

James W. St. G. Walker

THE BLACK LOYALISTS

The Search for a Promised Land in
Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone 1783–1870

FREE SETTLEMENT ON THE COAST OF AFRICA.

THE SIERRA LEONE COMPANY, willing to receive into their Colony such Free Blacks as are able to produce to their Agents, Lieutenant CLARKSON, of His Majesty's Navy, and Mr. LAWRENCE HARTSHORNE, of *Halifax*, or either of them, satisfactory Testimonials of their Characters, (more particularly as to Honesty, Sobriety, and Industry) think it proper to notify, in an explicit manner, upon what Terms they will receive, at SIERRA LEONE, those who bring with them written Certificates of Approval from either of the said Agents, which Certificates they are hereby respectively authorized to grant or withhold at Discretion.

It is therefore declared by the Company,

THAT every Free Black (upon producing such a Certificate) shall have a Grant of not less than TWENTY ACRES of LAND for himself, TEN for his Wife, and FIVE for every Child, upon such terms and subject to such charges and obligations, (with a view to the general prosperity of the Company,) as shall hereafter be settled by the Company, in respect to the Grants of Lands to be made by them to all Settlers, whether *Black or White*.

THAT for all Stores, Provisions, &c. supplied from the Company's Warehouses, the Company shall receive an equitable compensation, according to fixed rules, extending to Blacks and Whites indiscriminately.

THAT the civil, military, personal, and commercial rights and duties of the said Blacks and Whites, shall be the same, and secured in the same manner.

AND, for the full assurance of personal protection, the Company have subjoined a Certificate, by which they are incorporated a Company, and shall be the same, and secured in the same manner.

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and Sierra Leone, 1783–1870

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Introduction

In a review of Christopher Fyfe's *History of Sierra Leone*, Paul Hair drew attention to the tiny area occupied by Sierra Leone on the map of Africa and wondered rhetorically why it justified the detailed treatment given it by Mr Fyfe.¹ If this question can legitimately be directed at a history of Sierra Leone, it seems even more appropriate to ask it of a study that purports to relate the history of the Black Loyalist settlers from Nova Scotia, who never numbered more than twelve hundred persons and, after 1807, constituted a decreasingly significant proportion of Sierra Leone's population.

A response to such a hypothetical challenge might best be framed in terms of the interest Black Loyalist history holds for a variety of historians, for its importance lies less in geographical or numerical significance than in the events, trends and historical developments with which the Black Loyalists were intimately associated, and upon which their activities often had a profound and formative influence. The Black Loyalists originated, as a group, in the collapse of the old British Empire, they participated in the establishment of a new one in North America, and later were fundamental to the initiation of a unique colonial enterprise in Africa. It was Sierra Leone, Britain's first permanent African colony, that caused the British to see Africa 'not merely as it was, but as it might be, and with full consideration for the new Africa in the imperial scheme of things';² it was the Black Loyalists who made possible the establishment and continued British occupation of Sierra Leone in its earliest and most vulnerable years. The student of Imperial history can therefore find in the Black Loyalists' story an example of the colonial experience in several locations, and the germinal events leading to the expansion of British involvement in Africa. The settlers from Nova Scotia, however, were far from compliant colonial subjects. The first Africans to live under extended British jurisdiction, they were also the first to offer an ideological challenge to white alien rule. As Mr Hair has suggested, as part of his answer to his own query,

'Students of the development of African nationalism might care to take a longer look at the Nova Scotians, and the Freetown community they moulded.'³

For the student of Canadian history, as much as for the Africanist and Imperial historian, the Black Loyalist record offers a new perspective on formative periods and accepted historical concepts. There is a 'Loyalist myth' in Canada that perpetuates a view of the Loyalist immigrants as upper-class citizens, devoted to British ideals, who transplanted the best of Colonial American society to British North America.⁴ In this view the role of the Black Loyalists, though they represented more than ten per cent of the Loyalist influx into the Maritime Provinces, is generally overlooked. An examination of the Black Loyalists in Nova Scotia can contribute to an awareness of the multi-racial and socially heterogeneous nature of the Loyalist establishment and, since the blacks were at the lowest end of the Loyalist scale, their experiences help to illustrate the hardships and struggles of eighteenth-century pioneer life in Atlantic Canada. But above all the Black Loyalists hold significance, in Canada, as the founders of Canada's first free black community. Their concerns and initiatives, and their responses to the racial discrimination and economic exploitation practised by Loyalist society, shaped the development of separate institutions and a distinct social identity within the black population of the Maritime Provinces. The black community, and particularly its founding fathers, deserves the attention of those who would understand the origin and growth of the Canadian mosaic.

The history of the Black Loyalists in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone has not, of course, been completely neglected by scholars in the past. No single study, however, has attempted to treat the Black Loyalists as a historical entity, and those historians who have examined only certain aspects of their experience, or who have considered them as a part of a larger community, have therefore not had an opportunity to trace the internal evolution and considerable continuity of the Black Loyalists' initiatives and responses. Only in the context of their overall development as a distinct society can the Black Loyalists' participation in and contribution to a large series of events be explained, and only in that context can the effects upon them of the actions of other people be understood.

The arrival and settlement of the Black Loyalists in Nova Scotia have been described, in whole or in part, by Robin Winks, George Rawlyk, Bruce Fergusson, Anthony Kirk-Greene and Christopher Fyfe.⁵ All of

them give a general impression of the hardships and discrimination suffered by the black settlers, their inadequate or non-existent farms, and their economic dependence upon white society. And yet, because the motives which first led the blacks to the British during the American Revolution are overlooked, the dominating urge of the Black Loyalists to acquire land and economic independence does not emerge from a reading of these accounts, and a major theme is lost which could contribute fundamentally to an understanding of Black Loyalist frustration, apparent acquiescence in segregation, and eagerness to join the 1792 exodus to Sierra Leone. In each case the authors' concerns were other than a detailed study of the Black Loyalists—for Winks, Rawlyk and Fergusson they formed only a part of a larger canvas, while Kirk-Greene and Fyfe were concentrating on individual experiences—and therefore, inevitably, they do not offer evidence or interpretations to explain the significance of the Black Loyalists' failure to become self-sufficient landed proprietors.

The difficulty in treating the Black Loyalists as a minor part of a broad history is illustrated by Professor Winks' *The Blacks in Canada*. Though it is unquestionably a magnificent piece of historical research, the breadth of the enquiry has led its author to disregard the intimate details of the foundation and strength of communal consciousness within the Black Loyalist settlements. Instead, an image of a disunited and even divisive society is portrayed, and the most outstanding single characteristic of Black Loyalist society is submerged in a narrative of events that flows across Canada as a whole and over a period of several hundred years. Rawlyk and Kirk-Greene both include references to the role of religion in formulating local community ties, but only Andrew Walls, in his perceptive account of the formative influences on Black Loyalist religion in Nova Scotia,⁶ draws the implications from a description of the chapels, preachers and doctrines that welded the blacks together in a community aware of its distinction and opposed to the interference of outside influences or people. Without an understanding of the community identity felt by the Black Loyalists, the migration to Africa cannot adequately be explained or even accurately described. Fyfe and Kirk-Greene, from their vantage-point of the history of the migrants after their arrival in Sierra Leone, identify the exodus as a mass movement, made up of participating communities, but earlier accounts by Archibald and Haliburton treat it as a movement of individuals,⁷ and Winks attributes it to the deliberate lies of John Clarkson which misled individual blacks into forsaking their Nova Scotian communities.

The Fyfe, Walls and Kirk-Greene examples reveal the advantage that is gained by bringing an awareness of Black Loyalist history in Sierra Leone to bear upon an interpretation of Black Loyalist history in Nova Scotia. The reverse also appears to be true. As virtually the entire population of Sierra Leone from 1792 to 1800, and an important segment for at least a dozen years thereafter, the settlers from Nova Scotia have naturally attracted the attention of almost all of Sierra Leone's historians. But few scholars have considered Sierra Leone's early history as the continuation of a development begun even earlier in Nova Scotia, and none isolate the further evolution of Black Loyalist society, within the colony of Sierra Leone, once it ceased to be statistically significant. Christopher Fyfe's exhaustive treatment of Sierra Leone's history includes reference, at least, to every major event and personage in the colony from 1787 to the end of the nineteenth century,⁸ but since it was not Mr Fyfe's purpose to identify and interpret the peculiar characteristics of a small community within Sierra Leone's population, the separate development of the Nova Scotian settlers is not followed thematically throughout the narrative. The only other historical survey to approach Mr Fyfe's in scholarship and research is John Peterson's *Province of Freedom*.⁹ Professor Peterson includes considerable information on the Black Loyalists, particularly as part of his portrait of social life in Freetown, and he recognises and describes the political and cultural independence of the early settlers, though like Mr Fyfe his primary concern has been with the history of the colony and especially with the Liberated Africans. In the Fyfe and Peterson works the settlers intrude infrequently upon the narrative after 1807, and when they do it is often as individuals and usually in a context that involves settler participation in what could be regarded as the major events and trends of Sierra Leone history. This also holds true for the useful and readable survey of Sierra Leone and Liberia, *Back to Africa*, by the journalist-scholar, Richard West.¹⁰

In addition to these excellent surveys, there is a large journal and monograph literature on Sierra Leone that takes the Nova Scotian settlers into consideration. An article by Paul Hair,¹¹ following upon themes established in the review article cited previously, examines the political expressions of settler independence in the 1790s and suggests that they influenced the later direction of Sierra Leone's political development. The race-consciousness or 'blanco-phobia' identified by Mr Hair is also given attention by N. A. Cox-George, though the latter attributes it specifically to suspicions aroused by land problems in Sierra

Leone while Mr Hair traces it back to the settlers' North American experience. Professor Cox-George sees the disappointment over land as leading directly to the settlers' claim to political sovereignty, and as providing an undercurrent to race relations in Sierra Leone throughout the nineteenth century.¹² More common is a recognition of the settlers' cultural contribution to Freetown society. Arthur Porter acknowledges the Nova Scotians as the chief agents in the cultural transformations of the Creoles,¹³ a theory that has been accepted by such scholars as Kenneth Little and Eldred Jones.¹⁴ Three articles by Christopher Fyfe, on the Baptist, Huntingdonian and Methodist churches, necessarily concentrate on the Black Loyalists, since they dominated the chapels for fifty years.¹⁵

And yet, despite this considerable historical notice, in their own right the Black Loyalists in Sierra Leone have attracted little attention. Descriptions of settler community life in the early nineteenth century have been employed by the authors to serve an end other than the understanding of the settler community itself, and chiefly to illustrate the origin of traditions, practices and institutions adopted by other groups of people. If the Black Loyalists' contributions to the history of other societies have been deemed important, then it would seem essential to understand the development of their own society, for it was from their historical background that their character and influence grew. It has therefore been the purpose of this present study to examine the Black Loyalists as an identifiable community, to assess the experiences, motivations and beliefs that moulded that community, and to describe the unique expressions of the Black Loyalist identity in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone. For this purpose it has been necessary to research and analyse the evolving structures of the Black Loyalist community, the events that conditioned their group character, the nature of their daily life, employment, leisure, and relations with neighbouring communities. Such information has been gathered principally from sources that originated outside the community under study. The letters and journals of their European rulers, the dispatches of colonial officials, minutes of local councils, parliamentary enquiries, missionary reports and local newspapers have afforded contemporary observation and relevant documentation to enable the reconstruction of the framework in which the Black Loyalists existed. Their wages and occupations, food, housing and patterns of land-holding, crimes and punishments, churches, schools and families, political activities, in short, their physical, economic and ideological environment, must depend for their description largely upon

surviving documents penned by a succession of European administrators and observers.

This is not to suggest, however, that the Black Loyalists left no records of their own. Two short memoirs, by the preachers David George and Boston King, were published at the end of the eighteenth century,¹⁶ and the collected papers of John Clarkson, Zachary Macaulay and the missionary societies contain letters written by Black Loyalists. Official dispatches include petitions from Black Loyalists, Parliamentary enquiries and council minutes record their submissions, and private papers give verbatim reports on their conversations and mass meetings. There are in addition the wills, property deeds, chapel records and proclamations left by the settlers in Sierra Leone. This kind of information can supplement other descriptive material, and can give alternative views on the events reported elsewhere. But by far the most valuable function of the Black Loyalist-originated documentation is that it supplies an insight into the priorities, aspirations and frustrations of the community. From it, it is possible to discern the perspective from which the Black Loyalists approached and reacted to the environment established by others. Relative to their European neighbours the Black Loyalists were inarticulate of their own point of view, and yet an awareness of their basic concerns can turn a recorded event or a string of statistics into an articulation as vivid as any written memoir. It is axiomatic that the answers one receives from historical research depend upon the questions that are asked. The study that follows has not rejected the body of documents used by previous writers, but has subjected them to a different set of questions suggested by the few written records and the pattern of activities produced by the Black Loyalists. In this way, it is believed, the relevance of the events described to the people themselves can be determined, and a social history can be written of the Black Loyalist community despite an apparent reliance upon evidence left by alien and even hostile observers.

Notes

- 1 P. E. H. Hair, review article, 'A History of Sierra Leone by Christopher Fyfe', *SLS* (ns), no. 17, June 1963, pp. 281-96.
- 2 Philip Curtin, *Image of Africa*, Madison, 1964, p. vi. For a similar sentiment see Clarence Clendenen and Peter Duignan, *Americans in Black Africa up to 1865*, Stanford, 1964, p. 4.
- 3 Hair, 'A History of Sierra Leone by Christopher Fyfe', p. 286.

- 4 For example, see Jo-Ann Fellows, 'The Loyalist Myth in Canada', *Canadian Historical Association: Historical Papers 1971*, Ottawa, 1972, pp. 94-111.
- 5 Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History*, New Haven and Montreal, 1971; G. A. Rawlyk, 'The Guysborough Negroes: A Study in Isolation', *Dalhousie Review*, Spring 1968, pp. 24-36; C. B. Fergusson, *A Documentary Study of the Establishment of the Negroes in Nova Scotia between the War of 1812 and the Winning of Responsible Government*, Halifax, 1948; Anthony Kirk-Greene, 'David George: The Nova Scotian Experience', *SLS* (ns), no. 14, December 1960, pp. 93-120; Christopher H. Fyfe, 'Thomas Peters: History and Legend', *SLS* (ns), no. 1, December 1953, pp. 4-13.
- 6 Andrew F. Walls, 'The Nova Scotian Settlers and Their Religion', *Sierra Leone Bulletin of Religion*, vol. I, no. 1, June 1959, pp. 19-31.
- 7 Sir Adams Archibald, 'Story of Deportation of Negroes from Nova Scotia to Sierra Leone', *Collections of the Nova Scotia Historical Society*, vol. VII, 1891, pp. 129-54; G. Haliburton, 'The Nova Scotia Settlers of 1792', *SLS* (ns), no. 9, December 1957, pp. 16-25.
- 8 Christopher Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone*, London, 1962.
- 9 John Peterson, *Province of Freedom. A History of Sierra Leone, 1787-1870*, London, 1969.
- 10 Richard West, *Back to Africa, A History of Sierra Leone and Liberia*, London, 1970.
- 11 P. E. H. Hair, 'Africanism: The Freetown Contribution', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. V, no. 4, 1967, pp. 521-39.
- 12 N. A. Cox-George, *Finance and Development in West Africa: The Sierra Leone Experience*, London, 1961, and 'Direct Taxation in the Early History of Sierra Leone', *SLS* (ns), no. 5, December 1944, pp. 20-35.
- 13 A. T. Porter, *Creoledom. A Study of the Development of Freetown Society*, London, 1963, and 'Religious Affiliation in Freetown, Sierra Leone', *Africa*, vol. XXIII, 1953, pp. 3-14.
- 14 K. L. Little, 'The Significance of the West African Creole for Africanist and Afro-American Studies', *African Affairs*, October 1950, pp. 308-19; Eldred Jones, 'Freetown—The Contemporary Cultural Scene', in Christopher Fyfe and Eldred Jones (eds), *Freetown: A Symposium*, Freetown, 1968. Though it appeared too late to make a direct contribution to the present study, Leo Spitzer's *The Creoles of Sierra Leone: Responses to Colonialism, 1870-1945*, Madison, 1974, supports the important role played by the Nova Scotian settlers in Creole cultural development.

- 15 Christopher H. Fyfe, 'The Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion in Nineteenth Century Sierra Leone', *Sierra Leone Bulletin of Religion*, vol. IV, no. 2, December 1962, pp. 53-61; 'The West African Methodists in the Nineteenth Century', *Sierra Leone Bulletin of Religion*, vol. III, no. 1, June 1961, pp. 22-8; 'The Baptist Churches in Sierra Leone', *Sierra Leone Bulletin of Religion*, vol. V, no. 2, December 1963, pp. 55-60.
- 16 David George, 'An Account of the Life of Mr. David George (as told to Brother John Rippon)', *Baptist Annual Register*, vol. I, 1790-93, pp. 473-84; Boston King, 'Memoirs of the Life of Boston King, a Black Preacher, Written by Himself, During his Residence at Kingswood-School', *Arminian Magazine*, vol. XXI, March, April, May, June, 1798, pp. 105-11, 157-61, 209-13, 261-5.

Preface to the 1992 Edition

At a United Empire Loyalist bicentennial celebration in Lennoxville, Quebec, in May 1989, a distinguished guest speaker included a corrective note in his remarks. Contrary to the popular stereotype, he pointed out, not all Loyalists had been privileged, British and white: some were of African origin, people who had come to Canada either as free Loyalists in their own right or as slaves owned by the more privileged class. It is significant that the speaker on this occasion was His Royal Highness Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh. The Black Loyalists had received royal recognition at last!¹

Not very long ago the very existence of slavery in Canada was denied or obscured in Canadian historical writing, and the black 10 per cent of the Loyalist migration was simply ignored. The *Canadian Historical Review* remarked in 1978 that 'the blacks must be the least known of all the major Loyalist groups.'² As the comment by Prince Philip indicates, awareness has been growing in the past decade. Blacks were at least mentioned, although usually not featured, in most of the Loyalist bicentennial events that occurred during the 1980s in the Maritimes, Quebec and Ontario. More particularly, the written record that accompanied the public commemorations has acknowledged the Black Loyalists' contribution to the revolutionary war and their role in the pioneer settlement of British North America: every scholarly account included a discussion of the black participants, and books intended for a more popular audience often contained a separate chapter highlighting the adventures and the tribulations of this exotic group.³

Now comes another bicentennial, this time unique to the Black Loyalists, marking the anniversary of their flight to Africa in 1792. Celebrations have been confined almost exclusively to the African-Canadian population. A symbolic reenactment of the 1792 migration is being undertaken by members of the First Baptist Church in Toronto and the Black Cultural Centre of Nova Scotia. The Black Loyalists of New Brunswick Association, the

African United Baptist Association and the Black Cultural Centre are hosting dinners, seminars and cultural displays illustrating the Loyalist period and links between Canada and Africa. But Canada Post will not be issuing a commemorative stamp, and the anniversary date of the departure of the Black Loyalist fleet from Halifax has passed without comment from any level of government or any representative of the Crown. It is therefore especially appropriate that this book is being republished as a bicentennial project by Canada's flagship scholarly press. The conventional wisdom in Canada, which has reached out to incorporate Africans into the Loyalist legend, will have another opportunity to recognize the Black Loyalists' historic quest for racial equality both in Nova Scotia and in Sierra Leone.

Under the arrangements for this edition of *The Black Loyalists* it has not been possible to change the actual text from the 1976 original, so this preface is the only occasion to suggest how the book might have been written differently today. Some of the terminology would change. For example, the use of the masculine singular to represent the human individual has ceased to be standard practice. Grammatical usage is not unrelated to assumptions of human value and historical worthiness, and pronoun sensitivity would be accompanied by more deliberate attention to the actions and concerns of Black Loyalist women. Fortunately the participation of women at the forefront of community affairs was one of the distinguishing characteristics of Black Loyalist society, and so this book has been accorded a certain degree of durability in this respect. Other changes in terminology would include the application of 'African-Canadian,' or regional variations, to the Black Loyalists and their descendants in Canada. Although many black organizations have employed 'African' in their titles for generations, the specific term 'African-Canadian' meant a direct immigrant from Africa living in Canada. In recent years it has been used increasingly to designate Canadians whose origins are in Africa regardless of the date or directness of that ancestry. Like many other Canadians, African-Canadians are choosing an identity appropriate to their geographical and cultural heritage. Similarly in West Africa the term 'Krio' has replaced 'Creole' in customary usage, to reflect more accurately the African base of their culture. It is now applied generally to the language developed in Sierra Leone and to the community descended from Black Loyalist, Maroon and Liberated African ancestors. As several New Brunswick friends have pointed out, Saint John is no longer written as St. John, except in reference to the river. The typesetting, unfortunately, is fixed, and so the eighteenth-century style must be perpetuated. Finally, in a review for the *Journal of Negro History* Mary Beth Norton wondered how I

could reconcile my use of the term 'slave mentality' (page 57) to refer to a group of people whose assertiveness resounds throughout the book.⁴ I fully agree that the term is misleading and might more accurately be assigned to white society, whose refusal to regard the blacks as anything but slaves was the primary barrier to Black Loyalist independence.

Changes which might result from new research or fundamental interpretations are less easy to identify, though clues can be found in the questions raised by reviewers and others who have commented upon *The Black Loyalists* since 1976. It is part of the book's good fortune that many of the answers have already been supplied by other scholars who have published in the meantime. Nevertheless the basic story of the Black Loyalists has not been amended in subsequent publications, so that their role as founders not only of the physical black community in Canada but of many of its most distinct cultural attributes remains unchallenged.⁵ New information which has appeared, for example on Black Loyalists in Quebec, has confirmed the patterns already recognized in the Maritimes.⁶ In the absence of any more detailed local studies it is still not possible to be more exact than I was in 1976 with my estimate of the numbers and locations of Black Loyalists in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Even Carleton's 'Book of Negroes', now available in published form,⁷ lacks precision in enumerating slave and free blacks. An accurate census for the 1780s will have to await some entirely new source of documentation.

Brian Cuthbertson has suggested, in his scholarly biography of Sir John Wentworth,⁸ that in chapter four I misrepresented the origin of the slaves Wentworth sent from Halifax to his cousin in Surinam. A more extensive excerpt from Wentworth's letter accompanying the slaves may be instructive:

I hereby include to you a Bill of Lading for 19 Negro Slaves Isaac is a thoro' good Carpenter, and Master Sawyer perfectly capable of overseeing and conducting the rest and strictly honest. Lymas is a rough Carpenter and Sawyer. Quako is a field Negro, has met an Accident in his Arm, which will require Indulgence. The other Men are Sawyers and John also a good axe man. Abraham has been used to Cattle and to attend in the House &c. All the Men are expert in boats Venus is useful in y' Hospital Poultry Yards Gardens &c. Upon the whole they are a most useful Lot of Negroes and have behaved so intirely well and to my Approbation, that I earnestly recommend them to your particular care, and if practicable that they may be employed together, and that Isaac should be their Overseer.