

Book Report by Ivy Trumpour

Land of the Loyalists, Their struggle to shape the Maritimes by Ronald Rees

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The book begins with a description of the ideals of Sir Guy Carleton and others to build New Ireland as a province superior and more prosperous than rebellious New England and loyal New Scotland. It would conform to the British monarchical system of large estates with many workers. At the time of the Loyalist influx, there was already a population of 4,000 to 5,000 Indigenous people, Acadians and New England planters in Nova Scotia. In what later became New Brunswick, land had been granted to officers from the Seven Years War in 1765. Prince Edward Island was unavailable because it was owned by absent proprietors.

Land was allocated to Loyalists according to rank, from 100 acres for privates to 1,000 acres for officers. A group of 55 prominent Loyalists, later known as the Committee of Fifty-five, expected grants of 5,000 acres each. Not surprisingly, this resulted in tension.

The estate system of landowners and tenants that operated in England was not sustainable in Nova Scotia where climate and soils were poor. Landowners built mansions on grounds that were wilderness and few settlers were interested in tenant farming when they could obtain their own land. The end result was that the elite became penniless while tradesmen and merchants prospered.

Within a short time span 30,000 Loyalist refugees arrived in Nova Scotia expecting to be granted a piece of ground to start a new life. There is an explanation of the survey process as it proceeded in different locations. The surveys could not progress quickly enough for people to occupy their lots and many spent the first winter in tents or huts.

Black Loyalists were promised lots, but generally got the least desirable locations if any at all, and over 1,000 of them left for Sierra Leone in 1792.

The section on building the towns describes the town plans. Port Roseway, renamed Shelburne, had a population of 8,500 in 1884, and for a short time was the largest town in Canada, and the fourth largest in North America. There are pictures and explanations of the kinds of houses, churches and public buildings that were erected in the various towns.

Some public and official buildings were constructed on a grand scale to emulate the affluence of England and New England, although made of timber rather than cost prohibitive stone. Sir John Wentworth's Government House in Halifax was particularly opulent. The Charlotte County courthouse in St. Andrews gave evidence of devoted loyalty to the monarchy. Numerous drawings and pictures supplement the text.

The Anglican establishment's deference to grand churches and symbolism did not resonate with many of the general population who rejected class systems of the wealthy. Explanations of interactions and tensions among religious and educational institutions are enlightening.

This book is organized by the subjects of land description, settlement, and buildings. It does not deal with geographic areas or towns separately, rather it compares and discusses the subject, for example manors, as it applies in several different places. With my woefully inadequate knowledge of the local geography, and my familiarity of the wide open spaces of the prairies, I found this jumping around from one unfamiliar place to another disconcerting. Once I gave up worrying about where a particular creek or settlement might be and accepted that it was in the overall general area, I could concentrate on the information at hand.

Reading this was a worthwhile way of learning the who, how and why of Loyalist settlement in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. If you have ancestors who lived in a situation that is discussed in the book, it gives useful insight into their experiences.