

Liberty's Exiles by Maya Jasanoff



Amanda Foreman

February 12 2011 12:01AM

This is Dr Maya Jasanoff's second book. Her first, *Edge of Empire* (2005), was a pioneering study of the passion that 18th-century European collectors had for "foreign" artefacts. It won the Duff Cooper Prize and placed Jasanoff high in the firmament of exciting new scholars. Six years later she has become indispensable to any student of Anglo-American history.

The forced evacuation of royalists (Americans loyal to the Crown) at the end of the Revolutionary War and its place in British imperial history are the focuses of *Liberty's Exiles*. Simon Schama wrote about the fate of black loyalists in *Rough Crossings*; Linda Colley highlighted persecution of white loyalists in *Captives*. But there has not been a comprehensive narrative of the community or an attempt to create a history that fully embraced the meaning and consequences of the loyalist diaspora.

Jasanoff makes three important claims. First, that the wandering loyalists helped to spread Britain's political and economic influence. Second, that their experience of colonial self-government hardened British attitudes to imperial government. Third, that their plight forced Britain to clarify its commitment to humanitarian ideals. Of the three, the third is the most interesting.

The popular American depiction of the revolution as a staid affair with only a few battles to liven things up receives a proper bashing. Compared with the 30,000 or more murdered by the Jacobins in France, the American Revolution was rather tame. But the barbarism inflicted on the loyalist population was no less cruel or inhumane. In Georgia, for example, "Join or Die" was not a slogan but a possibility. In addition to having his property confiscated, one prominent loyalist was burnt, tortured and scalped; many others were beaten before being tarred

and feathered. In New Jersey the loyalist Mrs Skinner and her ten children were kept prisoner in their cellar through the winter of 1775, living with the corpse of a 14-month-old baby who had died of cold.

The reputation of the Founding Fathers also takes a knock. George Washington rejected British pleas for amnesty for all loyalists. His intransigence meant that almost one American in forty suddenly had no right to property, no right to freedom from persecution and no future in their own country. Benjamin Franklin contributed to the loyalists' troubles by refusing to sign the peace treaty in Paris if any form of compensation for their lost property was included.

The British had no choice but to remove more than 100,000 soldiers and civilians from American soil as quickly as possible. Sir Guy Carleton, the former governor of Quebec, oversaw the evacuation. He faced several humanitarian crises at once as thousands of destitute refugees poured into New York. But the most stark was the life-or-death threat hanging over former slaves, since Washington was demanding their return. Carleton's response was to organise a kind of 18th-century Schindler's list, called the *Book of Negroes*. All blacks who could prove that they had been promised freedom for serving the Crown were allowed to sail in an evacuation ship. Three thousand had left New York by November 25, 1783, known as Evacuation Day.

Many of the refugees, black and white, ended up in England, where public and political pressure led to the creation of the Loyalist Claims Commission. Although unsatisfactory in many ways, the Commission recorded the claims of 3,225 loyalists and handed out £3,033,091 in compensation. Shadrack Furman, for example, received an annual pension of £18. As Jasanoff notes, this was an unprecedented action and a major development in the notion of national moral responsibility. Moreover, a group of citizens created a charity to help the new "black poor". The Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor raised more than £890 and helped to bolster the growing abolition movement. A large number of the black poor ended up participating in the good-intentioned but ill-fated Sierra Leone scheme. Those who went to British North America — as Canada was called then — fared better.

Jasanoff deftly weaves a number of personal narratives. Even the well-known ones, such as the story of Elizabeth Lichtenstein Johnston, a staple of Canadian history, are given a vibrant makeover. Johnston was forced to leave Georgia in 1782 and wandered with her family through Florida, Scotland and Jamaica until she found a permanent home in Nova Scotia. Johnston's Jamaica has never received such literary treatment from a Harvard historian: "At dusk, the tropics grew deafening . . . cawing birds, scuttling animals, the rhythmic crescendo of rattling insects. Bats dipped and ducked in the twilight; sticky-toed geckos scuttled over walls; vultures swooped into the trees and hunched up their ruffled shoulders to sleep."

One may quibble with Jasanoff's overoptimistic portrayal of Anglo-American relations after 1812. But *Liberty's Exiles* is not only a masterful historical study, it is also a jolly good read.