

The Black Loyalists, Loyal Blacks, and A Matter of Equality

by Brian McConnell, UE *

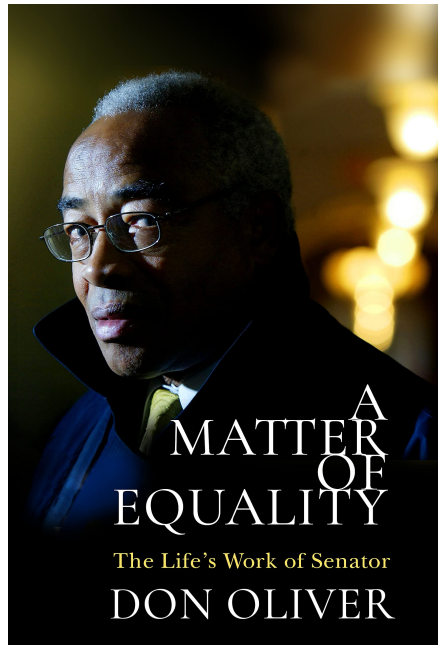
It was noted in 1983 by a leader in the Black Nova Scotian community that "historians have paid little attention to the political orientations of Nova Scotia's black immigrants following the American Revolution." In his article published in "The Loyalist Gazette" in Autumn 1983 on page ten, F.S. Boyd, Director of the Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia, described how they were "polarized" into "two parties or bodies of opinion; the conservative Black loyalists; (and) the radical left, the Loyal Blacks." Thomas Peters, a member of the second group, led 1,100 Blacks to Sierra Leone in 1792 partly in consequence of mistreatment and inequality regarding failure to receive promised land and provisions from government officials in Nova Scotia.

Loyal Blacks: Political Radicals in Nova Scotia

**By F.S. Boyd, Director
Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia**

The Autumn 1983 edition of "The Loyalist Gazette", a journal published by the United Empire Loyalists' Association of Canada, recognized the Loyalists' Bicentennial of their arrival in Canada in 1783 and also included the following other articles: "Unshaken Attachment - the Loyalists in Nova Scotia, 1779 – 1809" by Hugh Taylor, former Provincial Archivist of Nova Scotia; "A Loyalist Foundation – The University of King's College" by John F. Godfrey, President of the University of King's College in Halifax; and "Portrait of a Quebec Loyalist – William Smith of New York" by Professor Hereward Senior of McGill University.

I was reminded in reading the discussion in the article "Loyal Blacks: Political Radicals in Nova Scotia" of a recently published book entitled "A Matter of Equality: The Life's Work of Senator Don Oliver".



Donald Oliver is a descendant of Black Nova Scotians who came to the province to escape from slavery in the United States. He was appointed to the Senate of Canada in September, 1990 by Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and served for twenty - three years. In his book he describes how his life work has been about striving to root out the systemic racism that has stalled the growth of Canada's Black citizens. The book was published by Nimbus Publishing Limited in 2021.

Although written almost fifty years ago in 1983 the article by F. S. Boyd in "The Loyalist Gazette" is important for in its discussion of the treatment of Blacks and the causes and history of political divisions. With credit to the journal and author, it is being reproduced below. The original Notes at the end have been expanded and new ones added for further explanation.

Loyal Blacks: Political Radicals in Nova Scotia

**By F.S. Boyd, Director
Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia**

Next to religion, politics has been the arena of activity in which Black Nova Scotians have shown the greatest ingenuity and creativity. Still historians have paid little attention to the political ideas and affiliations of Black immigrants to Nova Scotia following the American Revolution. Perhaps this is because they were not compiled and written down, or perhaps because, quite simply, no one was interested.

"O, not in vain did Attucks fall" goes the poem of Excelsior Charitable Organization of Colored Ladies of Boston. "The first to defy, and the first to die." wrote John Boyle O'Reilly of Attucks. The men who died that night were "the most obscure and inconsiderable that could have been found upon the continent" wrote Boston's first President of the United States, John Adams. Attucks, who? Crispus Attucks. (1)

In March, 1770, British troops took the first American life in the years before the Revolution broke out. This encounter with British troops is now known as the Boston Massacre. Crispus Attucks was a free Black American who took exception to a British soldier using the butt – end against a child, and for his protest the patriot was killed. (2)

If you do not know who Attucks was, then this serves to illustrate the point with which this article began, namely that the political ideas and affiliations of Blacks have not been explored.

As the political ideals and affiliations of the Black immigrants to Nova Scotia are not compiled and recorded then what political meaning can be objectively ascribed to their behavior. This article is an attempt to do just that, to broadly categorize the political views of loyal Blacks through their political conduct.

The resolution for independence moved by Richard Henry Lee and seconded by Boston's John Adams was proclaimed as is well known on July 4, 1776. But the resolution in written form, the Declaration of Independence, crystalized political opinions which the battled of the American Revolution solidified. The Colonists split into two political camps: Patriots and Loyalists. Broadly speaking, the Patriots of the American Revolution were those who believed in the principle of independence as stated in the Declaration.

The generally accepted definition of a Loyalist is one who ardently believed in allegiance to King and Country. Loyalists believed that the levies of the King were just and should be paid. They accepted the mercantile policy which saw the metropolitan state enriched at the expense of the colonies. Hence, the American patriot, who took the opposing view, was a political radical, judged from the standpoint of Great Britain, while the Loyalist was a conservative.

By and large the Declaration of Independence had little effect upon the Blacks who eventually came to Nova Scotia. This was to be expected of course; the rights enshrined in the Declaration of Independence were for Whites only. There were exceptions however, as you now know. Among those fall the Black, Crispus Attucks, the first patriot to die during the conflict.

The statement that was destined to divide the Blacks politically was not the Declaration but rather the little known Dunmore Proclamation. Issued by John Murray, Earl of Dunmore and British governor of Virginia in the following words, the proclamation said: "...and I do hereby further declare all indented servants, Negroes or others, (appertaining to Rebels) free, that are able and willing to bear arms, they joining His Majesty troops, as soon as may be, for the more speedily reducing the Colony to a proper sense of their duty, to His Majesty's crown and dignity. (3)

This proclamation was the political catalyst the slaves so badly needed. It polarized political opinion into two camps – loyal blacks and Black Loyalists.

Black Loyalists were those Blacks who left the American colonies to come to Nova Scotia with their Loyalist masters. "As servants for life" these political conservatives could hold no other views than those of their masters. These views have already been described as Loyalist and Conservative. That is to say that Black Loyalists held an ardent belief in the supremacy of King and Country, just as their masters did. (4)

By contrast, those who left slavery in the United States and eventually came to Nova Scotia on their own and through the generosity of the British Navy believed fundamentally in the promises of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness (for lack of better words). This group, the loyal Blacks, has greatly interested historians, though not for its politics.

Among the leaders of the loyal Blacks were the illustrious Reverend David George and Reverend Boston King, who came to Nova Scotia and another leader, Reverend George Liele who went to Jamaica. Before Dunmore's Proclamation they were ministers without portfolio, but following that they had offices to pursue. Astonishingly, none of them rose to the occasion better than did a little – known sergeant of the Black Pioneers Corps who fought against the Patriots in the Revolution.

Sergeant Thomas Peters took the issues to the loyal Blacks throughout Nova Scotia and into New Brunswick. The issues were that loyal Blacks had been promised a) land in fee simple; b) provisions enough to see them successfully settled. In most cases they received neither, and often when they did receive them, they received by far the worst land and provisions when compared with the White Loyalists who were made the same promises. Peters took another issue to the people, Sierra Leone.

Convinced that free settlement in Sierra Leone, under the philanthropy of many of England's leading abolitionists, would be better than under a colonial government, like Nova Scotia, Peters persuaded his followers and the leading clergy to leave the Province and go to Sierra Leone. Despite the protestations of the Nova Scotia government as well as the private sector, the merchant class, the farming community and those who considered themselves proprietors of slaves, and who did not want to lose them to Sierra Leone, Peters and his followers pressed on. They were given reason to expect full political and economic participation in Sierra Leone that was not available to them in Nova Scotia. The opportunity was appealing and after almost a decade, the loyal Blacks, 1,100 in fifteen ships left Nova Scotia for Sierra Leone, Africa on January 15, 1792. (5)

Not surprisingly the loyal Blacks' dedication to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as witnessed in their preparedness to emigrate to Sierra Leone counts them among the more radical political elements in the history of Nova Scotia. It was an extreme choice, one that their radical politics naturally led them to. In truth the loyal Blacks were probably more radical in their politics than the American patriots, even though they chose not to take up arms against the British government in Nova Scotia.

This article describes the political orientation of Nova Scotia's Black immigrants following the American Revolution. It stresses two points: a) Dunmore's Proclamation politically polarized Nova Scotia's Blacks into two parties or bodies of opinion: the conservative, Black loyalists; the radical left, the loyal Blacks; and b) how a Loyalist proclamation produced a radical left body of opinion in loyal Blacks who led by Thomas Peters, a loyal Black himself, eventually rejected the protection of King and Country in Nova Scotia for economic and political freedom in Africa under aristocratic English patronage.

Notes:

(1) See: "Captain Thomas Preston's Account of the Boston Massacre. March 5, 1770" in Merrill Jensen, ed. American Colonial Documents to 1776 (New York: Nelson and sons, 1955), p. 752; Benjamin Quarles, The Negro in the American Revolution (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), pp. 3 – 4.

(2) See: "Anonymous Account of the Boston Massacre March 5, 1770" and reference to Crispus Attucks 'killed on the spot' accessed January 30, 2022 at <http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/documents/1751-1775/anonymous-account-of-the-boston-massacre-march-5-1770.php>

(3) See: James W. St. G. Walker, The Black Loyalists (New York; Africana Publishing Company, 1976, p. 1) Dunmore's Proclamation was issued on November 7, 1775. See Murray, John, Lord Dunmore's Proclamation (1775) accessed February 1, 2022, In Encyclopedia Virginia, <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/lord-dunmores-proclamation-1775/>

(4) "A large number of Negro slaves reached Shelburne from the revolted colonies. They appear on the rolls as 'servants', but their number, as ordinary servants, was conspicuously large. Stephen Shakespeare was accompanied by twenty, and Charles Oliver Bruff, a goldsmith, by fifteen of them. Isaac Wilkins is also said to have brought a good many. With Captain Andrew Barclay's company of fifty – five men and women and forty – nine children, were no less than fifty – seven servants, thirty – six of whom, however, were owned by four families. There is little reason to doubt that nearly all were really slaves. The term "slave" and "property of" appear as frequently in the official records of early Shelburne as one would expect to see them in those of a southern slave – holding city." These unfortunate human beings are examples of Black Loyalists whose views were not their own. See: T. Watson Smith, "The Loyalist At Shelburne", Collection of the Nova Scotia Historical Society for the Years 1887 – 88, pp. 74 – 75.

(5) See: "Thomas Peters – one of the founding fathers of Freetown, Sierra Leone", accessed January 30, 2022 at <https://blackhalifax.com/portfolio/thomas-peters/>

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