

Col. William Marsh, Vermont Patriot and Loyalist by Jennifer S.H. Brown and Wilson B. Brown

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[See table of contents](#)

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Book Reviews

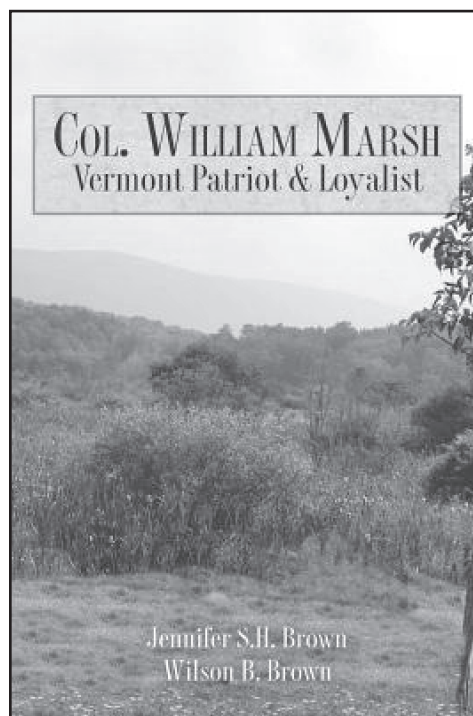
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Col. William Marsh, Vermont Patriot and Loyalist

By Jennifer S.H. Brown and
Wilson B. Brown

Denver, Colorado: The authors, 2013. 438 pages.
\$28.94 Canadian (price varies) paperback. ISBN
978-1-49282-969-0 (www.amazon.com)

Who was William Marsh? This is the question that authors Jennifer and Wilson Brown answer in this meticulously researched account of the life and experiences of a fascinating but little known participant in the American Revolution and the founding of Vermont and Upper Canada. As the authors note in their preface, William Marsh and his family lived in truly interesting times and Williams's story is by no means simple or straightforward. At various times he was an influential member of the Green Mountain Boys of Vermont (from which he earned the title of Colonel Marsh), an American patriot, a supporter of



an independent Vermont, a Loyalist, a spy for the British government during the Revolution, and a patriarch. Although for most historians he would probably be considered one of the “secondary” figures in this time of unprecedented upheaval in the British

colonies of North America, not only does William Marsh's life illuminate many of the central dilemmas faced by colonists during this period, he was also often at the centre of events on the northern frontier.

Col. William Marsh is the story of a family negotiating life in the borderlands – first on the contested land between New York and New Hampshire (that would become Vermont); and then along the northern borderlands of the new republic and Quebec (after 1791, Upper Canada). Like his father and grandfather, many of William's decisions centred around the issue of land, and his determination to gain security and a degree of prosperity for his family. For William Marsh this meant moving to the New Hampshire grants in the late 1760s where he became a leading member of the new community of Manchester. From the beginning, however, there were questions about whether he and his neighbours had clear title to their lands. In the years leading up to the Revolution, New York proprietors, authorities in New Hampshire, and local residents engaged in a complex and increasingly heated debate about which colony had jurisdiction over the region. Petitions and representations by local landowners to colonial and then British authorities brought no solution to the problem. It is not surprising, then, that when New York proprietors tried to evict those they termed squatters, the settlers took matters into their own hands. The loosely organized Green Mountain Boys (of which Marsh was a member) threatened New York officials and physically ejected those who threatened their homes. At the same time, William Marsh and a few other prominent men in the region came together and began to lay the groundwork to transform the New Hampshire Grant into a separate political entity, Vermont.

It is from the vantage point of this very

local context that William Marsh and others in the community responded to the decision of American colonists to take up arms against the Mother Country. Initially, Marsh and his neighbours judged that the best way to gain both clear title to their lands and acceptance of Vermont as a separate political entity was to join the patriot cause. But when in 1777 the Continental Congress refused to recognize Vermont as an independent state, William Marsh (and a few others) decided that the only way to secure their own and Vermont's interests was through a British victory. Marsh left home for Quebec in 1777 and in addition to providing the British with valuable intelligence throughout the later years of the war and overseeing the welfare of Loyalist refugees at St. Johns (a camp just south of Montreal), Marsh actively worked to support Britain's negotiations with influential Vermont residents (including Ethan Alan and his brother, leaders of the Green Mountain Boys) for a separate peace.

At the end of the war, Marsh again found himself searching for land and security. Negotiations with Vermont had failed, but despite his earlier support of the patriots, Marsh successfully petitioned to be recognized as a Loyalist, and as a result, he and his sons were granted land in the Bay of Quinte area. What is intriguing is that for William, this was not the final move. Three of his sons did decide to settle in Upper Canada and with their father's help, cleared and developed viable farms. But William decided to return "home" to Vermont; and although neighbours knew that he had supported the "enemy" during the Revolution, he was soon again recognised as a valued member of the community.

This fascinating study is, in large part, a work of recovery. Marsh left no personal papers and his name appears only sporadically in others' private correspondence. But

by drawing on family stories and research gathered by various descendants and an exhaustive search in archives and libraries throughout North America for tidbits of information – from land records, petitions, loyalist claims, local histories and a host of other sources – the Browns have recreated the life and times of what until now, is one of the forgotten men of the Revolution. This is more than the story of one individual, however. *Vermont Patriot and Loyalist* carefully places the Marsh family into their own worlds. The authors very skillfully weave Marsh's concerns and subsequent actions, including encouraging his neighbours to come together to create the new colony of Vermont, into the larger story of the Revolution. In a short, but effective discussion in the preface, the authors also clearly set out how their understanding of William's story speaks to the most recent literature about Loyalists and the American Revolution.

My one quibble is that at times, *Col William Marsh* includes too much in the way of lengthy excerpts from extant family documents (the codicil to William

Marsh's father's will, for example) or from the small extant Marsh correspondence, or official British documents. Although this is undoubtedly of interest to members of the family, the general reader is often immersed in details and can easily lose the thread of the story.

Col. William Marsh: Vermont Patriot & Loyalist is nonetheless a welcome addition to the growing number of recent studies on how British colonists in North America viewed the Revolution and why some chose to remain or, as in William Marsh's case, became Loyalists, and others did not. It also highlights how personal aspirations and beliefs were at the heart of what we often assume were really debates about high politics and noble ideologies. It is not that William Marsh did not appreciate the issues at stake in the years between 1775 and 1783; he certainly did. But the need to ensure the security of his family and of his new home, in Vermont, took precedence.

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Canada between Vichy and Free France, 1940-1945

By Olivier Courteaux

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Olivier Courteaux' *Canada between Vichy and Free France, 1940-1945*, is an international history that brings into dialogue Canadian, French, British and

US sources. It takes readers from the fall of France in June 1940 through to the San Francisco Conference of 1945. It offers some welcome insights into Canada's role in France's global schism and into an early exercise in Canadian multilateralism.

Courteaux convincingly demonstrates that domestic politics and a dose of pragmatism coloured William Lyon Mackenzie King's approach to the question of France. So too did his desire for closer relations with Roosevelt, who from the outset adopted a hostile approach to de Gaulle's Free French. This, and the delicate question of public opinion in Francophone