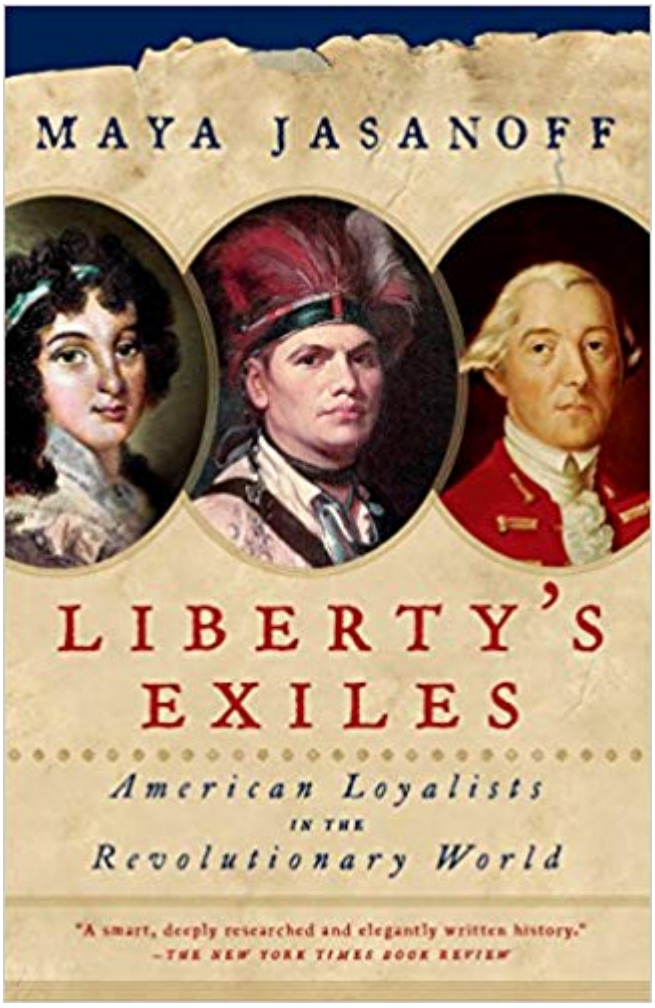
Loyalist Diaspora



In recent years we have seen a surge of interest in American loyalists. Highlights of this renewed attention to loyalists include: journal essays by prominent scholars such as Philip Gould, Alan Taylor, and Jasanoff; several recent books, most notably Cassandra Pybus' *Epic Journeys of Freedom,* which generated a significant response; a conference at the University of Maine in 2009; and the 2011 AAS Seminar in the History of the Book dedicated to the topic. With *Liberty's Exiles* Maya Jasanoff has added a remarkable book to this list, one that establishes the ground for all future studies of American loyalists. Jasanoff's meticulous and ambitious study deftly captures the experience of a wide range of loyalist actors, including black slaves, Native American allies of the British, Southern planters, and powerful mid-Atlantic and New England political figures. The demographic diversity of her history is impressive, as is the fluidity with which her narrative moves across gendered, racial, social, and regional variations. For these reasons, it would be an injustice to reduce *Liberty's Exiles* to the category of a study of loyalism. Loyalists may be the key players of the study, but the central theme of the book is the resituating of the American Revolution in a much broader global imperial history. As such, *Liberty's Exiles* makes an indispensable contribution

to a growing body of work on empire and the globalization of eighteenth-century studies.

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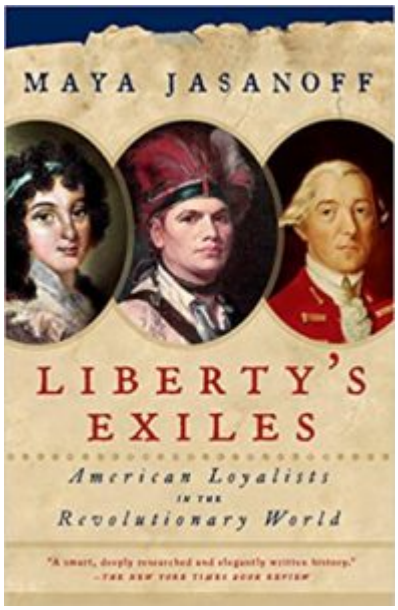

Another way to describe Jasanoff's study would be to say that this is a book about how the American loyalists who left the United States reshaped the British Empire in the decades following the American Revolution. The Revolution here becomes a crucial event in the history of the British Empire, which, of course, it was. But this dimension of the conflict has often been elided in nationalist histories focused on how the Revolution changed (or didn't change) the politics and culture of thirteen colonies turned states. Either way, as the emphasis on exile in the title implies, Jasanoff's study is principally focused on the loyalist migration out of the United States during and after the Revolution. The early chapters of the book explore the nature of American loyalists' sentiments and their views of the Revolution. The trajectory of the narrative, however, is always directed toward their eventual departure for England, Canada, and other parts of the British Empire.

Liberty's Exiles unfolds chronologically, but the focus of the study is biographical. Jasanoff builds her metanarrative around the stories of individual loyalists. This strategy of emphasizing individual experiences and tying them to the major political, military, and administrative events that unfolded has the advantage of giving a real human face to the conflict. In many ways it's a brilliant decision by Jasanoff, especially when we consider how intensively the traditional story of the American Revolution has dehumanized loyalists. Through the stories of loyalists such as Elizabeth Lichtenstein Johnston, David George, and William Augustus Bowles, Jasanoff provides a vivid sense of the impact that key events and decisions of the Revolution had on the people who were most affected by them. Policy decisions and military actions are not just currents in the broad flows of history; they have specific effects

on individuals who then make decisions accordingly. In addition to providing a more concrete sense of how individuals experienced the events of the Revolution, this approach highlights the kind of agency afforded to these loyalists.

Foregrounding the biographical also calls attention to the different and similar questions faced by loyalists from across the demographic spectrum. We can see, for example, how the departure of British loyalist forces in Savannah affects both the elite white Johnston family and the free black George Liele. Jasanoff constantly organizes her narrative around these comparisons and contrasts. The other key device that moves the narrative forward is the comparison between regions. So with an event like the aftermath of Cornwallis' surrender at Yorktown, she moves through a series of characters in Savannah and Charleston to show us how a diverse range of actors responded to the British departure from those cities. Later, in Part III of the book, she dedicates a series of chapters to the fates of loyalists in different outposts: the Bahamas, Jamaica, Nova Scotia, Sierra Leone, and England. This way we get both local variations and regional comparisons. In both cases, Jasanoff's remarkable archival work has enabled her to tell the stories of a diverse set of peoples. And Jasanoff has gone to great lengths to track down exiled American loyalists around the world and to tell their stories. Through them she traces the global effects of the American Revolution and its impact, particularly, on the British Empire as it rearticulated itself around the world. In this respect, *Liberty's Exiles*continues the work of Jasanoff's first book, *Edge of Empire,* which explored the origins of the British Empire. Closer to home, the early chapters of Jasanoff's book integrate the loyalists more fully into the story of the American Revolution and provide insights into what a less nationalistic reading of the Revolution might look like.

In its metanarrative, though, *Liberty's Exiles* is only peripherally interested in the Revolution itself and in the United States more generally. The loyalists in this book are always on the path to departing their homes in the thirteen colonies. The narrative trajectory of Jasanoff's history points away from the United States so that it sometimes can feel as if these characters, while clearly shaped by their American experiences, are mostly passing through the Revolution on their way to the more important work that will take place when they go on to challenge and reshape the British Empire. Ironically, then, the loyalists whose voices are absent from this study are those who remained in the United States after the war. Of course, those loyalists are not the subject of *Liberty's Exiles.* They were not exiled.

Jasanoff's study thus underscores a gaping hole in the historiography of the Revolution. For every loyalist who departed the colonies, at least seven stayed behind, and the number is more likely closer to ten or eleven. To do the math in shorthand: by Jasanoff's count, which can be found in the detailed appendix to the book, about 60,000 loyalists emigrated from the United States in the 1780s and 1790s, but by most estimates there were between 500,000 and 750,000 loyalists at the time of the Revolution. According to the U.S. Census Bureau,

the population of the United States in 1780 was about 2.8 million, and the general view among historians is that in 1775, 2.5 million people resided in the colonies. Using the 1775 figure as a baseline, if 30 percent of Americans were loyalists, there should have been a total of around 750,000 loyalists. Even if we take the most conservative estimate of 20 percent of the population, the total number of loyalists would be 500,000. By any count then, the vast majority of loyalists remained in the U.S. after the war. We sorely need a parallel study to Jasanoff's to recover their experiences, their voices, and, most importantly, their role in the creation of the new American state. To take only one example, Tench Coxe, one of Alexander Hamilton's most important confidants and advisors, was a loyalist who had left during the war but would return and come to play a key role in the new United States.

Virtually every study of American loyalists has focused primarily on the stories of those who left, from Mary Beth Norton's study of loyalists who relocated to England and Bernard Bailyn's biography of Thomas Hutchinson in the 1970s, to more recent work by Judith van Buskirk, Ruma Chopra, and Liam Riordan. No doubt the archive has made it much easier to tell the stories of those who left. For obvious reasons, loyalists who stayed tended not to publish narratives of their experiences of the war and not to advertise their feelings about the war and its effect on their families. We can find glimpses of those experiences, however, in the fiction of James Fenimore Cooper, who married the loyalist Susan DeLancy, and in the writings of Charles Brockden Brown, whose loyalist father was banished from Pennsylvania when the author was a mere child. One suspects, however, that with the longstanding emphasis on the Revolution as a narrative of triumphant nationalism, scholars have also not looked terribly hard to uncover the stories of loyalists who stayed.

To tell the story of the loyalists who left, Jasanoff draws on the language of diaspora. Surprisingly, however, Jasanoff never comments on or tracks the larger implications of this concept. What does it mean to call the experience of largely white American loyalists who felt they had to leave the United States a diaspora? The term diaspora has both a long history and, perhaps more importantly for the purposes of Jasanoff's study, a contentious recent history. Without going into that history here, suffice it to say that the study of diasporic peoples and their experiences has become so important in the social sciences and the humanities that it has an influential journal dedicated entirely to the topic. A quick perusal of any issue of *Diaspora* will show how vibrant and exciting, but also how contested, scholarship on the topic has been. Scholars of diaspora fiercely debate the applicability of the term to peoples other than the original Jewish and Armenian populations whose experiences have shaped its meaning. In recent decades, scholars such as George Shepperson and Brent Hayes Edwards have profitably argued for its applicability to the case of Africans relocated to the Americas. But they did so through a direct and careful engagement with the conceptual frame and theoretical meanings that diaspora has obtained.

Recently, in *The Importance of Feeling English,* Leonard Tennenhouse has argued

for diaspora as a useful framework for thinking about the British migration to the United States. Once again, though, Tennenhouse situates his use of the term in dialogue with its past uses and connotations. So, what does it mean to think of the loyalist exiles in terms of a diaspora? How do their experiences resemble the experiences of other diasporic peoples such as the Jews, the Armenians, and African-Americans? How might the insights of scholars who have worked on those other diasporic populations help us understand the ways these American loyalists experienced their dislocation and reconstructed their identities? By attending to these questions, Jasanoff might have helped us think about how a particular notion of what it meant to be British (or Anglo-American?), borne of a diasporic mentality, shaped these exiles' approach to the work of reconceiving and refurbishing the British Empire. Diaspora theory, in other words, has long been engaged with precisely the questions that Jasanoff takes up in her book: How do global flows of population shape cultural practices and identities? How does the notion of a home, or a cultural memory of home, inform cultural agents' or actors' approach to fashioning themselves and their world abroad? Diaspora refers to a way of thinking about these questions related to globalization and to the movement of people and ideas across space and time, a topic that is at the heart of *Liberty's Exiles.*

Liberty's Exiles is required reading for any scholar interested in the early phases of globalization, the impact of the American Revolution on the reshaping of the British Empire, and the exportation of what we might identify as an American way of thinking about the relations between periphery and center in an imperial context. Thus far I have emphasized the "exiles" in Jasanoff's title, but I would be remiss not to conclude by underscoring the metanarrative of "liberty" in her story of the American loyalist exiles. Again and again, Jasanoff traces how the ideas of liberty that the loyalists had developed during their time in the thirteen colonies would resurface and challenge the shape of British imperial authority in the other outposts of the empire to which they moved after the war. To some this might be the most surprising insight of Jasanoff's book: the long-demonized loyalists who had been written out of American national history as opponents of liberty and democracy would become among the most vocal advocates of their rights and liberties in Jamaica, Nova Scotia, the Bahamas and elsewhere. As Jasanoff shows, the American loyalists were never opposed to liberty or notions of representation in government. They were simply opposed to a separation from the British Empire, which they, and for that matter their patriot countrymen, saw as the source of liberty in the modern world. *Liberty's Exiles* tells how the loyalists' commitments to those ideas would transform the British Empire, if not the world.

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Edward Larkin is associate professor of English at the University of Delaware. He is the author of *Thomas Paine and the Literature of Revolution* (2005) and edited the Broadview edition of Paine's *Common Sense* (2004). He is currently working on a study of the way notions of empire shaped the politics and culture of the early United States.