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A Caustic Look at Shelburne Society in 1787

THE FOUNDING OF THE LOYALIST TOWN of Shelburne, Nova Scotia, was a remarkable phenomenon, a traumatic relocation after the uprooting of the American revolution. Almost 10,000 Loyalists seeking land, provisions and security had descended upon this empty harbour of a poor and insignificant colony. There was bound to be confusion and conflict within the community for these people had been lifted out of their environment and placed, often with acquaintances of a short time, into a new, alien and fluid environment where old forms and standards meant little and status was in a state of flux.

The confusion and the conflict inevitably gave rise to criticism. One of the most critical treatments of the Loyalists of Shelburne is the description that follows. If one accepts fully the views of the author, then the Loyalists of Shelburne were the sensual, snobbish, lazy, cheating, litigious, drunken, irreligious (or fanatically religious), frustrated dregs of the American ports. Perhaps some were some of the above; perhaps a few were all, but certainly the Loyalists of Shelburne were not all as he described, and the document must be handled with some prudence.

Yet, even with its excesses and bias, the description still tells us much of the community and of the difficulties that it faced. In talking of the idleness in the town the author underlines the fact that the anticipated boom never really materialized and the economic promise was receding already. One is also made aware of the disorientation of these uprooted, thrown together as strangers in this sudden community, seeking to define and establish their place in a new society. Jacob Bailey, the Loyalist Anglican minister once wrote that it takes almost a decade to carve out a secure living from a new land. It would be even more difficult for these people because they had come, many of them being unlikely pioneers, from a richer, more settled pre-war way of life to seek new homes in a poorer, more barren colony and a crowded, economically confined community. The contrast led to frustration, discouragement and often despair.

NEIL MACKINNON

A Sketch of Shelburnian Manners Anno 1787¹

The Inhabitants of Shelburne from the highest to the lowest have a pitiable passion for finery, revelling & dancing & every Species of Sensual gratification.

1 M.G. 9, b9-14, vol. 1, Public Archives of Canada.

They vie with one another in making an external appearance in the public eye, as being persuaded, that the world will jud[g]e of them much more by this, than from their internal worth. The modish Sort of Females, ever studious to attract public notice, spare no expence to set off their persons with Shewish vanities. So much are they abject Slaves to Fashion! That charming-bewitching thing.

The higher orders of people have private dancing parties each consisting of a few families who live in a constant habit of intimacy with one another. The Dance takes place in rotation at each Family, where a Suitable repast is provided for the Guests. It is matter of regret, that the Assembly for the Season, tho' designed for promoting social & friendly Intercourse among neighbors, should yet become the occasion of Censoriousness, Affronts & ill will, thro' the imprudence of Some Forward, pert & Gay young people who assume consequential airs by shewing themselves reserved, haughty & distant towards those whom they deem their Inferiors, & by scoffing at proprieties as well as improprieties in dress & behaviour. Their shewish dress bespeaks a frivolous, loose & extravagant turn of mind. If you except their dress, diet & a few articles of furniture, everything else belonging to them indicate that they are of the Dregs of mankind. As further indications of this, might I not add the low kinds of artifice which they practise in order to gratify their inclination towards Gaiety & pleasure. Never were known greater mixtures of privy & meanness than many of the families here exhibit. Those among them who seem passionately fond of all kinds of delicious food & drink are not few in number. To gratify their desire after these, no expence is spared & to support this extravagance, recourse is had to iniquitous means. To them may be applied what was remarked by St. Paul as distinguishing traits in the Character of the Cretians(sic) "Whose God is their Belly & who glory in their shame". Officers of the army on Half pay & Loyal refugees who have had Compensation for their losses do in the general run give into fashionable extravagancies & follies, & the better to support these, the former in particular monopolize (if I may use the expression) almost every public office which is in the gift of Government.

The liberal Provision made for them allowing them a great deal of idle Time, & enabling them to live well at ease, their manners are loose & Corrupt; the generality of them being luxurious, mean spirited & subservient. The ruinous effects of luxury not limited by fortune have been so felt by some families as to reduce them to very straitened Circumstances, which has obliged them to content themselves w.t the bulk of mankind, the native Consequence of the necessity of Circumstances. It is fortunate for such at least that this necessity has made them temperate & frugal. Deprived of a multitude of animal enjoyts. w.t which they were infatuated in the days of ease & of affluence, they are less exposed to those temptations which might Corrupt & debase the hearts. To an extravagant passion for fine cloaths & sensual pleasure, they join an immoderate love of money which tempts many to practise roguish tricks. Thence it is that they have no Scruple to get gain by illicit trades, to import & to circulate base

Coppers, to make use of those gross methods of dishonest Gain, the false balance, deceitful weights, & illegal measures, to adulterate Spirituous liquors, & to make an artificial want of Several articles brought to market. Some few, by keeping a Sort of Grocery Shop, have raised & enriched themselves, while others bred up in the lap of ease & plenty, not having it in their power to add to their fortunes, have exhausted them & fallen to decay.

The bulk of the Inhabitants having been accustomed to a trading & rambling way of life during the late war, contracted an aversion to all kinds of work which are laborious. Add to this, that business being dull makes many idle hours in the day, which the inactive spend in hearing something new, in playing at games of hazard & in tipping or what may be termed a sort of sober intemperance. Then it is, that schemes of gainful artifice & commercial speculation are more common methods than hard labour & application for gaining a livelihood. Knavish, fraudulent tricks are so common in this place, that but few seem to blush at standing chargeable with them, because they are not branded with the disgrace they deserve. This trickish, disingenuous turn of mind is accompanied w.t a prones(sic) to harass with duns & vexatious law-suits. So true is this, that the Houses & lands in the settlement round are mostly encumbered with mortgages or attachments. This has been the fertile source of animosities & litigations. It is to be lamented that property is often taken away by Subtilty of law; the law being made an instrument of injury instead of personal Security. A man is too often oppressed where he expected Security, & the Dispenser of Justice becomes more terrible than a Highwayman.

An Insolent, & vagrant Habit so easily noticeable in the Inhabitants is contrasted with a Supine disregard, if not contempt of religion. Habituated to a wandering way of life during the late civil Commotions, & living amid the alarms of war, the hurry of business, & dissipations of pleasure, in a forgetfulness of God & divine things, they became regardless of religious Concerns. Hence they appear to have a greater zeal for any thing than religion. Of this the temporary houses of public worship both for Episcopalians & Presbyterians are striking evidences. Those religious edifices being mean & shabby exhibit no fair emblem of the Piety of the Inhabitants. They have suffered their desires, hopes & fears to be so engrossed either by the Cares or pleasures of life as to leave them no disposition for religious regards. This irreligious bias has been strengthened by blemishes in those who make an open & solemn profession of their pious faith & hope, and by the ridiculous extravagancies of Character so palpably glaring in Bigots & Enthusiasts which have thrown a disgrace on true religion. A Spirit of discontent & repining pervades the whole Settlement. When people accustomed to live easily, like many in this place, are obliged to work hard & to feel straits, they become dissatisfied & restless; suffering much by toil & want, breeds discontent & wretchedness, especially where they have no near prospect of bettering their Circumstances. After enduring much fatigue & many hardships, in a Country which does not afford people but very scanty provision, they

become impatient for a change of Scene. Happy as they may seem to be under an easy, free Government, the happiness of it is very little perceived or felt, neither Rulers nor ruled having virtue enough to forego immediate petty Gains for the public good. Accordingly we find that not a few who enjoy posts of profits, betray their trusts & embazzle the public money & that almost every public undertaking is made a Job of.

People brought up in the lap of ease & plenty cannot endure the straits & inconveniencies to which the inhabitants of a new settlement are Subjected. Having been accustomed to what we call good living in a plentiful Country, they cannot enjoy life out of it. And even numbers who removed from the British dominions in Europe, previous to the late war, have contracted a restless, roving Spirit, the effect of an ardent desire after those pleasures & Conveniences which they once enjoyed there, but which they may now seek in vain. To many those days of ease, of pleasure & of happiness are no more. All they have got by tasting the Sweets of a fertily pleasant Country, is a restless desire after ease & plenty, which disturbs their tranquility & distracts their minds. After living very easily, they cannot be contented w.t a scanty allowance of the Comforts of life. Hence it is, that they are tormenting their brains w.t some scheme of private utility & are immoderately solicitous saying “what shall we eat? what shall we drink? wherewith shall we be clothed?” while they think within themselves “what shall we do to fare sumptuously, to wear fine apparel & to live in grandeur?” Sure am I that people who are strangers to the enjoyments & advantages of rich Countries, may be accounted happier, as enjoying more of an easy peace of mind.

[The document closes with a note in a different but near contemporary hand stating that “The preceding M.S. is the production and holograph of Mr. Fraser of Miramichi...formerly a district Judge of the Province of New Brunswick and afterwards established as an extensive Merchant in Halifax.”]