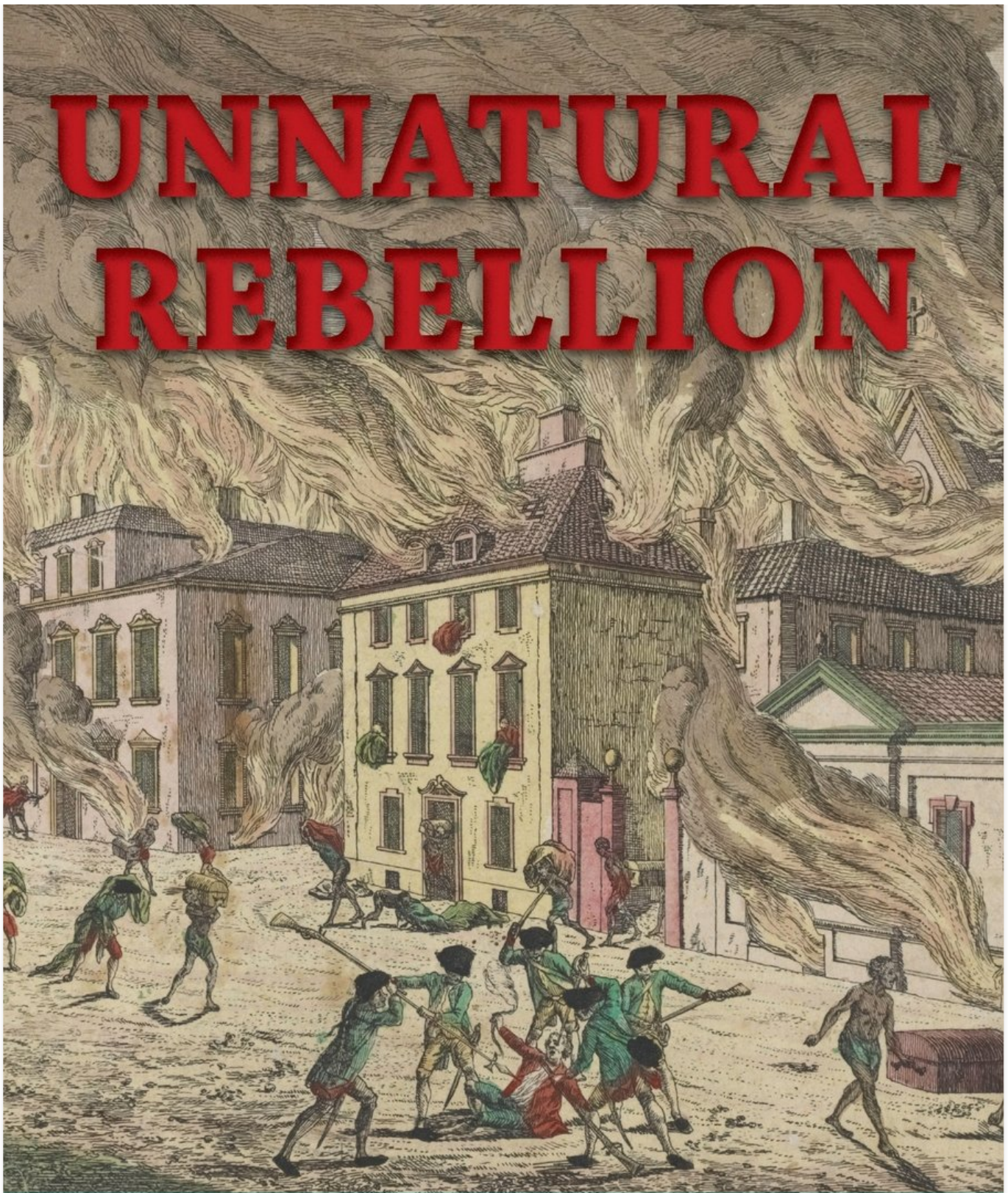


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Unnatural Rebellion: Loyalists in New York City During the Revolution

UNNATURAL REBELLION



LOYALISTS IN NEW YORK CITY DURING THE REVOLUTION

Ruma Chopra

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Unnatural Rebellion: Loyalists in New York City During the Revolution.
By Ruma Chopra (Charlottesville, Va. and London: University of Virginia Press, 2011). Pp. 304. Cloth, \$35.00

On the afternoon of August 12, 1776, Philip Vickers Fithian, a chaplain in Colonel Nathaniel Heard's regiment of New Jersey militia, heard some distressing news concerning the size of the British fleet nearing his home colony's shoreline. An express had arrived from Major General Nathanael Greene warning Patriot forces within the vicinity of New York City that the "Fleet which entered within Sandy Hook yesterday consists of fifty Sail." The vessels carried part of the army with which the British ministry hoped to squelch the colonial rebellion and restore wayward American colonists to their proper sense of loyalty to the crown. The report prompted Fithian to plead for divine protection. "Be on our Side, O Lord," he wrote in his famous diary, "& we fear them not!"[1]

Fithian's prayers went unanswered. A month later in September, after British forces had driven Fithian and the rest of the Patriot defenders off of Long Island, British and Hessian soldiers landed in New York City. Colonists in the city welcomed them not with fear and disdain, but, as the *New-York Gazette and Weekly Mercury* noted, New Yorkers "expressed the Feelings of their Hearts by loud Acclamations and Shouts of Applause." "No less patriotic than the revolutionaries," as Ruma Chopra argues in *Unnatural Rebellion: Loyalists in New York City During the Revolution*, "the glorious cause they promoted was reunion within the empire and not American independence" (1). Chopra seeks to explain the enthusiasm behind the Loyalists' joyful celebration of British army's arrival, and their ultimate sense of disappointment when the British failed to restore the King's peace in the American colonies.

Chopra's study borrows its title from a common Loyalist description of the colonial rebellion. Loyal Americans across social strata used various forms of the term "unnatural rebellion" to characterize a revolution that they feared would fundamentally reshape political society. In their view, colonial separation from Great Britain threatened the delicate balance between monarchy, aristocracy, and the common people. Loyalists worried that if the rebels symbolically killed the king they would give rise to mobocracy and excessive provincialism, a dystopian scenario that promised mob rule and civil war between the colonies.

Historians' interest in Loyalists has waxed and waned over the last few decades. In the 1970s, historians such as Bernard Bailyn and John E. Ferling examined the Loyalist experience in the American Revolution by focusing on prominent individuals.[2] Men such as Massachusetts Governor Thomas Hutchinson and Pennsylvania's Joseph Galloway, a delegate to the First Continental Congress, provided Bailyn and Ferling with windows into the Loyalist mind. They wished to understand how leading colonists loyal to the crown wrestled with the collapse of imperial authority in the colonies and dealt with ostracism within their own communities. In the 1980s and 1990s, however, Loyalist studies took a back seat to the renewed debate between Neo-Whig and Neo-Progressive historians over Patriot motivations in their struggle against the British. But in recent years historians have shown a renewed interest in the Loyalist perspective. These scholars have sought to find a middle ground between the Neo-Whig and Neo-Progressive schools by emphasizing Loyalists' ideological commitment to empire and the British Constitution while remaining mindful of their actors' wishes to protect their property and social standing, contributing to what could be called the "New Loyalist" historiography. They have also sought to reframe the American Revolution as a colonial civil war contained within an imperial conflict by re-writing Loyalists back into the story.[3]

Chopra advances this "New Loyalist" historiography in her efforts to explain the unnatural qualities of the rebellion. Readers of this work will find little new with respect to the political and economic history of late colonial and revolutionary New York City. Indeed, Chopra's first chapter is an excellent synthesis of the recent literature on colonial political economy, imperial politics, and political mobilization in urban spaces.[4] But she tells her story in such an elegant way that her argument breathes

new life into an old tale of the tension between British and civilian authorities in the city. She departs from Judith L. Van Buskirk's now ten-year-old social history, *Generous Enemies: Patriots and Loyalists in Revolutionary New York*, by emphasizing the division amongst Loyalists in their quest for reunion. Equally important, Chopra shows how the military authorities in the city beginning in 1776 made the Loyalists' strategies for restoring the natural order stillborn.

In reframing our understanding of New York City's Loyalists, Chopra argues that historians have too often considered Whig ideology only from the Patriot perspective. In her view, the Loyalist quest for reunion with Great Britain should be considered in the same Whiggish light. Loyalists feared that American independence would lead to American political slavery, brought on by self-interested Patriots who quelled political dissent and minority opinions. Loyalists, just as angry about British imperial reforms in the wake of the Seven Years' War (lasting from 1754 to 1761 in North America), saw in Patriots the very tyranny that the rebels claimed to be at work in London. Reconciliation with the empire would bring renewed prosperity while staving off political and social discord. Yet, as Chopra argues, Loyalists in New York City discovered during the war that they "valued the symbols of the British Empire – legal protection of property and liberty, civil government, and constitutional processes – more deeply than the Crown's representatives in New York or in London" (223). Like their Patriot adversaries, Loyal Americans in the city possessed an idealized vision of the British Constitution that did not meet the test of reality.

Chopra's first two chapters deal with the nature of the city in the late colonial period and New Yorkers' responses to Parliament's attempts to exert its authority over the colonies in late 1760s and early 1770s. The story is a familiar one. Roughly equidistant between Halifax and the Caribbean, the city's inhabitants could leverage their geographical position to take the "political pulse" of the other colonies, conduct a lucrative trade with Great Britain and the West Indies, and assist in forestalling any French incursions into the Hudson River-Lake Champlain region. The city was, in Chopra's estimation, as close to an imperial capital in North America as the British ever achieved (7-8).

The city's inhabitants had profited from war contracting during the Seven Years' War, but when the British redeployed forces away from New

York in 1761 it sent the province into a recession. The British ministry's attempts at imperial reforms in the late 1760s and the early 1770s exacerbated political and economic unrest in the city. New Yorkers joined their fellow colonial subjects in protesting Parliament's actions, but Chopra resists earlier Whig historiography in calling the Liberty Boys and other New Yorkers who resisted the Stamp Act and subsequent Parliamentary actions as proto-republican.[5] She frames their objections within the context of an "English tradition of protest based on the righteous justification of a moral economy" (22). The city elites who led the anti-taxation movement were "moderates, fearful of losing their social standing" and losing their access to imperial markets (26). The more radical Liberty Boys seem to be revolutionaries only in hindsight. Hardly anyone in New York, she rightly contends, wanted to break the bonds of empire before 1774.

Her remaining seven chapters hinge largely on a single theme – the tension between the city elite's desire to restore civilian rule as quickly as possible and the military authority's rejection of such a move in favor of military expediency. The strain between the colonial leadership and the military commanders was evident soon after New Yorkers welcomed the army ashore in the fall of 1776. Loyalists like Councilor William Smith, Jr. believed that reinstating civilian government would be the best means to heal the rift between mother country and colony. They did not gather into a political assembly to declare their loyalty because, as Chopra tells us, the city's Loyalists thought such bodies – as was the case of the Continental Congress – an extra-legal challenge to Parliament's sovereignty. Instead, they hoped that General William Howe, who led the army into the city, would exercise his authority to call for a new legislature to formally accept the king's pardon once rebel armies and committees had been disbanded. Loyalists believed that possibility was near after General George Washington's defeats on Long Island and Harlem Heights (59).

But in September 1776, General Howe appointed a military commandant to rule the city. Though Loyalists tried to minimize the importance of Washington's victories at Trenton and Princeton in December, General Howe knew they had bolstered rebel spirits. Loyalists from the countryside began pouring into the city to escape the rebel armies, doubling the city's population to 11,000 by February 1777. That winter the

Loyalist press argued that the rebel cause would only lead to endless civil war, while the British Constitution offered stability and continued economic wealth. Chopra notices a shift in rhetoric after the fall of Saratoga in October and as a Franco-American alliance seemed more likely. Loyalists began to assert the economic danger of independence to a greater degree, but they also shifted away from arguments centered on constitutional liberty and began to focus on symbols of the empire in the form of the king and the army (90).

Disgusted with General Howe's talk of leniency as a means to effect reconciliation and dismayed at British withdrawal from Philadelphia in the summer of 1778, the Loyalist camp began to split between moderates who wanted to continue pursuing civilian rule and militants who wanted to strike a decisive blow against the rebels. Moderates continued to believe that restoration of civilian rule would produce stability in a city wrecked by inflation, dwindling food supplies, and social unrest due in part to the influx of refugees. While they could not convince the new commander-in-chief General Sir Henry Clinton, who ascended to office after Howe had resigned after the 1777 campaigns, to lift the military administration, leading merchants did succeed in convincing the British to reopen the Atlantic trade. They hoped that reigniting the civilian economy would lead eventually to the return of civil government (134).

Refugees from the hinterlands and nearby colonies, dispossessed of their property and social standing by Patriot forces, began calling for a concentrated military effort to destroy the rebels. William Franklin, William Tryon, and other Loyalists pleaded with General Clinton to allow them to form units to directly engage with rebel forces. When Clinton largely rebuffed their requests, viewing Loyalists and their militia tradition as unreliable and undisciplined, the Loyalists began lobbying to Lord George Germain in London to make their case. In the summer of 1780, Franklin, Tryon, and their colleagues had convinced Germain to permit the formation of the Associated Loyalists, a military unit that sought to harass the rebels around Rhode Island and Sandy Hook, NJ. But "Clinton made sure the Associated Loyalists posed no threat to British authority or strategy. Fundamentally, Clinton distrusted the organization and felt its potential to obstruct his own operations far outweighed any potential advantages." Worried that the organization would prove more of a nuisance than an asset, and make him look bad

for his inability to finish off the rebels, Clinton restricted the Associated Loyalists' access to resources needed to fight a Partisan war (173).

Though Lord Germain had returned civilian powers to newly appointed governor Major General James Robertson in the fall of 1779 in an attempt to quiet the moderate Loyalists, Clinton's refusal to declare British held territory at the King's Peace made Germain's actions a moot point. Clinton continued to believe that civilian rule, particularly the restoration of civil courts, would get in the way of fighting the war. In the end the argument over civilian rule mattered little. Chopra notes that in the tenth section of the Articles of Capitulation following the British defeat at Yorktown in October of 1781, the British agreed to language that officially abandoned New York's and other Loyalists. They were not to be treated as prisoners of war by Patriot forces, as would be British regulars, but as treasonous citizens (194).

What is striking about Chopra's work is the extent to which she shows the persistence in the moderate belief that a return to civilian rule could lead to an empire reborn. Even in May 1782, some believed that Sir Guy Carleton's appointment to replace Clinton would produce negotiations that would lead to reunion. Five thousand white Loyalists and their 10,000 slaves had removed to the city from the southern colonies following the British defeat at Yorktown, a fact that Loyalists hoped would enhance their argument that a significant population lived in a territory governed by British law (199-202). Chopra might have pushed this notion further by discussing the British ministry's perspective on this argument. True, by the fall of Yorktown the British public and ministry had become increasingly tired of what they saw as a meaningless and expensive conflict that drained critical resources away from their struggle with the French and Spanish. Yet the Loyalists' tenacity in holding onto this sliver of hope, reinforced by a decently entrenched military position in the city, makes one wonder if the British ever seriously considered holding the city. In the end, thirty-five thousand Loyalists insufficiently wealthy or well connected to travel to England left New York for British North America following the Treaty of Paris in 1783. Many more stayed in the United States and attempted to make the best of an "unnatural" situation.

Chopra's book does much to illuminate the Loyalist perspective in New York City during the American Revolution. It does much to force us to

reconsider the internal struggle amongst Loyalists and the ways in which ideology and self-interest shaped that conflict as well as the tension between civilian and military authorities. While her argument is convincing, it does raise questions about the Loyalist effort in general to restore the empire. Given that New Yorkers believed that an assembly to declare their loyalty was, like the Continental Congress, an extra-legal institution in violation of Parliamentary sovereignty, one wonders what steps, if any, did New Yorkers take to coordinate with fellow Loyalists beyond the immediate vicinity of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Chopra argues that Loyalists hoped that Clinton's victories in the southern colonies would turn the tide of the war. Did New Yorkers seek to help southern militant Loyalists in the Carolinas and Georgia, despite the southerners' near destruction in the early phases of the war? To what extent did Loyalists in other colonies hold the same Whiggish perspective as their New York brethren? In recasting a familiar story, Chopra's fine work provokes more questions than it can answer.

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[1] "Philip Vickers Fithian: Journal, August 11-30, 1776" in John H. Rhodehamel, ed., *The American Revolution: Writings from the War of Independence* (New York: Library of America, Fithian, 2001), 171.

[2] Bernard Bailyn, *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1974); John E. Ferling, *The Loyalist Mind: Joseph Galloway and the American Revolution* (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977).

[3] A sample of these works include Judith L. Van Buskirk, *Generous Enemies: Patriots and Loyalists in Revolutionary New York* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles: America's Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011).

[4] On the republicanization of the monarchy and colonial life see chapter six of Gordon S. Wood, *Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1992).



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