

'Victorious in Defeat': The American Loyalists in Canada

In the maritime provinces and Quebec thousands of Loyalists took refuge and changed the course of Canadian history



Wallace Brown

By courtesy of the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry
A backwoodsman with his mule; sketch by Loyalist Joshua Shaw

'They [the Loyalists] would rather go to Japan than go among the Americans where they could never live in peace.' Col. John Butler, a New York Loyalist who emigrated to Canada.

AS THE War for Independence drew to a close, thousands of American Loyalists were looking for new homes.¹ The most attractive location because of proximity, availability of land and continuing royal rule, was what was left of British North America, constituting in 1783 three colonies: Nova Scotia, which included the future New Brunswick; the Island of St John, renamed Prince Edward Island in 1799; and the ancient province of Quebec, which since 1774 stretched west to include the Great Lakes region. The term Canada, except as a synonym for Quebec, is an anachronism before 1867 (the date of Confederation); but it will be used in this essay to designate the entire area. The Maritimes refers to Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island.

Most Loyalists arrived in Nova Scotia by ship, at government expense, from New York City, the last great British stronghold in the

'lost thirteen' colonies. The invasion began in October, 1782, with the descent of 300 Americans on the Annapolis Valley. Thousands more soon followed into the peninsula where the greatest concentration, perhaps 10,000, was at Port Roseway, renamed Shelburne, after the man who was the patron of Governor John Parr, but by no means a hero to the Loyalists on account of the generous peace terms he had negotiated with the rebels. A Spring and a Fall fleet in 1783 brought a host of refugees to the St John valley, some of whom founded the city of Saint John at the river's mouth and Fredericton, seventy miles upstream. Other settlements were made at Passamaquoddy Bay (notably St Andrews), Sackville, Bay Chaleur and the Miramichi River. Other Loyalists were lured to the Island of St John, mainly the Malpeque-Bedeque isthmus, where Summerside, the island's second largest town, was founded.

The results of the influx into the Maritimes were dramatic. A new province, New Brunswick, was split off from Nova Scotia, the 15,000 Loyalists swamping the pre-Loyalist population of about 4,000 New Englanders and Acadians. Nova Scotia was further partitioned – temporarily, in this case – when hitherto little-

¹ For a general account see my article 'Escape from the Republic: The Dispersal of the American Loyalists', *History Today*, February, 1972.

developed Cape Breton Island, acquired from France in 1763, became a separate colony as a result of the arrival of 400 Loyalists who more than doubled the existing population. The Americans could not take over the rump of Nova Scotia; but, numbering at least 15,000, they slightly out-weighted the old inhabitants. On the Island of St John the up to 1,000 immigrants, almost equalling the existing population, were a force to be reckoned with.

Arrival in Quebec was much more sporadic than in the Maritimes as the Loyalists, often pushing hand-carts, trickled in by various water-assisted routes, including the St Lawrence and Hudson-Mohawk rivers, and Lakes Oneida and Champlain. Some sailed across Lake Ontario, frequently to the Bay of Quinté; others followed the southern shore to the Niagara peninsula; others pushed on to the Thames River and the northern shore of Lake Erie; a few even ascended the Mississippi and settled at Detroit. Again the results were the founding of new towns including New Johnstown (now Cornwall) and Cataraqui (now Kingston), and partition when the western area became Upper Canada (the future Ontario) in 1791. In Upper Canada, as in New Brunswick, the Loyalists, numbering perhaps 7,000, took over a wilderness area from a small pre-Loyalist population of only a few hundred; but in the original colony of Quebec 70,000 French Canadians were not directly threatened by the 1,000 Loyalist immigrants, half of whom settled in the outlying Gaspé peninsula, and half in the old inhabited area, mainly at Sorel and Machiche. Later, the Eastern Townships received some Loyalists.

Government was ill-prepared for the arrival of the Tories, though Governor Frederick Haldimand in Quebec proved much more capable and sympathetic than Governor Parr in Nova Scotia. Halifax and Saint John were severely overcrowded. In the former, churches and warehouses served as temporary quarters, and in both tent-cities sprang up. Congestion, but not always hardship, was relieved when many refugees moved to take up government land grants. Contemporary accounts are few; but some evidence about life in early Fredericton

survives. All too soon the Loyalists faced the hard Canadian winter in tents covered with boughs or in half-finished log cabins. Some unfortunates froze to death; others only escaped by organizing shifts through the night to keep the fires going. The want of bedding might be supplied by heated boards. Even in 1787 the Reverend Jacob Bailey, a talented Loyalist from Massachusetts, reported from Annapolis County, Nova Scotia, that: 'Many families are confined to a single apartment built with sods, where men, women, children, pigs, fleas, bugs, mosquitoes and other domestic insects mingle in society.'

In western Quebec there was also much hardship. In July, 1784 it was stated that 'the settlers at Cataraqui are in great disorder, not having yet got upon their land, many of them unprovided with a Blanket to cover Them, scarce any Turnip seed and neither Axes nor Hoes for Half of Them'. Brighter reports soon followed; but 1789 was known as the 'hungry year' when 'dreadful circumstances' were noted: 'one spoonful of meal per day, for one person' was the ration; wild leaves, such as beech, were eaten; famished domestic animals were bled Masai-style; one family 'leaped for joy at one robin being caught, out of which a whole pot of broth was made'.

The Canadian land was quite capable of supplying a living at a simple farming level, but first came the back-breaking work of clearing the forest. Even Beverley Robinson Jr., scion of one of the richest New York families, recounted in 1784 that: 'He is now settling a new farm in Nova Scotia by beginning to cut down the first tree and erect a loghouse for the shelter of his wife and two small children, and to accomplish that is obliged to labour with *his own hands*' (my italics). We see here the influence of the frontier at work in a Turnerian way.

Under the strain of the new environment, grown men wept like children and some cracked up completely. Filer Diblee and his family came from a prosperous middle class background in Connecticut. Their Loyalism resulted in an Odyssey of flight, imprisonment and persecution which ended with their arrival at the Kingston peninsula, New Brunswick,

where they survived the winter of 1783-84 in a log cabin. But Diblee's 'fortitude gave way' at the prospect of imprisonment for debt; he 'grew Melancholy, which soon deprived him of his Reason'; and one day in March, 1784, 'he took a Razor from the Closet, threw himself on the bed, drew the Curtains, and cut his own throat'. Though she lost her house twice by fire, his widow struggled on in what she called 'this frozen Climate and barren Wilderness'.

Groups as well as individuals were unfortunate. The Loyalist boom-town, Shelburne, had a magnificent harbour, but otherwise was so badly located that it rapidly declined to a hamlet. Port Mouton, Nova Scotia, was settled by over 2,000 refugees, mainly disbanded soldiers, in 1783 and quickly the town of Guysborough was built, and a road hacked through the woods to Liverpool. But in 1784 the town was destroyed by fire, a fate that struck several Loyalist settlements. Most of the inhabitants left and founded the present Guysborough on Chedabucto Bay, Nova Scotia, while some others founded St Stephen in New Brunswick. Typically, most Loyalist set-backs were temporary. Most Shelburners found new homes. Even the Diblee family endured.

The arrival of the Loyalists in Canada marks the beginning of a great epic tale insufficiently appreciated by historians or the public. It ranks with the history of the Jesuit missionaries and the *coureurs de bois*, but has never found its Parkman.

Although plagued with difficulties, the Loyalists had many advantages. The environment was not completely hostile. Trees that had to be removed also supplied fuel and material for houses, tools and furniture; winters that inflicted frost-bite also provided a free 'deep-freeze' for the abundant game and fish; governments that were cursed for incompetence and ingratitude granted tax exemptions, issued provisions, medicines, clothes, tools, seeds, boards, and, most important of all, surveyed and granted, free of charge, land – the basis of survival for most people in those days. For a fortunate minority government largesse went further. Ex-officers received half pay for life; some Loyalists got pensions and lump-sum

grants in compensation for losses sustained by the Revolution; all of this injected much needed capital into Canada and ultimately benefited all the inhabitants. A very small minority got government offices, especially in the new provinces of New Brunswick and Upper Canada, but there were never enough to satisfy the voracious Loyalists' demands. The scorned pre-Loyalist inhabitants were helpful as suppliers and informants. For example, in New Brunswick the Acadians sold cleared land and provisions to the Loyalists, while the Indians introduced them to fiddlehead greens (the edible shoots of a wild fern that are still a local delicacy). Though some observers noted the 'vice of every kind, incident of the camp', that prevailed among the many Loyalists who settled as groups of disbanded regiments, particularly at Niagara, on the St John River and the upper St Lawrence, others stressed the advantages that military discipline and cohesiveness gave.

It has nurtured the self-esteem of some Canadians, especially New Brunswickers, to consider the Loyalists as mainly colonial aristocrats and Harvard graduates, in the same way it has flattered Virginians to consider themselves the progeny of Cavaliers. In fact, the vast majority of Loyalists were modest farmers (plus some artisans) who were well-suited to pioneering. But the Loyalist myth of gentility has a grain of truth; there *was* a significant minority of the 'better sort', again especially in New Brunswick. Sergeant-Major William Cobbett, on duty in New Brunswick in the 1790s, was amazed to find 'thousands of captains . . ., without soldiers, and of squires without stockings or shoes', some of whom were happy to serve him a glass of grog. There were few fee-paying clients for doctors or lawyers. Not surprisingly a number of gentleman Loyalists left Canada. For example, no less than six members of New Brunswick's first assembly, which met in 1785, had returned to the United States before the session was completed!

Nevertheless the contribution of the élite Loyalists to Canada, especially to government, politics, the law, religion and culture, must be acknowledged and can be suggested by listing a few names. Edmund Fanning (North Carolina)



A Loyalist encampment on the St Lawrence in 1784, by James Peachey
From: Upper Canada by G. M. Craig, O.U.P., 1963

and Sir John Wentworth (New Hampshire) became the lieutenant-governors of the Island of St John and Nova Scotia respectively; John Saunders (Virginia) and William Smith (New York) became chief-justices of New Brunswick and Quebec; Philip Marchington and Richard Cartwright (both from New York) were leading merchants in Nova Scotia and Upper Canada respectively; Sir John Johnson and Gabriel Ludlow (both from New York) became prominent office-holders in Quebec and New Brunswick; the Reverend Jonathan Odell (a poet of distinction from New Jersey) became the long serving provincial secretary of New Brunswick; and so it went even to succeeding generations – Simon Fraser, the great explorer, was the son of a Loyalist; Sir Leonard Tilley, a father of Confederation, was a grandson.

Most Loyalists were subsistence famers; but there were other areas of economic endeavour. Canada was slated by the British government to replace the former thirteen colonies as the purveyor of fish, timber and other supplies to the British West Indies. Indeed, some so-called Loyalists only migrated when they learned that the Navigation Acts would be applied against the United States. The West Indian market encouraged Canadian agriculture, fishing and

lumbering; but supply never equalled demand, and the British frequently had to open the West Indian trade to the United States. Even much of the early Nova Scotia and New Brunswick timber exports were American, frequently illegally obtained. The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars stimulated the Maritime mast trade; but much of it was not in Loyalist hands, and people tended to be diverted from agriculture, which partly explains why the Maritimes were chronically short of food.

The Loyalists dreamed of making the new provinces 'a showcase for the continent,' 'the envy' of the United States; but sometimes the dream fell short. The Maritimes were poor by American standards. In 1790 William Pitt, influenced by laissez-faire principles and the United States policy of selling public lands, ended free land grants in British North America. Lord Dorchester, the Governor of Quebec, ignored the order; little land worth having remained in Nova Scotia; but the ban, which lasted seventeen years in New Brunswick, stunted development. On the Island of St John most Loyalists could not get clear title to their land because of a complicated matter of absentee ownership. Some refugees bought new land; many simply squatted;



Mansell Collection

SIR GUY CARLETON, Lord Dorchester, 1724-1808, Governor of Quebec before and after the Revolution

others moved away. The issue, which was not resolved until 1875, cast a pall over the island, but stimulated reform politics during the first half of the nineteenth century. Upper Canada suffered from isolation and the barrier of the rapids of the St Lawrence; but the rich soil presaged a prosperous future in what became the wealthiest part of Canada.

There is a chorus of contemporary testimony that most Loyalists, apart from a few who had 'contracted . . . rum and idle habits . . . during the war,' made good settlers. For example, Patrick Campbell visiting Upper Canada in the early 1790s, was impressed with the 'immense industry' of the Loyalists, who, he claimed, had cleared more land in eight years than the French had in one hundred; James MacGregor visiting Prince Edward Island in the early nineteenth century found the Loyalists 'industrious and independent,' very well-suited to coping with 'a country in a state of nature.' In 1802 Edward Winslow, a descendant of the Pilgrim Father of the same name, looked back

at the history of his fellow New Brunswick Loyalists with modest satisfaction. 'Immense labour' had transformed a wilderness into a prosperous farming community. 'Enquire among 'em. Are you oppressed with taxes? No. Does anybody interrupt you in matters of conscience? No. Do the laws afford you sufficient protection. Why yes.' After a few years the Loyalists were strung out along a line of permanent, mainly agricultural, settlements from Cape Breton to Detroit,² and they had created two new provinces and several important towns. This is their prime contribution to Canada. They are the English founding fathers, analagous to the Virginians and Puritans of the early seventeenth century.

There remain two questions to be answered: what kind of society did the Loyalists create; and what was their legacy to Canada? The Loyalists were essentially good Americans, rarely docile Tories. As early as May, 1783, the royal surveyor, Benjamin Marston, a Loyalist himself, was complaining about the 'curs'd Republican Town meeting Spirit' that made his life in Shelburne a trial. Bishop Charles Inglis was appalled by the democratic implications of 'free pews' (i.e. not assigned according to rank) at Trinity Church, Kingston, New Brunswick. The Maritimes were (and are) susceptible to United States frontier-style revivalism; and from the start the hopes of the élite for a strong, established, Anglican Church were disappointed, despite the appointment in 1787 of Inglis as Bishop of Nova Scotia with jurisdiction over New Brunswick and Quebec, and the setting aside of 'clergy reserves' of land in the Maritimes and Upper Canada. Too many Loyalists were Erastian. Élite hopes for an hereditary aristocracy were frustrated, and it was even difficult to live in gentlemanly style. Thus, the very wealthy John Saunders sat on his great estate, the Barony, near Fredericton, unable to attract tenants – men naturally preferred to work their own land.

The single characteristic common to the Loyalists was quarrelsomeness. The old

²Detroit, although legally in the United States by the peace treaty of 1783, was not evacuated until after the signing of Jay's Treaty in 1794, when the Loyalists moved across the border into Canada.

inhabitants could not be expected to relish the intrusion, even if the refugees had been exceptionally reticent. Generally the Loyalists disliked the old inhabitants of Canada whom they considered had been too friendly to the American Revolution. 'Languid wretches,' said Edward Winslow in New Brunswick; 'exulting in their beloved Ignorance', said Jacob Bailey in Nova Scotia; 'idle' and 'indolent', said Benjamin Marston in the Island of St John; 'the Darkest Corner of the Dominion', said William Smith in Quebec.

But the most bitter quarrels were between Loyalists, usually between the élite and the rest. The tone was set even before the evacuation of New York when a group known as the Fifty-Five, on account of their high social standing, petitioned for special large land grants of 5,000 acres each in Nova Scotia. A howl of protest resulted and the scheme was thwarted. The first New Brunswick election in November 1785 led to rioting in St John which crystallized two parties: the minority, aristocratic Upper Covers, versus the majority, plebeian Lower Covers. In 1787 Lord Dorchester had to send a committee to investigate Loyalist unrest in the future Upper Canada. The committee reported 'a very dangerous Jealousy and want of Confidence . . . between the Majority of the settlers and their late officers.' In New Brunswick the political dispute culminated in 'the Glenie affair,' in which James Glenie, a Scottish timber merchant, not a Loyalist, led the opposition to Governor Thomas Carleton and the official clique in Fredericton which in 1792 lost its majority in the assembly. The affair finally turned on whether the council had the constitutional right to interfere with the initiate money bills. From 1795 to 1798 an impasse meant no revenue was collected at all until a compromise allowed both houses to initiate.

In Nova Scotia the situation was complicated by a powerful segment of 'old comers', and no real Loyalist party developed. But the Loyalists were in the thick of politics and led a thrust against the council. A Halifax by-election of 1788 was marked by rioting and murder; and, a year later, the Loyalists were charged with rebellion. Order was restored in 1791 when

Governor Parr, who had long complained about the Americans – they 'almost wish to take over the government' – died and was replaced by a Loyalist, Sir John Wentworth.

W. S. MacNutt, the best historian of the Maritimes, comments on the early political history of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick that it was firmly in the tradition of the former American colonies, that 'replicas of the constitutional struggles . . . of New York and Massachusetts were . . . the common lot of the two provinces.'

Now to consider the Loyalist legacy. It must be stressed that only in New Brunswick did the Loyalists remain a majority for very long, and even there they were engulfed by other immigrants after the War of 1812. They and their descendants retained political power almost until Confederation; but from the early years the economy was dominated by Scots. Direct Loyalist influence was much more ephemeral elsewhere in Canada. In Upper Canada by 1812



By courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum
Sergeant-Major William Cobbett on duty in New Brunswick in the 1790s; engraving from Gillray's 'Life of William Cobbett', 1809



The grounds of Governor Frederick Haldimand's house in Quebec by James Peachey, 1781

By courtesy of the Public Archives of Canada

only one fifth of the population of 100,000 were Loyalists or their children, although most of the remainder were American-born; these were the so-called 'late Loyalists', American frontiersmen who were simply attracted by Governor John G. Simcoe's offer of free land in an area where the land was very good. Many Canadians with no Loyalist background, however, have acquired Loyalist attitudes. For example, John Strachan arrived in Upper Canada from Scotland in 1799 with pro-American convictions, but by 1809 was convinced that 'true liberty' did not exist in the United States; later in the nineteenth century in New Brunswick, Protestant Irish immigrants became 'Loyalized', a process aided by inter-marriage.

The Loyalists helped establish Canada's tradition of a 'cultural mosaic', which is held to contrast with America's alleged, homogenizing melting pot. From the start most Loyalist preferred to leave the French alone, and their own

settlements were frequently fragmented; for example, in the Upper Canadian Townships Roman Catholic Scots and Presbyterian Scots kept apart. The Loyalist influx also brought many loyal Iroquois, who settled along the Grand River, and a number of black Loyalists who founded settlements in the Maritimes that persist to this day.

The Loyalists and the British government set the political structure of English Canada which was only in embryo in Nova Scotia before 1783. The aim was to avoid the 'mistakes' that had caused revolution to the south. New Brunswick may serve as a model that was generally copied. The lower houses were believed to have become too powerful; so the powers of the appointed council and the Governor, who was made financially independent, were strengthened. The élite were encouraged by appointment to the council and government office, and as JPs in the counties – the New England township was scrupulously avoided. The colonial gov-



A view of Fort Needham, near Halifax, Nova Scotia, 'severely overcrowded with Loyalists'; watercolour by G. Parkyns, 1801
By courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum

ernment of New Brunswick was made less dependent on the home-country; more internal self-government was allowed than had been the case in America. Conservative social institutions, like the Church of England, were supported; and with sad memories of Revolutionary agitation in the American cities still vivid, the capital was moved from Saint John to the inland village of Fredericton. (Many Loyalists had a Jeffersonian dislike of commerce and cities.) But the tone in New Brunswick was far from entirely conservative; the British never attempted to tax the North American colonies directly; thus the essential early goal of the Revolution was secured. In the words of W. S. MacNutt, 'democracy ran riot in the Loyalist citadel'; the suffrage was for all men, and the city government of Saint John, with its annual elections, was one of the most democratic bodies of its kind in North America. The Revolution not only made Americans free, but also Canadians, who found that 'subjects' could

be just as happy as 'citizens'.

French-Canadians owe much to the Loyalists. The Constitutional Act of 1791, partly because of Loyalist agitation, began representative government in Quebec and introduced freehold land tenure. At the same time, the French way of life, including legal and religious systems, was maintained. The Loyalist numbers doomed the French to become a minority; but the Loyalist strength enabled Canada to withstand the onslaught of American imperialism. It is doubtful if French culture could have survived within the American union.

The Loyalist tradition is often decried in Canada because it has been held responsible for the development of aristocratic governing cliques, known as the Family Compacts. In fact, the Family Compacts were not a Loyalist phenomenon. True, in Upper Canada about half of the leading members of the compact were second-generation Loyalists, men like

Sir John Beverley Robinson; but Loyalists' descendants were an important component of the opposition, and the rebellion of 1837 similarly found them on both sides. In New Brunswick the Loyalists were also on both sides of the compact question. Lemuel Allen Wilmot, a grandson of a Poughkeepsie Loyalist, led the struggle, successful in 1836, for New Brunswick to gain control of Crown lands, an important landmark on the road to full self-government. During the same period Joseph Howe, whose father was a loyal Massachusetts newspaper editor, played a similar role in leading the forces of Nova Scotia democracy. Nevertheless, the aristocratic British proclivity of some Loyalists and their descendants has frequently gone against the Canadian grain. The tone was set in 1789 when the Quebec Council resolved to have the Loyalists and their posterity discriminated, from future settlers, 'giving them a Marke of Honor,' the right to put UE (Unity of Empire) after their names, hence the expression United Empire Loyalists.

New Brunswick is *par excellence* the Loyalist province; and a brief account of some influences there may be appropriate. On the positive side, there is a cultural tradition. In 1784 the Loyalists laid the foundations of the University of New Brunswick at Fredericton, where the residence of the poet, Jonathan Odell, began a literary tradition that leads directly to Bliss Carman and others. On the negative side, we find an over-dependence on government, a scramble for office and patronage, a morbid absorption in politics that sapped more wholesome initiative, particularly economic. Writing in this vein in 1904, John Davidson, a Scottish professor, now perhaps understandably forgotten, at the University of New Brunswick, found the Loyalist tradition baleful. He quoted a local: 'in this country men think five dollars of government money is worth ten dollars from anybody else,' and added that New Brunswick was the only country he knew where professional and business men had to do their legitimate work at night because politics took up the day.

Discussion of the efforts of the Loyalists often centres on explanations of why Canada is

so different from the United States. Such items as law, Parliamentary government and the monarchy are obvious; but Canada's relatively peaceful western expansion, and a general lack of lynching, are also listed. It is even argued that several Canadian provinces have elected mild socialist governments during the last few decades because of the Loyalists. More of a class structure was maintained in Canada, and Canadians, far from starting with a distrust of government authority, positively embrace it.

The Loyalists offered a valid critique of the Revolutionary ideals and moral absolutism. The Nova Scotian writer, Thomas C. Haliburton, the grandson of a Loyalist and a popular satirist, had Sam Slick say simply 'there is no tyranny on airth equal to the tyranny of a majority'. Similar sentiments were expressed by the Reverend Mather Byles, who, watching the hysteria surrounding the funeral of a victim of the Boston 'massacre' in 1771, opined: 'They call me a brainless Tory; but tell me . . . which is better to be ruled by one tyrant three thousand miles away, or by three thousand tyrants one mile away?'

The Loyalists have profoundly influenced Canadian nationalism. They began an abiding love-hate attitude toward the Great Republic. During the War of 1812, by opting out, the Maritimes demonstrated the love; but there was a bitter struggle in Upper Canada. The Loyalists took pride in victory of sort; but more important were the myths and symbols established: the Loyalist militia had beaten the Yankees; Laura Secord had led her cow through the American lines. Fear of the United States has remained, and Unity of Empire has frequently been invoked as a shield, as in the 1880s which witnessed one of several Loyalist revivals.

It is true that there is a certain Canadian dourness resulting from three losing traditions: French, Scottish and Loyalist. But a Canadian poet's description of the latter is also apt:

Not drooping like poor fugitives they came
In exodus to our Canadian wilds
But full of heart and hope, with heads erect
And fearless eyes victorious in defeat.

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