

**Rebecca Brannon.** *From Revolution to Reunion: The Reintegration of the South Carolina Loyalists.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2016. Illustrations. 232 pp. \$49.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-61117-668-1.

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The Revolutionary War was in many settings a civil war, and perhaps no state was so riven by internal struggles during the revolution as South Carolina. After the fall of Charleston in 1780, South Carolinians experienced a violent internecine conflict that lasted more than two years. Particularly in the backcountry, South Carolina Loyalists and Patriots set upon each other with a shocking ferocity that escalated through a series of atrocities on both sides. The conflict exposed profound rifts in South Carolina society that cut across class, neighborhood, and even family lines. Yet the ink was scarcely dry on the Treaty of Paris of 1783 when South Carolina (and South Carolinians) had, for the most part, forgiven the state's Loyalists.

In *From Revolution to Reunion: The Reintegration of South Carolina Loyalists*, Rebecca Brannon, associate professor of history at James Madison University, attempts to make sense of a fascinating paradox: South Carolinians and their lawmakers "offered the most generous reconciliation to Loyalists ... despite suffering the worst extremes of violent civil war" (p. 10). She convincingly argues that South Carolinians, driven by social, political, and economic imperatives, engaged in a process of integration that was significantly more generous than that of other states. Indeed, Brannon's account strongly suggests that it was pre-

cisely the brutality and destructiveness of the conflict in the Palmetto State that led South Carolinians to favor reconciliation over retribution.

Many other historians of Loyalism have emphasized the retributive behavior of victorious Patriots, and at least superficially, South Carolina's Confiscation and Amercement Acts, passed by the General Assembly at the so-called Jacksonborough Assembly in 1782, appear harsh and unforgiving in their treatment of the state's Loyalist population. The Confiscation Act enumerated more than two hundred Loyalists and confiscated their property in the state, including property in enslaved people. The Amercement Act placed a one-time tax levy on the estates of Loyalists, with the percentage determined case by case based on the extent and circumstances of their contributions to the Loyalist cause.

But despite the apparent harshness of these measures, Brannon argues, “the vast majority of Loyalists dodged a bullet” (p. 51). Confiscation mostly affected a small group of Lowcountry elites and British merchants whose wealth made them low-hanging fruit for the assembly. Additionally, a waiting period built into the law provided a chance for many Loyalists to “petition or even pester” the assembly into exempting them from these punishments (p. 56). Moreover, many of those listed in the act had already departed the state.

In the aftermath of these acts, many of the Loyalists singled out for punishment duly petitioned the legislature for leniency. Their petitions served as a form of “polite abasement ... that granted legislators license to take pleasure in their suffering” (p. 63). Simultaneously, through their pathos, they invited the same legislators to empathize with the plight of the fallen petitioners. South Carolina’s revolutionary leaders thus experienced the psychological satisfaction of exacting revenge without pursuing a vindictive agenda that would have deepened the scars of war. This process of forgiveness and reintegration was smoothed to some extent because, as Brannon observes early in the book, “strongly ideological South Carolinians were rare” (p. ix). In the midst of the chaos that followed the British capture of Charleston, most South Carolina Loyalists remained loyal out of necessity or pragmatism more than any devotion to the cause. In their petitions, Loyalists were eager to emphasize this reality, one that was well understood by many of their erstwhile enemies after the war. They cited a range of justifications for their decisions, recapitulating their traumatic wartime experiences to “rationalize their behavior” (p. 81).

Successful petitioners also needed to demonstrate the support of their local communities for reintegration. Individual Loyalists, mostly Lowcountry elites, faced the unenviable task of seeking the forgiveness of their neighbors, whose support in the form of written endorsements was an

important factor in the success of a petition. In an astute reading of these sources, Brannon illuminates, if indirectly, what must have been a very painful process indeed for Loyalists. It not only was important to the petition but also was, in a face-to-face society, the most important step in the process of reconciliation. To vouch for their neighbors, South Carolinians had to be convinced not just that the former Loyalists were sincerely remorseful but also that they could reenter the newly established republican polity as people of free will, capable of exhibiting “volitional citizenship reliant on the honorable character of male citizens” (p. 96). Their efforts were mostly fruitful, and in effect the General Assembly simply ratified community decisions by enacting a mass clemency bill in 1784. The new state constitution of 1790 restored citizenship rights to former Loyalists, practically completing the path to reintegration. But Brannon shows that the petitioning process must have been instrumental in fostering the healing that occurred in the many South Carolina communities devastated by civil war.

In less than a decade, then, former enemies of the state were readmitted into civil society in South Carolina. So thorough was this reintegration that, as time advanced, “the true history of the Revolution as a civil war was excised from public memory” (p. 10). The fact that significant numbers of South Carolinians had opposed the revolution was completely effaced from narratives, like David Ramsay’s *History of the American Revolution* (1789) that emphasized American unity in the face of British tyranny. The responsibility for any divisions that occurred lay squarely at the feet of the British oppressors. In a particularly compelling example, Brannon observes that Ann Pamela Cunningham, founder of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association and namesake of a Columbia chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, was in fact descended from South Carolina Loyalists, a family that included William “Bloody Bill” Cunningham, among the war’s most notorious partisan fighters. Ann Pamela Cunningham’s activities

in the antebellum era were not so much rooted in personal hypocrisy as in “society-wide decisions to manage public conversations about the war and its combatants carefully” in the interest of social and political unity (p. 140).

On the one hand, this process of forgetting was salutary, even essential, allowing South Carolinians like Christopher Gadsden (himself held captive by British troops during part of the war) to observe later that “he that forgets and forgives most ... is the best citizen” (p. 1). Indeed, Brannon suggests that the first generations of South Carolinians were in a sense paradigmatic in their willingness to forgive and forget. The postwar experience in South Carolina was a “particularly American way” to approach the aftermath of a civil war inasmuch as it embodied a “focus on the future and ... deliberate ignorance of the past” (p. 11). But the postrevolutionary healing process portrayed in *From Revolution to Reunion* had a tragic coda. Having no memory of the trauma of internecine conflict, Palmetto State firebrands seeking disunion were “too confident in their ability to wage a civil war again” (p. 164). Antebellum South Carolinians were not, to paraphrase George Santayana, condemned to repeat the past, but they charged headlong into the political crises of the nineteenth century apparently oblivious to an object lesson in the potentially dire consequences of disunion.

*From Revolution to Reunion* focuses on white Loyalists, as they were the only South Carolinians for whom reconciliation was possible. Clearly, the presence of a black majority was a reason that whites in South Carolina prized political unity, for more reasons than one. After the war, “South Carolinians correctly divined that a society in which men were focused on getting rich was a society with better things to do than rehearse old wrongs” (p. 111). “Getting rich,” of course, involved importing slaves, which South Carolinians resumed apace after the war. But Brannon concludes persuasively that the existence of an enslaved population was

not the most important factor in shaping the process of integration. South Carolina, she observes, went well beyond other southern states in its generosity to Loyalists. Still, Brannon is sensitive throughout the book to the ways that the institution of slavery stalked the memory of the revolution in South Carolina. Noting that antebellum South Carolinians regularly toasted revolutionary heroes like George Washington, Francis Marion, and Thomas Sumter alongside John C. Calhoun as avatars of unified resistance to tyranny, Brannon observes tellingly: “Then again they were slaveholders all” (p. 154).

*From Revolution to Reunion* is expansive in its research, persuasive in its arguments, and genuinely sympathetic in its treatment of sources generated by people living through the most traumatic of times. With this excellent study, Brannon has made a significant contribution to our understanding of Loyalism, historical memory, and nation building in the early republic.

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