FOREWORD

Loyalists and the Teaching of Canadian History: Old Ideas, New Trends and a Local Connection Or Two

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Over the years, I have had the pleasure of teaching Canadian history to students of varying ages and levels of interest and aptitude. I make no claims to being particularly expert in Loyalist studies, but I do have an interest. Year after year, I contemplate what students should know about this period in our country's history.

This isn't as easy a question to answer as some might suspect. History is very political. As some academics like to say, it is "contested terrain." Loyalists changed the course of history in at least two countries. If you contend that Quebec is actually a country trapped inside Canada, this number becomes three, and the tally rises even more when you consider that the events that produced the Loyalist émigrés could be felt in dozens of British colonies, as well as Britain itself.

These questions did not trouble past generations of Canadian history teachers much. For example, I have a copy of my father's Canadian history textbook from the late 1920s. A popular reference in its time, it emphasizes the bitterness of the American Revolution and its character as a civil war. In the aftermath of the war, the book details the persecution of those who remained loyal to Britain and the scope of their losses in the conflict. It suggests that many were wealthy and prominent citizens of the old Thirteen Colonies and notes that they faced not just material losses, but were forced to learn completely new pioneering skills. In overcoming adversity and eventually succeeding in rebuilding their lives, they are portrayed as stout, and more than a little stoic. Overall, the emphasis in this and other textbooks of the time is on the Loyalists' heroism, sacrifice and dogged defense of a political ideal.

The only twist in this story is a brief mention of the so-called "late Loyalist" phenomenon: namely, American settlers attracted by Governor Simcoe to Upper Canada, not for any noble political ideal, but by the promise of free land. The textbook suggests that many proved to be "excellent settlers," but others showed their true republican colours in 1812, with most eventually leaving Upper Canada for the U.S. For historians of this generation, late Loyalists were a type of self-fulfilling prophecy. If you left, you were not a *real* Loyalist; if you stayed, you were.

The textbooks of my high school and undergraduate years a generation later had a slightly different emphasis. Many hint at an intriguing aspect of the Loyalist legacy. On the one hand, early views of Loyalists often emphasized their political conservatism and elite origins; and yet, their arrival in the old colonies of Nova Scotia and Quebec resulted in elected legislatures and more local autonomy. This would suggest that the Loyalists might not all have been quite so conservative and royalist as earlier histories implied, and that the political struggle in the Thirteen Colonies was really a sophisticated argument over democratic institutions.

In The Story of Canada, one of the more influential textbooks of the 1960s and early 1970s, Donald Creighton argues that the Loyalists were not some aristocratic fragment of American society, but rather broadly representative of the societies that they had to leave. He describes them as a "cross-section of rich and poor, literate and uneducated, town and country, seaboard and frontier." He goes on to describe the make-up of this settler stock, which ranged from the educated Harvard elites who made up the appointed executive council in the new colony of New

Brunswick to the tough veteran soldiers who settled along the St. Lawrence and the Niagara frontier.

Creighton suggested that the struggles in the Thirteen Colonies were about constitutional government versus rebellion, unity of the Empire versus disruption, monarchism versus republicanism. Creighton's Loyalists turn out to be not so different from the American revolutionaries after all. What distinguished them was a willingness to accept the British tradition of "representative Parliamentary democracy." Admittedly, this was the unreformed British Parliament of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Creighton and other historians of this time managed a neat trick: they cast Loyalists as politically progressive settlers by asserting their North American-ness, without denying the importance of their decision to support Britain in the American War of Independence. This in turn gave them an important place in the constitutional evolution of Canada.

This process was neatly summarized by another equally prominent Canadian historian of the period, A.R.M. Lower, in the title of his textbook, Colony to Nation. This view of Canadian history placed constitutional and political history at the centre of our national story and put particular emphasis on a series of constitutional turning points: the Proclamation of 1763, the Quebec Act, the Constitutional Act, the Act Of Union, Responsible Government, the British North America Act and the Statute of Westminster, followed more recently by the repatriation of the Canadian Constitution, the Bill of Rights and the Charlottetown and Meech Lake accords. Within this framework, Loyalists were crucial; they altered the political calculations of the Quebec Act and led directly to the creation of new colonies with elected legislatures.

The other major consequence of the Loyalist migrations, at least in textbooks of this period was that this massive resettlement of people changed the demographic, and therefore the political and cultural face of British North America. In 1776, no one imagined that the colony of Quebec would ever be anything other than French speaking and Catholic. Seven years later, this assurance was gone. The American Revolution actually prompted the migration the British had hoped for in 1763. Unwillingly perhaps, but no less comprehensively, the struggle in the Thirteen Colonies made Britain's largest remaining North American colony bilingual and bicultural.

Much of the early teaching about Loyalists might have agreed on their place in Canadian history, but beneath this surface unanimity, important distinctions were beginning to appear. There are several reasons for this. In the years leading up to the American Bicentennial in 1976, American historians began a critical reappraisal of the revolution and what it meant. This inspired renewed interest in the leading figures and political theories behind the revolution, as well as a new consideration of those who opposed it. In Canada, a growing interest in what historian Maurice Careless called "limited identities" — questions of class, gender, ethnicity and region — encouraged historians here, too, to reevaluate their views on the Loyalists.

The result has not been a rejection of earlier ideas of the significance of the Loyalists so much as a broadening of their story. For example, it's worth considering what Loyalism meant in 1776. For years, American pop culture has encouraged the view that support for a break from Britain was the common colonial position, and what needed to be explained was why some opposed this natural step. In reality, support for the Continental Congress was hardly continent-wide. In 1775, when hostilities first broke out, Britain had about 30 distinct colonies in the Western Hemisphere. These ranged from sugar islands in the West Indies to the fur trade posts of the Hudson's Bay Company. Most colonies did not rebel; most never even considered rebelling. Arguably, the Loyalist position was the majority position among all colonies and colonists, and perhaps it is George Washington and Ben Franklin's ideas that were the anomalies.

This observation has led historians to look at Loyalism in two ways: the Loyalism of entire colonies and the Loyalism of individual residents of colonies that rebelled. I think it is important students understand both forms. As historians John Finlay and Doug Sprague suggest, the former was “quiet and situational” and might reflect more passive neutrality than active hostility towards the idea of rebellion. The sugar-producing islands of the British West Indies were not likely to rebel against Britain in 1776 — why would they, when Britain bought all the sugar they produced and plantation owners were probably second only to the mighty East India lobby in terms of influence in the British Parliament. Why revolt against a Parliament that is likely to do your bidding? Why separate from a country that buys all your products?

Similarly, Newfoundland had little interest in revolution when most of its fishing economy was so closely tied to Britain. Many inhabitants were still only seasonal residents of Newfoundland returning to their West Country homes in England each winter. Equally, there were few reasons for residents of Prince Edward Island or the scattered population of Cape Breton to rebel. Like the larger settlements of Nova Scotia, people in these areas had good reason *not* to. For one, they ran the risk of attack by the Royal Navy. Many earned their living supplying British military garrisons and ships or producing fish and timber for British markets, and the military base at Halifax cast a long shadow on the region. There may well have been some support for the position of the American revolutionaries in parts of the Maritimes, especially among the expatriate New Englanders living in Nova Scotia, but for most residents, active rebellion was simply not practical.

In Quebec, the situation was complicated by questions of language and religion. Few historians still believe the Quebec Act was the reason Quebec remained at least nominally loyal, but many think the American response to that act — adding it to their list of "Intolerable Acts" as another proof of British tyranny — was very significant. Invading Quebec was probably not a prudent way to encourage the population of that colony to rise in rebellion, either.

For all of these colonies, loyalty was the sensible and practical choice. Individual Loyalism, however, was a more complex matter. When active hostilities broke out in 1775, opinion in the Thirteen Colonies was sharply divided. It has been estimated that at the start of the American Revolution, about one-third of the colonists supported the cause, one-third opposed it and one-third simply tried to stay uninvolved and out of trouble. Open hostilities, however, changed the mix and made it very difficult for anyone to publicly oppose the Continental Congress. Out of a population of about 2.5 million people living in these colonies, a sizable but vulnerable minority of about 400,000 people openly sided with Britain.

Most eventually stayed in what became the United States of America, and had a very rough time of it. We can only assume they had no choice but to stay, since this was probably even riskier than leaving. About 100,000 or more of these Loyalists left the 13 Colonies during or immediately after the war. According to most estimates, about half of these Loyalists — about 45,000 — departed for what would become Canada. I think it is important for students to understand that the Loyalist migration is not just a Canadian story. They were, in many respects, the first political refugees of the modern world, and they had an impact on places ranging from Sierra Leone — where 1,200 black Loyalists were resettled in 1792 — to the British West Indies, as well as what would become western Canada.

The struggle between Britain and the Thirteen Colonies did more than create the United States and serve as a dress rehearsal for the French Revolution. It was also a watershed in imperial history between what historians call the First and Second British Empires. As John Bowle puts it in The Imperial Achievement, the irony is that though Britain may have lost America, it emerged

as the dominant world power with a new empire based on naval power and industrial might. In their own way, Loyalists played a part — albeit reluctantly — in this fundamental shift in world history.

The United States of North America with the British territories and those of Spain according to the treaty of 1784. Engraved by Willeam Faden (1750-1836. Map: hand-coloured, engraved 52.5 x 63.5 cm. Library and Archives Canada: Cartographic and Architectural Archives Division. (NMC 24667)

I think it is also vital for students to consider what the events of the American Revolution tell us about the politics of the day. According to Finlay and Sprague, the revolutionaries adopted what can only be called a politically paranoid position. To justify their cause, they had to act as if Britain really intended to enslave the colonists. Others could still dispute revenue-raising acts, argue for no taxation without representation and worry about the implications of the Quebec Act without believing that King George III was an out-and-out tyrant and that Britain meant to crush the colonies. In short, you could be a Loyalist not because your politics were that different from your neighbour's but because you were more concerned about the threat of tyranny at home than from far away. Mather Byles, a Boston minister, remarked that even if the Patriots were right, it was less frightening to live under “one tyrant 3000 miles away [than] 3000 tyrants not a mile away.”

Recent research on Loyalists has shown that many were either political skeptics or members of religious, ethnic or other minorities in the Thirteen Colonies. The latter had some cause to fear the potential tyranny of their neighbours rather than any threat posed by a government in London.

Nor were they willing to buy the proposition that freed from British control, the new American nation would become a better, freer England. It appears many suspected the opposite was more likely to be true. What this reappraisal suggests is that Loyalists had very plausible reasons for their position and were not the reprehensible political reactionaries they are sometimes portrayed as being in American popular culture.

This new research helps explain why the Loyalists who arrived in Nova Scotia and Quebec were such a varied bunch. It is important for students to know that Loyalists added more diversity to Britain's remaining North American colonies than helping to make Quebec more bilingual and bicultural. For example, more than 10 per cent of the Loyalists who came to what would become Canada were not Europeans. Out of about 45,000 people, there were about 2,000 Iroquois and other First Nations people who had to resettle in Upper Canada because they had supported the British. Equally interesting are the over 3,000 slaves, former slaves and free black Loyalists who settled in Nova Scotia. Many had been granted their freedom in return for serving with Loyalist and British regiments in the war. Despite this service, many faced discrimination and unfair treatment as Loyalists (for example, they received smaller land grants, in less desirable areas) and over 1,200 chose later to move again to the country of Sierra Leone when the opportunity presented itself.

Even among the European Loyalists, many were not "English." The Loyalists included people of Dutch and German background, religious minorities such as Quakers and French Protestants and significant numbers of Scots and other Celtic peoples who were still part of Britain without being English. In fact, Loyalist migrations helped make Canada such a multilingual and multicultural nation.

The other group of Loyalists, whose stories have started to emerge through more recent research, are the women and children who were also part of the migration. In some cases, they may have actively supported the British cause in the war, but many became Loyalist refugees due to decisions taken for them by husbands, fathers and brothers. Together, these women and children make up the majority of the people classed as Loyalists, and students should know that theirs was neither the “situational” Loyalism of colonies like Nova Scotia or Jamaica nor the obvious Loyalism of a man who joined Butler's Rangers or imprudently expressed political opinions in town hall meetings. Their Loyalism was situational because the social and economic position of women and children in 18th-century North America put clear limits on what they could independently do or say. As a result, we need to be cautious in assuming the reason behind their forced migration.

I promised a local connection or two to this story. I suspect few Canadians know that a major campaign in the American Revolution was actually played out on Hudson Bay and led to the capture and destruction of two of the Hudson's Bay Company's most important posts there. This led to a serious disruption of the fur trade for several years and helped to encourage the expansion of interior posts.

The American War of Independence was not a local conflict. It took on a much larger global dimension when France seized upon it as an opportunity to strike a blow at Britain. After years of offering indirect support to the Continental Congress, in the early 1780s, France decided to take a more active part in the conflict. In 1782, a French naval squadron with supporting troops was dispatched to disrupt British trade, particularly in furs. This force was commanded by Count de la Perouse and comprised three ships: a 74-gun ship of the line and two 36-gun frigates. In addition, the ships transported 250 infantrymen and 50 artillerymen along with mortars and other weapons to undertake any sieges that were necessary.

La Perouse successfully navigated his way into Hudson Bay, despite having neither charts nor men with any experience sailing in these northern waters. On August 8, they reached Fort Prince of Wales at Churchill, Man. After an initial reconnoitre, Major de Nostaing, the commander of the infantry and artillery, landed with his troops and found Samuel Hearne, the HBC factor ready to surrender. Prince of Wales Fort was captured without a single shot being fired. All the HBC employees, including Hearne, were taken prisoner; the post was then looted and blown up (which is why to this day, it remains a ruin, albeit a reconstructed one).

La Perouse then sailed on to York Factory, which was surrendered on the 25th of August. Once again, the French looted the post and made everyone prisoners. By September 2nd, they were on their way home. The losses to the HBC were over 15,000 pounds sterling; trade was disrupted for years to come. In the following years, the HBC made major adjustments in its system of trade, partly in response to La Perouse's raid. In particular, the HBC expanded its system of inland posts; by the late 1780s and early 1790s, the first posts were built in what would become Alberta.

The American War of Independence also had two other significant impacts on the fur trade in western Canada. Although French fur traders were active in the area north and west of the Great Lakes prior to 1759, much of their activity was focused in Detroit and Michilimackinac, south and west of the lakes. After 1759, the newly arrived English traders out of Montreal continued this trade. It was the loss of the territories south of the Great Lakes to the Americans after 1783 that really encouraged the development of the North West fur trade. In fact, it would later be discovered that the great fur trade centre of Grande Portage was actually in American territory, forcing the North West Company to move its operations to Fort William on our side of the border.

More than just shifting the geographical focus of the fur trade, individuals with Loyalist backgrounds played significant roles in the development of the Montreal-based fur trade after 1783. One of the key figures in the fur trade on the mid-18th century was Sir William Johnson of New York. Johnson had close ties with the Mohawk tribe, including Molly and Joseph Brant, and offered land on his estate to Scottish and Irish settlers. He gave many of these settlers a chance to try their hand at the fur trade with his patronage, and if you look at the founding partners and many of the early officers of the North West Company, a significant number got their start with William Johnson.

Johnson died in 1774, and his son, Sir John Johnson, inherited his estates. When war broke out, John Johnson's political views in support of the connections to Great Britain were well known and he had to flee into Quebec. From there he raised a Loyalist regiment, largely from residents of this family's estate: the King's Royal Regiment of New York, or the Royal Greens. Many other Johnson tenants joined a second Loyalist regiment, the Royal Highland Emigrants. After 1783, many of the veterans took up land in what is now eastern Ontario (roughly between Kingston and Cornwall, which was originally called New Johnstown). Johnson’s friends among the Mohawks also moved north of the border.

Not surprisingly, more than a few in each of these groups moved on to work in the fur trade. In particular, the Loyalist settlements of eastern Ontario provided a high proportion of the staff of the North West Company, building directly on their business and political connections through the Johnson family.

So if asked what students should know about Loyalists, I would say it would be all of the above. The Loyalist story is interesting because it is so complex and demanding**.** It is important to realize that, although this story took place over two centuries ago and thousands of kilometres away, it

really isn't remote or irrelevant at all. The Loyalist story has global implications, and at the same time, it is also very much part of our Canadian story.

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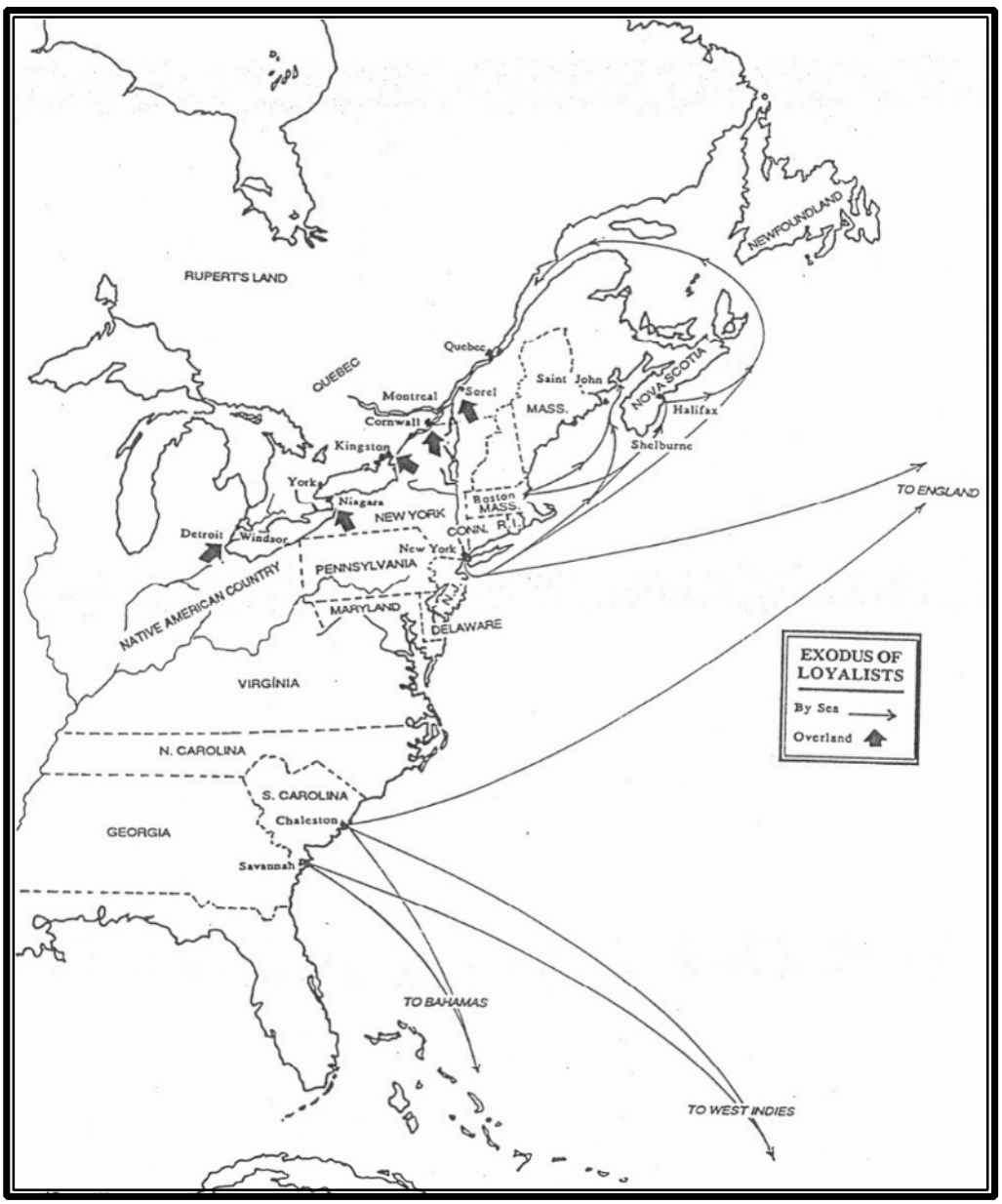

The Exodus of Loyalists (Ontario 10)
by J. Rogers '96