

Catholic Loyalists in the American Revolution A Sketch

The following sketch was delivered by Fr. J. S. McGivern, s. j. , Archivist of the Archdiocese of Toronto. It concerns those loyalists who professed the Roman Catholic religion and whose story has never been fully told. This sketch treats of "some rather minor but not unimportant points," as Father McGivern put it.

Editor.

In this paper it is intended to treat – 1. The condition of Catholics in the various states; 2. The passing of "The Intolerable Acts" with special reference to the "Quebec Act"; 3. A brief indication of the reaction to this last Act; 4. Some examination of loyalism among the Catholics, and finally; 5. The story, so often told, of a particular group of Highland Scots, Catholic loyalists.

Our modern historians, undeniably, lack a required statistical foundation for reaching a solid understanding of the United Empire Loyalists in the Revolution. Because of this lack of knowledge we commonly resort to general population percentages and so a strong reliance on round figures and easily remembered proportions.

First we should indicate the estimated numbers in the rebellious Colonies. I am in no position to verify these figures. I shall take them from the latest volumes of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. According to this source there were in the colonies a population of over 4,500,000 (four and a half million). Of these the overwhelming number were non-Catholic. In fact only some 25,000 were Catholics. The majority of these seem to have been in New York, Pennsylvania and Maryland. If these figures can be trusted, there was only a little over one for every 200 of the population or 1/2 of one percent. No wonder some authors claim that Catholics played only a minimal part in the Revolution.

What was the legal position of Catholics in the various States prior to the Revolution? Let us examine, sketchily, the state of religious toleration prior to 1776.

Virginia – In this State from its beginning, the official Church was the established Church of England. The Virginia Company Charter declared that Christianity was to be fostered “according to the rites and doctrine of the Church of England” and the Royal Charter of 1624 continued this polity without regard to dissenters – particularly in this State. Quakers, Puritans and Catholics were unwelcome. However, historians point out that at least one Catholic was an exception to this general rule – his name was Giles Brent – a wealthy planter.

Carolinas – The Church of England was by law established from the beginning. By a law of 1696 Catholics were excluded from any toleration.

Georgia – The Charter of George II in 1732 assured all inhabitants, except Catholics, “a free exercise of Religion.”

Massachusetts – Catholics were definitely unwelcome and by several specific laws were singled out as being even more unwelcome than Quakers. It has been said that in Plymouth Colony, before being absorbed in the similar, but stronger, element of Puritanism from Boston, there were some Catholics. For instance, Miles Standish certainly came from a strongly Catholic family in England and did not join officially the colony church until much later than the time of his arrival in 1620. However, in the whole of Massachusetts, the Puritans, strongly anti-Catholic, were the main element. A Declaration of Rights of 1689 urged Massachusetts to extend toleration and freedom of worship to all Christians except Catholics.

Connecticut - strictly Congregational – no tolerance to Catholics.

New Hampshire – almost entirely indifferent and dissenters (their churches and worship) not opposed. However I cannot find much toleration for Catholics.

Rhode Island - There were some Catholics in this State, but in 1729 they were disfranchised, as they had been probably in 1664.

J. Moss Ives states that:

There was no sanctuary in Rhode Island for Roman Catholics in the days of Roger Williams. As late as 1680 Peleg Sanford, Governor of the

Province, reported to the Board of Trade in England that “as for Papists we know of none amongst us.”¹

There was a good reason why there were no Catholics in Rhode Island at this time. They were not wanted. Apparently a law was passed in 1664 expressly excluding Roman Catholics from the franchise.

Williams may have given an uneasy toleration to Quakers, but shows in his words an intense hatred of them. This hatred was exceeded only by his hatred of Catholics upon whom he showered all the bitterness and venom of which he was capable. He consigned both of these religions to the lake “that burns with fire and brimstone”; their foundation, he wrote, “laid deep upon the sand of rotten nature.”

New York – Under James II liberty of conscience was specifically granted in 1685 but an Act of 1734 barred and denied to Catholics any of the benefits of toleration. In spite of this, many Catholics were settled in this State, especially in the Northern portion, by the time of the Revolution.

New Jersey – In 1693 toleration was granted to all except Catholics.

Pennsylvania – In 1682 this State – William Penn’s colony, – began a

“holy experiment by which all persons living in this province shall in no way be molested or prejudiced in their religious persuasion or practice or in matter of faith or worship.”

The State became a refuge for persecuted Catholics and we find Catholics there from the beginning. There is a record of Mass being celebrated publicly in 1707. In fact, we know of repeated complaints that were made to London about this “Popish Mass.” In 1757 Father Harding, S.J., reported that there were 1,365 Catholics over the age of 12 who received the Sacraments, 378 of them living in Philadelphia. In 1778 General Howe took with him a “Roman Catholic Battalion of about 180 men with Colonel Alfred Clifton of St. Mary’s Parish.”

Delaware – In this State the Swedish Lutheran Church was established but after coming under British rule continued (after 1701) to have a toleration

¹ Ives, J. Moss, “Roger Williams, apostle of religious bigotry.” *Thought* Vol. 6, December 1931, pp. 478-492

similar to Pennsylvania. The oaths administered against Catholics were mitigated to the advantage of immigrants.

Maryland – Religious liberty, and a fuller measure of it than in any other State, came with the letters of instruction given by the second Lord Baltimore, a Catholic, to those setting out for the new world in the “Ark and the Dove” in 1634. They were told to be “silent upon all occasions of discourse concerning matters of religion.” This was a wonderful piece of advice for that day and time, for it simply meant that each man, when it came to religion, was to mind his own business. The Toleration Act of 1649 allowed freedom of conscience for all confirming the very practical sort of religious liberty already existing. Unfortunately, Maryland was not to continue in this tolerant manner but at a much later date enacted an “Act to prevent the Growth of Popery.” Thereafter Catholics found many obstacles in coming to Maryland.

QUEBEC ACT – When we consider the oppressive measures of the various States against the Catholics and the hatred and suspicion behind those measures, it is not surprising that one of the causes of the American Revolution was the Quebec Act of 1774. Coupled with the four so-called Intolerable Act (also known as the Coercive Acts), enacted by the British Parliament in retaliation for colonial acts of defiance, the fears and hatreds of American colonists were brought to dangerous heights.

The Quebec Act was intended to safeguard the rights of the French in Canada to their laws and their religion. This Act was but a further guarantee of liberty of conscience and the practice of the Catholic religion already given by the Treaty of Paris.

The pertinent wording of this Act is as follows:

"And for the more perfect security and Ease of the Minds of the Inhabitants of the said Province, it is hereby declared that His Majesty's Subjects, professing the Religion of the Church of Rome of, and in the said Province of Quebec (as the same is described in and by the said Proclamation and Commissions, and also of all the Territories, Part of the Province of Canada at the time of the Conquest thereof, which are hereby annexed during His Majesty's Pleasure to the said Government of Quebec) may have, hold and enjoy, the free exercise of the Religion of the Church of Rome, subject to the King's Supremacy."

By this granting of freedom in matters of religion this Quebec Act was obnoxious to the British Colonies in America. Perhaps it would not have been so if it had not extended the Province of Canada to include their former territory to the West and to the South. After the Treaty of Paris, Canada was of little importance to the Colonies – a sort of poor relative open to neglect and unworthy of any consideration. Americans scarcely mentioned it and always with contempt. Formerly as New France it could block any expansion of the British Colonies. But after the Treaty of Paris and the Royal Proclamation of 1763, Canada was no longer a hindrance. But now, with the passing of the Quebec Act in 1774, it seemed New France was to be reborn.

In 1773 the Canadians had sent a petition to Great Britain asking for

"the preservation of our former law, customs and privileges in their fullness – and the return to Canada of that territory possessed by it under the French Regime."

As Marcel Trudel remarked

"If we did not know that England had been for some time disposed to grant all this, we might say that the petition of 1773 was the basis for the passing of the law of 1774."

It is not surprising to find in England and the British Colonies an immediate reaction. Considering the anti-Catholic laws prevailing in both the old country and, as we have seen, in the American colonies, fear of Rome, bitterness and hate reared their ugly heads. The Congress sent a petition or address to the King declaring that the Quebec Act gave a legal existence to a religion which flooded England with blood and had spread hypocrisy, persecution, murder and revolt into all parts of the world. This view of the Quebec Act was widespread among the English colonists and was made use of to excite the passions of men and women. Demagogues harangued the multitudes and preachers and ministers from their pulpits filled the churches with vilifications against the threat of popish tyranny. Liberty of language – liberty of worship – liberty of conscience and all the rights of English – so they shouted – were threatened by the establishment of the Roman religion in Canada and its newly extended territories.

FRENCH CANADIAN – The American Congress, not content with an Address to the People of Great Britain and a Memorial to the inhabitants of the British Colonies, adopted an address to the people of Quebec on October 26, 1774, urging the Canadians to join the rebellion. In November of 1777 Congress invited the Canadians to enter into the union of States, and also proposing that they raise a battalion in the service of Congress. With the defeat of General Burgoyne, a Corps of 148 Canadians had been captured. Promotions were promised to any Canadian who enlisted recruits for a French legion and this legion would have as Chaplain “any Priest of Canada who would help to complete this battalion and promote the union of Canada with union of States.” However, such a Catholic and French battalion could not be completed. Perhaps the only priest who joined the Americans from Canada was Abbé François-Louis Chartier de Lotbinière – though we must not forget the actions of Abbé Gibault in getting his people in Illinois to take an oath of allegiance to the “Republic of Virginia.”

It should be noted that another attempt at a French Canadian Battalion in the service of the Congress was partially successful. After the fall of Montreal to Montgomery and Arnold in 1775, Canadian volunteers were organized into a regiment under the command of Colonel James Livingston. In January, 1776, after the death of General Montgomery, General Arnold continued the siege of Quebec – having with him a thousand men of whom two hundred were Canadian volunteers. How many of these were actually French I do not know, but the address of the Bishop of Quebec to the citizens of that place and his Mandement of 1776 to the rebel Canadians suggest that the number was not inconsiderable. More study could be given to this.

The duplicity of Congress with respect to Catholics was evident to all the Canadians and an anonymous letter of 1775 entitled “Oh this evil Congress – perfidious and two-faced” tells a little of the reaction of those who compared the different addresses of Congress. The pastorals and letters from the Bishop of Quebec were strongly in favour of Britain. The Mandement published in 1776 against those who joined the Americans is particularly pointed. In other letters and documents the local clergy were asked to enjoin loyalty and obedience to the Crown. If this clerical influence did nothing else it at least prevailed upon the local inhabitants to remain neutral for the most part.

The British, on the other hand did better. During the Invasion of Canada they succeeded in raising at least one regiment consisting of French. This regiment under Baron de Longueuil was directed to the relief of Fort St. Jean and in the fighting with the Americans it seems that the Canadians suffered the most casualties. I know nothing further about this battalion.

AMERICAN CATHOLIC LOYALISTS – In any discussion of Catholic Loyalists we must realize that the number of Catholics, as we stated in the beginning of this paper, was extremely small. Except for pockets here and there they were surrounded by an overwhelming number of Protestants. They were largely poor and unimportant and their neighbours and local Associations forced them at peril of their lives to join the local groups in favour of the Congress. The outside figure for loyalists coming to Canada has been stated as 100,000. This works out to one in every 45 persons in the Colonies. If the same proportion is applied to the Catholic group the number would be slightly over 500 Catholic Loyalists who would have come to Canada. We know that they numbered far in excess of this.

How many Catholics were in Loyalist Regiments we cannot truly estimate, but we do know that in the King's Royal Regiment of New York (Royal Green's) the greater part was composed of Highland Scots – almost entirely Roman Catholic. In this Regiment there were also enrolled many Irish and many Canadians. The names are known and their origins can be ascertained but by names alone one cannot tell their religion.

The first battalion counted 549 men, and with women, children and servants totalled 1462 souls, almost 40 % of the Loyalist settlers in Upper Canada. The second Battalion had only 199 who with their dependents totalled a mere 310, or 8 % – but together they amounted to almost half of all the famed U.E.L's. of Upper Canada.

In the first Battalion there were 35 officers with an average service of ten years, thirteen were born in Scotland, and ten of those thirteen were named Macdonell. In the second battalion, of 34 officers with an average service of seven years, ten were Scots but only two named Macdonell. Of the rank and file the best source of information is the two lists of Loyalists compiled by the compensation commission. In all, 964 members of the Royal Greens are recorded and 291 or 30 % have indisputably Scottish names. Of the 291 in turn, ten family names are borne by 100 individuals, or 38 % of the whole. Place of honour must go to the fruitful Macdonells who numbered one in every seven Scottish Yorkers.

A similar situation prevailed in the two battalions of the Royal Highland Emigrants commanded by Brigadier Allan MacLean. These battalions were known also as the 84th Regiment; the one mobilized in the Canadas saw action against the Americans, the other recruited in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island served guard duty only in the Maritimes. In addition Butler's Rangers also were recruited in part from the Highland Scots of Upper New York and thus had a fair proportion of Catholics.

Among exclusively Catholic Regiments in the service of Britain, there was that under Colonel Clifford of St. Mary's Parish in Philadelphia,

mentioned above under Pennsylvania. When the regiment was moved from Pennsylvania in the wake of General Howe they had 168 men enrolled. This does not seem a large number. But as it is doubtful that even 1500 Catholic men, women and children could be found in that city at the time of the Revolution, we should say that this number of Catholic volunteers was extraordinary. And if we are to accept the statistics of Paul Smith, and I think they are relatively good and probably more exact than any other, the Roman Catholic Volunteers at its maximum strength was estimated at 240 officers and men.

There was another regiment called the Volunteers of Ireland, with an estimated maximum strength of 871 officers and men under Lord Rawdon. It seems that towards the end of the Revolution these two regiments were combined. I may be wrong in also including two other regiments coming from states that had a greater number of Catholics than others, the New York Volunteers under Lieutenant-Colonel George Turnbull with 475 all ranks and the Maryland Loyalists under Lieutenant-Colonel James Chalmers with 425 all ranks.

At that time Roman Catholics were not allowed to join the British Army, but special permission was given for two Provincial regiments to be made up entirely of members of that religion. They were to come from New York's large Irish population. The units were called the Roman Catholic Volunteers and the Volunteers of Ireland.

The Roman Catholic Volunteers was a totally worthless unit, impossible to discipline. Two captains from the unit were courtmartialled for plundering, and some of the men ended up under the lash. Finally, in disgust, the army's commander ordered the unit disbanded in October, 1778, and sent the men into the Volunteers of Ireland. The latter were well disciplined and hard fighting. It received the ultimate honor for a Provincial unit when it was by war's end, designated a regular British regiment, the 105th Regiment of Foot. When one also considers the regular British Regiments and the Hessian mercenaries the number of Catholics is considerably augmented, but as these, are not normally considered Loyalist Troops they do not enter our calculations.

NOTE:

Father McGivern also spoke briefly on Father John McKenna, a Catholic priest of Irish birth who first accompanied Catholic tenants evicted by the Scottish Laird of Boisdale in 1770 to the Mohawk Valley in New York.

"Your memorialist who is an Irish Roman Catholic Priest, together with 300 Scotch and Irish emigrants of the same persuasion, embarked in the year 1773 at Fort William in Scotland and settled at Johnstown on the Mohawk River in New York, under the protection of Sir William Johnson, then Superintendent of Indian Affairs there."

At the time of the rebellion Father McKenna induced 'his' Catholic settlers to join the British side and the various regiments mentioned above, particularly the Royal Green's and the Royal Highland Emigrants. Father McGivern continued as follows:

Father McKenna was unquestionably the most active Chaplain among the Canadian militia. He celebrated Mass for his old parishioners, both soldiers and their families, now divided between Allan MacLean's camp and Sir John Johnson's. He also looked after the Hessian troops scattered in camps along the St. Lawrence from Montreal to Three Rivers – "going from company to company preaching and confessing in German, which he spoke fluently." He seems also to have had a fair knowledge of French with a command also of Gaelic and of English. Father McKenna accompanied various expeditions of these militia troops, especially he notes "that he was at Fort Stanwick under Lt. Colonel St. Leger." But his health was failing rapidly and late in 1778 he returned to Ireland where he lived for the rest of his life.

Father McKenna's fighting parish from the Mohawk Valley was finally settled in the Eastern part of what is now Ontario, but they were not long deprived of a pastor. When they had settled in Glengarry and Stormont in Ontario, Father Roderick McDonnell sailed to join his parents and kinsmen in Ontario in 1784 and two years later Father Alexander McDonnell came with some 600 settlers. This Alexander McDonnell was not the Alexander McDonnell who became the first Bishop of Kingston.

This story, as outlined here, is a very inadequate treatment of the subject of Catholic Loyalists in the American Revolution. It well deserves the study of historians and could perhaps be made the topic of several doctoral theses.