

*Neil MacKinnon*

**Bitter Verse: Poetry, Verse and Song of  
The American Loyalists in Nova Scotia**

With the peace treaty that ended the American Revolution, many of those tens of thousands that had supported the cause of the crown found that they had to leave the new nation. Almost twenty thousand of them made their way to the small, isolated peninsula of mainland Nova Scotia. Understandably, many were despondent, some disillusioned, almost all bitter and angry at the outcome of the war and the fate of their cause. Not only had they been uprooted from their homes and heritage and cast upon a poor, alien colony, but they also found themselves, ironically, the butt of history. They had fought the just fight, supporting legitimacy in the form of the crown and constitution while opposing the threat of revolution and anarchy, only to find themselves abandoned by the crown, discarded by the rabble they had denounced, and only weakly appreciated by their new neighbors.

The results among many were trauma, anger, bitterness and often denial of their fate. Their views were vented in a variety of ways: petitions, newspapers, broadsides, diaries, letters, and occasionally verse. This study examines some of their verse to illustrate the varied responses and attitudes among these people. The writings, perhaps one a poem, the rest ranging from verse to doggerel, were spread out in time over almost a decade and divided between those published in newspapers and those written for private reading. It is not the quality of the works that is of concern here; it is the attitudes that they reflect, particularly the hostility, its extent and, interestingly, its variety.

The earliest verse presented was written by a Mrs. Hutchinson, formerly of Boston, who had come to Halifax early in the revolution. From then until her death in the 1790's she kept up a very active correspondence with her sister in Boston, Margaret Mascarene. The letters touched on almost everything: recipes, religion, warm descriptions of friends and relatives in Halifax, and the insistent queries about friends and loved ones in Boston—everything but politics and the war.

While war dragged on, her letters, like her verse, reflected the hope of many for an end to that struggle, and for a peace that would allow her to return home to Boston to pick up the thread of her life.

When friends and kindred shall once more embrace  
 And anxious sorrows from each bosom chase  
 When wars and tumults shall give place to peace  
 And noise and discord from our dwellings cease  
 When we once more shall view our native shore  
 And sound of gun and cannon hear no more  
 But peace and harmony again abound  
 And social mirth and friendship spread around  
 God grant our latter end may thus be crown'd

Mrs. Hutchinson to Margaret Mascarene, Boston  
 Halifax, 6 August 1780  
 Mascarene Papers, PANS

The lines of Jacob Bailey were written later, when the peace treaty had been signed and the Loyalist fate revealed. Any chance of a swift return to the United States was denied the Loyalists. Bailey, an Anglican minister in the Annapolis Valley, had come from New England during the revolution. In his unpublished writings from verse to history he wielded a caustic and restless pen, skewering the rebel mentality throughout the years of the war. With the coming of peace, however, his anger turned more to a Britain that in his opinion had shamefully abandoned the Loyalists for a convenient peace. The first work, describing the harsh fate of the refugees at Annapolis, turns in the end to the reason for that fate, Britain and her king.

When I survey the refugees  
 Camped under tents and spreading trees  
 Along the field and pasture spread  
 Without an house to screen their heads  
 From the dire peltings and alarms  
 Of North East winds and thunder storms  
 Compelled to trudge thro' fire and water [sic.]  
 And oft exposed to fire and water [sic.]  
 From clime to clime obliged to stray  
 As freakish Britain leads the way  
 Sometimes as friends and sons cares't  
 And then with every ill opprest  
 The butt, the scorn the insult made  
 Of those to whom they lent their aid  
 When I these wretched sights behold  
 It brings to mind the saints of old  
 Fated o'er hills and dales to trudge  
 And forced in caves and dens to lodge  
 But this difference we may see  
 Between a saint and refugee

The first acknowledges the Lord  
 The other bows to George the Third  
 The first is heaven's immortal King  
 The last a supple passive thing

Jacob Bailey to \_\_\_\_\_

22 August 1783

M.G. 23, D1-1, Vol. 72, PAC

His second poem deals with the naming of Port Roseway on the south-west coast of Nova Scotia. This community was the great Loyalist hope, blossoming quickly into one of the largest ports in America, and doomed to collapse almost as quickly. With the town's birth, however, the governor of Nova Scotia, John Parr, decided to name it after his patron, Lord Shelburne, the British minister most closely associated by the refugees with the infamous peace. Again, the verse is used as a vehicle of Bailey's contempt for the British actions on the peace. As in the previous work the loyalty of the refugees comes forth as of far greater value than the objects of that loyalty. Nineteenth Century historians in Canada tended to create a morality play of the Loyalists' experience, having them leave the new nation solely out of their love for British connection, customs and government. What Bailey underlines, and what is so prominent in other Loyalist writings, is the anger towards Britain, sometimes outweighing their hostility to the United States.

Sh-l--rne we saw thee late on high  
 Blaze like a comet thro' the sky  
 Tho' not like other blazing stars  
 Which threaten famine, plagues and wars  
 For thou by gentle dispensations  
 Hast given peace to all the nations  
 A peace which at a jerk has thrown  
 A powerful thriving empire down  
 A peace that makes stare and wonder  
 And laugh at all the British thunder  
 Which makes that dockt and cropt tailed nation  
 Of all the scorn and execration  
 But North and Fox eye with delight  
 The fallen and extinguished light  
 Not so the sons of Roseway  
 Patient to suffer and obey  
 For they conspire to noise the fame  
 And give their rising shape the name  
 The sages used in days of yore  
 The heavenly bodies to adore  
 But never went it seems so far  
 As to adore a fallen star  
 O hapless port of Roseway  
 What signs on that ill fated day

Did all the scenes around display  
 The rocks, the mountains and the woods  
 The rolling streams and spreading floods  
 Prickt up their wild astonished ears  
 And trembled at thy three-fold cheers  
 Shelburne we see thee late on high  
 Blaze like a comet thro' the sky  
 When the dire sweepings of thy tail  
 Made men to tremble and grow pale  
 Tho' not like other blazing stars  
 Didst portend destructive wars  
 For thou by gentle dispensations  
 Hast given peace to all the nations

Jacob Bailey to H.B. Brown  
 23 August 1783  
 M.G. 23, D1-1, PAC

The poem of an unnamed Loyalist lady, printed in the *Nova Scotia Gazette*, illustrates the refugees' need for illusion. They had just left New York in humiliation, with the jeers of the victors still fresh. Yet the poem rejoices to be free of this new, oppressive nation and once again safe in a colony under the Crown. It reflects the powerful hope that the refugees would yet triumph, the war would yet be won in their new communities which, with their character of loyalty, their British constitution, their prosperity and freedom, would become models for the world and objects of envy for the doomed republic. Yet there is within the poem a wistful glance back to New York and America, a gentle prodding of the British lion that slept too long.

Hail! happy land! where peace shall dwell,  
 Where love and harmony shall reign;  
 Where subjects loyal to their King  
 Shall dare to own Great George again.

Under a Sov'reign whose mild sway,  
 We shall flourish and be free,  
 While the land from which we fled  
 Shall be oppress'd with tyranny.

There Liberty extends her arms!  
 There let us fly and court her smiles,  
 The glorious Constitution own  
 Which rules in distant British Isles.

York, we leave thee with regret,  
 The place where once mild peace did reign;  
 Britannia leaves thee for a while,  
 But surely will return again.

The British Lyon yet shall rouze,  
Too long, alas! he's lain asleep.

*Nova Scotia Gazette and  
Weekly Chronicle*, Halifax, N.S.,  
18 October 1785, PANS

Much more shrill was the verse appearing in the *Nova Scotia Packet*. This newspaper was one of three published in the Loyalist centre of Shelburne, and all three packed their pages with pieces and information hostile to the United States. The poem from the *Packet* reflects the general attitude of the Shelburne newspapers towards the new nation and represents what one would expect from a people recently expelled from their land after a violent civil war, a contempt for the new ways and the new gods, an emotion expressed by another, briefer, poem from the *Packet*.

To make my kingdom strong and mighty,  
Says Satan is an easy task,  
Give me but *mobs* and *paper money*,  
And I no other means will ask.

The New Year's eve verse is particularly revealing. The verse, intended as a light-hearted work for local consumption, begins thus with references to Shelburne, Jordan and "Quambo" of Birchtown. What follows is an expected paean to the king, "The good, the worthy, and of Kings the best." It then proceeds, however, to a fierce and unexpected attack on the new nation and its citizens, those "changeling sons of earth" who tore an empire apart for the spoils of power and ambition, only to be robbed of the spoils by those among them more ruthless. This diatribe on the reversed fortunes of winner and loser runs away with the verse, a distortion of the mood and intent that were found in the opening lines, and returned to but lamely at the end.

The New Year's Verse of the Printer's  
Man, Who Carries about the  
Nova Scotia Packet to the Customers  
January 1, 1787

Alas! alas!—The tedious search is vain!  
Thro' cold, and frost, and storm, and drenching rain,  
The town I've rambl'd for a generous Poet;  
If such there is, . . . I wish to Heav'n I knew it!  
Nor *Shelburne*, *Jordan* nor will *Birch-town* grant  
One single verse, to save your boy from want!  
At *Birch-town*, true, old *Quambo* said he'd try;  
And, sure enough, such lines, they'd make you cry;

What shall I do? My last year's friend is gone,  
 And such another I cannot find one!  
 O that I'd wings Parnassus' heights to soar!  
 I'd rob the muses of their choicest store.  
 To try myself!—presumpt'ous sure, 'twould be!  
 Instead of pence, 't might bring far worse to me!  
 What shall I do? I know your kindness great,  
 You will forgive in so distrest a state:  
 I'll try my skill; who knows what may come from it?  
 As it is said, *Poeta nascitur non sit.*

And what more proper to begin my lays,  
 Than with a grateful heart kind Heav'n to praise  
 For that insanity's rash, murd'ring hand,  
 Did not in sad distress involve our land;  
 In that Our GEORGE, (by nations round confest)  
 The good, the worthy, and of Kings the best  
 \_\_\_\_\_ preserv'd t'increase His people's bliss,  
 \_\_\_\_\_ improve His Reign the Reign of Happiness  
 \_\_\_\_\_ it still preserve in blissful joy  
 \_\_\_\_\_ life; nor let one grief annoy  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Flock; and may we ever sing  
 \_\_\_\_\_ heaven's peculiar care is GEORGE our King,  
 \_\_\_\_\_ with it 'sovereign shall this land rejoice,  
 \_\_\_\_\_ raise to Heav'n in gratitude its voice;  
 \_\_\_\_\_ far from the pow'r of faction's cursed sway,  
 Our nights shall pass in ease, in joy the day;  
 Our trade protected shall each year increase,  
 And in its train bring freedom, plenty, peace;  
 Whilst Independence sons shall curse the hour,  
 That first gave birth to Independence pow'r.

Ye who are fond of giving faction birth,  
 Pause here; —behold those changeling sons of earth  
 How lost! How lost to truth and shame!  
 For th' shade of pow'r they've sold their peace and fame!  
 Near ten long years they wag'd rebellious war,  
 And only fought the shameful spoils to share!  
 Yok'd with the Devil, 'cause he promis'd pow'r,  
 And t'let Ambition strut its little hour.

Like Hounds who have quit their huntsman in the race:  
 Or right, or wrong, to them, 'tis all the same,  
 Whilst some accomplish, others lose their aim:  
 The disappointed, hungry worn, and tir'd,  
 Vex'd at their lot, with jealous envy fir'd,  
 Call on their comrades, but they call in vain,  
 To share the spoil their better luck did gain;  
 Hence rage ensues, the rage of curst despair,  
 And all the horrors of domestic war:  
 They curse the hour they quit their Master's call,  
 And leave the World a lesson in their fall!

Here would I stop; but first this lesson see,  
 "The Path to HONOUR is CONSISTENCY;  
 The dome of FAME's supported on its base,  
 And forms the Temple of true HAPPINESS."

Allow me now to wish you ev'ry cheer,  
 May ev'ry joy attend th' ensuing year:—  
*Keen blows the wind, and piercing is the cold;*  
 I feel that in your service I grow old,  
 That age want something to renew its sense,  
 That something's purchased with a few Half-pence:  
 Possesst of them I'd caper thro' the snow,  
 Nor mind the wind how hard so e'er it blow!

*The Nova Scotia Packet,*  
 I January, 1787, #447,  
 Gideon White Collection, PANS

\*The words missing in the third stanza seemed to have been obliterated by water stains.

The Shelburne newspapers, and the *Packet* in particular, played an important role in fostering a continued anti-Americanism. By their constant attention to the United States, by their comparisons and contumely, these newspapers helped to sustain the intensity of Loyalist hostility, for with three such newspapers in Shelburne, dragging the past in all its rancour before them, the Loyalists were given little respite from the war. The Shelburne papers, however, like their community, were short-lived, their demise coinciding with a shift in the Loyalist attitude towards the United States. By the time of their passing, Loyalist antipathy was receding, the response to their former home less automatic and less harsh. With the passage of time local problems and issues weighed upon the refugee as much as did the remnants of the revolution.

Captain Booth, a member of the British army stationed at Shelburne, was witness to the rapid collapse of Shelburne, and witness also to life there, to the relationships of Loyalists to Loyalist, government to refugee. One of the themes that runs through the diaries that he wrote is the exploitation of the refugee by government agents. In 1787 he wrote some doggerel in which he describes the plight of refugees who, having sought out and discovered good land, are denied the land by surveyors and other government agents. Booth's implication is that often when little was known of the quality of much of the land, the agents would allow the Loyalists, through their exploring and their claims, to fill in the agent's knowledge of good and bad land. The frequent fate of refugees discovering good parcels of land was to have their claims denied on the pretext that the lands they discovered had

already been set aside for others. Thus, deprived of choice, delayed often a year or more in settling, forced to consume their provisions before they had actually settled, often ultimately saddled with bad land, many simply abandoned their uncleared lands and returned to the United States.

December 18, 1787

A New Song to an Old Tune

Ye knowing old rogues attend to my song  
I demand your attention, tis not very long  
You never no never had such a field  
As the division of lands at Shelburne did yield

Derry down

The American war being settled at last  
The Crown-boys began to move off very fast  
In order to take up new lands in their turn  
And establish a town which they named Shelburne

Derry down

Their Lolls being drawn to work they begun  
By clearing the trees, for this excellent fun  
For behold ye! as soon as they'd clear'd a small space  
There Tom, Jack, and Harry were not to be placed

Derry Down

The director of matters made a great route,  
When Tom, Jack and Harry began for to pout  
Saying set off, good lads and look out for new Patches  
And leave Wives w/w their Daughters to make up new matches

Derry down

Some went to Green Harbour, and others to Jordon  
By dozens, I am told, as they gave me their word on;  
But before they return'd to the knowing-ones baited  
They had new information those land were located

Derry down

Being vex'd and fatigued at those frequent humbugs  
Poor Yankee, frost bitten, his Shoulders then shruggs  
He collects his few chattles that remain'd on the Ground  
And Setts off w/w a Copper for every pound

Derry down



When arrived at New York his friends gather Round  
 Expecting to find him worth ten thousand pounds  
 But no sooner is Yankee set down in the house  
 Then he relates his sad story of, not worth a sou

Derry down

The diary of Captain Booth,  
 now at Acadia University Library

The Shelburne song is similar in theme although much more sombre. The general state of poverty, according to Booth, shaped not solely by the barrenness of the land but also by the “knavery” of officials and others, dictated that the Loyalists leave or languish in Nova Scotia forgotten and in poverty. Paradoxically, this song, written in 1789 when the collapse of Shelburne was much more marked than earlier, tends to end on a less pessimistic note than the previous song, with the feeling that if only King George knew of their plight, “Relief will come and Rogues may fear”.

A Shelburne Song  
 Tune Roblin Caster

1

It was in a deep embow'ring shade  
 Britannia wept' distressed maid;  
 Her care was for a loyal few  
 Who oft was tried, and wer true.  
 By peace to cruel fate decreed  
 All nature Shock'd at such a deed.  
 At length her Carleton did inspire  
 A place of refuge to retire

2

On Scotia's barren rocky shore,  
 Consign'd to labour and be poor;  
 For what the King in bounty gave,  
 Half serv'd to poor, half kept by knave.  
 Our province taxes next to pay,  
 Our duties high and must obey;  
 Divested of our Country's laws  
 To represent our civil cause  
 Each virtue in a loyal heart  
 Despair cries out go hence, depart;  
 Or languish out thy tedious end  
 Unknown by King or any friend;  
 Then welcome reason—come tho' late  
 Relieve despair from cruel fate;

Relate to George thy sufferings here  
Relief will come and Rogues may fear

The diary of Captain Booth,  
December, 1789  
Acadian University Library

Perhaps an excessive amount of weight should not be placed on such a slender sample of Loyalist verse. Such works, however, bring the reader more intimately into the particular world of Nova Scotia Loyalists during that most tumultuous decade, the 1780's. Most of the verse is dominated by the feeling that they were the wronged, and consequently by those wronging or having wronged them. The verses are, in most cases, angry, bitter writings, although those destined for the public emphasise almost to the point of obsession the recent enemy, the United States. The hope is that Loyalist Nova Scotia would yet surpass the new nation. However, those works of Bailey and Booth, written for private consumption, reflected little such optimism and described other threats and dangers than the Americans.

Another characteristic of this batch of verse is the shifting objects of hostility. In the immediate aftermath of the war it was difficult for the Loyalists not to be obsessed by the new America. Yet they were also aware of a peace treaty in which Britain apparently left them naked to their enemies and throughout the Loyalist publications a delicate line was drawn between the quality of their loyalty and the worthiness of the object of that loyalty. Privately in much of their correspondence Loyalists were less reserved and Britain was duly and strongly castigated. Moreover, the first year of that great wave of settlement brought them into contact with a harried, over-worked, under-staffed, and not exceptionally able government and its agents, who would do what they could for these "ingrates" but in doing so would take what opportunity arose, in typical Eighteenth Century fashion, to pick what meat they could off the bones of the Loyalist presence.

Although these objects of enmity were not mutually exclusive, with time the American experience, lacking the immediacy of Britain's terms of settlement and Nova Scotia's efforts at settling, was less preponderant. To some degree attitudes to the United States would come almost full cycle. For example, in 1780 Mrs. Hutchinson had wished for a cessation of hostility so that she might return home to America. Although by 1783 she was bitter towards the war's outcome and victors, by the end of the decade her views again softened towards the new republic. Although she never returned, many others, as relations with the United States improved and ties increased and enmity weakened, did live out her earlier desire and returned home to the

United States. For these Nova Scotia had been an interlude. Thousands of others remained and stuck through the difficult years of re-settlement. With the passage of time there was among them also a weakening of hostility towards old antagonists in America but also antagonists in Britain and Nova Scotia as the crush and turmoil of the early years became a part of the past. The verse presented, however, is limited to that first ominous, uncertain decade of their expatriation and re-settlement, and reflects the dominant hopes, fears and frustrations that possessed the Loyalists, lending a particular immediacy to that peculiar period.