

Esther Clark Wright: A Re-Assessment

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Esther Clark Wright: A Re-Assessment

I KNOW ESTHER CLARK WRIGHT THROUGH HER WORK and what others have said about her and her work. Following the thoughtful and entertaining tributes to her at the 2016 Atlantic Canada Studies Conference, I wondered aloud whether the significance of her scholarly contribution might have been just a little shortchanged. So I agreed to write a few comments about that scholarship, and began by undertaking some research.

That research convinced me that Esther Clark Wright's training in economics shaped her approach to history. Evidence that she remained engaged in this field can be found in her review of *Saga in Steel and Concrete: Norwegian Engineers in America*. A thoroughly scholarly review, it reflected both her particular approach to economic history and her interest in the application of demographic analysis to the study of history. Wright noted that while the author had presented "a clear and comprehensive answer to one question: What did Norwegian technical skills contribute to America?" many other questions were left unanswered. She regretted that the author "did not make more use of the several hundred carefully prepared 'case studies' in his possession" to answer no fewer than 18 questions.¹ In her own work, Esther Clark Wright would make use of her data on individuals to develop generalisations that would seriously revise traditional views about both New Brunswick Loyalists and Loyalists in general.

Esther Clark Wright's books have, however, received little attention outside the region. To some extent, her choice of topic explains this neglect. In 1969, in a talk entitled "The View at Two Hundred Years," the Loyalist scholar Wallace Brown, identifying Wright's *The Loyalists of New Brunswick* (1955) as one of "a very few recently published professional works" on the Loyalists, asserted that "despite their role in Canadian history, the Loyalists do not have a distinguished historiography and Canadian scholarship lags far behind American."² Yet when Wright's monograph, which had been preceded by a scholarly article in the *Canadian Historical Association Annual Report*, was published, it was deemed of sufficient significance to be reviewed in such august journals as the *William and Mary Quarterly*, the *Canadian Historical Review* and the *English Historical Review* (the most distinguished of the three and the one with the widest readership).³

Given Dr. Wright's gender and her status as an independent scholar, it is, perhaps, more surprising that the editors of those journals chose to commission reviews of the book than that two of the three reviewers failed to recognize either

1 Esther Clark Wright, "Saga in Steel and Concrete: Norwegian Engineers in America. By Kenneth Bjork. Northfield Minn.: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1947. Pp. 504," *Journal of Economic History* 10, no. 1 (May 1950): 97-8.

2 Wallace Brown, "The View at Two Hundred Years: The Loyalists of the American Revolution," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 80, no. 1 (1 January 1970): 25-47; Esther Clark Wright, *The Loyalists of New Brunswick* (Fredericton: self-published, 1955).

3 Esther Clark Wright, "The Settlement of New Brunswick: An Advance Toward Democracy," *Canadian Historical Association Report of the Annual Meeting* 23, no. 1 (1944): 53-60.

her scholarly credentials or the path-breaking nature of her research. Robert O. DeMond's review in the *William and Mary Quarterly* reflected the bias of "Whig history" when he argued that Esther Clark Wright had "let her sympathy for the Loyalists run away with her" in her description of the persecution they had suffered. DeMond, the author of *The Loyalists in North Carolina During the Revolution* (1940), did not see those on the losing side as worthy of sympathy. Although he admitted that her work "makes a real contribution to our knowledge of the American Loyalists," his assessment was generally dismissive: "Mrs. Wright has apparently designed this book for the general public rather than for the specialist." Of her appendix, which included data on over 6,000 individual Loyalists, thereby providing interested scholars with the necessary information to check her conclusions by replicating her analysis, he commented only that it "will prove a fertile field for genealogists."⁴ William H. Nelson, the reviewer for the *Canadian Historical Review*, did recognize the revisionist nature of Wright's work: "By a close analysis of who the New Brunswick Loyalists were, Mrs. Wright destroys . . . the once dearly held notion that they were Tory gentlefolk, mainly Harvard men." By demonstrating that over 80 per cent of them "appear to have been long-settled Americans of yeoman stock," he concluded, "Mrs. Wright has done a service to American as well as to Canadian historical interpretation." Yet as a contribution to scholarship the book failed to satisfy Mr. Nelson, whose own interest in Loyalists, as demonstrated in *The American Tory* (1961), did not involve demographic analysis. Critiquing the book she did not write, he complained that "the author fails to show plausibly why these people became Loyalists in the first place."⁵ Only W.P. Morrell, the reviewer for the *English Historical Review*, was unhampered by his own predispositions and research on the topic. He recognized *The Loyalists of New Brunswick* for what it was: "a thorough and scholarly piece of work" that "fills an important gap in Canadian historical writing." He further recognized the author's scholarly credentials: "There were two streams of emigrants whom Dr. Clark Wright distinguishes as Refugees . . . and Provincials But though the settlements were distinct, they of course tended to merge as time went on. Dr. Wright estimates that fourteen or fifteen thousand Loyalists in all were settled in New Brunswick Ninety per cent of them, she believes, were American born, five-eighths of these coming from New York or New Jersey." Pointing to the "stimulating generalizations" advanced in the final chapter, Morrell concluded that "Dr. Wright is entitled to claim that the conduct of this 'first important evacuation of political refugees in modern times' has an interest extending far beyond New Brunswick."⁶

In many ways, Morrell's assessment was the most prescient, although Esther Clark Wright has never been accorded the recognition she might have received had

4 Robert O. DeMond, "The Loyalists of New Brunswick by Esther Clark Wright," *William and Mary Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (January 1956): 125-6; Robert O. DeMond, *The Loyalists in North Carolina During the Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1940).

5 William H. Nelson, "The Loyalists of New Brunswick by Esther Clark Wright," *Canadian Historical Review* 37 no. 2 (June 1956): 180-1; William H. Nelson, *The American Tory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961).

6 W.P. Morrell, "The Loyalists of New Brunswick by Esther Clark Wright," *English Historical Review* 72, no. 282 (January 1957): 183-4.

she been writing two decades later. I say this from the vantage point of someone trained as “a new political historian” in the mid-1970s, when the then “new social history” was riding the crest of the wave.

Looking back to the distant and unfamiliar historiographical past, and down from the dizzying and esoteric historiographical heights of the 21st century, we see Esther Clark Wright’s questions in her *Loyalists of New Brunswick* as mundane and take her findings for granted. Rather than reflecting on the quality of her contribution, we muse about why it took her so long to publish her major work. And although we recognize that Esther Clark Wright revised historians’ understanding of the very identity of the New Brunswick Loyalists, we perceive even her seminal works as descriptive rather than analytical. But it is worth considering the breadth as well as depth of her contribution.

While previous studies of Loyalists had focused on the leaders, Dr. Wright was a forerunner of the new social historians (Wallace Brown among them), who would first emerge a decade later. She extended her gaze beyond the leadership, to encompass the rank and file in her analysis. Earlier studies of the Loyalists based their conclusions on an analysis of the written records produced by a very small minority, the elite members of a very large group. Wright’s focus was the entire group, estimated by her and others to be between 14,000 and 15,000, of whom more than 1,000 did not remain long enough to leave a record. Sifting through ships’ lists, land grants, and other routinely generated sources, Dr. Wright identified over 6,000 individuals and was able to establish the previous residence of about half of them. All this was done without the aid of a computer. It took many years to gather and organize the data, and then to do the calculations necessary for the analysis. Because the 6,000 individuals for whom she was able to find sufficient data to allow comparative analysis comprised heads of families and single men who were eligible for government land grants, the vast majority of the women and blacks, as well as all the children among the Loyalists, figured very little in her analysis. But we can assume that they shared the colony of origin and the place of settlement of their travelling companions.

Esther Clark Wright’s analysis overturned long-held misconceptions about who the Loyalists were. Because the former American colonies had unique histories that shaped attitudes about religion, education, and governance, it is highly significant that the majority of New Brunswick Loyalists came, not from Massachusetts, as earlier writers had claimed, but from New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. The numerical insignificance of the Massachusetts Loyalists raises analytical questions about the basis for the political prominence of this group in New Brunswick and about their relations with their fellow Loyalists. On a broader level, Dr. Wright’s finding that most New Brunswick Loyalists belonged to families settled in the American colonies for generations, and represented a cross-section of the population of those older communities, demonstrated that traditional American views about who the Loyalists were also required major revision. As Wright herself put it, the number of college graduates was insignificant and the large numbers of artisans and farmers “belies the legend that ‘the embattled farmers’ were all fighting on the American side.”⁷

7 Wright, *Loyalists of New Brunswick*, 160.

Drawing distinctions between refugees and provincials, she uncovered different settlement patterns in the two groups. A comparison of the muster rolls of the regiments with the provision muster and the grants demonstrated that less than ten per cent of the members of the various regiments settled on their blocks. Using demographic analysis to explore the reasons for this pattern, Wright compared variations between individual regiments and between counties, considering variables ranging from the nature of the land in the block to specific ethnic, religious, and economic issues that induced people to stay or to relocate to another area. Drawing on the relevant scholarship in the field, she concluded that “New Brunswick’s experience of group settlement was similar to that in many places and at many periods: group settlement is successful only if there are strong religious bonds or social customs . . . to cement the group.”⁸

Identifying a higher birth rate in New Brunswick than in the thirteen colonies, particularly for the first two generations, Wright credited the healthy climate. Later demographers would recognize that high birth rates are common in pioneering farming regions. Dr. Wright, like those later demographers, argued that children were an asset in pioneering families, and that early marriage encouraged large families. And, like the authors of the community studies of colonial America published during the subsequent decade, Wright argued that, for the third and later generations, large families also meant out-migration in search of land. As in the American colonies of an earlier era, this led, eventually, to a westward movement – in the New Brunswick case, to Upper Canada. And again, as later studies would confirm, “a continuing core of the family remained in New Brunswick, but New Brunswickers were to be found in every expansionist movement on the continent from Maine to California. New Brunswick became what it has ever since remained, a notable nursery of men and women.”⁹

Most remarkable, in her conclusion Esther Clark Wright raises questions that are at least as pertinent today as when she asked them: “Were Loyalists displaced from New Brunswick by post-Loyalist immigration? Which suggestion in turn leads to the question, did the Loyalists displace the Pre-Loyalists? Did the Pre-Loyalists displace the Acadians? Did the Acadians displace the Indians? At this starting place, consideration of the problem can usefully begin.” And if her response is largely phrased in economic and demographic terms, that, too, is a useful place to begin consideration of these historical questions. Her reflections on another question that continues to intrigue historians – Why was there was no violent uprising against the oligarchy in New Brunswick? – are equally interesting.¹⁰

Esther Clark Wright’s highly revisionist arguments were based on a sophisticated analysis of a database that had taken years to construct. Her scholarship was too far ahead of the curve to be properly appreciated in her own day. But it ought to be appreciated in ours.

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8 Wright, *Loyalists of New Brunswick*, 208.

9 Wright, *Loyalists of New Brunswick*, 222, 225-6.

10 Wright, *Loyalists of New Brunswick*, 226-8, 233-41.