £7 that Kerr deducted from his bill because he owed Berczy that amount, all lead me to propose that Kerr portrait #4395, Baldwin Room, Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library, was painted by William Berczy, probably in 1794, or at least was based on sketches made at that time. One may go further and suggest the possibility that the Kerr portrait was painted first, and was carried by Kerr to Brant, as a sample of Berczy's artistic ability, when Kerr advised Brant to have his own likeness painted. With Kerr acting in so helpful a manner towards Berczy, and with Berczy having some perhaps undesired leisure at Queenston, while his wife underwent confinement, what would have been more natural for Berczy to offer, or for Kerr to request than a portrait. Did Berczy record Kerr's portrait for history? The evidence certainly is circumstantial but not implausible.

NOTES

* An earlier version of this paper was presented 16 October 1993 as part of the symposium, "Medicine in Toronto: 200 Years," sponsored by the Toronto Medical Historical Club.
3 Archives of Ontario (AO), RG 1 AVII, Vol. 10, p. 68.
8 R. Kerr to the Lieut. Gov., 15 May 1820, National Archives of Canada (NAC), RG 5 B6, Vol. 1.
10 T. Ridout to Francis Gore, 21 February 1816, NAC RG 5 A1, Vol. 26, 12053 [Reel C4546].
17 Upper Canada Gazette, supplement, 10 June 1824, NAC RG5 D1, Vol. 24.
21 Most of the following biographical information is derived from Mary Macaulay Allodi, Peter N. Moogk, and Beate Stock, Berczy (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1991), p. 328.
22 Allodi, Moogk, and Stock, Berczy, p. 95.
23 In 1794, Kerr submitted his account, "To medical advice, Visits, Medicines, and attendance, on the German families at Queenston," in the amount of £70:0:0 NYC (NAC MG 23 H116, Vol. 2, p. 377).
25 Berczy to David Smith, 11 August 1794, AO MS 526, William Berczy Papers.
29 Robert Kerr to W. Berczy, 29 July 1794, NAC MG 23 H116, Berczy Papers, 015996. Cited in Betcherman, "Genesis."
31 Landmarks of Canada, Item #23, p. 3.
32 Landmarks of Canada, Item #4395, p. 339.
34 The late J. J. Talman of the University of Western Ontario kindly provided this information on the relationship between masonic regalia and rank. Prof. Talman is, of course, in no way responsible for my interpretation.