

Esther Clark Wright and Recent Themes in Historiography

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Esther Clark Wright and Recent Themes in Historiography

I FIRST “MET” ESTHER CLARK WRIGHT WHEN SHE WAS A STUDENT at Acadia, and by reading her love letters. During the two years that I worked as an archival assistant in the Esther Clark Wright Archives, 1995-1996, her voluminous papers were being sorted on long rows of shelving, and I had occasion to look for class photos or to read letters from Conrad that, at least in my memory, all began with, “My Dear Girl.” We in the archives spoke of “Esther” with the fondness born of daily acquaintance.

However, my topic here is endnotes rather than love notes, and historiography rather than class photographs. I have been asked to share a few comments on the ongoing relevance of Esther Clark Wright’s work from the perspective of my doctoral research on religious communities in Planter and Loyalist Nova Scotia.

I am sure I am not the only researcher who has dog-eared the endnotes section of Wright’s books. Many of us have benefitted from her diligent work in the archives, sliding our fingers down the page with an eye to locating good sources for our own research projects. I suspect that it’s during the research stage of our work that many of us are grateful for Wright’s books, even if we make use of the archival sources for quite different projects than her own.

We are perhaps less likely to ask Wright to help us with the interpretive or historiographic aspects of our writing. I did a very selective survey of books on Loyalists, looking for Wright in the notes or index. You will probably not be surprised to know that it was mostly historians of (and from) this region who cited Wright, while her books were mostly absent from broader and more recent studies.

Nevertheless, I would like to suggest a few ways that aspects of Wright’s work continue to resonate with several themes in subsequent historiography. I will organize my remarks around four themes: Planters, Loyalists, lived religion, and bodies of water.

Planters

It is, of course, widely acknowledged that Wright was instrumental in setting the Planter Studies initiative in motion, helping to recover the “Pre-Loyalist” settlers as subjects of study in their own right. Her own study, *Planters and Pioneers*, names and counts the people of Nova Scotia’s resettled townships – a demographic headcount that is a perennial help to genealogists.¹ I must admit that I am not primarily a “counter.” However, as I reread Wright’s detailed accounting, I was struck afresh by the contingency of the whole project of repopulating Nova Scotia after the Acadian deportation. I *knew* that this was a period of flux and uncertainty – despite government proclamations and later historical narratives of inevitable progress. But seeing the very small numbers of settlers in each township, and reading Wright’s admission of how difficult it was to get accurate figures because so many settlers moved on or returned home or died – this made the contingency of this period more tangible for me.

1 Esther Clark Wright, *Planters and Pioneers* (Hantsport, NS: Lancelot Press, 1982).

Wright's books together also offer a birds-eye view of the Planter settlements as a whole, tracing the connections between various New England regions and Maritime townships as well as the entrepreneurial ventures of particular agents – connections that continue to be explored. Alexandra Montgomery, a PhD student at the University of Pennsylvania, for example, has told me how helpful Wright's work has been as she fills in a more detailed account of the Philadelphia-based settlement schemes.²

Loyalists

Wright helped us get a better sense of who the Loyalists were. She helped us, in other words, through her combination of social history and genealogy, to see the Loyalists as a *diverse* group – to get past the stereotype that they were all elite “Tory” officeholders. Her focus was on the experience of “ordinary” Loyalist refugees. As Barry Moody puts it, “People counted, and were counted, in her work.”³

Although figures like Edward Winslow and Ward Chipman certainly feature prominently in her narrative, she demonstrated that not every Loyalist was a Harvard graduate from a wealthy Massachusetts family. We learn from her careful work with census, shipping, and probate data that well over half of New Brunswick Loyalists were originally from New York or New Jersey, rather than Massachusetts, and that there were more carpenters and tradesmen than lawyers among them.⁴

Reading Wright's work, one can trace several themes or approaches that have been taken up more recently in Loyalist studies. Here we could play a historical version of “If you liked A, then you'll love B”:

- If you liked Wright's description of the internal displacement of Loyalists behind British lines in New York, you'll love Ruma Chopra's *Unnatural Rebellion* and Judith Van Buskirk's *Generous Enemies*.
- If you liked Wright's focus on Loyalists as refugees in New Brunswick and the Atlantic world, you'll love Maya Jasanoff's *Liberty's Exiles*.
- If you liked her account of Loyalists jostling for power and provisions along the Saint John River, you'll love David Bell's *Loyalist Rebellion in New Brunswick*.
- And if you liked her detailed demographic work on a particular Loyalist community, you'll love Christopher Minty's use of social network analysis to study the political affiliations of Loyalists.⁵

2 Alexandra Montgomery, “The Land Jobber's Revolution: Land Speculation in Maine and Nova Scotia, 1765-1800” (paper presented at 39th annual meeting of the Society for Historians of the Early Republic, Philadelphia, 21 July 2017). An article based on this research is in progress.

3 Barry Moody, “A View from the Front Steps: Esther Clark Wright and the Making of a Maritime Historian,” in *Creating Historical Memory: English-Canadian Women and the Work of History*, ed. Beverly Boutilier and Alison Prentice (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), 249.

4 Esther Clark Wright, *The Loyalists of New Brunswick* (Fredericton: self-published, 1955), 155, 160.

5 Ruma Chopra, *Unnatural Rebellion: Loyalists in New York City during the Revolution* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011); Judith L. Van Buskirk, *Generous Enemies: Patriots and Loyalists in Revolutionary New York* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania

Lived Religion

There is not much sustained reflection on religion in Wright's books, but there is her interesting essay in a volume of conference papers edited by Barry Moody. Entitled "Without Intervention of Prophet, Priest, or King," Wright asks of religious history the same kind of question she asked of Loyalist history: what was the experience of ordinary women and men?⁶

Wright observes that many of the region's churches were simply without clerical leadership for much of the 19th century – either because they were too small to support a minister or because the ministers they did have were so frequently engaged in months-long circuits of itinerant preaching.

She mined memoirs, diaries, and newspapers for traces of what more recent historiography terms the "lived religion" of Maritime Baptists and New Lights. She recorded instances of storekeepers providing religious leadership, of earnest family prayers, of lay people leading weekly meetings, and of a savvy housewife whose extensive doctrinal knowledge allowed her to challenge the dubious messages of visiting preachers.

Appearing in a book on Baptist history, Wright's essay also begs the question of why the history of a religious tradition that puts so much theological emphasis on the spiritual experience of *every* member devotes so much attention to a handful of ministers rather than the lived religion of people in the pews – a good question that remains relevant.⁷

Bodies of Water

Reading all of her books in sequence was an experience of "water, water everywhere." I was surprised by how much of Wright's work had to do with bodies of water. She located the Nova Scotia Planters along the five rivers feeding into the Minas Basin. She wrote books on the Saint John, Miramichi, and Petitcodiac rivers as well as on shipbuilding in Saint John and St. Martin's. I would argue that the body of water around which most of her scholarship was organized was the Bay of Fundy.

Wright has helped to recover aspects of the lived experience of the region's waterways: patterns of colonization and settlement, transportation and trading, communication and industry. I find this emphasis very helpful. In my work on Nova Scotia, for example, it takes a continual effort to historically imagine places like

Press, 2002); Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011); David G. Bell, *Loyalist Rebellion in New Brunswick: A Defining Conflict for Canada's Political Culture* (Halifax: Formac, 2013); Christopher Minty, "Sources for Loyalist Studies," *Borealia: A Group Blog on Early Canadian History*, 1 September 2015, <https://earlycanadianhistory.ca/2015/09/21/sources-for-loyalist-studies/>; Christopher F. Minty, "'Of One Hart and One Mind': Local Institutions and Allegiance During the American Revolution," *Early American Studies* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 99-132.

6 Esther Clark Wright, "Without Intervention of Prophet, Priest, or King," in *Repent and Believe: The Baptist Experience in Maritime Canada*, ed. Barry M. Moody (Hantsport, NS: Lancelot Press, 1980), 66-74.

7 A recent attempt to take this perspective is Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, *Christian Churches and Their Peoples, 1840-1965: A Social History of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).

Canning as close to shipping routes rather than far from the highway, and therefore more connected to the Atlantic world than I first assumed.

Wright's work is also suggestive of the benefits of organizing historical inquiry around bodies of water. Now the Bay of Fundy is no Mediterranean Sea, and I'm not prepared to cast Wright in the role of Atlantic Canada's Fernand Braudel. Yet Wright's tendency to place a river or the Bay of Fundy at the centre of her story invites us to think about long-term changes. Reflecting on the centrality of the St. John River in its region's histories, she wrote:

A river is something more than a feature of the landscape. Interesting as it may be aesthetically, geographically, geologically, what matters is its relationship to the people who come upon it and who live beside it. Who they are, where they come from, why they come, what use they make of the river, what kind of communities they develop, what they do to the river, what it does to them – these are the considerations that give purpose and vitality to the study of the river.⁸

That very river is also at the centre of Jason Hall's recent work. Hall explores the intertwined environmental, Indigenous, Acadian, and British histories of the *Wəlastəkw* (Wolastoq) River region.⁹ Focusing on the river has allowed him to, as it were, portage around the obstacles of periodization, borders, and historical specialization.

Conclusion

Wright's historical scholarship was motivated by a love of *place* that was never far beneath the surface of her work. Her book of essays, *Blomidon Rose*, for example, began with the words "To those of us who live on the hillsides which look northwards across the Basin of Minas, Blomidon is a never-ending delight. . . . We love it . . . because it has had a part in making us what we are."¹⁰ To be sure, this kind of localism can veer into the sentimental or romantic, but, at its best, Wright's work demonstrates how digging deep into the history of this region raises themes that have contemporary relevance around the Atlantic, as well as around the Bay of Fundy.

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8 Esther Clark Wright, *The Saint John River* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1949), 6.

9 Jason Hall, "River of Three Peoples: An Environmental and Cultural History of the *Wəlastəkw* / Rivière St. Jean / St. John River, c. 1550 to 1850" (PhD dissertation, University of New Brunswick, 2015); Jason Hall, "Maliseet Cultivation and Climatic Resilience on the *Wəlastəkw*/St. John River During the Little Ice Age," *Acadiensis* 44, no. 2 (Summer/Autumn 2015): 3-25.

10 Esther Clark Wright, *Blomidon Rose* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1957), 1-2.