

REVIEW OF**STEPHEN DAVIDSON, *BLACK LOYALISTS IN NEW BRUNSWICK: THE LIVES OF EIGHT AFRICAN AMERICANS IN COLONIAL NEW BRUNSWICK, 1783–1834*. HALIFAX: FORMAC PUBLISHING COMPANY LIMITED, 2020.****Bonnie Huskins**

Black Loyalists in New Brunswick meticulously reconstructs the lives of nine Black settlers (eight free Black loyalists and an enslaved woman) who joined the loyalist exodus to colonial New Brunswick after the American Revolution.¹ The book is divided into two parts: “New Hope in New Brunswick” examines the experiences of Black loyalists who resettled in the colony, while Part Two focuses on those who left New Brunswick in a “Second Exodus” to Sierra Leone. This collection of biographies ranges from the first Black loyalist in New Brunswick, Thomas Hide, who arrived as an indentured servant; to Nancy Mosely, who became the prime suspect in New Brunswick’s first murder trial; and Richard Corankapoon, who dropped his slave name in favour of an African name, and travelled on foot from Saint John to Halifax to join a migration to West Africa.

This volume is the second of Stephen Davidson’s books to be published by Formac, the first being *Birchtown and the Black Loyalist Experience: From 1775 to the Present* (2019). The United Empire Loyalists Association of Canada has also published many of Davidson’s works including *The Burdens of Loyalty: Refugee Tales from the First American Civil War* (2015) as well as entries in their magazine the *Loyalist Gazette* and in their newsletter *Loyalist Trails*. It is primarily in *Loyalist Trails* that we see Davidson develop his interest in loyalist biography, including the lives of Black loyalists.

When thinking about Black history in Canada, it is typical to start with the refugees who arrived in British North America as part of the Underground Railroad. Although the railroad included a station in Tomlinson Lake, New Brunswick, most of the literature focuses on those who made their way to Canada West (Ontario). As Davidson discusses in his introduction entitled “Laying the Foundation for the Black Experience in Canada”, the country’s first Black settlers were not the nineteenth-century runaways who migrated to central Canada, but the 3,500–4,000 free Black settlers and 2,000 slaves who arrived as part of the loyalist migration to New Brunswick and Nova Scotia in the 1780s.

Moreover, the Underground Railroad often lends itself to “feel good” history, allowing Canadians to bask in the glow of their heroic efforts to rescue a disadvantaged population. This is an example of what Harvey Amani Whitfield calls the “slavery to freedom” paradigm, a hegemonic narrative that associates the United States with bondage and Canada with freedom.² Not only is this a naïve interpretation of the Underground Railroad, but it also disregards the “single largest influx of enslaved people in Canadian history” (9) who arrived as the property of white loyalists, as well as the racism faced by free Black settlers in the Maritimes. Davidson suggests that the prospect of Black loyalists resettling in the colony was an “unprecedented moment in history” when New Brunswick had the potential to be a new kind of experiment wherein Blacks co-existed on equal terms with whites. This was encapsulated in the promise of the Quaker settlement of Belle View in Beaver Harbour, New Brunswick, formed with the intention of creating the “first and only...anti-slavery settlement in all of North America” (10). The founders, including eighty Baptists, seven indentured servants, and twelve Black loyalists, posted a sign at the entrance of the settlement “NO SLAVE MASTERS ADMITTED”,

but a fire destroyed the settlement as well as their dream, and the founders left for “better opportunities” along the Bay of Fundy (11).

The colony continued to be based on white privilege and bondage. Within a few years of the arrival of the Black loyalists in New Brunswick, the charter of the first incorporated city of Canada, Saint John, explicitly forbade Blacks from living and working within the boundaries of the settlement. Black loyalists also had difficulties acquiring land grants, and many were relegated to indentured servitude and low wage manual labour.

In presenting the history of Black loyalists and slaves in the form of a series of biographical vignettes, this book follows a broader historiographical trend that highlights the value of biography in attempting to understand the nature of slavery and racism in Canada. Whitfield notes that “One way to understand slavery is to examine biographical sketches of enslaved people in the Maritimes and other parts of Canada.” These sources are usually created by white society and must be read critically. Yet, as Whitfield argues, “if we read these sources carefully, we start to get a sense of the lives of individual enslaved people”.³ Davidson shows considerable skill in reconstructing the lives of these nine individuals using fragmentary documents. Most Black loyalists and enslaved people did not leave behind memoirs, diaries, or correspondences.

Instead, as Davidson noted in a Champlain Society Witness to Yesterday podcast (<https://champlainsociety.utpjournals.press/podcast/wty/the-black-loyalists-of-new-brunswick>), he was forced to put together “random jigsaw puzzle pieces” including probate records, christening rolls, victualling musters, and ledgers such as the *Book of Negroes*. The Black settlers featured in this book, therefore, are not a cross-section of the population, but rather “the handful of accounts that *can* be pieced together from available resources” (16). Given the significance of these fragmentary sources, the main weakness of the book is that it does not include references, so that interested readers may conduct further research on Black loyalists. Nor is there a suggested readings section. Thus, the book should be paired with the podcast where Davidson elaborates on the relevant historical literature.

It should be noted that Davidson is not a member of the Black community in New Brunswick. The book does allude to local grassroots efforts to memorialize the population, such as the establishment of a Black settler’s house at Kings Landing (Gordon House), and the removal of racist place names in the province. In the podcast we learn that he has connections to the New Brunswick Black History Society. However, Davidson’s acknowledgement of the efforts of Black descendants to recover and preserve their own history is not fleshed out as it is *Birchtown and the Black Loyalist Experience*, or in W.A. Spray’s *The Blacks in New Brunswick* (1972/2021). This book is a good “starting point” in “recovering the long-neglected stories of these founding settlers of Canada” (15). But as Black loyalist descendent Jennifer Dow notes, there must also be opportunities for the Black community in New Brunswick to write their own history (<https://nbmediacoop.org/tag/jennifer-dow/>).

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Notes

¹ Although the subtitle of the book suggests that “eight African Americans” will be profiled, there are actually nine, including Cairo, an enslaved woman who was married to one of the Black loyalists.

² Harvey Amani Whitfield, “Black Loyalists and Black Slaves in Maritime Canada,” *History Compass*, Vol. 5, Issue 6 (November 2007), 1982.

³ Harvey Amani Whitfield, “White Archives, Black Fragments: Problems and Possibilities in Telling the Lives of Enslaved Black People in the Maritimes,” *Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. 101, no 3 (September 2020), 326–27.