

Teaching Loyalist History

Using blogs as teaching tools

By Bonnie Huskins

Preface

As Loyalist Studies Coordinator at the University of New Brunswick, I am responsible for generating interest in Loyalist history. This means engaging in research on the Loyalists, organizing panels, promoting the use of The Loyalist Collection at UNB's Harriet Irving Library, as well as teaching courses on the Loyalists and the American Revolution.

In an effort to make these courses more interactive, I have been experimenting with the use of blogs as teaching tools. The following is a blog posted initially in Borealia: a Group Blog on Early Canadian History entitled "Loyalists in the Classroom: Students Reflect on Historical Sources" (<https://earlycanadianhistory.ca/2015/12/11/loyalists-in-the-classroom-students-reflect-on-historical-sources/>) This blog was composed collectively by third-year students in response to an earlier blog written by Dr. Chris Minty called "Sources for Loyalist Studies." (<https://earlycanadianhistory.ca/2015/09/21/sources-for-loyalist-studies/>). In his blog, Minty analyzed the significance of Loyalist petitions vs. the records generated by the Loyalist Claims Commission. The students had already discussed the Loyalist Claims Commission in a seminar, so I had them read a sample of Loyalist petitions. I summarized their analysis in a response to Minty, which the editors of Borealia decided to turn into a stand-alone piece. Minty subsequently responded to OUR blog. The blogs had essentially become mediums of communication between students and historians. I took the opportunity in the blog to also reflect on teaching Loyalist history more generally.

Before we turn to the Borealia blog, I would like to add that I am also using blogs in my second-year Canadian History survey course at St. Thomas University. All students in the course are expected to write a blog of their choosing: topics range from treaty-making to the debate over official languages. The blogs are then posted to Moodle (STU's electronic learning platform) and fellow students are encouraged to respond to the blogs online as a form of class participation. We then review the online responses in face to face discussions in the classroom. The experience of writing blogs has helped many students craft succinct and precise arguments. Students also use ActiveHistory blogs (<http://activehistory.ca/>) as sources for their research papers. This use of blog entries has introduced students to a range of research findings and historical interpretations. In essence, it has become another way of introducing the students to the concepts of historiography and historical understanding. I would be interested in knowing whether other historians are using blogs as teaching tools. If so, how do you use them?

Borealia blog: "Loyalists in the Classroom: Students Reflect on Historical Sources"

This response to Christopher Minty's post on Loyalist Sources was composed collectively by the students of History 3403, a

course at the University of New Brunswick devoted specifically to the Loyalists of the American Revolution.

Their comments are summarized below by their professor Bonnie Huskins, followed by a brief postscript on the challenges and rewards of teaching Loyalist history.

Dear Dr. Chris Minty:

During our class on 13 November 2015, we read your blog on Loyalist Sources, and then compared the strengths and weaknesses of Loyalist Claims Commission records versus Loyalist petitions.

Loyalist Claims Commission Records

Before this assignment we had already consulted Loyalist claims for a seminar, and many of us had used them for our first major written assignment, which involved "adopting a Loyalist" and then using the themes emanating from that person's life to craft a thematic paper. We enjoyed using the claims for their graphic depictions of harassment and sacrifice, and for the clues they presented regarding the claimant's previous lifestyle. We were also able to assess the significance of the items that the Loyalists were claiming, whether they were tea cups, books, or slaves.

In our seminar, we discussed the interpretive issues involved in using Loyalist Claims Commission (LCC) records. We agree with you that the claims were biased in the sense that claimants were crafting their submissions to acquire compensation from the commission. But it was the subjective nature of the claims records which made them so fascinating. In our seminar we found that the language used by the claimants was significant: for example, the phrases used by female claimants provided insight into the gender norms of the period. We also concluded that claims records only applied to those who had access to the commission process and could document their claims. The claimants were mostly male and mostly white. It was interesting to assess why it was that Black Loyalists received so little from the commission.

Loyalist Petitions

At first we found the petitions less "sexy" than the LCC records, appearing as little more than a list of names. On closer reading, however, we discerned considerable emotion behind the language of petitions. This was particularly the case with the counter-petition to the famous "petition of the 55." The initial petition explained why 55 elite Loyalists deserved significant land grants in Nova Scotia. The counter-petition, signed by 600+ Loyalists in New York City, brimmed with anger over this sense of entitlement. We discussed the counter-petition's loaded language, especially words such as "tenancy." Why were Loyalists afraid of

sinking into “tenancy” in Nova Scotia? We concluded that, just as claims records were biased, so too were petitions: both were composed, at the end of the day, to attain support and approval.

Throughout the class, we also composed a series of questions which historians should consider when using petitions as historical sources:

- How many names appear on a particular petition? Why so many or so few?
- The names on many petitions are often all male. Why?
- Some of the names are written in the same hand writing even though they are different names. What does this suggest?
- Some people are only able to sign with an X. What does this tell us about literacy rates?
- Did the people who signed this petition do so because of ideological reasons? Or did peer pressure play a role?
- Did petitioners come from the same families or neighborhoods? Were they friends?

Conclusions about Claims Records and Petitions

We have concluded that both claims records and petitions have strengths and weaknesses as historical sources. This exercise reinforces the need to critically analyze all sources and corroborate findings using other primary and secondary sources if possible.

What made the counter-petition to the petition of the 55 more exciting for us was that many of the people on this New York petition also appeared as political dissidents in Saint John during the first New Brunswick election in 1785. David Bell’s work on the political riots in Loyalist Saint John was probably our most lively seminar. It was rewarding to see the relationship between this event and the names on this petition. This made us realize how challenging and rewarding it must be for you, Dr. Minty, to figure out the connections between the people who sign these petitions.

Sincerely,
Bonnie Huskins

On behalf of the following students of History 3403:

Caleb Goguen	Tristan Workmann
Destiny Sewell	Jenna Torrance
Seth Page	Brittney Bedford
Eli Clerke	Hattie Sheppey

Postscript on Teaching Loyalist History, by Bonnie Huskins

Many people have asked me over the years: “why offer a course on the Loyalists of the American Revolution?”

I approach this course as an example of the rewards of “doing” microhistory. By studying this group, students are able to practice their critical skills by assessing primary sources, as they do above. This opportunity is enriched by the proximity of The Loyalist Collection at the Harriet Irving Library at UNB, which is one of the richest collections of British and North Ameri-

can colonial records on the continent. Thus, it is imperative to get students into the collection, although it is large and intimidating. The librarians in charge of the Loyalist Collection are doing a wonderful job at making the collection more accessible (<https://loyalist.lib.unb.ca/>)

By studying the Loyalists, students also come to appreciate what goes into the crafting of historical categories and historical interpretations. For example, in this course we tackle such questions as:

- Who/what was a Loyalist? (not an easy question to answer, as Chris Minty notes in his posting *The Future of Loyalist Studies*)
- What happens when we apply the categories of gender, race, ethnicity and class to our population?
- Are there merits to approaching this topic from the perspective of loyalism(s)?
- What was involved in “choosing sides” during an event like the American Revolution?
- Were the Loyalists “refugees” like the Syrians of today? Did they experience a “refugee crisis”?
- To what degree was the “American Revolution” a “revolution” or a “civil war”?

Another reward of teaching Loyalist history at UNB is engaging with students from the Atlantic region, many of whom have Loyalist ancestry. Such students craft exquisite research projects by placing their own families within the larger context of the colonial period.

At UNB, it is also possible to call on a range of resident scholars who are interested in the history of the Loyalist era. It has been important for students to see the enthusiasm of researchers in action. Presenters have included Gwendolyn Davies on female Loyalists, David Bell on political unrest in New Brunswick and New York, John Leroux on Loyalist architecture, and Chantal Richard on comparing Loyalist and Acadian identities.

Despite the richness of “the local” in New Brunswick, the most challenging yet rewarding exercise has been to place this course within the multiple contexts of colonial North America/the Atlantic World/the British Empire and global history more generally. Students respond well to the realization that one can study this population through multiple lenses. I think they have enjoyed comparing and contrasting the experiences of Loyalists in such diverse places as Nova Scotia, Sierra Leone, the Bahamas, Jamaica, and England. I am also very excited by the new literature emerging amongst young American historians on various aspects of Loyalist history, including the reintegration of Loyalists back into the United States.

So, I think I will continue to offer this course as long as I am able, and it will continue to evolve as the literature evolves..... back to marking.....

Respectfully yours
Bonnie Huskins