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From Loyalists to Loyal Citizens: The DePeyster Family of New York.

Reviewed by Brett Palfreyman

What happened to the loyalists after they lost the American Revolution? Maya Jasanoff’s immensely popular Liberty’s Exiles tracks the fortunes of some 60,000 Tory refugees who fled the independent states and filtered out to Canada, England, the Caribbean, and other remaining outposts of the British Empire.¹ But could such onetime enemies ever return to the homes they had forsaken? Would homesick exiles ever be re-accepted back into societies that considered them apostates and betrayers? In at least one significant case, according Valerie McKito, the answer was a resounding yes.

From Loyalists to Loyal Citizens is a multi-generational family biography of the DePeysters of New York, focusing in particular on Frederick DePeyster (1758–1834), a prominent Tory who served as an officer in the British Army during the Revolution, spent ten years in exile in Canada, and then returned to New York in 1793 where he managed to rebuild his family fortune and status—almost as if nothing had happened in between. Somehow, McKito asserts, by this point “[h]is loyalist past was simply not an issue” (96). Way back in 1940 Oscar Zeichner speculated that the sheer number of loyalists in New York left pragmatic post-war policymakers with no choice but to be magnanimous to former enemies who never left or tried to come back. More recently Judith Van Buskirk posited that the lines between patriot and loyalist—these “generous enemies”—were so nebulous and blurred during the war that it was practically impossible to separate out who was who afterward.² McKito

now promises to put these theories to the test in person of Frederick DePeyster.

Throughout McKito’s winding family narrative, generation after generation of DePeysters seem animated by a single guiding ambition: to live “how a DePeyster ought to live” (63)—that is, to maintain the privilege and status they saw as the natural prerogative of a pedigreed family. This is what motivates the first DePeyster arrivals in Dutch New Amsterdam to build tangled webs of intermarriage and business connections with the colony’s other elite families. This is what drives Frederick and his three brothers to volunteer for the King’s loyal regiments in 1776, seemingly the most pragmatic and safe course for well-bred young men at the outset of the war. This is in part what pushes Frederick to flee to Nova Scotia in 1783, where the promise of land grants and status for loyalist officers offer him the chance “to be the gentlemen he was raised to be” (30). And this is what finally pulls the wayward refugee back to New York ten years later, where declining anti-Tory sentiment and increasing financial opportunities allow Frederick and his children to re-enter the upper echelons of New York’s economic and social elite.

Both the strengths and weaknesses of McKito’s analytical strategy lie in her laser-like focus on the DePeysters in general and Frederick in particular. The author’s central historiographic claims revolve around the processes of re-integration—how an active loyalist might manage to transform himself from enemy to American citizen, and why patriots in New York might be willing to “forget the sins of the Revolution” (1) and re-accept him. Here we see the appeal of McKito’s near genealogical dedication to family history, because it’s precisely in the details and peculiarities of the long DePeyster history in New York that she finds her answers. Frederick was able to re-integrate in 1793 because he had access to an extensive network of social and kinship ties in New York, relationships his ancestors had painstakingly cultivated for generations before the revolution. Frederick found his path smoothed because he had money and overseas business connections, both of which New York needed, and both of which Frederick had inherited from previous generations of DePeysters. In this, McKito’s effort is case study analysis as its best: an exhaustive, historically specific account of the tangled, idiosyncratic family history that allowed one former loyalist to rejoin New York’s elite society, despite his unsettling revolutionary past.

Yet McKito’s admirable quest for precision—to understand in concrete terms how Frederick DePeyster might go from “loyalist to loyal
citizen”—also makes her study somewhat narrow. For one thing, her archival source base (primarily the DePeyster Collection at the New-York Historical Society) comes almost entirely from within the DePeyster orbit. Indeed, her storytelling point of view stays exclusively with the DePeysters. When Frederick is in Canada, we are in Canada too. Readers are left wondering what patriots back in New York, the people upon which Frederick’s prospects for re-integration ultimately depended, might have thought, said, and done about loyalists during the period of Frederick’s exile. There is no shortage of evidence to address these questions. New Yorkers talked themselves hoarse arguing about what to do with loyalists who wanted to linger after the Revolution or return from abroad; the debates played out in newspapers, pamphlets, courtrooms, and on the floor of the state legislature. Frederick DePeyster returned at the tail end of a contentious and often faltering process of reconciliation between former patriots and former loyalists that had already been going on in New York since the end of the war. Certainly by 1793, as McKito tells us, Frederick could manage to “seamlessly integrat[e] himself into a country whose creation he had opposed” (85). But that was partly because New Yorkers had already been working through the thorny problems of reintegrating a defeated people for the past ten years.

In total, while McKito’s case study of Frederick DePeyster is perhaps an anecdotal approach to far-reaching questions about the peace settlement between patriots and loyalists that ended the revolution, it is a fascinating, meaningful, and well-researched one. Combined with Jasanoff’s Liberty’s Exiles and other new studies about the fate of Tories after the revolution, McKito brings us one step closer to a more complete picture of loyalists’ often surprising prospects for success in the wake of defeat.

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