

Myth, History and Revisionism: The Black Loyalists Revisited

James W. St.G. Walker

Volume 29, numéro 1, autumn 1999

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad29_1for02

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Walker, J. W. S. (1999). Myth, History and Revisionism:: The Black Loyalists Revisited. *Acadiensis*, 29(1), 88–105.

Myth, History and Revisionism: The Black Loyalists Revisited

IT IS CHARACTERISTIC OF OUR profession to challenge and revise standard interpretations. Historiography classes eagerly watch the development of historical understanding as different scholars subject common bodies of fact to new levels of questioning. Even if it lacks the excitement of uncovering new material, revision can make a considerable intellectual contribution by keeping archival researchers on their toes and by bringing conceptual variety into our analysis. As a spectator sport it has a select but well-defined and usually appreciative audience in the history classroom. And sometimes, innovative historical explanations can actually make a difference in how the general public perceives not only the past per se but the legacies of the past and the nature of the communities surviving that past. This lays a burden of responsibility on the revisionists; their challenges have to meet the same professional standards as the original interpretations they scrutinize.

Were the black Loyalists really *Loyalists*? That is a legitimate question, and a rather interesting one. Certainly it is a concept that has become “normal”, and so it is a likely candidate for reinterpretation. One of my teaching duties at the University of Waterloo is History 250, our introductory historiography course for new history majors. Over the term we examine a series of historical writings, testing their evidence, dissecting their arguments and attempting to discern their perspective and intent. It is an exercise, and it can help students better understand the topic under review and, more importantly, it can promote their appreciation of the historian’s craft so that they can identify both the positive and negative features of the example at hand to be emulated, or avoided, in their own historical writing. Is “The Black Loyalist Myth in Atlantic Canada” an appropriate object for such an exercise? Its author, Barry Cahill, is senior archivist at the Public Archives of Nova Scotia, an earlier version has already been presented publicly at a distinguished heritage conference, and it is being published now in Atlantic Canada’s flagship historical journal. Its revisionist themes have been lent credibility by this exposure, and so it invites careful, and critical, attention.

Historical interpretation stands or falls on its management of the evidence. Unfortunately Cahill’s article rests on a faulty foundation. It makes a number of clearly erroneous, and easily avoidable, statements about the available evidence. Fundamental to Cahill’s argument that the black Loyalists *should not* be regarded as Loyalists is his allegation that they *were* not regarded as Loyalists, by the white Loyalists or British, by the American Patriots, or even by themselves (p. 80). This is an essential claim because, had they been so regarded, then obviously the notion already existed and could not have been “invented” as a modern myth by misguided academics as Cahill alleges (p. 77). But this claim is not upheld, for there is a substantial body of contemporary evidence indicating recognition of the African-American fugitives as Loyalists, evidence originating with each of the groups Cahill has identified as rejecting such recognition.

Let me begin with evidence that the African Americans who migrated to the Maritimes in 1783 did indeed consider themselves Loyalists and worthy of the same respect and rewards granted to all other Loyalists. In a petition to Governor John Parr

on behalf of their fellow veterans of the Black Pioneers, Thomas Peters and Murphy Still claimed that when they swore allegiance to the Crown in New York in 1776, they were promised to be treated the same as the rest of the king's soldiers. Since they had behaved faithfully in accordance with their oath, they asked Parr to grant them lands and provisions on the same basis as the other newly-arrived migrants from the American Colonies.¹ Both Peters and Still had been fugitive slaves before joining the British. Thomas Brownspriggs sent a memorial to Parr expressing his surprise that he and other "Black Men Inhabitants of this Province . . . have never received any Lands, although they have been employed in the King's service during the late War".² In New Brunswick, similarly, Robert Lawson and others petitioned Governor Thomas Carleton "That your Petitioners came here in the time of Refugees, That they were Promised Land and Every Thing that others were, None of which they have Received".³ Zimri Armstrong asked Carleton "to grant me some [land] as well as other indigent loyalists".⁴ William Fisher described himself as "a Black Man" and a "poor indigent Loyalist hoping your Excellency will take it into consideration and will grant me the same as is granted to all other loyalists".⁵ When Thomas Peters presented his two famous petitions directly to the British cabinet in 1790, he submitted the first "on Behalf of himself and others the Black Pioneers and loyal Black Refugees", and he introduced his second petition by explaining that he had been "deputed by his Fellow Soldiers and by other Free Negroes and People of Colour Refugees".⁶ Reference to themselves as "refugees" by these black petitioners did not mean refugees from slavery; it was common parlance in the 1780s for "Loyalists". The documents are full of *white* Loyalists describing themselves as "refugees" or "loyal refugees", in exactly the same way as the black Loyalists.

There are two messages to be taken from these records: one, that the black migrants were claiming Loyalist status for themselves and declaring their insistence upon equal treatment; and two, that their claims had not been satisfied at the time of their petitions. Obviously, they were *not* receiving equal treatment. But does this discrimination mean that they were not regarded as Loyalists at all, as Cahill contends? During the Revolutionary War British and Loyalist military authorities made a clear distinction between fugitive slaves who came voluntarily to the British, and those who simply fell into British hands in the course of their campaigns. The Clinton Proclamation itself made such a distinction: those who came voluntarily would be considered as free British subjects; those captured from the rebels would be kept as slaves or sold for the benefit of their captors.⁷ Thomas Peters carried a typical certificate, issued at the end of the war, bearing witness that he had sworn allegiance, had served "faithfully and honestly", and was "a good and faithful subject of Great

1 21 August 1784, Vol. 359, Public Archives of Nova Scotia [PANS].

2 Land Papers, 9 December 1788, Thomas Brownspriggs, PANS.

3 Land Petitions, 21 February 1784, No. 12, Sunbury County, Provincial Archives of New Brunswick [PANB].

4 Land Petitions, 1785, No. 78, Saint John County, PANB.

5 Land Petitions, March 1785, No. 127, York County, PANB.

6 December 1790, FO 4/1, Public Record Office [PRO].

7 30 June 1779, Carleton Transcripts, British Headquarters Papers in America, New York Public Library [NYPL].

Britain”⁸ Commander-in-Chief Sir Guy Carleton sent orders that the Black Pioneers embarking for Nova Scotia in October 1783 were to receive town lots and, if they were to be farmers, a 100-acre country lot, the same as white Loyalists of similar rank.⁹

As I described at length in *The Black Loyalists*,¹⁰ these promises and orders were never fulfilled. The process was far more complicated, however, than the simplistic notion purveyed in “The Black Loyalist Myth” that as fugitive slaves they were not capable of being numbered among the Loyalists. The list of “Loyalists . . . Leaving Charleston for Halifax”, the “return of Loyalists gone from New York to Nova Scotia”, the “Muster Rolls of Annapolis and Digby”, the enumeration of “Disbanded Soldiers and Other Loyalists recommended for Lands on the Dartmouth Side”, all included among the Loyalists those black people who had fled slavery and joined the British. Slaves brought by white Loyalists were identified separately.¹¹ The unequal land grants that were distributed to the black Loyalists were laid out under general orders for surveys “for Loyal Emigrants and Disbanded Corps”. The “Board of Agents for Locating the Loyalists on Lands” processed the actual grants. The grants were recorded under the heading “Loyalist Land Grants”.¹² Governor Thomas Carleton would later insist that the black Loyalists had been allotted land “in *the same* proportion and on the same conditions with all other Inhabitants whether Loyalists or disbanded Soldiers”.¹³ The governor’s assertion was decidedly contrary to their actual experience, but at the same time he was clearly identifying them as Loyalists. The Loyalist Claims Commission did entertain petitions from fugitive slaves, though the accompanying article suggests otherwise (p. 79), deciding in the case of David King that he “like many of the Blacks had gained his Liberty by the War and ought to be satisfied, but under all the Circumstances of the Case we think it very reasonable to give him so small a sum as £5”.¹⁴ The definitive acknowledgement, however, came from Sir Henry Clinton, the commander-in-chief who issued the 1779 Proclamation inviting fugitive slaves to join the British. Endorsing Thomas Peters’ complaint to the British cabinet in 1790, Clinton wrote that Peters had been “a very active Serjt. in a very usefull Corps”, and that he and the other “poor blacks” in the Maritimes “seem to be the only Loyalists that have been neglected”.¹⁵

They called themselves Loyalists; the highest ranking military authorities called them Loyalists. It hardly seems necessary to add that the Patriots also distinguished

8 Issued 26 October 1783 by Lt. Col. Allan Stewart, Commander of the Black Pioneers in which Thomas Peters was a sergeant, FO 4/1, PRO.

9 21 October 1783, Carleton to Fox, Carleton Transcripts, NYPL.

10 *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783-1870*, 2nd ed. (Toronto, 1992).

11 Morse to Fox, 23 August 1783 (from Charleston to Halifax), Carleton Transcripts, NYPL; Vol. 369 (from New York to Nova Scotia), Vol. 376 (Annapolis and Digby), Vol. 359 (Dartmouth), PANS.

12 Council Minutes, 5 August 1784, Vol. 213; Circular Letter, Provincial Secretary (Richard Bulkeley), 26 May 1785, Bulkeley to Isaac Wilkins and the Board of Agents, 20 November 1786; Shelburne Records, Loyalist Land Grants, PANS.

13 Emphasis in original. Carleton to Dundas, 13 December 1791, CO 188/4, PRO.

14 King was described by his wartime commander, Col. Edward Fanning, as “a very honest, Loyal and deserving Blackman”: AO 12/99, PRO.

15 Clinton to Grenville, 26 December 1790, FO 4/1, PRO.

the black Loyalists from other runaways, Cahill's contrary statement notwithstanding (p. 83). The basis for the distinction was the black Loyalists' adherence to the British cause. Running away from slavery had been made a crime in Virginia in 1680, but in 1775 the Virginia Convention legislated the death penalty for fugitive slaves captured with the British or even trying to join the British. In April 1776, for example, two fugitives mistakenly approached a Patriot ship and declared their wish to serve Lord Dunmore. They were immediately tried and executed. That same 1775 Virginia Convention, on the other hand, announced that apprehended runaways who were not suspected of serving the British were to be restored to their owners or, if unclaimed, to be sold for the public benefit.¹⁶ Fugitives responding to the Dunmore Proclamation could be "summarily executed without benefit of clergy — as if they had been tried and convicted of high treason".¹⁷ And why were their actions treasonous, when the simple act of running away was an ordinary crime? Because they had declared in favour of the enemy, the Crown; that is, because they were Loyalists who wanted to ensure the continuation of British authority in America. Henry Melchior Muhlenberg wrote in 1777 of the African Americans that "They secretly wished that the British army might win, for then all Negro slaves will gain their freedom. It is said that this sentiment is almost universal among the Negroes in America".¹⁸ Recognizing the same phenomenon, Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur wrote that the slaves had all become "Toryfied".¹⁹ Both these observers were Patriot sympathizers, expressing a concern that was widespread in Patriot circles.

There are a number of other inaccurate allegations in "The Black Loyalist Myth" that should be addressed. Cahill writes (p. 83) that "By and large the fugitive slaves were not active participants in the civil war", in contrast to "freeborn or manumitted Blacks". There is no satisfactory way of knowing how many fugitives there were, let alone how many actually served the British. There is, however, one document which itemizes the wartime experience of Birchtown men, formerly fugitive slaves. Of a total of 151 adult males, 68 men had seen military service as soldiers, sailors or pioneers.²⁰ That is 45 per cent. It cannot be claimed that this percentage is representative, for we do not have the documentation for analysis. One wartime list enumerated 1,500 fugitives then with the British at Charleston, 773 of whom were specified as employed with the Royal Artillery (266), the Pioneers (192) and smaller numbers with the Royal Fusiliers, the Hessians, the commissary general and the hospital.²¹ Again, the percentage is impressive. It seems unlikely that they would have been matched by freeborn or manumitted African Americans, for, as Ira Berlin has pointed out, the number of freeborn black people was extremely small at the time

16 Sylvia R. Frey, "Between Slavery and Freedom: Virginia Blacks in the American Revolution", *Journal of Southern History*, XLIX (1983), pp. 383-6.

17 Barry Cahill, "The Black Loyalist Myth in Atlantic Canada", note 28.

18 *Journals of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg*, trans. T.G. Tappert and J.W. Doverstien, 3 vols. (Philadelphia, 1942-58), vol. III, p.78 (journal entry for 20 September 1777).

19 J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Sketches of Eighteenth Century America: More Letters from an American Farmer*, ed. H.L. Bourdin, R.H. Gabriel and S.T. Williams (New Haven, 1925), p. 301.

20 "List of the Blacks of Birch Town who gave in their Names for Sierra Leone", November 1791, CO 217/63, PRO.

21 Alexander Leslie's Letterbooks, Return of Negroes, 17 July 1780, Emmet Collection, NYPL.

of the revolutionary outbreak, and most of those manumitted by masters were too old or otherwise incapacitated for productive labour. That is why they had been manumitted, and that is why their military contribution was bound to be less significant.²² Nor is it possible to make an accurate comparison with white Loyalist wartime participation, although Paul Smith has calculated that it was 15 per cent of adult white male Loyalists who actually “took up arms in service of the Crown”.²³ Given the nature of the available evidence, it would be much more reasonable for Cahill to conclude that fugitive slaves were *over*-represented as active participants in the war to suppress the American rebellion.

In an apparent attempt to deny agency to the black Loyalists, Cahill refers to them constantly as “freed” rather than “free”, and even as “stolen property of the rebels” (p. 83), as if the British forces had marched in and liberated them from their rebel claimants. It is in this context that Cahill discusses the Peace Treaty and the evacuation of the black Loyalists to the Maritimes, something he calls a “flagrant violation” of the Treaty (p. 86). As I have documented in *The Black Loyalists* and other publications, the African-American fugitives freed themselves, by running away from their enslavement. British military commanders issued proclamations declaring that fugitives (who had already run away) would be recognized as free British subjects upon voluntarily joining the British. The people who thus became “black Loyalists” were contrasted with the thousands of American slaves who were confiscated, stolen and sequestered by British forces during the war. When the British promised, in Article VII of the Provisional Treaty (and later the final Treaty), not to carry away any American *property* including “Negroes”, it was the latter category that was meant, the contraband of war, not the voluntary fugitives. Of course the Americans insisted that it meant any black person who had ever been held in slavery, but Sir Guy Carleton pointed out that by the time the Provisional Treaty was signed in 1782, the black Loyalists were no longer American property but free British subjects, and therefore could not be included under Article VII. Only those who had been *taken* by the British, or those who came to the British after the signing of the Provisional Treaty (and who were therefore “property” at the time of the signing), needed to be restored to their American claimants. As Carleton patiently explained to George Washington, the black Loyalists were already free and “I had no right to deprive them of that liberty I found them possessed of”.²⁴

I mentioned above that all these errors were easily avoidable. The reason is that every document cited in the preceding pages was listed in the footnotes of *The Black*

22 Ira Berlin, “The Revolution in Black Life”, in Alfred F. Young, ed., *The American Revolution: Essays in the History of American Radicalism* (DeKalb, Ill., 1976), p. 352.

23 Paul H. Smith, “The American Loyalists: Notes on Their Organization and Numerical Strength”, *William and Mary Quarterly*, XXV (1968), p. 267.

24 Carleton to Washington, 12 May 1783, Vol. 369, PANS; memo summarizing the British interpretation of the Treaty, fols. 112-4, CO 5/8, PRO; “An Interview Between Lord Dorchester [Guy Carleton] and General Washington at Orange Town, 9 May 1783”, Chatham Ms., 1780-92, Bundle 344, National Archives of Canada [NAC]. The American argument differed, but Washington’s account of the discussion over the disposition of the “free” black Loyalists matched Carleton’s. See John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington* (Washington DC, 1931-44), XXVI, pp. 401-14, including Washington to Carleton, 6 May 1783.

Loyalists and/or other titles mentioned in Cahill's note 3, where he identifies his sources. And there are other indications that the secondary sources listed in his note 3 were not examined with sufficient care. To support the contention that a small group, or perhaps even this author alone, "invented" the black Loyalists, Cahill contrasts my interpretation with that of more sophisticated modern scholars who avoid the term and the concept. "[F]or Winks", Cahill would have his readers believe, "fugitive slaves and Loyalists were mutually exclusive" (p. 79). Robin Winks makes no such distinction. *The Blacks in Canada* has an index category for "Loyalist Negroes", and the many pages indicated there include the discussion of wartime runaways, the British refusal to return them to their American claimants, their life in Nova Scotia and their migration to Sierra Leone. Winks distinguishes them from the Maroons and the Refugees of the War of 1812, but nowhere does he omit from the Loyalist category those who were fugitives. When Winks refers to "Loyalist Negroes" who applied for a land grant, the Brindley Town people he specifies were fugitive slaves when they joined the British. Though "Loyalist Negroes" is his preferred term, writing when he did, he also speaks of "Loyalists, white and black" who had difficulty with their land grants. Winks has been sorely misrepresented in Cahill's article.²⁵ Ellen Gibson Wilson is another who allegedly "stops short of calling fugitive slaves Black Loyalists" (p. 85). The confusion almost seems deliberate. Wilson's book *The Loyal Blacks* has an index category "Loyalists: black — in war . . . ; — as refugees . . .", exactly paralleling "Loyalists: white — in war . . . ; — as refugees. . .". Under "Loyalists: black" Wilson includes the fugitives who responded to the wartime proclamations, mentioning by name David George, Boston King, Thomas Peters and Mary Perth, all of whom were claimed as slaves by American Patriots, ran away and joined the British, and later migrated to Nova Scotia. Nowhere does Wilson hint that some of the people she calls "Loyal Blacks" or "Loyalists: black" were more or less qualified for that designation because of a previous condition of servitude.²⁶

What my book did was to standardize the term "black Loyalist", which has since come into common usage. However, the concept was there from the time black Americans swore allegiance to the Crown during the Revolution. Winks and Wilson do not differ from me in this respect. And neither do the other scholars mentioned by Cahill. Stewart MacNutt (Cahill, note 34) invited me to join the Programme for Loyalist Studies and Publications, with the specific commission to prepare a volume of documents on the black Loyalists. He explicitly endorsed the former fugitives as Loyalists, in public meetings and private correspondence with me.²⁷ Unfortunately Professor MacNutt's death led to the abandonment of the Programme, but in the meantime I remained a happy member of what Wallace Brown has called "an historical version of 'the largest permanent floating crap game'"'.²⁸ It was through the colloquia and conferences organized under the Programme that scholars such as

25 Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada. A History*, 2nd ed. ([1971] Montreal, 1997), pp. 32, 35-45, 53, 61-78, 95, 134, 140-1, 534.

26 Ellen Gibson Wilson, *The Loyal Blacks* (New York, 1976), passim.

27 Preparing this response I consulted my photocopies made for Prof. MacNutt's series, and discovered tucked in the files my correspondence related to the project. The earliest seems to date from January 1971.

28 Wallace Brown, "Loyalist Historiography", *Acadiensis*, IV, 1 (Autumn 1974), p. 134.

Wallace Brown and Neil MacKinnon became familiar with my own research, and vice versa, before my thesis was completed and long before my book was published (p. 85 and notes 10, 36). That is why MacKinnon would avoid duplication in his own doctoral thesis on "The Loyalist Experience in Nova Scotia", which was being researched and written in the same period. To write, as Cahill does (p. 85), that MacKinnon "excluded" the black Loyalists because they were "so marginal" to Loyalist history, is to misunderstand the nature and purpose of doctoral research. The whole point is to say something *different*. Notice that in his book, *This Unfriendly Soil: The Loyalist Experience in Nova Scotia, 1783-1791*, Neil MacKinnon does include considerable notice of the black Loyalists.²⁹ Obviously a book is a different creature from a thesis, and in the published version the author was more concerned to tell a complete story. It is perverse as well to portray Robert Allen as somehow ambivalent about the black Loyalists (Cahill, note 7). Allen explained in his *Loyalist Literature* that in Nova Scotia the freedom of the black Loyalists was "nominal", an assessment entirely in accord with my own, but he did not challenge their Loyalist credentials. In fact he called them a "unique Loyalist minority".³⁰

One point on which Cahill and I might agree is a neglect of the black Loyalists in the historiography of Atlantic Canada prior to ca. 1970, and the absence of a widespread public awareness or folk tradition about the Loyalist origins of many black communities (p. 79). When in 1948 Bruce Fergusson compiled a documentary history of the Nova Scotia black population, he entitled it *The Establishment of the Negroes in Nova Scotia between the War of 1812 and the Winning of Responsible Government*, completely overlooking the black Loyalists and the slaves who had been there generations before 1812.³¹ This was not untypical. The Rev. W.P. Oliver, a highly respected leader of the African United Baptist Association, wrote in 1963: "The majority of Negroes in Nova Scotia today are descendants of the 1812 Refugees. Those who came to Nova Scotia prior to this date either returned to the United States or migrated to Sierra Leone".³² Of course the neglect was not absolute. By Cahill's own count, there were Benjamin West, T.C. Haliburton, Evelyn Harvey, Phyllis Blakeley and Wallace Brown who recognized the black Loyalists, and there were others Cahill does not mention. Furthermore, the fact that the black people of Birchtown sought historical recognition in 1963 (p. 81), shows that they had not lost touch with their origins. Still, it remains true that most people, including most black people, had not paid particular attention to this aspect of Canadian history. The Black Loyalists of New Brunswick Association and the Black Loyalist Heritage Society are

29 Neil MacKinnon, *This Unfriendly Soil: The Loyalist Experience in Nova Scotia, 1783-1791* (Kingston and Montreal, 1986).

30 Robert S. Allen, *Loyalist Literature: An annotated bibliographic guide to the writings on the Loyalists of the American Revolution* (Toronto, 1982), pp. 52-4.

31 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).

32 W.P. Oliver, "Adult Education in the Negro Communities of Nova Scotia", *Canadian Baptist Home Missions Digest*, VI (1963/64), p. 146. Cahill makes a similar error when he writes that "most" of the black Loyalists migrated to Sierra Leone in 1792 (p. 4). About one-third of the total black Loyalist population migrated.

only recently established.³³ It is not unlikely that the availability of published historical writing has stimulated the renewed interest and awareness since the 1970s. If my book on *The Black Loyalists* participated in this revival, I can only feel satisfaction. If all those other observers from Benjamin West to Phyllis Blakeley had already recognized the black Loyalists, I cannot claim to have “invented” the concept.

The basic argument of “The Black Loyalist Myth in Atlantic Canada” seems to be that a specific group of ideologically-motivated scholars, of whom I am the “normative” example, “invented” something Cahill identifies as “the Black Loyalist myth” (p. 79). Given the evidence outlined in the preceding section, this argument is demonstrably untenable and irresponsible. Nevertheless the exercise upon which we are embarked demands that it receive clinical attention. Cahill’s argument sets out with the supposition that a person who was a slave when the Revolution began was not “capable” of being a Loyalist (p. 76). This disqualification is stated repeatedly but never explained. “The implied definition of Black Loyalists is Black people who were loyal to the crown, and it excluded ex hypothesi the freed Blacks — precisely because they were fugitive slaves” (p. 79). This is a circular argument. Loyalists are defined to exclude fugitives, so fugitives are excluded as Loyalists. “Blacks collectively were freed, not free, and they were not Loyalists, but fugitive slaves who absconded from the rebels in order to secure their liberty at the invitation of the British military” (p. 81). Only “freeborn or manumitted” African Americans were “capable of being Loyalists” (p. 76). A precondition for this argument, apparently, must be that the black Loyalists (other than the freeborn or manumitted) were “freed” by the British, but if that is so, how can they be regarded as having “absconded” from their rebel claimants? The logic does not hold. Quite apart from the moral implication of the term “abscond”, as a verb it requires volition, initiative, agency; it means that they ran away, not that they were “freed”. Neither is it supportable historically. The fugitives who sought out the British swore allegiance to the Crown, the one “qualification” for inclusion in the Loyalist category, and surely the oath of an unfree person would have been meaningless. The distinction was drawn between slaves of rebel claimants who were involuntarily brought under British control, and those who came voluntarily. There is no evidence that a prior condition of freedom was a criterion, only that the *claimant* should not be a Loyalist; i.e., slaves of Loyalists could not themselves become Loyalists, but all other African Americans, freeborn, previously manumitted or fugitives from rebel claimants, were eligible.

Another circular element in Cahill’s argument is the notion that the terms “Loyalist” and “fugitive slave” are fundamentally incompatible, because “Loyalists defended colour slavery” (p. 82). But wait: if the fugitive slaves *were* Loyalists, then Loyalists did not, by definition, defend colour slavery. Only if an arbitrary condition is set — that Loyalists defended slavery — can the fugitives be excluded from the definition. The solution seems to be to make the definition more realistic, rather than to impose an idiosyncratic condition with neither logical nor historical justification. Of course it is true that *some* Loyalists (white) owned slaves; it is also true that *some* Loyalists (black) were fugitive slaves. Should one cancel out the other? If so, which

33 Black Loyalists of New Brunswick Association, 92 St. Catherine Street, Saint John, N.B. E2J 2J3; Black Loyalist Heritage Society, 157 Water Street, Shelburne, N.S. B0T 1W0.

one? Besides, it cannot be shown that even among white Loyalists there was absolute support for slavery. Approximately 1200 slaves were brought into the Maritimes by Loyalists. How many “owners” there were has not been compiled. Some brought several dozen, a few more than 50 each. It is therefore only possible to say that a few hundred white Loyalists owned slaves, out of a total of more than 30,000. This is still not an account of Loyalist *support* for slavery: the thousands who owned no slaves might have approved, or they might not. The evidence goes both ways. The power of the state and the courts supported slavery on behalf of society in general, and (as I argue in *The Black Loyalists*) this prevailing condition had serious implications for the exercise of freedom by the black Loyalists. But if some of those white Loyalists opposed slavery, or were even indifferent, were they thereby no longer eligible to be considered Loyalists? This would follow logically from Cahill’s argument. On the other side, in 1807 a group of 27 white Loyalist slave-owners, claiming among them 84 slaves, asked the Nova Scotia assembly to clarify the title to their “property”. The petitioners were “far from pretending to advocate Slavery as a System”, they stated apologetically, but “owing to certain doubts now entertained by The King’s Courts of Law in this Province, such property is rendered wholly untenable by your petitioners whose Negro Servants are daily leaving their service and setting your petitioners at defiance”. The Loyalist-dominated assembly declined to grant their petition.³⁴ This seems to confirm that *some* (white) Loyalists must have opposed slavery, even to generate the doubts that demanded clarification from the legislature. The equation of Loyalist and supporter of slavery cannot be maintained. Either some white Loyalists were not Loyalists, according to Cahill’s definition, or it was not impossible for a Loyalist to oppose slavery.

Cahill makes a major distinction between the previously free and those who became free during the Revolution.³⁵ According to “The Black Loyalist Myth”, only the former “qualified” as Loyalists. The previously free had a “different mindset from the fugitive-slave refugees”, Cahill claims, and this is revealed through their different attitudes towards the Sierra Leone exodus. These attitudes, purportedly, “are *the key* to unlocking the Black Loyalist myth” (p. 84, emphasis added). Stephen Blucke, the one example offered by Cahill, did claim to be freeborn (and therefore capable of being a “real” Loyalist by Cahill’s definition), and he did oppose the Sierra Leone migration. There is one surviving document recording this opposition, the only available source for the “*key*” to unlocking the “myth”. This was a petition forwarded to the British government by Stephen Skinner, a white Loyalist landowner in Shelburne, in which some Birchtown black Loyalists declared the migration a foolish mistake and asked the government for financial assistance to “make us comfortable on our little farms”.³⁶ Skinner himself opposed the exodus, complaining that the loss

34 Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, p. 106.

35 Cahill states that “Many, perhaps most”, of the previously free, whom he is willing to recognize as genuine black Loyalists, “do not appear in the Inspection Roll of fugitive-slave refugees” (p. 79). In fact 409 of the people listed there claimed to have been legally free before the Revolution, including Stephen Blucke. They were evacuated along with the fugitives, settled together with them, and as a group became indistinguishable upon arrival in Nova Scotia. Cahill may be right that there were many more who were not on the list, but he could have no way of knowing that.

36 Enclosed in Skinner to Dundas, n.d. [Petition dated 1 November 1791], CO 217/63, PRO.

of black labour seriously damaged the profits of large landowners such as himself.³⁷ It was Skinner who collected the signatures. But quite apart from any external pressures, Cahill's "*key*" hangs on the claim that the signatories to the Birchtown petition were previously free, a condition that gave them a different "mindset" and made them opposed to the exodus while the former fugitives' "mindset" made them accept the Sierra Leone offer. It should be clearly understood that the Birchtown petition of 1 November 1791 is the only piece of evidence we have of any group of black Loyalists deliberately rejecting the Sierra Leone opportunity. Since it is such an important document, I had photocopied it (in anticipation of the MacNutt documentary volume). After reading Cahill's paper, I spent an afternoon in my attic examining the signatures and tracing the origins of the signatories through other documents I had at hand. Stephen Blucke's signature is at the top, and we believe he was freeborn. Of the other 51 names on the petition, I was able to trace 27. One, James Newcombe, claimed free birth, and one, Isabella Gibbons, had been purchased by Margaret (Mrs. Stephen) Blucke and given her freedom. Two others had names that belonged to both former fugitives and to persons who were previously free (one by birth and one by manumission), and it was not possible to tell which had done the signing. That makes a definite total of three free persons (including Stephen Blucke), and the possible addition of two more, out of the 28 traceable names. The remaining 23 were all definitely identifiable as wartime fugitive slaves. Even if the doubtful cases were previously free, even if *all* the untraceable names³⁸ belonged to persons who were previously free, that still leaves a very substantial proportion of former fugitives as signatories to this petition rejecting the Sierra Leone migration. It cannot support the contention that there was a different "mindset", or that only the previously free were disinclined to migrate. And by the way, there were freeborn or manumitted black Loyalists who *did* participate in the Sierra Leone exodus and there was at least one person, Scipio Channell, who signed the Birchtown petition and later, evidently, changed his mind.

What is the test of a Loyalist? Throughout Cahill's argument there runs the presumption that there is a standard definition, and that the African-American fugitives do not measure up: "they were not Loyalists in the historical sense of the word" (p. 80; see also p. 76 where a "full-blown historical sense of the term" is mentioned). But there is, unfortunately, no universal consensus, no historical "sense" that everybody accepts. As Paul H. Smith has written, "loyalism meant different things to different persons in different situations".³⁹ Cahill drops a clue to his own understanding of the term when he says that the slaves did not flee "on the grounds of political principle or expedience", but simply to gain their freedom (p. 83). Why this would not be "expedient" is left unexplained. Robert Calhoon, a considerable authority on this subject, has written that Loyalists, and he had in mind white Loyalists, were motivated by "self-interest, temperament, conscience, intellect, fear

37 Petition of "Proprietors of Lands" to Henry Dundas, 16 May 1793, CO 217/63, PRO.

38 I mean, of course, untraceable in my attic in Waterloo, Ontario. It is quite likely that additional documentation exists elsewhere that could illuminate more of the names.

39 Smith, "The American Loyalists", p. 261.

and plain confusion”⁴⁰ Canadian scholars George Rawlyk and Ann Condon have explained that (white) Loyalists did not often understand, nor were they particularly motivated by, an ideological Loyalism, and even when they were, Janice Potter adds, the ideology was not always the same: some wanted to maintain the old pre-revolutionary colonial system, others wanted a reformed and revitalized British Empire. Small wonder David Wilson entitles his review of this literature “The Ambivalent Loyalists”.⁴¹ There is, Cahill complains, “a lack of clarity concerning how to define Black Loyalism” (p. 78), but this could and should be said about Loyalism in general. Must there then be a special test for black Loyalists? Apparently so, for Cahill criticizes Graham Russell Hodges for defining them as “free and enslaved men, women, and children who allied with the British in the American Revolution”, which Cahill dismisses as “a definition of ‘Loyalists’ with the word ‘Black’ added” (p. 87). The Hodges solution seems eminently sensible to me. *The Canadian Encyclopedia* defines Loyalists as “American colonists of varied ethnic backgrounds who supported the British cause during the American Revolution . . . for highly diverse reasons”.⁴² One of those reasons, surely, could be freedom from slavery.

Black Loyalists did undoubtedly “ally with the British” and “support the British cause”, and it would be accurate to add that their motivation included political principle. As Cahill correctly states, “They anticipated that Britain would win and that the royal bounty of freedom would be extended to all slaves” (p. 83). In other words it was not just their own freedom that was at issue, but the freedom of all African Americans; they were fighting for a United Empire without slavery, for racial equality. As a political vision, this ranks with the best. This *is* an ideological commitment to British victory. Not all runaways offered their services to the British. Note that the Virginia Convention recognized the difference with different penalties. In *The Black Loyalists*, and in greater detail in “Blacks as American Loyalists: The Slaves’ War for Independence”,⁴³ I have described how slaves managed to escape from their rebel claimants. Thousands, tens of thousands, did so. Thomas Jefferson, who lost 30 of his own slaves, estimated in 1778 that 30,000 Virginia slaves ran away from Patriot claimants. This would be more than 10 per cent of the Virginia slave population of about 250,000. Jefferson’s figures were not intended to be precise, but Sylvia Frey claims that “Good evidence . . . strongly suggests that Jefferson’s estimates of slave losses might in fact be reliable”.⁴⁴ John Hope Franklin writes that 75 per cent of Georgia’s 15,000 slaves fled from Patriot claimants during the Revolution, and another 25,000 from South Carolina.⁴⁵ Some of these numerous fugitives sought refuge in territory still under Native control; some moved to distant

40 Robert Calhoon, *The Loyalists in Revolutionary America, 1760-1781* (New York, 1973), p. xi, quoted in Brown, “Loyalist Historiography”, p. 136.

41 David A. Wilson, “The Ambivalent Loyalists”, *Acadiensis*, XIV, 1 (Autumn 1984), pp. 122-37, discussing, inter alia, works by Rawlyk, Condon, Potter, MacKinnon, Brown and Allen.

42 Bruce G. Wilson, “Loyalists”, *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (Edmonton, 1988), II, p. 1250.

43 *Historical Reflections*, II (1975), pp. 51-67, republished in Paul Finkelman, ed., *Slavery, Revolutionary America and the New Nation* (New York, 1989), pp. 447-63.

44 Frey, “Between Slavery and Freedom”, p. 376.

45 John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom*, 7th ed. (New York, 1994), p. 75.

places and tried to pass as free persons; some, especially in Georgia, set up independent “Maroon” communities beyond the reach of white authority; and some, a minority if these numbers are to be taken seriously, joined the British. Sometimes considerable effort was necessary to get themselves to a British or Loyalist unit (that is, they were not “freed” by the British; they attached themselves to the British after running away, rather than opting for one of the other alternatives).

Why did they do it? Jefferson’s thousands were not responding directly to the Dunmore Proclamation (November 1775), for Dunmore only welcomed those who were fit for military service. The Clinton Proclamation (June 1779), which broadened the invitation to *any* fugitive claimed by a rebel, had not yet been issued when Jefferson wrote this in 1778. Some undoubtedly were taking advantage of an opportunity, but many came in response to a perception of British war aims. There was a belief among the slaves, widely noted at the time and well documented, that the British would abolish slavery if they won the revolutionary war. When fugitives swore allegiance to the Crown, they were promised equality. An entirely new racial order was expected. And the belief was sincere. Thomas Peters travelled all the way to London to tell the king that promises made in his name had not been fulfilled. Of course they were mistaken, as we now know. Britain had no such intention, though the message seemed reasonably clear at the time: Dunmore’s “Ethiopian Regiment”, for example, marched into battle with a banner announcing “Liberty to Slaves” across their chests. But if the fugitives misunderstood British intentions, their mistake cannot be twisted into an argument that they lacked political principle, that they were seeking only their own individual advantage, that they were “not Loyalists . . . [but] fugitive slaves deserting in response to a proclamation of martial law” (p. 79), much less that they were “stolen property of the rebels” (p. 83).

Cahill’s argument is often contradictory (fugitives “abscond” and “desert”, yet are “stolen”) and tautological (fugitives could not be Loyalists “precisely because they were fugitive slaves”). Lacking a convincing argument or substantial evidence, “The Black Loyalist Myth in Atlantic Canada” attempts to convey its message through rhetorical contrivance. The paper opens with one of these. The reader’s attention is drawn to the Benjamin West painting, “Reception of the American Loyalists”, with its representation of African Americans among the Loyalists. The reader is then invited to “infer” from the painting that black Loyalists genuinely existed. Next, the painting is critiqued for “hiding a truth” and “presenting a falsehood”, for being “propaganda” in fact, because one owner of the painting, John Eardley-Wilmot, described the African Americans as “looking up to Britannia in grateful remembrance of their emancipation from Slavery”. I have never written that the British emancipated the slaves, nor that the black Loyalists were or should have been grateful to Britain, but within a few paragraphs I have become associated with this “allegory” and am numbered among the “academic scholars” principally responsible for originating the myth that exudes from the painting! David Bell’s warning about “socially dangerous” myths can then be invoked to lend a sense of purpose to the assault on what Cahill calls “the Black Loyalist myth”. Actually my favourite comes a little later, in the discussion of T.C. Haliburton. One: Haliburton used the term “Negro Loyalists”, the first to use it that Cahill is aware of (because he was not aware of the black Loyalists using equivalent terms themselves, as described above). Two: Haliburton has been exposed as a racist. Three: there is therefore “some urgency”

required to “demythologize” the black Loyalists. One feels moved to salute such a pristine example of guilt by association.

It is a bit old-fashioned these days to paint somebody with the brush of racism. Much more appropriate for the dawn of a new millennium is to hint at “cultural appropriation” and “assimilation” (p. 79), “turning Black people into honorary whites”, and “the colonization of Black history by White historical myths” (p. 87). Such phrases carry rhetorical punch in the post-colonial era. It is interesting that not a single footnote accompanies these allegations, no quotations to illustrate what is being denigrated. It is, apparently, the simple designation of former fugitives as Loyalists that bears the odium. Since this is an entirely legitimate designation, adopted by black Loyalists, British authorities and Patriots alike, confirmed by scholars whom Cahill expressly admires, the rhetoric is hollow. In the same category is the notion that for the fugitives themselves to have “bought into Loyalism would have amounted to denying the slavery from which they had so recently escaped” (p. 80), and “To label the fugitive slaves Black Loyalists is . . . to diminish the reality of the slavery from which they managed to escape” (p. 87). This could mean that slavery was so demeaning that it prevented African Americans from having political motivations and that they could not have been attracted by an ideology of liberation. If so, it is demonstrably false. It could, more likely, be another example of empty rhetoric. *Why* would it be a denial of their slave past for fugitives to opt for Loyalism? A rejection of *slavery*, certainly, but the fugitives openly admitted their former enslavement in the detailed list kept, on Carleton’s orders, of black Loyalists being evacuated from New York in 1783,⁴⁶ and their numerous petitions to governors and kings actually dwelled upon their condition as former slaves who had voluntarily joined the British in response to certain expectations. The heated language of “The Black Loyalist Myth in Atlantic Canada” is no more than an attempt to fill in the gaps left by an argument in advance of its evidence.

Historical analysis consists in asking questions of the available evidence. The answers the historian gets, usually through archival, library and oral research, are then ordered into an explanation and written down. The questions put by the historian may be suggested by simple curiosity, they may be dictated by the nature of the project (undergraduate essay, Ph.D. thesis, journal article), they may be realistically limited by the nature of the evidence or they may be deliberate elaborations on questions put by previous scholars. Whatever the immediate influences or constraints, the questions reflect the perspective of the author, the designer of the project, and that perspective, in turn, is a dynamic of personal and societal concerns, issues, interests and beliefs. This is why the time *in* which a historical interpretation is written can be as significant as the time *about* which it is written. For example, American slavery ended more than a century ago; nothing new has happened to change what *happened* then. But witness the series of revolutions, in the past several decades, in the way slavery is understood and explained. Each new interpretation arises from different questions, questions

46 Three copies of this list have been consulted, one in Vol. 423, PANS, another in the Carleton Papers, British Headquarters Papers, doc. 10427, at the NYPL, and a third in Vol. 55, American Manuscripts, Royal Institution, NAC. There is now a published version, Graham Russell Hodges, ed., *The Black Loyalist Directory* (New York, 1996).

demanding different source materials and innovative research methods. History is far from dead, and the vitality is provided by our questions. An intriguing exercise is to examine a piece of historical writing — a journal article perhaps — as a set of answers, and then try to identify the questions that must have been asked to produce those particular answers. From those questions, it is then interesting to try to discern the apparent purpose that lay behind them, the perspective of the historian who dreamed them up.

As for my own work, Cahill correctly identifies “the ideology and psychology of the civil rights and human rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s” (p. 77) as a prevailing influence during the research and writing of *The Black Loyalists*. My Ph.D. thesis was entirely researched and substantially written in the late 1960s, during the Africville dislocation, through the launching of the Transition Year Programme at Dalhousie, amidst projects and campaigns that kept me connected to what we called “the movement”. My academic interest was to discover how the black communities were established and why they remained isolated and disadvantaged so late as the 1960s. I had no specific expectations about what I might find in the documents, but I was convinced that historical study could enlighten us on the nature of the problem and thus facilitate finding a solution. This confidence in history as a “revolutionary act” was itself a part of the “ideology and psychology” of the times. I had a draft of my thesis almost completed, including all the Nova Scotian chapters, when I moved to Waterloo in 1971. When Cahill writes that I “developed the Black Loyalist hypothesis as an antidote to Winks” (p. 82), he obviously has both the sequence and the motivation wrong. Winks’s book, *The Blacks in Canada*, appeared only in 1971, just as I was leaving Halifax for Waterloo. I brought along an as-yet unread copy, for a review that eventually appeared in the *Dalhousie Review*.⁴⁷ In the preface to the new edition of his book, Robin Winks writes that I was his “most formidable critic” in that *Dalhousie Review* article.⁴⁸ While I certainly did criticize Winks’s interpretation, I never wrote that he failed “to put an end to the ‘victims’ school of Black Canadian historiography”, as Cahill suggests (p. 79). That phrase is a corruption and misapplication of something Winks wrote about my book, in the *Dalhousie Review*, and what he said was that I *had* effectively ended the “victims school” with my study of *The Black Loyalists*.⁴⁹ Sometimes Cahill has discerned the wrong questions from the answers he found in my book, and sometimes the answers themselves have been confused.

I was not aware of Robin Winks until my own work was virtually completed. Nor was I aware of the 1963 letter sent by Will R. Bird to the Historic Sites Advisory Council declaring that there was nothing of historical significance about the Birchtown community. But I was *very* aware of that attitude. One of the few things written on the Sierra Leone migration when I began my study was Sir Adams Archibald’s “Story of Deportation of Negroes from Nova Scotia to Sierra Leone”.⁵⁰ “Deportation”! Note the “agency” identified in Archibald’s title. When Stephen

⁴⁷ *Dalhousie Review*, LI (1971), pp. 282-7.

⁴⁸ Winks, *Blacks in Canada* (1997), p. xvii.

⁴⁹ *Dalhousie Review*, LVII (1977), p. 150.

⁵⁰ *Collections of the Nova Scotia Historical Society*, VII (1889-91), pp. 129-54.

Blucke asked for details about the Sierra Leone scheme, it was “with true negro pomposity”; when some white landowners objected to the exodus, it was because “our people [sic] did not care to let [John Clarkson] take away the least objectionable of the race, leaving behind only a residuum of the idle, the drunken and the dishonest”. After all, Archibald explained, “A negro with plenty to eat and to drink, with clothing and shelter, has little care for anything else. He has no ambition. To him labor is only a last resort. . . . Negroes like an idle and lazy life, and have no aim or ambition for anything beyond mere animal existence”.⁵¹ The specifics of Archibald’s attitudes were formed in the 1880s, not the 1960s, but the notion that black people had done nothing of historical value and, by extension, *could* do nothing worthy of a historian’s attention, was still current in some circles as I began my research.

All this inevitably shaped the kind of questions I pursued. As I wrote in the preface to the 1992 edition of *The Black Loyalists*, I would not have written it the same way again. Its agenda has become old hat, even “politically correct”. How humiliating that would be, except that 30 years ago that agenda was opposed to the conventional wisdom of its time. Like Cahill (note 15), I recognize the liabilities of an emphasis on black agency, black community and culture, on the things black people *did* rather than what was done *to* them, and I have acknowledged them in a recent article in the *Dalhousie Review*.⁵² Nevertheless it was a necessary corrective. Now we can move on to new questions. *The Black Loyalists* had its value, perhaps it still has, but “definitive history” is an oxymoron.

I can say much less about Cahill’s perspective, or his “ideology and psychology”. His article was first sent to me with no name attached, so my response was conceived with nothing in mind except what appeared in its pages. Only afterwards was the name revealed and I realized that I had read some of his work before and in fact had refereed, and recommended for publication, two articles of his on slavery for the *UNB Law Journal*.⁵³ Even before learning the name, however, it was evident from the answers contained in the article that the author had underlying questions and concerns about the history of slavery in the Maritimes. The article has considerable edge, and this was far more apparent in the earlier, much longer version; here is an author with a mission. As I perceive it, his project, and it is a commendable one, is to promote attention to slavery in Canada, particularly the slaves brought by white Loyalists. The assault on the black Loyalists, that is on what he calls the “myth” of the black Loyalists, is a means, not an end. He obliges with a concise declaration of his purpose: “to show that [the Black Loyalist hypothesis] is not only an historical myth, but also a potentially dangerous one” (p. 78). Why *dangerous*? That aspect unfolds more slowly, but it appears that “the hegemony of the Black Loyalist myth” has the effect of “undermining Black history” (p. 81) because it “sidelines” the history of the slaves (p. 83). To “reclaim the history of the slaves”, therefore, the black Loyalist myth has to be “dismantled” (p. 87). In another round of circularity, Cahill also

51 Ibid., pp. 139, 140, 148, 152.

52 “Allegories and Orientations in African-Canadian Historiography: The Spirit of Africville”, *Dalhousie Review*, LXXVII (1997), pp. 155-77.

53 “Slavery and the Judges of Loyalist Nova Scotia”, *University of New Brunswick Law Journal*, XLIII (1994), pp. 73-134, and “Habeas Corpus and Slavery in Nova Scotia”, XLIV (1995), pp. 179-209.

explains that “The unfortunate embryonic state of slave studies in Atlantic Canada has contributed to the persistence of the historical myth of the Black Loyalists” (p. 83), but I think this contradiction is inadvertent and his point in general must be that it is the “myth” that is suppressing the slaves. I heartily agree that the history of slavery in the Maritimes has been neglected, and, as I wrote in my *UNB Law Journal* report, Cahill’s own contributions to this topic are to be welcomed. We need more, and we need more from Cahill in particular. It would, as he says (p. 82), be possible for someone to undertake a Trudel-like study of the Atlantic region, and I join him in making such an appeal. I do have to wonder, however, why the promotion of slave history requires the elaborate and indirect approach taken in this article.

It must be that Cahill genuinely believes in the existence of a black Loyalist “myth”, and that it creates a barrier to him and other researchers who might take up the story of the slaves. What is this dangerous “myth” that Cahill finds so threatening? Its first feature, according to his article, is that it portrays a benevolent Britain graciously emancipating the slaves. This is the intended point of the Benjamin West diversion (p. 76), and it is given priority as “an important element” of the alleged myth (p. 77). Except for Cahill’s frequent insistence that the black Loyalists were “freed, not free”, which seems to confirm rather than contradict the mythical emancipation by the British, I can join him in rejecting the gracious Britannia image. It is a myth, and I repeat what I wrote in *The Black Loyalists*: “Of the theories and rationalisations later offered to explain the British stand, it is clear that an abolitionist sentiment cannot seriously be included among them. The slaves belonging to Loyalists were never offered their freedom. . . . In an empire still very much determined to maintain the institution of slavery and the continuation of the slave trade, the Dunmore proclamation and Britain’s subsequent extension of it can only be viewed in isolation as a desperate attempt to bring the rebellious colonies to their knees by any available means”.⁵⁴ The proclamations invited slaves to run away, they did not free them; what they said was, once the slaves freed themselves from Patriot claimants, the British would recognize them as free British subjects. This part of the myth can be disarmed, like a related mythical claim that the fugitives were allegedly choosing loyalism rather than liberty from slavery (pp. 80, 87). The entire point of the first chapter of *The Black Loyalists*, and of my article on “The Slaves’ War for Independence”, was that fugitives joined the British *because* they believed it would mean liberty, for themselves and for other slaves. Cahill is quite right to unite with me in denying that loyalty to the Crown took priority over the commitment to freedom from slavery.

The “myth” Cahill describes seems to propagate an impression that once they joined the British, and after evacuation to the Maritimes, the black Loyalists were treated equally by their government and their neighbours (pp. 80, 82, 87). Chapter 3 of *The Black Loyalists*, entitled “Freedom Denied”, can contribute to Cahill’s arsenal against this aspect of the “myth”. “Promoters of the Black Loyalist concept”, however, may be hard to convince, for apparently they “overlook Loyalist slaveholders” (p. 82). I wish I could direct those myth-mongers to the passage quoted above from *The Black Loyalists*, or to other passages in my book where I make it clear

54 *The Black Loyalists*, p. 2.

that “The Nova Scotia that offered a haven to fleeing American slaves was not itself innocent of the evils of slavery. . . . An estimated 1,232 slaves . . . were brought by Loyalists from the former American colonies. . . . This placed severe limitations on the freedom and opportunities of the Black Loyalists”, or to the pages where the re-enslavement of black Loyalists in Nova Scotia is documented.⁵⁵ I wish I could direct them to the efforts taken by the now-free black Loyalists to eliminate slavery in the Maritimes, their court appearances on behalf of fellow African Canadians who were enslaved, and above all to Thomas Peters’ second petition in 1790 denouncing the “avowed Toleration of Slavery in Nova Scotia as if the happy Influence of his Majesty’s free Government was incapable of being extended so far as America to ‘maintain Justice and Right’ in affording the Protection of the Laws and Constitution of England. . . . [T]he oppressive Cruelty and Brutality of their Bondage is in General shocking to human nature but more particularly shocking irritating and obnoxious to their Brethren of the same Kindred the free People of Colour who cannot conceive that it is really the Intention of the British Government to favour Injustice, or tolerate Slavery. . . .”⁵⁶

This evidence would certainly convince the mythologizers, but I cannot direct them to it because I do not know who they are. I think I have read most of the published literature on this subject, and nowhere do I find the benevolent Britannia, the slaves opting for loyalism rather than liberty, the equal treatment of black Loyalists during the Revolution or in the Maritimes, the denial that black people continued to be enslaved by white Loyalists. I read these things first in “The Black Loyalist Myth in Atlantic Canada”. Unfortunately the article contains no references to actual examples, so a reader is unable to locate the source of the error. Without them, an impression emerges that Cahill has erected a “straw myth”, created as a target to justify an assault on a historical interpretation that is perceived as “dangerous” enough to require such a tactic. The specific characteristics of the myth, the features that might deserve to be “dismantled”, are imaginary; more fundamentally, recognition of former fugitives as Loyalists has convincing contemporary evidence and cannot possibly be a recent deception perpetrated by an ideologically-driven group of academics. In short, the “myth” is a myth.

Everyone who cares about history and thinks history is important wants to ensure that it is reported as accurately as possible. This, I am sure, is what motivated Cahill to point out errors he believed he found in my publications, and this is why I have pointed out the errors I believe I found in his article. This is the way it works. I hope I have set his mind at rest, and that he can now proceed with his research on slavery. There are many topics worth pursuing in the early history of the African-Canadian communities, many new questions that deserve answers. The final word has not been uttered.

Were the black Loyalists *Loyalists*? For students trying to make sense of our national history, this could be an interesting way to approach the Loyalist contribution to the foundation of English Canada, and indeed of the nature of Canadian society as it has been constructed historically. I believe Cahill would agree that whichever way

55 Ibid., pp. 40-2, 50-1.

56 26 December 1790, FO 4/1, PRO.

the investigation leads, it will expose a shocking component of racial injustice that, once ensconced in the minds and institutions of Canada, has been perpetuated and has still not been overcome. I am not yet ready to give up the notion that an understanding of the origins of the problem is a prerequisite to finding a solution. And if they *were* Loyalists, would this serve for anything more than to give their descendants a sense of self-importance, a little me-tooism? For one thing, it would force attention to the actual events, in the Revolution and especially in Loyalist Nova Scotia, to try to explain how one group of Loyalists was excluded from full membership in society. If they were never Loyalists, then that in itself is explanation enough. But if there was a good reason why they should have been included, and still were not, then a whole new bundle of insights becomes available. And yes, their descendants are concerned, and not just those with a direct lineage to 1783. Few African Canadians in the Maritimes are able to trace their ancestry so precisely, though the documents are available to do quite a bit of it. The Black Loyalist Heritage Society is trying to compile a “census” of descendants, and it is proving very difficult not just because some families do not know but because so many have intermarried with other lineages, both from slaves or later black migrations and, often, from Loyalist and other white families. This absence of precision has not produced disinterest; on the contrary, it has obviated any exclusive ownership of the Loyalist heritage and makes it available to all members of the black community. What that heritage means, in a word, is *entitlement*. This is not, or not just, a moral issue, it is not just political correctness, it cannot be dismissed as cultural appropriation or colonization (pp. 80, 87): it means that black people were full founding members of Maritime society, to whom the same promises were made, and owed, as to any other Loyalists. It is time for some retroactive recognition, not only from academic historians but from our society, and our governments, who have still to deliver.

JAMES W. St.G. WALKER