

The Loyalist Legacy

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REVIEWS/REVUES

The Loyalist Legacy

IN THE GOOD OLD DAYS OF WHIG HISTORY the American Loyalists presented no interpretive challenge. For American historians of the 19th century they were mere Tories, bound to Britain by office, or economic dependence, or elitist pretension, or narrow habit. They fared hardly better in Canada where they were frequently seen as archaic familial oligarchs whose role was to serve as a foil for the onward march of responsible government and democracy. A fragment of Canadian society, it is true, remembered them with genealogical fondness, and in so doing only confirmed their irrelevance. The British forgot them altogether, except for a few historians such as that classic Whig, George Otto Trevelyan, for whom they were fawning courtiers not to be compared for sturdy English virtue with the leaders of the Revolution. As of most other matters, the Whig historians' view of the Loyalists was narrowly political and focused on the leaders. The Loyalist rank-and-file remained in shadow — in Canada at best proto-British yeomen; in the United States dupes and mercenaries, tainted with treason, consorting with Indians.

This view began to change a little at the turn of this century, most significantly in the work of the new Imperial historians in the United States. In particular C.H. Van Tyne and M.C. Tyler portrayed with some sympathy respectively the actions and the thought of the Loyalists.¹ But for another two generations little was done to change substantially the 19th-century view of them. More came to be known about them, it is true, especially in the group of state and local studies beginning with A.C. Flick's book on the New York Loyalists.² But it is only during the past 30 years that Loyalist historiography has begun to change fundamentally the general perception of them. This change has resulted partly from the sheer amount of new work — local, state, provincial and general studies, works of political and intellectual analysis, quantitative investigation, studies of major individual Loyalists. Even more important, the old Tory stereotype has been shattered by the discovery of and emphasis upon Loyalist diversity: Loyalists were women as well as men; black and Indian as well as white; Dutch and German and French as well as British; Baptists and Methodists as well as Anglicans; fishermen and frontiersmen, artisans and poor farmers as well as office-holders and merchants; Whigs as well as Tories; rebels against established authority as well as its upholders. Not all recent work on the Loyalists, however, has focused on their variety. Bernard Bailyn, for example, in the tradition of American consensus historians, has given us a neo-Whiggish portrait of Thomas Hutchinson and more recent works such as Brian Cuthbertson's book on Sir John Wentworth and Janice Potter's on Loyalist ideology have continued to study the Tory elite among the Loyalists.³ Of two recent

1 C.H. Van Tyne, *The Loyalists in the American Revolution* (New York, 1902), M.C. Tyler, *The Literary History of the American Revolution*, 2 vols. (New York, 1897).

2 A.C. Flick, *Loyalism in New York During the American Revolution* (New York, 1901).

3 Bernard Bailyn, *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson* (Cambridge, 1974), Brian Cuthbertson,

books to be considered here, one, Ann Condon's *The Loyalist Dream for New Brunswick* (New Ireland Press, Fredericton, 1984), is a sympathetic study of the hopes of the Loyalist founding elite in New Brunswick; the other, Wallace Brown's and Hereward Senior's *Victorious in Defeat: The Loyalists in Canada* (Methuen, Toronto, 1984), is a general account of the Loyalists' settlement and development of British North America from the Revolution to the War of 1812; its emphasis is on the Loyalist rank-and-file.

Essentially Ann Condon's book is a study of the 20 Loyalists who made up the core of the Tory leadership in New Brunswick in the generation after the Revolution, holding most of the provincial offices and sharing a common social and political dream for the province and, indeed, for a revived British Empire. Profiting from their American experience, these men wanted New Brunswick's institutions to be revolution-proof, to avoid the anarchic localism and laxness which seemed to have made revolution easy, if not inevitable, in the old American provinces. They wanted political power to descend in a regular pyramid from the King to his Governor, to a local propertied aristocracy of Councillors and judges (themselves), finally to the elected representatives of the people in the Assembly, these to be guided and limited by those above them. The institutional basis for this political system was to be, first, the establishment of the Loyalist leaders themselves as a propertied class, an economic as well as a social aristocracy; second, the establishment of the Church of England and of cultural and educational institutions regulated and dominated by the church, in order to prevent the loose and licentious features of old American society from developing; and, finally, steady and generous support from the imperial government through subsidies, a military establishment, and trading preferences. Properly constructed, such institutions would make New Brunswick the "envy of the American states" — envy, that is, in the sense of a model to be admired and imitated, perhaps even to the ultimate reformation of the United States.

These high, if also self-serving, hopes of the Loyalist gentry were not, of course, to be fulfilled, but the author sees them as central both to an understanding of the way New Brunswick was governed in its first generation and to the motives and actions of the Loyalist leaders themselves. For, while not an apology for the Tory elite, this book is sympathetic to them. People such as Edward Winslow and Ward Chipman, Jonathan and Daniel Bliss, George Leonard and Jonathan Odell were never able to forget the American Revolution. They felt they deserved British support for their sufferings and losses in the service of the Crown, and they persuaded themselves as well that Britain's support was in her own imperial interest. So year after year, decade after decade, they petitioned for privilege and office, for Church endowment and land grants. Their attitude towards the Loyalist rank-and-file was that of officers towards their men, and their attitude towards non-Loyalists was patronizing and

The Loyalist Governor: Biography of Sir John Wentworth (Halifax, 1983), Janice Potter, *The Liberty We Seek: Loyalist Ideology in Colonial New York and Massachusetts* (Cambridge, 1983).

sometimes contemptuous. The author gives a fair account of the high-handedness of her oligarchs, admitting, for example, that their arbitrary overturning of the election results in Saint John in 1785 left a residue of bitterness and mistrust among much of the population. Still her account of this event is much kinder to the Loyalist leaders than, say, that of David Bell in his recent book,⁴ and generally her sympathy for her subjects softens her criticism.

Some of the most interesting passages in this well-written book deal with the thoroughly ambivalent attitude of the Loyalist leaders towards their old country and countrymen. In the 1780s despite their frustration with the rigours of settlement in a harsh country, they nevertheless exulted at the disorder and weakness of the United States. In the 1790s, for the leadership at least, conditions in New Brunswick worsened measurably with the withdrawal of British troops to Halifax, the opening of the West Indian trade to the Americans, and the decline of British interest in New Brunswick itself. At the same time, the United States appeared to achieve political stability under Presidents Washington and Adams, for whom the Loyalists developed grudging admiration. Then after 1800 economic conditions improved in New Brunswick while deteriorating in the States, and the Loyalists became somewhat self-congratulatory again; this mood strengthened with the War of 1812 which many of the original Loyalists lived to see and which they regarded as a kind of confirmation of their original break with their fellow-Americans.

In their individual relations with American relatives and friends the Loyalists were sometimes defensive and uneasy, sometimes friendly, seldom casual. Many, especially the New Englanders, visited old friends in their former country. Edward Winslow, for example, enjoyed his stay in Massachusetts in 1799, writing that American hospitality "excited my utmost gratitude", though he then crossed that out, and wrote that their hospitality "did them credit". Ward Chipman sent his son to grammar school in New England and then to Harvard College with the help of his wealthy Yankee brother-in-law, but refused that gentleman's offer to finance his son's legal education in Boston, and brought him back to New Brunswick.

Wallace Brown's and Hereward Senior's *Victorious in Defeat* is a much more general study than Ann Condon's though it deals with the same generation from the 1780s to the War of 1812. Much of its material, like Ann Condon's, is familiar; there are no footnotes, and the tone is popular rather than scholarly. The book has some flaws in organization: The first chapter and the first part of the second summarize Loyalist experiences in the Revolution itself and should probably have been either longer or shorter; too much is attempted too briefly; there are a number of controversial, sometimes even cranky, generalizations presented without argument or illustration; why, for example, did the Loyalists "correctly" see that the British surrender at Yorktown was a "military setback, not a mortal blow"? Some assertions are just wrong: The French at Yorktown

4 David Bell, *Early Loyalist Saint John: The Origin of New Brunswick Politics, 1783-1786* (Fredericton, 1983).

did not outnumber the Continentals “two to one”; their respective numbers were about 7,800 to 5,600 plus 3,200 Virginia militia. Similarly at the end of the book a rather trivial epilogue needs more consideration; it might well have been replaced by a re-working of the half-dozen pages of more interesting speculation about the Loyalists’ later role in Canadian history that appears earlier at the end of Chapter Six.

But these are really minor flaws. The heart of the book is a first-rate account of the actual process of Loyalist settlement and development in the Maritimes and Canada. It is hard to think of a book that conveys more vividly the harshness of the struggle between settlers and the northern lands. Almost everywhere the forbidding forest made even surveying, let alone clearing and planting the land a challenge. As settlement gradually nibbled into the wilderness, the settlers found new dangers and disappointments — the isolation of the terrible winters, sickness, crop failure, indeed all the obstacles not only to new settlement, but to settlement at the northern margins of agricultural possibility. (Even in New Brunswick, however, a killing frost on 15 June 1794 was surely *late* rather than, as stated here, “early”). Still they persisted, most of them, clearing and planting the land acre by acre, building houses and barns, sawmills and gristmills. The poorest settlers from the old colonies probably improved their fortunes with land of their own, while many of the formerly better-off declined in prosperity and status. Silversmiths became blacksmiths, and cabinetmakers became carpenters. (Ann Condon, in her book, mentioned General Coffin receiving news of his promotion while selling cabbages at the public market in Saint John).

Brown and Senior persuasively link the levelling necessities of settlement itself with the democratization of British North American society. And, as well, they stress throughout the diversity of opinion and outlook among the Loyalists to begin with, so that, among them one finds not only the genesis of the Family Compact, but much of the opposition as well — Loyalist ancestors of the rebels of 1837 in both Canadas, Whigs and even democrats who from the beginning resist the Tory oligarchs whom Ann Condon describes. There are separate chapters for Black and Indian Loyalists, neither adding much to what is already known, though the story of the grateful exodus of most of the Black Loyalists from Nova Scotia to Sierra Leone adds a wry and poignant comment to the theme of Loyalist flights from persecution.

These books take a useful place in the Loyalist literature of the past few years. What do we still need to know about the Loyalists? In Canada we need to know more about the political and social influence of the non-Tory Loyalists. It is no longer possible to see the Loyalist political heritage as deferential to authority and to Britain. Brown and Senior think the Loyalists may have shared an un-American, and even now perceptibly Canadian, endorsement of active and positive government, though for diverse ends. Beyond that they shared, again in a recognizably Canadian way, mistrust of the United States, though for a variety of reasons. It does seem that if the diversity of their outlook is accepted, the

Loyalists were much more in the shaping centre of Canadian political society than historians used to think.

Not much is known even now about the Loyalists who returned to the States, and more important, not much is known about the influence in American society of the 90 per cent or so of Loyalists who never left the United States. Did this fifth of American society simply disappear quietly into the melting pot? One gets occasional tantalizing glimpses of these later Loyalists: Harold Hancock describes some in southern Delaware in an election of 1787 when they drilled under arms in the fields, marched in military formation to the polling place, supplied the men chosen by the sheriff to protect the polling place, cursed and assaulted their old Revolutionary enemies, and "huzzaed for the King".⁵ Moreover, under the new federal Constitution these old Loyalists carried on their old politics and old enmities at least into the 1790s. If the Loyalist influence in Canadian society is broader and deeper than it used to seem to be, perhaps the same is true in American society: Could the Loyalists who never left have carried on, some of them, as dissenters from American ideology and contributed to the glimmers of self-doubt seen in later times in the United States?

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5 Harold B. Hancock, *The Loyalists of Revolutionary Delaware* (London, 1977), pp. 99-103.

Situating A Classic: Saunders Revisited

THE NEW EDITION OF S.A. SAUNDERS' *The Economic History of the Maritime Provinces* (Fredericton, Acadiensis Press, 1984) is more than simply the reissuing of a 1939 contribution to the debate over Maritime underdevelopment. This early and much criticized version of our political economy from the 1850s to the 1930s is the foundation of the whole orthodox stream of thought about "what happened to the Maritimes". It has a landmark status and general unavailability that makes this a worthy choice for reprinting. Fortunately, this edition is more than a simple reprinting, thanks to T.W. Acheson's introductory essay. This edition of Saunders' *Economic History* is one of those reprints where the essay introducing the classic is at least as interesting and valuable as the original work itself. It is fitting that Acheson, as the author who did more than anyone else to upset the "fact-situation" Saunders painted, was chosen to write the introduction.¹ Rather than the usual "hymn of praise" introducing a Great Work, we are presented with a worthwhile essay which, while giving respectful credit to Saunders, fits him and *The Economic History* into a critical framework that

1 See T.W. Acheson, "The Social Origins of Canadian Industrialism: A Study in the Structure of Entrepreneurship", Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1971, and "The National Policy and the Industrialization of the Maritimes, 1880-1910", *Acadiensis*, 1, 2 (Spring 1972), pp. 3-28.