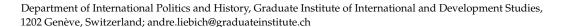




Article

# History and Its "Losers"

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**Abstract:** This article considers the historiography of the British Jacobites and American loyalists. It argues that they have been treated unfairly by history. In short, their importance has been minimized out of regard for dominant narratives. The article looks at older and newer historical accounts that reinterpret events in 17th and 18th century Britain and in revolutionary America to give Jacobites and loyalists a fairer share in these events. In conclusion, the article states that historiography will soon have to integrate the experience of these hitherto neglected currents into its main narrative.

Keywords: Jacobites; loyalists; historiography

#### 1. Introduction

Historiography has not been kind to history's losers. Nowhere is E.P. Thompson's pithy statement about "the enormous condescension of posterity" as apt as it here [1]. Although Thompson had in mind the struggles of ordinary folks his comment applies to the subjects studied here. This article proposes to look at the English–language historiography surrounding two "lost causes," that of the British Jacobites and that of the American Loyalists. These two groups of historical actors have been unjustly vilified, although they may be coming into their own.

## 2. Jacobites

The Jacobites took their name from their first leader, James II (1633–1701), king of England and Ireland from 1685 to 1688 and as James VII, king of Scotland in the same years<sup>1</sup> [2–4]. James was deposed by the "Glorious Revolution" (for more detail about which, see below). He was not the last Stuart monarch to reign in England; his daughters, Mary and Anne, succeeded him before succession passed on to the House of Hanover, which has reigned ever since. He was the last British monarch to convert to Catholicism—a step that may have cost him the crown.

James II set up an exile court in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, near Paris, under the auspices of the French king, Louis XIV. James and his descendants—his son the "Old Pretender" (1688–1766), and his grandson known in history as "Bonnie Prince Charlie" (1720–1788)—made numerous armed attempts to regain the throne that James had forfeited. All of these attempts were unsuccessful. Historians have explained this failure in terms of their foreign support. French help was seen very dimly in England (as was the Jacobites' later reliance on the Spanish and even on the Danes, about whom hardly a bad word has been uttered). It is said that the Jacobites' foreign help was fickle and its inconsistency may have contributed to their failure as much as their own mistakes<sup>2</sup>. Above all, the Jacobite monarch and pretenders were damned by their adherence to a much hated Catholicism<sup>3</sup> [5]. Apparently, James' repeated assurances that he would keep his faith a private matter were not believed. The conversion of his grandson to Anglicanism in 1766 came too late to make a difference [6].

The "Glorious Revolution" that ejected James II from his throne has been celebrated in Whig historiography, as the name given to the events of 1688/1689 indicates. The "Glorious Revolution" is seen as a shining example of British pragmatism (it took place without a



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civil war), the affirmation of the supremacy of Parliament over the crown, and the event that began Britain's immensely successful imperial expansion.

Whig historiography, whose most famous exponent was the great nineteenth century historian, Thomas Babington Macaulay (not coincidentally, a Whig politician), has been severely criticized. One of Giles Lytton-Strachey's last essays poked fun at Macaulay [7]. Lytton-Strachey attacked Macaulay for what he called his smugness and his Victorian complacency (he may well have been complacent; after all, he was writing in the context of the greatest empire of his time). The coup de grace was given by a young Cambridge historian who reproached "Whig History" for presenting the past—especially the English past—as an inevitable progression towards ever greater liberty and enlightenment that culminated in liberal democracy and constitutional monarchy [8].

Other scholars poked holes in this as well; they saw the "Glorious Revolution" as a temporary and short-lived alliance of Whigs and Tories, afraid of republican stirrings that could bring back the fearsome Cromwellian period amid the prevailing chaos. William of Orange—the spouse of Mary Stuart—who came to the throne after James' departure (he reigned with Mary until her death in 1694, whereupon he reigned alone until his own death in 1701), has been presented in a sinister light, in contrast with "Whig History" depictions of William as a champion of parliamentary democracy [9].

It is certainly true that the period following the "Glorious Revolution" saw an upswing in British commercial success, but would that upswing not have occurred if James II had kept his throne? Economists and historians wedded to the traditional anti Jacobite view have only been able to make a weak case. Cain and Hopkins have explained that no "fundamental (financial) revolution was possible before 1688", presumably because James II's pro-French and pro-Catholic policies "frightened" the predominantly Protestant bankers and investors [10]. Apparently, bankers and investors did not trust James II's frequent assertions—both when he was king and in his exile—that "nothing was more beneficial to trade than liberty of conscience", nor his praise of Protestant emigrés from France<sup>4</sup>. The notion of bankers and investors being "frightened" is itself laughable, and Cain's and Hopkins' adherence to shopworn theories, contested by Lucile Pinkham among others, is confirmed by their statement that "the gentlemanly revolution of 1688" had created "a new type of monarch" that compelled the king to govern through parliament, although they acknowledge that thereafter parliament was forced to pay for the continental wars of the rulers [10].

Throughout the eighteenth century, Jacobitism was used by the disgruntled population to express dissatisfaction with its rulers, and by the political elite as a "bogeyman" against its opponents [11,12]. People contrasted the unattractive Hanoverian monarchs with the (comparatively) dashing Stuart exiles<sup>5</sup>. Thanks to the skillful politicking of the king's first minister, Robert Walpole, the Tory party as a whole was tarred, unjustly according to Linda Colley—with the brush of Jacobitism, and kept out of power for several decades<sup>6</sup> [13,14]. True, the temporary alliance of Whigs and Tories soon fell apart, and some of those—notably Londoners—who had supported the Whigs in the "Glorious Revolution" turned to the Tories [15]. In spite of the numerous scandals and mistakes of their opponents, the Jacobites in exile were unable to turn these to their advantage, and they remained out of power, eventually fading from history<sup>7</sup> [16].

### 3. Loyalists

Americans have a reverential attitude to their constitution—the oldest such document still in existence, after more than two hundred years and numerous amendments. Reverence surrounds the Founding Fathers of the Republic and the events leading up to its creation, especially the Revolutionary War that marked the severance of the ties of subjugation of the Thirteen Colonies to their British motherland. The American Revolution is seen as the democratic uprising of a whole people against foreign tyranny (short shrift is given to the French and Spanish help to the revolutionaries, which is acknowledged, but not emphasized). It is therefore an inconvenient fact that fully one-third of

the population—roughly the same proportion as those that filled the rebel ranks (the remaining third—those uncommitted or indifferent—belonged to neither camp)—remained faithful to Great Britain and its king<sup>8</sup> [17–19]. Moreover, these "Loyalists", as they came to be known—disparagingly in the United States, and less so in their future countries of settlement—were not all Tory grandees<sup>9</sup>.

Even those historians who combat "originalist" contemporary interpretations of the Constitution stay clear of the legend of the Revolution<sup>10</sup> [20]; they never suggest that George Washington ("I cannot tell a lie, it was I who cut down the cherry tree") or Benjamin Franklin espoused the revolutionary cause for anything but the purest motives<sup>11</sup> [21]. A recent well-acclaimed book on the Loyalists begins their story after their defeat [22]. Occasionally, and, for the most part recently, sectoral histories of America during the Revolutionary period point to dissent from the "patriotic" account of the Revolution, but they have not affected the dominant legend<sup>12</sup> [23–25].

What difference does it make to see the American Revolution as a civil war or as the righteous uprising of a whole people against foreign tyranny? First, it casts British imperialism in a new light. After its victory over France (and Spain) in 1763, Britain found itself dealing with a multicultural and multilingual empire both in the East and in North America. Having taken over French colonies in what came to be known as Lower Canada, and having failed to assimilate its inhabitants, the British Parliament passed the Quebec Act in 1774 granting religious liberty to the province's French speaking and Catholic majority. Even earlier, Britain had forbidden the inhabitants of the Thirteen Colonies from settling west of the Appalachians, presumably to keep the peace with the Indians (Native Americans) resident there. These British decisions were among the intolerable acts, consigned in the Declaration of Independence, that prompted the colonies to revolt<sup>13</sup>.

It must be said that the "mother country", as exemplified in the king and parliament, treated the American colonists as second-class citizens. Moreover, the British victory over the French in North America reduced the strategic importance of the Thirteen Colonies that, in any case, did not bring much wealth to Britain.

The Seven Years' War against France and Spain, though victorious, had left Britain financially exhausted. With the highest per capita tax burden in Europe, Britain was prepared to squeeze whatever revenue it could out of its colonies, making them, in effect, pay for its victory.

The advance of the Anglican Church in colonies founded by Puritans who had come to North America precisely to escape from Anglicanism further disturbed some colonists. Anglicans confronted Presbyterians and Quakers who, eschewing violence, sought to remain neutral<sup>14</sup> [26]. It is no accident that the Revolution was strongest in Boston, and Massachusetts in general, where the Puritans had first settled. Religious strife characterized America well before the Revolution. It is hardly surprising too that members of minority churches preferred the protection of the crown rather than entrusting their fate to the revolutionary committees founded by the First Continental Congress—originally to control commerce with Great Britain, but which soon exercised power at the local level. These committees were likened to the Inquisition by Loyalists and other dissatisfied Americans. A more modern comparison, unavailable at the time, would be to the soviets that reigned throughout the USSR after the Bolshevik revolution [27].

Seeing the American Revolution as a civil war would bring much-needed nuance to the account of the founding of the United States, and it would undermine the belief in the "exceptional" character of the country<sup>15</sup> [28]. It would explain why some historians see Hobbes rather than Locke as a more likely inspiration for the revolution and what followed<sup>16</sup> [29]. Moreover, it would please the many revisionists who battle the dominant interpretation of the revolution. These include the stars of the historical profession as well as some of its lesser lights<sup>17</sup> [30]. However, "revisionist scholarship has failed to dislodge the most popular treatment that tells the saga of how a new and exceptional nation achieved and spread liberty and democracy" [31].

The 'New York Times' "1619 Project" has brought fresh attention to the "losers" of the American Revolution. In particular, it has pitted those historians who see the main impetus behind the Revolution in the desire to preserve the institution of slavery against those who see this as a subordinate, if unfortunate, issue. It is true that, as of the Somerset case of 1772, holding slaves was outlawed in Britain, and the colonists could have legitimately feared that this prohibition would soon be applied to themselves. At the same time, for over a century the colonies had passed laws that nullified an understanding in British common law that baptism brought freedom<sup>18</sup> [32]. During the Revolutionary War both sides sought to enlist black slaves. Massachusetts soon halted the practice, deferring to the wishes of Virginian slave owners; only later did the Continental Congress revert, out of sheer necessity, to the practice of recruiting blacks [33]. British commanders in the field promised freedom, to the disapproval and consternation of authorities in London, to those black Americans who joined their forces and 20,000 former slaves did so<sup>19</sup>.

According to one source, this constituted the largest emancipation of slaves before the American Civil War [22]. Benjamin Quarles, in a classical study, agrees—partially—with this assessment. He acknowledges that the number of Afro-Americans who sought refuge in the British army "ran into the tens of thousands" [34]. This figure is high, he states, but not nearly as high as it might have been. The reason for this was the rather terrible reputation of army life—any army. In any case, the unsettled conditions of the Revolution—a general breakdown in law and order—made an escape from bondage a tempting and realistic proposition for American slaves. Most chose to cross over into British lines, in spite of distrust of both sides. Not Loyalism—which, in any case, differed widely in meaning, for whites as well as for blacks—but the desire for freedom dictated their decision.

Another minority group that largely sided with the Crown was that of the various tribes of Native Americans (Indians), known to both sides as "savages". Many of these tribes considered themselves allies, not subjects, of the king [35]. Americans tried to keep the "savages" neutral, but this was no longer possible once white settlers had moved into Indian country. Moreover, a popular royal superintendent of Indian affairs, contributed to re-enforcing Native American allegiance to the Loyalist cause. Of course, slave owners and white settlers reacted strongly to the situation. South Carolina and Georgia, where slaves outnumbered or were equal to the number of free people, imposed particularly harsh measures to prevent their slaves from revolting or from joining the British. Georgia, in particular, found itself torn between both camps: it relied on British protection from an onslaught of Native Americans but the sympathy and interest of its slave owners alliedit with the rebel or "patriotic" cause<sup>20</sup>. South Carolina and Georgia were the only colonies that refused to recruit black soldiers and even offered slaves to those who joined their forces [24].

Critics of the premise underlying the "1619 Project" point out that slave emancipation in the British Empire followed rather than preceded the American Revolution [36,37]. Although the slave owners' lobby in London was greatly weakened by American independence—Britain lost half of its slaves—the institution continued to thrive in some other British possessions, most notably in the Caribbean. It is shameful that the American constitution counted slaves as 3/5 of a person for census electoral purposes. This was a compromise intended to attract the Southern slave-holding states. In any case, the issue of slavery continued to bedevil the United States of America for almost a hundred years (and perhaps to this day). It was at the heart of the USA's costliest war (in terms of manpower)—the Civil War of 1861–1865—which gave rise to the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which conferred formal rights upon former slaves.

## 4. Conclusions

One scholar has compared the historiographical fates of Jacobites and Loyalists [38]. The latter did not have to wait long for recognition, although they remained vilified in their original status. To be sure, they were also the defeated; however, it is reluctantly acknowledged, by remaining British subjects they helped "to shape a regenerated British

Empire"<sup>21</sup> [39]. The Jacobites have waited longer. Until now they have been the subject of sentimental or wishful histories that have concentrated particularly on the romantic story of Bonnie Prince Charlie's escapades. To be sure, historians have noted a change in scholarly attitudes to Jacobitism, but this has not penetrated to a popular level [40]. This may be changing as Scotland seeks to establish its own national identity. Although an independent Scotland has promised to keep the Hanoverian monarch reigning in London, it may well look to its Jacobite antecedents. If this were the case—losers in their own time—losers in their own time, would enjoy a long-awaited posthumous victory over the "condescension of posterity".

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#### Notes

James II has been called, by Thomas Macaulay and others, "one of the worst English kings." There have been attempts to rehabilitate him: Maurice Ashley "Is there a Case for James II?" History Today 1963 pp. 347–352 and W.E. Brown, "A plea for James II," Contemporary Review 138 (1925) pp. 501–508 For a generally favourable view of James II or, at least, one that tries to draw a balance between denigration and praise, see K.N. Stankov," korol 'iakov 11 v zarubezhioi istriografii; osnovnye nauchye napravleniiia i podhody" Vestnik PSTGU (2016) seriia. Istoriia, Istoriia russkoi pravoslavnoi tserkvi.

- 2 Among recent additions to the literature on the exiled Jacobites attempts to regain the throne are the numerous works of Daniel Szechi.
- Eamonn O'Ciardha, Ireland and the Jacobite Cause, 1685–1766: A Fatal Attachment (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002) has argued that the Stuarts could have reigned in Ireland where their Catholicism was not an obstacle (to the contrary). James II and his descendents could not imagine reigning n only one of their three kingdoms. Nor, for that matter, could the Hanoverians give up Ireland.
- These examples are given, as might be expected, by Ashley. "Is there a Case for James II?" p. 350. He also makes the bold assertion, following Lord Acton, that James II not William III, represented the cause of toleration in its most liberal form. Cain and Hopkins, British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion 1688–1914 pp. 62–63.
- The first two Hanoverian monarchs, George I (1714–1727) and George II (1727–1760) hardly knew any English. In itself, this was not an eliminatory feature in that pre-nationalistic age. James II was approached for the crown of Poland (which did not interest him). One of the principle charges against the early Hanoverians was that they were loutish.
- No friend of the Jacobites, Linda Colley, In Defiance of Oligarchy: The Tory Party 1714–60. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1982) argues that Jacobitism was only one option among others for the Tory party. She is indirectly replying to Eveline Crui kshank's argument, i.a. in The House if Commons 1715.1754 edited by Romney Sedgwick (London: Oxford University Press, 1970, 2 volumes) that attachment to Jacobitism was widespread in the Tory Party, indeed it was the ideology of the Tory Party.
- In a review of Eveline Cruickshanks and Jeremy Black, eds., The Jacobite Challenge (Edinburgh: Donald, 1988) Linda Colley, American Historical Review 95:3 (1990) pp. 818–819 attempts to provide reasons for the Jacobites' failure. She touts the wide tolerance that the Hanoverians displayed toward their critics and claims that the Jacobites irritated rather than subverted the government. More to the point she argues that no one was prepared to act decisively on behalf of the exiled Stuarts. She also argues that Jacobite Britons were very similar to their Hanoverian counterparts in terms of their attitudes to commerce and other variables. She concludes that Jacobites failed not because they were traditionalists in a proto-modern age but because they were too much a part of their age to disrupt it. Nowhere does she mention the religious fanaticism that animated the population as late as the anti-Catholic Gordon riots of 1780 and that explains much of the suspicion of Stuart intentions.
- Paul H. Smith "American Loyalists: Notes on Their Organization and Numerical Strength," William and Mary Quarterly 25:2 (1968) pp. 259–277, cites this figure "generally attributed" (p. 260) to John Adams, second President and founding father of the United States. Smith follows the (tortuous) history behind these figures but eventually adopts them as his own basing himself on William H. Nelson, The American Tory (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961). The figure of one third of the American population being opposed to the American Revolution has been adopted by more recent authors.

Nelson The American Tory has done a disservice to the Loyalist cause, and to American history in general, by using "Tory" and "Loyalist" interchangeably, even though he rejects the "class war" interpretation of the American Revolution (p. 86) and considers the Revolution "a civil war". p. 1).

- Jill Lepore's, The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010) well-aimed salvo at a contemporary fundamentalist interpretation of American history does not contain an index entry for "Loyalist" (or Tory).
- T. H. Breen, "How Did he Colonies Unite?" New York Review of Books, 11 March 2021 [review of Mary Beth Norton 1774: The Long Year of Revolution (New York: Vintage, 2020)] suggests (basing himself on Norton?) that Washington and Franklin (and john Adams, the second president of the United States as well) were offended at being passed over for British government preferment as "colonials."
- The Other Loyalists: Ordinary People, Royalists, and the Revolution in the Middle Colonies, 1763–1787, edited by Joseph S. Tiedemann, Eugene R. Fingerhut and Robert W. Venables (Albany: Suny Press, 2009); Jim Piecuch, Three Peoples, One King: Loyalists, Indians, and Slaves in the Revolutionary South, 1775–1782 (Columbia. SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2008). Maya Jasanoff, "The Other Side of Revolution: Loyalists in the British Empire" William and Mary Quarterly. Third Series 65: 2 (2008) pp. 205–232 regrets the "marginal status of the topic of Loyalism which is "underscored by the predominance of antiquarian and genealogically oriented studies" but she also lists a number of serious works dealing with Loyalists especially praising the contribution of Robert McLuer Calhoon (p. 206 note 2). She also notes that "It remains surprisingly controversial in the United States to count loyalists among the victims of republican chauvinism" (p. 207).
- Among the intolerable Acts attributed to George III in the Declaration of Indepedence was that of "abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province, establishing therein an Arbitrary government, and enlarging its Boundaries so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these Colonies."
- Quakers seem to have irritated American "Patriots" the most. They believed government to be divinely inspired and thus obeyed any government that did not force them to act against their conscience. Before the revolutionary war they expressed sympathy for American objections to unfair taxes but, when violence erupted they broke with the "Patriots" leading Samuel Adams to declare "if they will not pull down George III, let them not support tyrants," A Glenn Crothers "Northern Virginia's Quakers and the War for Independence: Negotiating a Path of Virtue in a Revolutionary World," in The Other Loyalists, p. 109.
- In a critical article on Bernard Bailyn, "exceptionalist" historian par excellence, Alan Taylor defines American exceptionalism as a "celebration of deviation from old world tradition" and he states (ruefully?) that "the exceptionalist mentality is deeply rooted in our [i.e., American] national identity." (p. 34) Alan Taylor, "The Exceptionalist [review of Bernard Bailyn, To Begin the World Anew: The Genius and Ambiguities of the American Founders]" The New Republic. 9 June 2003, pp. 33–40.
- See Frank M. Coleman, "The Hobbesian basis of American Constitutionalism," Polity 7:1 (1974) pp. 57–89 and for a more pithy (and Hamiltonian) statement, Tom Cutterham, "Thomas Hobbes and Post-Revolutionary American Citizenship." Commentary, 13 May 2013.
- P. Smith (p. 259) cites R.R. Palmer's lament in Palmer's classical two volume work, The Age of the Democratic Revolution (Princeton: Princeton University Press) first published in 1959. Smith summarizes Palmer's complaint that loyalists have been eliminated from the national consciousness—and from the work of "consensus" historians (vol. 1, p. 190). Even Nelson, The American Tory, who consistently confuses Tories and Loyalists, laments that "[t]he Loyalists in the American Revolution suffered a most abject kind of political failure, losing ... even their proper place in history."(p. V).
- Erica Armstrong Dunbar, "A Praise House of Many Mansions" [review of Henry Louis Gates Jr. The Black Church This is Our Story. This is Our Song] New York Review of Books, 29 April 2021, p. 37. The slaves who escaped to Florida, then under Spanish control, allowed themselves to be baptized into the Roman Catholic faith, as much of a red flag for most American colonists as no baptism at all.
- Official London shuddered at the thought of black soldiers in its ranks, although the population at large was mostly sympathetic to the cause of emancipation. Westminster did its best to keep social relations in the colonies unchanged, perhaps because of concern at the post-revolutionary situation, Piecuch, Three Peoples, One King, p. 8, p. 39.
- Georgia had abolished slavery between 1735 and 1751. It was the only one of the thirteen colonies to have done so and the experiment did not last long.
- Linda Colley, review of Jasanoff, Liberty's Exiles, The Guardian, 19 February 2011. Mason, referenced above, makes an exception for Canada that, as Hugh MacLennon and others have pointed out, was indelibly marked by defeated peoples (Jacobite Scots, the French and Loyalists) 'A Society in Revolt' in Voices of Canada, edited by Judith Webster (Burlington, Vt USA: Association of Canadian Studies, 1976) pp. 33ff.

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