

Robert K. Landers

Follow the Losers

Liberty's Exiles

American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World

Maya Jasanoff

Alfred A. Knopf, \$30, 460 pp.

In *The Conservative Mind* (1953), Russell Kirk argued that the American Revolution had mainly been “a conservative reaction, in the English political tradition, against royal innovation...a conservative restoration of colonial prerogatives,” and held up John Adams as an exemplary conservative thinker. Ignored by Kirk were those Americans who, remaining loyal to Britain, had opposed the revolution, and who appear to have as good a claim—and perhaps a better one—to be considered “conservative.”

Adams famously recalled that at the start of the revolution, a third of the populace was loyal to the king, a third favored the revolution, and the remaining third was uncommitted. But according to a modern estimate, loyalists actually made up only about one-fifth of the populace. By this estimate, then, out of the 2.5 million Americans in 1775, there were a half-million loyalists. During the war some nineteen thousand white loyalists joined provincial regiments, and about twenty thousand blacks who had been enslaved by (self-described) “patriots” accepted British offers of freedom in return for agreeing to fight.

“Loyalists are often stereotyped as members of a small conservative elite: rich, educated, Anglican, and with strong ties to Britain,” notes historian Maya Jasanoff in *Liberty's Exiles*. The reality, however, was much more various. “Loyalists included recent immigrants and *Mayflower* descendants alike. They could be royal officials as well as bakers, carpenters, tailors, and printers. There were Anglican ministers as well as Methodists and Quakers; cosmopol-

itan Bostonians and backcountry farmers in the Carolinas.” And there also were free blacks.

When the British cause was lost, only a minority of loyalist Americans—those who had been most active in opposition or were most fearful of the loss of almost all that they had—chose to leave America for other parts of the British Empire. In *Liberty's Exiles*, exhaustively researched and very well written, Jasanoff focuses on these sixty thousand loyalists, including eight to ten thousand free blacks, who left, as well as the fifteen thousand slaves departing loyalists took with them. (The British had emancipated only patriot-owned slaves.)

Jasanoff focuses on the loyalists who went into exile because—to borrow a phrase from legendary bank robber Willie Sutton—that’s where the records are. The records of Britain’s Loyalist Claims Commission, she notes, “form the largest single archive of evidence about the loyalist side of the American Revolution. Within these thousands of bundles lurk extraordinary stories of wartime devastation, adventure, and personal trauma.” Jasanoff has used those and other records well, skillfully weaving into her work the stories of individual loyalists, British officials, and others. She is as good at close-in, detailed narrative as she is at detached, balanced analysis of the forces at work. *Liberty's Exiles*—which provides, she notes, “the first global history of the loyalist diaspora”—belongs on the short shelf of indispensable books about the American Revolution’s losers.

Lord Cornwallis’s surrender at Yorktown in October 1781 did not end the civil war between patriots and loyalists, and many loyalists, craving protection from reprisals and security for their property, felt severely let down by the British in the 1783 Treaty of Paris. “Loyalists thus often went into exile harboring grievances against the very same government they relied on

for support,” Jasanoff observes. “Their disheartening final months in America laid the groundwork for a recurring pattern of discontent elsewhere in the British Empire, with repercussions as far afield as Nova Scotia, Jamaica, and Sierra Leone.”

Of the sixty thousand loyalists who fled, only thirteen thousand (eight thousand whites and five thousand free blacks) went to Britain itself. A majority of the refugees went to Britain’s northern provinces in North America: some thirty thousand, including about three thousand free blacks and twelve hundred slaves, went to Nova Scotia (and New Brunswick, created in 1784 at the loyalists’ behest from part of Nova Scotia on the western side of the Bay of Fundy); and six thousand white loyalists emigrated to Quebec. “A further six thousand or so migrants, especially from the American south,” Jasanoff writes, “traveled to Jamaica and the Bahamas—carrying the vast majority of the fifteen thousand exported slaves with them.” Virtually every corner of the British Empire received some refugees, including India and Sierra Leone (where nearly twelve hundred black loyalists from Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, sponsored by British abolitionists, went to found the utopian settlement of Freetown).

Loyalists may have been conservative, but they weren’t all blind followers of British rule. “In fact,” Jasanoff writes

many leading loyalists sought to reform the imperial relationship. They resisted the prospect of authoritarian rule, and were quick to defend their rights to representation. Indeed, during the colonial protests of the 1760s and 1770s, future loyalists and patriots alike spoke out in unison against perceived British tyranny.

And as loyalists later ventured into other parts of the British Empire, they brought this American heritage of protest with them.

In British North America, the Bahamas, and Sierra Leone, loyalist refugees beset hapless British governors with demands for political representation that sounded uncannily like those of their patriot peers.

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The loyalist refugees often had new grounds for protest, for after the revolution, Jasanoff says, British officials "by and large concluded" that the thirteen colonies had had too much liberty, "and tightened the reins of administration accordingly."

Despite their discontents, the loyalist refugees remained loyal. The British Empire, rapidly rebounding from the loss of the thirteen American colonies, "significantly expanded around the world—and loyalists were both agents and advocates of imperial growth," Jasanoff writes. The loyalists may have lost a lot, but they never lost their standing as British subjects, and no "lost cause" laments would be passed down to later generations.

Still, what might have happened if the loyalists hadn't lost but prevailed, and the revolution had been averted? In September 1774, on the eve of the revolution, Joseph Galloway, then speaker of the Pennsylvania assembly and later a leading lobbyist for loyalist relief in Britain, suggested to the Continental Congress a Plan of Union in which America would acquire a parliament of its own and remain within the British Empire. The plan lost by a single (colony's) vote. Had the Galloway plan been adopted, what might have happened to the thirteen colonies? Jasanoff suggests looking to what happened in British North America in 1867:

The provinces of Canada [Quebec and Ontario], New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia united to become a federal, self-governing dominion within the British Empire. Canada—as this confederation was called—was the first example of "home rule" (autonomy over domestic policy) in the empire.

Without the monitory example of the successful American Revolution, it is by no means certain that Britain would have gone along with the Galloway plan. But his proposal at least showed, as Jasanoff says, that "loyalists possessed dynamic political visions of their own." ■

Robert K. Landers is the author of *An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell (Encounter)*.