

The United Empire Loyalists

by Professor A. R. M. Lower, Ph.D., LL.D., F.R.S.C., Historian, Queen's University, Kingston

The following are excerpts from an address by Professor Lower delivered at the University of Delaware, Newark, U.S.A. in 1960.

In the introduction to his address Professor Lower maintains that "There exists three points of view on the American Revolution: the American, the British, and the Canadian". In developing the last two of these points of view, Professor Lower says that there is "an oral tradition: regarding the American Revolution which has come down to the present day among Canadians of Loyalist descent. But in addition there is "a more sophisticated, literate level" as represented in the writings of men like William Canniff, (*History of the Province of Ontario*, published in 1872) and Egerton Ryerson, (*The Loyalists of America and their Times*, published in 1880). "Canniff—Lower says—represents the orthodox Loyalist interpretation of the Revolution....which became an arsenal of ammunition for later pamphleteers in attributing the purest of motives, the most lofty of sentiments to the Loyalists." Ryerson, the son of a Loyalist of Dutch descent from New Jersey affirms: "I cannot sympathize with, much less defend, the leaders of the old American colonies in the repudiating what they professed from their forefathers After many years of anxious study and reflection, I have a strong conviction that the Declaration of American Independence in 1776 was a great mistake in itself, a great calamity to America as well as to England, a great injustice to many thousands on both sides of the Atlantic, a great loss of human life, a great blow to the liberties of mankind, and a great impediment to the highest Christian and Anglo-Saxon civilization among the nations of the world." "There you have," Lower says, "British North American Loyalism at its most literate, most considered level. This was 1880. Ryerson was a Methodist minister, a man of high abilities, a great public servant—the school system of Ontario is his monument—a man who commanded an exceedingly able pen."

Professor Lower continues:

"Members of this audience as Americans, will say, But this is exactly the old revolutionary debate, surely sterile a hundred years after all the issues had been settled. It is, of course, exactly that. And to Americans, it must have been sterile in 1880 and it must be still more so today. While a self-conscious body of people remains unscattered, such memories remain, and they have the highest political consequences. In this case, if you ask me what consequences, I answer briefly: Loyalist ideas and attitudes have passed into the general Canadian tradition and have greatly influenced it. Canada has taken much of its political colouring from the Loyalists. Their attitudes and emotions are thus still very much alive and without overemphasis, they may be regarded as one of the principal foundation stones of the Canadian nation.

It has always seemed to me that the Revolution was primarily a civil war. Eventually it became a war against Great Britain, but severe divisions within the colonies were evident before the Revolution, and it could be conjectured that if no Great Britain had existed, civil government would have broken down in internal conflict, just as it did a century later.

America represented various segments of English society transplanted and growing independently. Within each the same rivalries and divisions could be found as within the parent

state. They centred mainly on religion and the class structure. With the notable exception of Virginia, the American Revolution was the renewal on American soil of the English 17th century struggle against the Stuarts.

Again, our own day has shown us that revolutions do not spring from majorities but from determined minorities. "The voice of the people" in the face of well-organized, resolute minorities becomes a meaningless phrase. It is "the seizure of power" which counts, rather than some nebulous "voice of the people". There should be little difficulty in understanding many aspects of the Revolution if we have grasped anything at all about seizure of power in the various countries of today. I suppose you could see it illustrated with well-meaning people, decent, respectable people scattered, and the extremists first of all cajoling, then coercing the crowd. There is a French saying: in revolution, it is first of all necessary to sweep out the decent (and therefore lukewarm) people.

I cannot believe that the American Revolution was different from other revolutions. It was probably made by a minority, with the mass conservative and wishing more than anything else, to avoid decision. It would be natural for a man to remain in his old way of thinking. Consequently, people who became Loyalists were probably drawn from the majority of the American population. When, however, they had made their decision, they set themselves apart, and in this way the two extremes drifted into war.

Whatever one says about the Revolution must necessarily be an oversimplification. When we look at actual, as apart from theoretical Loyalists, we find them representing every grade of society, every creed and every colony. As the war went on, they became more and more distinct from their former fellow citizen, either because they had actively identified themselves with the king's cause, had taken service under his colours, had left the country or for any one of a dozen other reasons. As the war drew to a close, more and more left the country, others gathered to the centres of British power, especially New York, and in that way the movement known in history as the Loyalist migration had its origin.

But the main body of migrants, the significant body, went to the British possessions to the north. I say significant because those who went to the West Indies did not continue to exist as a separate, compact body of people and those who went to Great Britain went as individuals. They were the wealthiest and the better educated, and as individuals, they put their point of view forward in Britain effectively enough. But they did not affect British opinion to any marked extent: they just merged into the general body politic.

With those who went to the new British North American provinces it was quite different. First of all, their numbers were relatively large. Simple settlers from the western New York began drifting over the Niagara frontier before the war had ended and at its close this movement was accentuated. Loyalist regiments were brought up to the city of Montreal and there others joined them. A large camp was formed at Sorel, at the mouth of the Richelieu, and there some thousands of people put in the winter of 1783-84. In the spring they were taken off up the River St. Lawrence and settled all the way up from the last French seigneurie to Lake Ontario.

All told some thirty-five thousand persons are supposed to have left the new United States and to have come to what British territory remained. A good many of these, unable to face the wilderness, or other reasons, returned after a year or two when things had quieted down, but the net result was enough people put down north of the new border to form substantial new communities and entirely to change the nature of what was then loosely called British North America.

The Loyalists who went by sea to the Maritime provinces were drawn from every colony and represented most of the colonial races and creeds. English in race, Anglican in denominational adherence and of New England origin, the most of them undoubtedly were. But there were people from at least as far south as the Carolinas. There were Irish, Scots, some Germans, and a good many Dutch. There were in addition to Anglicans, representatives of nearly every Protestant denomination and people who were of no denomination. There were Irish Catholics and there were Negroes. A good cross section of colonial life. One group of the many groups may be singled out: graduates of Harvard University. As Edward Winslow in New Brunswick, said, they were founding a society as fit for a gentleman as could be found. It is well known that the official classes furnished a large contribution to the emigres and it is natural that Harvard graduates should be common among the official classes. It is also natural that, of all social groups, university graduates should be the most conservative, for they have benefitted most from society as it is, and as educated men, they can see more plainly than most other people, the line of historical evolution.

The persons who left the old colonies because they would not relinquish their allegiance, seem from the first, to have had a firm consciousness of their own virtue, and attitude. The response to this of the Imperial government was an attitude which evinced quite extra-ordinary generosity. The Loyalists were fed and clothed until they could get their lands into production, and provision was made not only for liberal land grants but even more important, for clearing away all the brushwood that surrounded the grant of good titles. Given the resources of the 18th century, and transatlantic distances, it was no small task to put some thirty thousand people on new landholdings, feed them, clothe them, and keep them alive with some of them a thousand miles from the sea and nothing but river transport in between. Two men share the major part of the credit for this. One was the British commander-in-chief at New York, Sir Guy Carleton, the other was the French-speaking Swiss Protestant governor of the Province of Quebec, Sir Frederick Haldimand. It was Sir Frederick who distributed the Loyalists along the River St. Lawrence in so wise a manner and it was Sir Guy Carleton, later to become Lord Dorchester, who secured adoption of the device which more than any other has from that day to the present given the Loyalists a corporate identity and preserved their pride and morale.

The device was simple. In the year indicated, Lord Dorchester, now Governor-in-Chief of British North America, proposed "to put a Mark of Honour upon the families who had adhered to the unity of the empire, and joined the Royal Standard in America before the Treaty of Separation in the year 1783, and all their children and their descendants by either sex." The persons concerned were "to be distinguished by the letters U.E. affixed to their names, alluding to their great principle the Unity of the Empire." In this way, the United Empire Loyalists, as distinguished from mere Loyalists, came into being. The letters have always been cherished, and for nearly a century now the privilege of using them has been buttressed by the various Associations which collectively make up The United Empire Loyalists' Association of Canada.

The United Empire Loyalists—familiar to every Canadian "the U.E.L.'s"—have thus from the beginnings of most English Canada been a special body of people, with accurate genealogical records, suitable organization, and above all, a coherent and unvarying tradition. It is only to be expected that in the course of a century and more, persons not strictly entitled to the appellation U.E. have managed to make good their claim to it, but in general, claims to U.E. descent can be substantiated. Of course, in the six and more generations since those days, every degree of intermarriage with persons of other descents has occurred, so that today a person

entitled to put "U.E." after his name may in fact be only one sixty-fourth of that particular strain.

The largest single group that has got mixed up with the U.E.'s was that group known in Canadian history as "Late Loyalists". For a good many years after 1783, a person born in one of the former colonies before 1783 might have been expected to be more or less uncertain of his ultimate political allegiance—he might be an American citizen on one side of the boundary, but if he crossed, he might remember that he had been born a subject of King George. Who is to penetrate the degree of loyalism or non-loyalism that would fill the mind of such a person? Who is to separate political emotion from the prospect then lying before such a person of a grant of two hundred acres of good land? It is reasonable to suppose that in the few years immediately following the Revolution many a person either because he preferred the old institutions to the new came north to join his family and friends or because he was an object of suspicion among his old associates. As the years rolled by, more and more of those emigrating to Canada would do so for land, fewer and fewer because of political reasons, though it is to be remembered that many of the original Loyalists never lost their ties with their native places and often went back to visit friends and relations there: in some cases, such associations continued over several generations.

By the time of the War of 1812 most of the population of the province of Upper Canada, now Ontario, was of American descent or birth: some put the figure as high as nineteen twentieths. Of the total the Loyalists themselves composed only quite a small minority. The War of 1812 had affects for Canada like those of the War of Independence for the United States. People had to stand up and be counted.

Consequently, those who were on the other side had either to decide to keep quiet or get out. There was thus a purge from Upper Canada in 1812-1814 not unlike that which had occurred in the old colonies thirty-five years before, with similar results, though in the opposite direction. The War of 1812-14 solidified the provinces in their allegiance to all things British. In it Loyalists had taken a prominent part, and it in turn, reinforced and re-invigorated Loyalism. After the War, Canadians knew that their destinies were to be worked out under the British crown.

One of the primary arguments during the Revolution had concerned Parliamentary Supremacy. Was the British Parliament the supreme law-making body of the Empire? or were there subjects on which it could not act, such as taxation? Most colonists, Loyalists included, had taken the latter view: Parliament was limited in its powers, though for convenience it might be regarded as the central regulatory body. As the war had gone on, views had got more extreme. At last, Loyalists had come to share Parliament's own view of its powers: it was the supreme law-making body. This view was never to be challenged in the new empire that appeared so rapidly after 1783. Every Canadian has been brought up in the doctrine of Parliamentary Supremacy, that is to say the Supremacy of the Imperial Parliament. How to reconcile Parliamentary Supremacy with self-government has been the primary constitutional problem ever since the Revolution. In the 19th and 20th centuries it was settled as Loyalists in the 18th century had said that the quarrel of those days should be settled—by trial and error and the rectification of abuses as they made themselves manifest. In this way, Parliamentary Supremacy remained as a doctrine but shrank and shrank as a matter of day-to-day importance. The big steps on the way were the attainment of Responsible Government by the British North American Colonies in the 1840's, the formation of the Dominion of Canada in 1867, the Great War and, in law, the passing of the Statue of Westminster in 1931, which came as close as words could, to

putting an end to the doctrine. But if you are a stickler for legal formality, you could say that if the Cheshire cat has disappeared, you can still see a bit of the grin.

If Canada had not been built on a Loyalist foundation, it would have had a quite different history and at one time, indeed, might have left the Empire in much the same way as the older colonies had done. Loyalism in Canada has thus involved compromise and evolution, not dogma and revolution.

Descendants of the United Empire Loyalists do not form any considerable proportion of the population of modern Canada. I have at times tried to reckon this up and, giving them the most liberal allowance in the way of natural increase, I do not see how the Loyalist stock can make up more than some eight to ten per cent of the total population. In all probability the percentage is lower than that, not higher. But its importance far transcends its members. The Loyalists were almost the first English population modern Canada had and they were concentrated in certain areas. I have spoken of the valley of the St. John River: New Brunswick is the Loyalist province, par excellence, a province where the old ideas and the old way of life have, until recent years, completely dominated. Today, the province still retains its characteristic flavor. Its life has emphasized the hierarchical element in society perhaps rather more than other parts of Canada. It has been rather easy going. In a society so completely in agreement about first principles, party politics, at least to the outsider, has seemed rather irrational, apparently consisting in sham battles between ins and outs. And nationalism has been very slow to develop.

It is still rather difficult there to make a distinction between the government of Canada and what some New Brunswickers would consider the "real government", "the government of the Empire". One result of this psychology is visible in the number of New Brunswickers who have gone to Great Britain, there to make their home and fortune, coming back at intervals to give their compatriots discrete revelations from "the heart of Empire". I think of such people as Lord Beaverbrook and the late R. B. Bennett. R. B., later Lord Bennett, was of Loyalist origin. When he had finished his term as Prime Minister of Canada, I suppose it seemed natural to him to return to the land of heart's desire across the water, there to take a seat in the most august assemblage of empire, the House of Lords. Growing nationalism in the rest of Canada was more inclined to look on it as desertion.

Nova Scotia, the sister province, had a New England population before the American Revolution. This group today, still very conscious of its origins, refers to itself proudly as "Pre-Loyalist". When the Loyalist migrations came, they temporarily overwhelmed the previous inhabitants, and for more than a generation, there was a distinct line of separation between them. The ex-New Englanders had become frontier Baptists, with all the equalitarian attributes that go with those terms. The Loyalists brought their sense of hierarchy, they were mostly Anglicans, and there was a large band of Harvard college graduates among them. These latter expected quickly to reproduce Boston in Halifax, and incidentally, to secure whatever public prizes the little colony had to offer. In New Brunswick, where Loyalists had had it all their own way, there had not been this tension between elements, and without causing overmuch heartburning, the Harvard men had secured the prizes. In Nova Scotia, it quickly became a matter of Halifax against the province. A little knot of men, some Loyalists, some not, got power and place into their hands. They came to control the Legislative Council, supplied most of the judges, rallied round the Anglican bishop, established the banks, and had the shipping business in their hands. King's College at Windsor, 1793, begun with a good deal of Imperial aid, had become their

educational citadel. But in the rebellious decade of the 1830's, tension worked up to a climax and the power of this establishment was challenged. The challenger was himself the son of a Boston Loyalist, but not a man of the classes, Joseph Howe. His father had been a Boston printer. Howe successfully broke the power of the little ruling class and after ten years of conflict secured for his province the first application in the empire of what we in Canada call "Responsible Government", that is, a government in which those in power must at all times be able to secure through the representatives of the people in the Assembly, support for what they do.

Howe was a Loyalist, a democrat, a Baptist. But he was no more a republican than the King of England himself. Twenty years after his victory over privilege in government, the issue of Confederation became paramount. Howe saw in it or professed to see, extinction for his native province and he fought it might and main: he wanted no absorption of his right-little, tight-little peninsula into the bush-government being built up a thousand miles inland at Ottawa.

The largest settlement of United Empire Loyalists outside of New Brunswick has been in Upper Canada, along the St. Lawrence, part of Lake Ontario, and further west, along Lake Erie. In these regions, many of their descendants still live and thus my opportunities for observation should therefore be good, but there are several qualifications to be made. First of all: many new people, such as myself, have come in and sullied the purity of the original stock. Secondly, the Loyalist stock of Ontario is now so much a part of the ordinary life of the province that it is hard to tell which is which. Thirdly, most Ontario—or Upper Canada—Loyalists were simple farmers so that as one moves among them, he does not find them overly vocal and it is hard to get a glimpse of the springs of action which move them. They must be distinguished from their leaders, who over the course of Canadian history have been prominent, quite able to express themselves and who have left no one in doubt as to their springs of action.

Our plain people in my district, a mixed lot of racial origin as I have said, are unquestioning traditionalists. We would never have the remotest chance of electing anyone but a Conservative as Member of Parliament. We take the present order of things for granted, symbolized, until the adoption of a new flag in 1964, by Crown and Union Jack. It is as much a part of the ordinary man's existence as the air he breathes. But I have not been able to discover that he attaches high emotional significance to these symbols. If someone tried to take them away, I suppose he would be roused. They have nothing to do with his ordinary conduct as a citizen, which is exactly the same as that of other Canadians: without class consciousness, equalitarian, law-abiding, not much interested in politics, not much interested in the country's part, with little sense of national identity, and all of them, whatever their racial origins may have been to begin with, now as solidly Anglo-Saxon as can be found anywhere in the world.

Sharp internal stress was introduced into the Loyalist communities of Upper Canada through frontier Methodism: Practically all the American writers on the Loyalists emphasize the close alignment of Loyalism with Anglicanism. They refer to innumerable people of wealth and education, both clerical and lay, in support of their view. The whole congregation of old Trinity Church, New York, for example, minister included, remained Loyalist and went off to Nova Scotia. In Upper Canada, there was the same alignment between the Anglican church and the upper classes of Loyalists as elsewhere. This monopoly of place and opportunity became so marked that it got the name "Family Compact": its kindness to itself resulted in the misgovernment of the province and the abortive rebellion of 1837.

But long before the rebellion the ordinary Loyalist had been picked up by the Methodist

circuit riders, who came over from Massachusetts as early as 1792. By the early 19th century, American Methodism, then a hot and strong frontier creed, its services marked by many hallelujahs and much rolling in the aisles, had established itself at various points in Upper Canada. Later on it was to encounter its more staid original Wesleyanism, moving westward from the seaboard, at Kingston, where for a period, there was much rivalry between the two. Methodism of the American, or bush variety, gave simple people a semi-equalitarian creed in distinction from the hierarchical atmosphere of Anglicanism. It made for a strong sense of independence and self-reliance among the lower middle classes. It began to wage its noisy fight against the frontier demon, rum. It exhibited to the world in its first years little of the grace, refinement and moderation of Anglicanism, which was essentially a denomination for gentlemen, plus retainers. Methodism could not fail to be unpopular with the "best people" and since it was brought into the province from The States, to be accused of republicanism.

With Methodism was associated the Baptist denomination, similar in its characteristics, though never so influential. One of the pioneer Baptist Loyalists in eastern Ontario came from Vermont, where it was said, his own father had informed on him and taken over his property. Another, a Baptist preacher, performed a marriage in a district outside of that for which he was licensed—the Anglican clergy were most jealous of the marriage prerogative—and received a sentence of fourteen year's imprisonment. This seems a bit excessive! So the governor of the day thought, anyway, as he commuted it. Another Baptist Loyalist was Samuel Edison, who came up from Nova Scotia to the Lake Erie district. It is said he was constantly getting haled into court on charges of assault, so it is not surprising that this pugnacious man should have been a rebel in 1837 and have found it advisable to leave the province for "The States". He was the grandfather of Thomas Edison.

The most interesting point about Methodism, to my mind, is the psychological division it introduced into individuals. Egerton Ryerson, mentioned above, is a prime example. He was a Loyalist of the Loyalist, but after his conversion to Methodism, the semi-democratic qualities of the creed and the pretensions of the Anglicans forced him far towards the left. He managed to pull himself up before he went over the cliff of rebellion in 1837, and he managed to save the good name of the Methodist denomination, too, but it was a fairly narrow squeak. How could monarchy, with its stiff old 18th century trimmings of rank and privilege, and Methodism, with its North American lower class assertiveness, be reconciled? Many Methodists have not to this day reconciled these two elements. There is something in the order and discipline of Methodism that makes for material success, and men who have won material success are invariably conservative. There is also something in Methodism which reminds a man sharply that he is his brother's keeper, so that this denomination has been the foremost proponent of the social gospel. Throughout the denomination, the old Loyalist propensities have continued strong and formative. The Methodist thus tends to be a divided man, both conservative and liberal, seeking privilege and feeling democratically at one and the same time. These tensions, I presume, are present in American Methodism, but in Canadian Methodism, as long as it had a separate existence, they were heightened by Loyalist origin and emotions.

In one lecture, there can be mentioned only a few of the innumerable ways in which the United Empire Loyalists have affected Canadian life. In fact, in order to give you a complete picture, I would have to inflict a lengthy analysis of Canadian history upon you. Just to take a few of the high points, as I approach my conclusion: the expulsion of American armies from Canadian soil in the War of 1812 owed not a little to the specific efforts of the Loyalists and the

general social cohesion provided by them. The suppression of the rebellion of 1837 in Upper Canada was made easy—some would say, all too easy—because the Loyalist attitude towards the rebels was either negative or hostile. Responsible Government, the solution of the Constitutional riddle, was won for Nova Scotia by Joseph Howe, a Loyalist who received the support of every type of person, Loyalist or not. In New Brunswick, the same result was achieved by Lemuel Wilmot, another Loyalist. In Upper Canada no one was more influential in shaping ideas than Egerton Ryerson, whom I have already mentioned. When in 1895, relations between Great Britain and the United States became strained owing to the Venezuelan affair, a spate of Loyalist pamphlets appeared in Canada, sounding exactly the same notes as had been heard in the 1770's. Early in the present century similar pamphlets continued to appear, no doubt partially in response to the Alaska Boundary settlement of 1903. In fact, right down to the First World War, the view of Anglo-American relations, the explanation of the American Revolution and the United Empire Loyalists' conception of Empire remained unchanged.

These attitudes had been maintained from the first. They had entered the general stream of Canadian life from a dozen and one sources. United Empire Loyalists views became the views of most Canadians. To a considerable degree they still hold intact. But since 1941, we have had two great World Wars, in both of which the peoples of the English-speaking world have fought together. And since the last war, we have had the division between east and west. These great events have naturally affected even so hard a body of traditions as that of the Loyalists. I am not voicing my own sentiment, but I would voice those of the diehards among them if I were to quote the old saying: "Better keep the devil you know than take the devil you don't know."

Even the most obdurate of historical sentiments wears out in time. I do not think there is much likelihood of Loyalist sentiment wearing out completely for quite a while yet, but it is altering, softening and managing to reshape itself. Only very irrational people can keep on forever flying in the face of facts and the United Empire Loyalists are no more irrational than other people. Consequently, I think you will find that the old sentiments are changing, though I can discern no decrease in attachment to our peculiar Canadian version of monarchy, and that those of the more extreme views will now at least charitably allow that the great mistake made in 1776 is in process of being remedied. Canadians in general I think have a feeling that that old past was being buried, that the peoples of common speech and traditions are coming much closer together. That is what Mr. Winston Churchill said, you remember, in one of his speeches. The old bitter feelings are being transferred to groups much further off and the family feuds are losing most of their heat.

I say "family feud". I do not know what word Americans would use, but I do know that you will never persuade Canadians to think in any other terms. To them, the English-speaking world is a "family", a large, loose family, if you will, but still a family. And since today they have a little more weight in the Anglo-American scheme of things, I am pretty sure that as time goes on, this concept "family" will grow in intensity, rather than weaken. For its maintenance over the centuries, a large share of the credit goes to The United Empire Loyalists.

Taken from the Loyalist Gazette, Spring, 1969.

Please Photocopy And Distribute This Article Freely.