

What is a Loyalist?



The American Revolution as civil war

In the opening number of *The Crisis* Thomas Paine saves some choice words for the loyalists: "And what is a Tory? Good God! what is he? I should not be afraid to go with a hundred Whigs against a thousand Tories, were they to attempt to get into arms. Every Tory is a coward; for servile, slavish, self-interested fear is the foundation of Toryism; and a man under such influence, though he may be cruel, never can be brave." Paine doesn't so much define loyalism here, as he does the character of loyalists. His strategy is typical of patriot accounts of loyalists, which dissolve the category of loyalism by emphasizing the individual loyalist over the shared vision of loyalism. Characterizations such as this make it virtually impossible to understand loyalist motivations or thinking. Framing the question in terms of individual loyalists and using the term as an *ad hominem* empties loyalism of any ideological, political, or conceptual meaning. This strategy has proven remarkably effective. For most of the past two hundred-odd years the answer to the question of what made someone a loyalist at the time of the American Revolution has been more or less irrelevant. Although subsequent political and cultural historians may not partake of Paine's vicious rhetoric, loyalism and loyalists remain among the most poorly understood aspects of the Revolution.

Not only have loyalists been generally dismissed as self-interested, cowardly, antidemocratic, elitist collaborators, their numbers have often been distorted and minimized. Determining who was a loyalist and under what conditions can be very difficult. Given the intimidation and violence to which they were subjected by crowd action, committees of safety, and patriot agitators like Paine, most loyalists carefully avoided public scrutiny. Many signed oaths of allegiance to the patriot cause when threatened with public action; some successfully maintained a pretense of neutrality; and still others kept their secret safe. This may explain why calculations of the percentage of loyalists in the colonies and early states have varied from one-fifth to one-third of the total population. The most famous estimate of the percentage of loyalists at the time of the Revolution comes from an 1815 letter John Adams wrote to James Lloyd in which he calculates that one-third of the population were "averse to the revolution." In the same letter Adams also suggests that another third wavered in their allegiances. Even at the more conservative (probably too conservative) 20 percent figure favored by some historians, the idea that such a significant proportion of the population may have opposed the independence movement is a staggering fact—a fact that remains virtually unaccounted for in our reckoning of the Revolution. Moreover, if we add the significant numbers of blacks and Native Americans who, for various reasons, sided with the British, the percentage of loyalists swells to an even greater proportion of the population. In this discussion I have focused solely on the white settlers because they form the core of the typical narrative of the Revolution.

My aim here is less to suggest how a consideration of loyalists and loyalism might change our view of the Revolution and more to begin to develop a working definition of loyalism that does not reinscribe their marginality. Only in so doing can we truly begin to understand their significance. In what follows, I want to begin to sketch out a definition of loyalism that is not inherently prejudicial by drawing on two writers, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur and James Fenimore Cooper. These two authors have often figured as paragons of the exceptionalist thesis, or the idea that there is something very, very different about American identity, and that something is often equated with patriotism. Crèvecoeur and Cooper, however, had strong ties to loyalism and produced early works in which loyalist characters play major roles. These characters suggest that in many cases loyalists opposed the Revolution not only because they cherished their historical, commercial, and affective links to the British Empire but also because they objected to the cost it exacted on their communities. Just as significantly, Crèvecoeur and Cooper respectively imply that loyalism, despite its apparent alienation from the mainstream, has played a vital role in the development of American culture and society.

Farmer James and the Dilemma of the

Revolution

In the influential third chapter of *Letters from an American Farmer*—which bears the title “What is an American?”—Crèvecoeur’s narrator Farmer James describes the process whereby European (primarily British) immigrants to Pennsylvania were transformed into Americans. Critics have typically read this chapter as evidence of the emergence of a new and distinct American national identity in the late eighteenth century. In other words, “What is an American?” has served as a cornerstone of the American exceptionalist account of the Revolution. In the exceptionalist view, which dominated so much of literary and historical analysis of American culture and politics during the last century, the forces shaping colonial America and the early United States are fundamentally different from those shaping Europe and the rest of the world. The United States and its people are seen to represent a special instance in the history of the world. Farmer James’s description of the process whereby European immigrants are transformed into Americans has often been understood to reinforce the proposition that the Revolution was the inevitable consequence of America’s radical difference with Europe. Crèvecoeur, however, was a loyalist who fled the colonies to return to his native France. Farmer James, the hero and narrator of the *Letters*, is also a loyalist, albeit one who in the end opts out of the war altogether. Crèvecoeur’s case illustrates the difficulties a more complicated and nuanced version of loyalism poses for the patriot narrative of the Revolution.

The exceptionalist reading of “What is an American?” emphasizes those moments in the chapter when Farmer James celebrates the differences between European and American identities: “The American is a new man,” he asserts, “who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas and form new opinions.” If we look more closely at the chapter, however, we can see that Crèvecoeur sets up the narrative of transformation with a scene that affirms the ties between the Old World and the New. The chapter opens with an account of what he imagines a newcomer might see and feel upon landing in Philadelphia.

I wish I could be acquainted with the feelings and thoughts which must agitate the heart and present themselves to the mind of an enlightened Englishman when he first lands on this continent. He must greatly rejoice that he lived at a time to see this fair country discovered and settled; he must necessarily feel a share of national pride when he views the chain of settlements which embellish these extended shores. When he says to himself, “This is the work of my countrymen, who, when convulsed by factions, afflicted by a variety of miseries and wants, restless and impatient, took refuge here. They brought along with them their national genius, to which they principally owe what liberty they enjoy and what substance they possess.” Here he sees the industry of his native country displayed in a new manner and traces in their works the embryos of all the arts, sciences, and ingenuity which flourish in Europe.

The trajectory of the narrative here emphasizes continuity with an English and

European past rather than a radical break with a hopelessly antiquated and hierarchical world. This imagined English traveler recognizes the new world he encounters in British North America to be an extension of English aesthetic and social ideals. The American colonies, rather than rejecting or ignoring European culture and society, have evolved by developing their English and European inheritance. Crèvecoeur strategically uses the term “national” to describe the character of these people and their work, and thereby privileges the deeper connections between Americans and Britons. He uses “country” and “countrymen” to refer to the place that is British North America, but he never identifies the people of the thirteen colonies as a nation. This is true throughout the *Letters*.

Crèvecoeur thus sets up his account of the development of an American identity by calling attention to continuities between Europeans and British North Americans *before* turning to the differences between them. This sense of a dual identity, in turn, explains Farmer James’s reaction to the Revolution in the last chapter of the *Letters*, a chapter that has long puzzled scholars, who have often argued that it is inconsistent with the rest of the text. I want to focus on one moment in particular from that closing chapter, because I think it offers an insight into a completely different understanding of the Revolution. Struggling to come to grips with the onset of the Revolution, Farmer James is so distraught that he suffers a nervous breakdown. Recovering his wits but still unable to choose a side, he seeks divine guidance.

Great Source of wisdom! Inspire me with light sufficient to guide my benighted steps out of this intricate maze! Shall I discard all my ancient principles, shall I renounce that name, that nation which I held once so respectable? I feel the powerful attraction; the sentiments they inspired grew with my earliest knowledge and were grafted upon the first rudiments of my education. On the other hand, shall I arm myself against that country where I first drew breath, against the playmates of my youth, my bosom friends, my acquaintance? The idea makes me shudder! Must I be called a parricide, a traitor, a villain, lose the esteem of all those whom I love to preserve my own, be shunned like a rattlesnake, or be pointed at like a bear? I have neither heroism nor magnanimity enough to make so great a sacrifice.

Borrowing not from the language of republicanism or liberalism but from the vocabulary of sentimentalism, Farmer James presents the Revolution as a choice between killing his father and killing his brothers. The politics and ideals of the Revolution are irrelevant to Farmer James who, elsewhere in the chapter, dismisses the political debates of the Revolution as an elite game that callously ignores the sufferings of ordinary people. Rather than feeling implicated in the political stakes of the Revolution, Farmer James experiences the conflict as a local matter that potentially pits him against his family, friends, and neighbors.

Framed as a prayer, Farmer James’s plea for wisdom revolves around feelings and affective relations rather than social, political, ideological, or economic

concerns. By the end of the passage, his feelings of disorientation merge what appear to be two choices into one inevitable outcome; the apparent binary of patriot and loyalist dissolves. Neither side offers a substantially different outcome because regardless of which side he chooses, Farmer James will be seen by many as a traitor and a villain. From the point of view of social relations, the political choices of the Revolution are inherently unsatisfactory because they divide and fracture a once peaceful community. Crèvecoeur's poignant account of the dilemma of the Revolution is a far cry from Paine's characterization in *The Crisis*. Instead of cowering in fear, Farmer James presents the reader with a profound ethical conundrum. The enormous psychological and emotional weight of this decision drives him to temporary insanity and ultimately he opts to avoid the question altogether by removing his family to the western backcountry. Like Crèvecoeur and his semi-autobiographical hero Farmer James, most loyalists were deeply ambivalent about the Revolution. They were torn between their local attachments and their allegiance to the British Empire. The latter had supplied not only an affective and historical connection but also a link to European commercial, political, and cultural centers of exchange. This is a version of loyalists and loyalism to which popular historians and scholars of the Revolution alike have for the most part failed to attend.

Crèvecoeur's characterization of Farmer James demonstrates why loyalists challenge the powerful narratives of unity and consensus that were so important to the patriot rhetoric of democratic Revolution. For patriots, alienating and disenfranchising the loyalists was crucial to ensuring the Revolution's success, but all too often subsequent generations of historians have, albeit tacitly, accepted patriot characterizations of loyalism as the truth. Put simply, loyalists have been omitted from the history of the Revolution because there is no convenient place for them in the stories of triumphal democracy and freedom that inform most histories of the Revolution. Erasing the loyalists, dismissing them as self-interested cowards, radicalizing them as a band of fanatical hard-liners, or as is more typically the case, alienating them by lumping them in with the English invader makes it possible to imagine that there was no meaningful domestic opposition to the "patriot" plan of separating from Great Britain and adopting a radical new democratic form of government. This narrative tells the story of American independence as a conflict between the newly emergent United States and the powerful and established British Empire. By its logic loyalists had to be Britons: they could not be Americans when "American" had become a synonym for patriot. Not being Americans, in turn, loyalists would not be considered relevant to the story of the early United States. This was, of course, Paine's strategy in those sections of *Common Sense* and *The Crisis* where he attacks loyalists. Ironically, the viciousness of Paine's antiloyalist rhetoric suggests that he understood them to pose a significant threat to the success of the patriot movement. Crèvecoeur's Farmer James, the sympathetic, sentimental, ambivalent loyalist, presents the greatest challenge because he is virtually impossible to demonize. Perhaps this explains why scholars have so often ascribed a patriot point of view to Crèvecoeur and his hero.

Cooper's British Americans

Early in his career, James Fenimore Cooper published two novels about the Revolution and early republic in which loyalists figure prominently, *The Spy* (1821) and *The Pioneers* (1823). In these novels loyalists are often sympathetic figures whose experience of the Revolution, much like Farmer James's, is no less traumatic and difficult than that faced by patriots. I want to focus on *The Spy* in particular because it is the only novel in which Cooper directly treats the War of Independence. In his introduction to the 1831 edition, Cooper comments explicitly on his view of the Revolution.

The dispute between England and the United States of America, though not strictly a family quarrel, had many of the features of a civil war. Though the people of the latter were never properly and constitutionally subject to the people of the former, the inhabitants of both countries owed allegiance to a common king. As the Americans, as a nation, disavowed this allegiance, and as the English chose to support their sovereign in the attempt to regain his power, most of the feelings of an internal struggle were involved in the conflict. A large proportion of the emigrants from Europe, then established in the colonies, took part with the crown; and there were many districts in which their influence, united to that of the Americans who refused to throw away their allegiance, gave a decided preponderance to the royal cause. America was then too young, and too much in need of every heart and hand, to regard these partial divisions, small as they were in actual amount, with indifference.

Cooper ties himself in knots in this passage. Throughout the paragraph he qualifies each statement to the point where what might otherwise seem to be crucial distinctions are blurred, even to the point of being emptied of meaning. Phrases such as "not strictly," "never properly," "most of the feelings," and "partial divisions" obscure as much as they reveal. The language of this paragraph suggests that Cooper finds himself torn between a desire to recognize the internal divisions between Americans at the time of the Revolution and a wish to produce a narrative of American nationhood.

Cooper struggles to reconcile those two impulses because so often the national argument has depended upon the alienation of the loyalists and the dichotomization of American and British identities, values, and cultures. In spite of such manifest fears about acknowledging the potential legitimacy of loyalism, Cooper invites his readers, albeit tentatively, to understand the Revolution as a civil war. By equating it with a family quarrel or an internal struggle, Cooper represents the war as a conflict pitting Americans against one another rather than an international conflict between two wholly separate peoples. Like Crèvecoeur, then, Cooper has chosen to explore the way the Revolution splinters the American family. He does so in *The Spy* by focusing on a family that is divided in its loyalties and by situating the action in New York, perhaps the most divided of the former colonies. The major conflicts in the novel, both on the battlefield and off, take place between family members,

friends, and neighbors who often appear to agree on everything but the question of American independence.

The central drama of the novel concerns the fate of Henry Wharton, an accused spy, who is captured by the Americans while visiting his family in Westchester. In order to make his way safely from New York City—the center of British military operations for much of the war—to his family's Westchester home, Henry is forced to cross the American "picquets" in White Plains. Fearful of being identified as a loyalist, Henry disguises himself for the journey. Although he sought to do nothing more treacherous than visit his family, the use of a disguise technically makes him a spy. During Henry's trial, the accusation, although it is never explicitly stated as such, seems to be that Henry avails himself of the pretext of visiting his family in order to survey the positions of the American troops.

The matter is complicated because the ranking officer of the troop that detains Henry is his sister Frances's fiancé, Major Peyton Dunwoodie. Frances, an ardent patriot who had promised to marry Dunwoodie at the conclusion of the war, vows that she can never consent to the proposed union should her brother be hanged as a spy. Dunwoodie, who believes Henry is innocent and does everything in his legal power to help him, finds himself torn between his duty as an officer and his love for Frances. Henry and Dunwoodie are close friends too. Unlike Frances, Henry understands Dunwoodie's predicament and urges Frances to marry Dunwoodie in spite of the American officer's role in his capture and detention. The novel makes it clear that, political differences notwithstanding, Henry and Dunwoodie share a commitment to the same male sense of duty and honor, one that absolves Dunwoodie of any personal responsibility for Henry's death. They both insist on separating their duty from their feelings, their role as soldiers from their personal relationship—a theme that is repeated throughout the novel. Frances, who in many respects emerges as the true hero of the novel, refuses to give credence to such distinctions, especially when Henry is innocent of the charges.

Cooper has thus structured these relationships so that Frances is torn between her feelings of loyalty towards her brother and her love for Dunwoodie. In so doing, Cooper suggests a profound affinity between Henry and Dunwoodie, although one is a loyalist and the other a patriot. Both are presented as honorable figures, each equally sincere in his motives for adopting his respective causes and each equally committed to the rules of conduct governing his professional position. The novel never suggests any fundamental ethical or character flaw in Henry. If anything, Henry narrowly avoids becoming the victim of a great American injustice. The patriot Dunwoodie and the loyalist Henry are much more alike than they are different. The problem the novel addresses, therefore, is not related to Henry's character or the reasons for his decision to espouse the loyalist position—the narrative's silence on the question implies that such questions are irrelevant. Instead, the novel explores how the divisions created by this "family quarrel" lead to artificial distinctions that distort human relations and destroy communal values. Frances is thus left to

negotiate the same problem that had paralyzed Farmer James in Crèvecoeur's text.

Ultimately, the novel suggests that Henry and Dunwoodie are wrong to choose the political over the personal. They are wrong, that is, to privilege duty over feelings. That message is delivered most effectively in the novel's denouement when Henry's escape to safety is ensured by Dunwoodie's acknowledgement of the wisdom of Frances's priorities. When Dunwoodie meets Frances after learning of Henry's escape he complains, "I can almost persuade myself that you delight in creating points of difference in our feelings and duties." Frances replies, "In our duties there may very possibly be a difference . . . but not in our feelings, Peyton—you must certainly rejoice in the escape of Henry!" Frances, who has been urged to keep Dunwoodie busy for two hours to insure Henry's escape, dramatizes the union of feelings and duty when she decides that the best way to delay Dunwoodie's pursuit of Henry is to accept his proposal of marriage on the condition that the wedding take place immediately. She feels so guilty about deceiving Dunwoodie that she reveals her reasoning to him: "Stop, Peyton; I cannot enter into such a solemn engagement with a fraud upon my conscience. I have seen Henry since his escape, and time is all important to him. Here is my hand; if, with this knowledge of the consequences of delay, you will not reject it, it is freely yours." By accepting her terms openly, Dunwoodie appears to accept Frances's view of the proper relationship between feelings and duties. Cooper stages this scene so that Dunwoodie's consent to Frances's terms establishes that he has finally learned this important lesson and can now collect his reward.

By combining the discussion of duty and feelings with an insistence on the fundamental similarities between loyalists and patriots, Cooper has constructed a novel in which the affective relations between family members, friends, and neighbors supersede the political debates of the Revolution. Hence, the aim of the novel is not simply to foster reconciliation between patriots and loyalists but to challenge the notion that the distinction between them was ever particularly meaningful. Cooper's aim is not to dismiss the dispute over rights and sovereignty that motivated the Revolution but instead to remind his readers of the contingent and fluid meaning of those debates. Once the war had concluded, Americans needed to find ways to reconcile with one another and rediscover their fundamental commonalities. To this end, Cooper and Crèvecoeur challenge the easy dichotomies of loyalist and patriot, Briton and American, instead underscoring the fundamental continuities between both. Those continuities can be difficult to perceive if we privilege the political. In *Letters* and *The Spy* the political is relegated to the background in favor of an emphasis on local or personal relationships.

In light of Crèvecoeur's and Cooper's respective representations of loyalists at the time of the American Revolution, I'd like to conclude with a definition. Let me emphasize the provisional nature of this description of loyalism. I see my work on loyalism and loyalists as one entry point into a subject that requires much more study and analysis. In that spirit, I propose the following

definition: A loyalist was an American who favored reconciliation with Great Britain during conflicts that began with the Stamp Act and concluded with the War of 1812. Loyalists, who constituted up to one-third of the population at the time of independence, opposed the Revolution for a variety of reasons, including affective, sentimental, economic, political, religious, and philosophical ones. Most loyalists were proud to be American colonials and identified strongly with their local communities and governments. In many cases, they resented the British government's efforts to tax them and shared the view, held by most mainland British-Americans, that those measures violated their rights as British subjects. In spite of such concerns, they were proud of their British heritage, which in fact had taught them (and their patriot counterparts) to cherish their rights, and they wished to remain a part of the powerful British Empire. Understanding themselves as imperial subjects, loyalists saw no necessary contradiction between their local identity as Americans and their national identity as Britons. Although large numbers of them migrated to British Canada during the War for Independence, many also stayed in the new United States and many of this latter group became important figures in the politics and culture of the early American republic. To recognize loyalism as a legitimate response to the late eighteenth-century colonial controversies in British North America thus requires us not only to recast the Revolutionary conflict as a civil war but also to revise our understanding of the dynamics of consent, coercion, resistance, nation formation, and peoplehood during the Revolution.

Further Reading:

The classic treatment of loyalists is Mary Beth Norton's *The British Americans: The Loyalist Exiles in England, 1774-1789* (Boston, 1972). More recently, Judith Van Buskirk's *Generous Enemies: Patriots and Loyalists in New York* (Philadelphia, 2002) explores relationships across the political divide in the British "occupied" New York City. A spate of pieces published in a variety of venues in the last year suggests a resurgence of interest in loyalists. To name a few, Alan Taylor published an article on loyalist exiles to Canada, in the *Journal of the Early Republic* (Spring 2007), Maya Jasanoff contributed a provocative piece on loyalists in the *New York Times Magazine* (July 1, 2007), and, of course, readers of this publication will recall that Ed Griffin wrote about his current work on the loyalist Mather Byles for the July 2007 edition of *Common-place*.

A fuller account of Crèvecoeur's instrumentality to the exceptionalist paradigm and his text's critique of the Revolution can be found in my forthcoming essay, "The Cosmopolitan Revolution," which will appear shortly in a special double issue of the journal *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* dedicated to the early American novel. For an excellent account of the challenges critics have faced when attempting to reconcile "Distresses" with the rest of the *Letters*, see Grantland S. Rice, *The Transformation of Authorship in America* (Chicago, 1997).

The body of scholarship on Cooper is long and deep. Two works in particular that attend to concerns I address in this essay are Shirley Samuels, *Romances of the Republic: Women, the Family, and Violence in the Literature of the Early American Nation* (New York, 1996)—which explores Cooper’s habitual treatment of political and ideological themes in domestic terms—and Wayne Franklin’s recent biography of Cooper, *James Fenimore Cooper: The Early Years* (New Haven, 2007), in which he discusses Cooper’s relationship with the Delancey family.

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