

## Disciple of St Paul: Jonathan Boucher and the American Revolution

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American Loyalists have been cast – when they have received enough attention to be cast – as reactionaries, well-meaning though misguided Tories, and “Benedict Arnolds.” *Damnant quodnon intelligent*. Many students of the American Revolution have not quite fully appreciated, nor understood, the motivation of men such as Jonathan Boucher to remain loyal to King and Country. To Boucher and fellow Loyalists, Country meant America – not England – a fact sometimes overlooked. A number of arguments used to explain the Loyalist mindset are familiar: conservatism, English identity, aristocracy, Anglicanism, to name a few. While these are not wrong explanations, they fail to portray the most holistic interpretation of Loyalism possible. By using Rev. Boucher’s autobiography *Reminiscences of an American Loyalist* this paper will analyze his understanding of Loyalism through post-modern textual methodology<sup>1</sup>. In consequence, Rev. Boucher’s religious impetus for refusing to partake in revolutionary flite will be considered with an empathy sometimes wanting amidst American historiography of the Revolution.

To begin with the historiography of Boucher and his politics: even his more generous commentators write of him with only varying degrees of pathetic patronization. One of his most sympathetic champions, Robert G. Walker, writing in the *William and Mary Quarterly* of 1945, admits: “Jonathan Boucher, when he has not been completely ignored, has received undeservedly severe treatment at the hands of American literary historians.”<sup>2</sup> His best attempt to assuage that undeservedly severe treatment: “That Boucher saw only half of this [the benefit of emerging republican democracy] makes him worthy of respect. He was not merely a Tory divine who preached quaint, confused, naïve political doctrines; he was a man who had more in common with the impious rebels against whom he preached than either he or they were at the time able to recognize.”<sup>3</sup> Significantly, the only

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<sup>1</sup> Let it be noted that the useful tool of linguistic analysis sharpened by the post-modernists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is not an endorsement of the logical conclusions of the theory.

<sup>2</sup> Robert G. Walker, “Jonathan Boucher: The Champion of the Minority,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Jan., 1945): 3-14. Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

way Walker can attempt to rehabilitate Boucher's reputation among his fellow Americans is to suggest that, in the end, he was really *almost* "one of us." Dr. Walker is acting *almost* the good historian here. The inability to recommend Boucher on his own merits points to the fact that American historians are often unwilling to take seriously Loyalist proclivities. They are not seen as anything beyond "quaint, confused, naïve." Given the importance of the Revolution in American history, modern historians of the Revolutionary period owe a debt to these colonists, and to themselves, to better understand the Loyalism men like Boucher fled, bled, and sometimes died, for.

In an article published seven years before Walker's, Director of Proviso Junior College in Maywood, Illinois, R.W. Marshall,<sup>4</sup> wrote in the *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*: "The unescapable [sic] conclusion of all of Boucher's arguments was, if anyone had believed him, that, in his own words, 'Liberty consists in subserviency to law' and 'where there is no law there is no liberty.' But he convinced no one. Nevertheless, what he believed, he preached."<sup>5</sup> Again, we find in Marshall a belittling of Boucher afforded by an anti-Loyalist perspective emerging from overriding nationalistic sensibilities. Marshall, at least, comes closer to Boucher's fundamental reason for opposing the bloody revolution: his theology. He cites Boucher's faith-informed position toward Indians, for example: "We found not these wretched tenants of the woods a whit more savage than our progenitors appeared to Julius Caesar...what else is the early history of nations now the most polished, but the history of Indians?"<sup>6</sup> He points out that on one Easter Monday Boucher "baptized three hundred thirteen negro adults and lectured extempore to upwards of one thousand!"<sup>7</sup> Going further, he highlights a 1763 sermon by Boucher: "If ever these colonies, now filled with slaves, be improved to their utmost capacity, an essential part of the improvement must be the abolition of slavery."<sup>8</sup> Perhaps Boucher had in mind John Wesley's reminder to the colonists who cried enslavement by Britain that the true slaves in the colonies were Negroes. For, Wesley was well aware of said blindness as is evidenced in his letter to abolitionist William Wilberforce in 1791: "Dear Sir: Unless the divine power has raised you to be as *Athanasius contra mundum*, I see not how

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<sup>4</sup> Now Proviso Township High school. A sign, perhaps, of the less-than-significant treatment Boucher was receiving that Walker alludes to.

<sup>5</sup> R.W. Marshall, "What Jonathan Boucher Preached," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (Jan., 1938): 1-12. Virginia Historical Society. Accessed 28/10/2011. 11.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

you can go through your glorious enterprise in opposing that execrable villainy... you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils ...”<sup>9</sup>

Lastly, Marshall does well to draw attention to Boucher’s influence. Boucher was Rector of St Anne’s Parish in Annapolis, and so *ex officio* the Chaplain of the Lower House of the Assembly at Maryland. As Boucher tells us in his autobiography: “The management of the Assembly was left very much to me; and hardly a bill was brought in which I did not either draw or at least revise... All the Governor’s<sup>10</sup> speeches, messages, etc., and also some pretty important and lengthy papers from the Council were of my drawing up.”<sup>11</sup> In addition, he mentions the fact that the Governors of King’s College in New York<sup>12</sup> conferred upon him the honorary degree of Master of Arts for “his services to Church and State.”<sup>13</sup> Given this influence, Marshall’s conclusion that “he influenced no one” is left in considerable doubt.

To this author’s knowledge, the modern, American historian most willing to proscribe to Boucher kinder motives is Mark Noll, now the Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History at Notre Dame. Perhaps tellingly, Noll is interested in exploring religious motivation for American causations. In an article published two days before the United States bicentennial, Noll wrote:

Jonathan Boucher of Maryland was another Anglican who discovered a foundation for Loyalism in the Bible. In a sermon “On Civil Liberty, Passive Obedience, and Nonresistance” preached in 1775, Boucher argued that... the New Testament did, however, speak clearly of political obligations in demanding “obedience to the laws of every country, in every kind or form of government.” “Obedience to Government is every man’s duty,” Boucher went on, “because it is every man’s interest; but it is particularly incumbent on Christians, because it is enjoined by the positive commands of God.”<sup>14</sup>

Even so, Noll twice reminds his readers that the political commitments of Christian Loyalists may have to be rejected on moral grounds, leaving room for his readers to distance themselves from this disconcerting political rebel. However, he acknowledges that only very recently has serious study of American Loyalists begun.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Yrigoyen, Jr., *John Wesley: Holiness of Heart and Life*. A Letter to William Wilberforce, Balam, 24 February, 1791. 1996. <http://gbgm-umc.org/wmw/wesley/wilber.stm>. Accessed 29/10/2011.

<sup>10</sup> Maryland’s Governor Eden, with whom Boucher was on intimate social terms.

<sup>11</sup> Marshall, “What Jonathan Boucher Preached,” 2.

<sup>12</sup> Now Columbia University, New York.

<sup>13</sup> Marshall, “What Jonathan Boucher Preached,” 3.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Noll, “Tory Believers: Which Higher Loyalty?” *Christianity Today* (2 July 1976): 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

And so the serious study of colonial loyalists continues. Robin D.G. Kelley, in his *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* argues that individuals' lives must be seen as a "totality of lived experiences."<sup>16</sup> In other words, the historian must take into account the life and environment of an individual in order to understand his actions. In Kelley's case, he examines the life of Malcolm X in such a way, attempting to explain the "riddle of the Zoot suit." Boucher and Malcolm X lived centuries and worldviews apart; nevertheless, both were men to stand out of a crowd. It remains to be fully explained what deep convictions a man of comfortable means possessed to stand-out for a political cause amid turbulent times. In keeping with Kelley's method of textual criticism we may turn to *Reminiscences of an American Loyalist* itself.

Published by Boucher's grandson, Jonathan Bouchier<sup>17</sup>, *Reminiscences* allows us not an insignificant glimpse into the mind of Jonathan Boucher. Only thirty-eight pages are directly related to the conflict in the Americas; the rest being a fairly detailed summary, in flowing narrative, of his early life in England, move to the American colonies, eventual flight back to the Isles, and his ensuing elder years. It thus provides the primary opportunity to assess the totality of Boucher's lived experiences: the very method by which we may better understand his Loyalist convictions, and those of his peers. Lawrence H. Leder comments in *The Colonial Legacy: Loyalist Historians*: "historical literature has a refractive quality: it mirrors both the time *about* which it was written and the time *in* which it was written."<sup>18</sup> Indeed, regarding his autobiography Boucher himself implores in the introduction: "read it with the same spirit with which it is written."<sup>19</sup> Thus it shall be taken.

The historian may be tempted to ascribe to Boucher, an Anglican priest, purely esoteric sentiment towards the Church of England as an explanation for his Loyalism. This, as his autobiography reveals, is not the case. Writing about a time near 1761: "I was now...as much at a loss as ever as to a profession for life. My thoughts had long been withdrawn from the Church; nor could my late course of life in any sense have qualified me for it. Yet happily...a train of unforeseen circumstances...at last made me an ecclesiastic."<sup>20</sup> It seems that Boucher landed, as it were,

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16 Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 181.

<sup>17</sup> Apparently a change to the surname, which Jonathan Boucher says occurred several times throughout the family's long history.

<sup>18</sup> Leder, Lawrence H. *The Colonial Legacy: Loyalist Historians*, Ed. Leder. Harper & Row, New York, 1971. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Boucher, *Reminiscences of an American Loyalist*, ed. John Bouchier. (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, Inc. 1925).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

upon the Orders in the Church of England by mistake. In any event, it was not the consummation of a life-long career ambition.

Boucher's first real encounter with the Church of England occurred in 1755 when he was 17 years of age. His then schoolmaster, Mr. Ritson, was an Anglican parson, and took especial concern for the young Boucher; a kindness he never forgot. Still, Boucher shares with us no experiences of angel visitants or divine calls; not even an attraction to the bells and smells of Anglican liturgy. Nor was he particularly pious: "I was often in mischief, and still oftener suspected of mischief."<sup>21</sup> In fact, when already ordained a priest, Boucher confesses to nearly losing his Christian faith altogether.

His readings of popular Enlightenment deists and agnostics of the time were apparently a cause of great anxiety to him.<sup>22</sup> In the end, he retained his orthodox faith. How he did so speaks volumes of his political Loyalism. "In this manner did I *search the Scriptures*, [italics original] with the single view of ascertaining whether they do or do not teach the doctrine of a co-essential Trinity in the one essence of the Deity...the result of this laborious examination was a full conviction both of the truth and importance of the doctrine of the Trinity."<sup>23</sup> A little further on Boucher states: "My ruling passion was, if possible, to see to the bottom of things..."<sup>24</sup> Here we discover two important aspects of Boucher's mind: first, an evangelical approach to the Bible; second, a determination to see arguments through to the bitter end. This straightforward interpretation of Scripture and analytical stubbornness formed during this pivotal moment in his life would come to determine his reaction to the political crisis of 1775.

Other than assumptions of inordinate affection toward the Church of England, American historians too often equate Loyalism with aristocracy – or at the very least – snobbery. Boucher possessed little of either. While it is true that he cites Vanity as his chief sin, he rightly recognizes it as a general fault of humanity in general (and if Vanity be the cause of Loyalism, surely several of the chief revolutionaries wound-up on the wrong side). Of his upbringing Boucher tell us: "I remember only that we lived in such a state of penury and hardship as I have never since seen equaled, no, not even in parish almshouses."<sup>25</sup> His situation would steadily improve; however, he retained significant debts as a result of living a lifestyle slightly above what his normal salary could afford – partly due to his forced return trans-Atlantic voyage – for the rest of his life.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

Neither maudlin affection for the Church of England nor highbrow sentiments for England proper kept Jonathan Boucher from endorsing the American Revolution. His faith did. A Faith built, as we have seen, on an unshakable conviction in the truthfulness of Scripture. In his last sermons to his congregation in Annapolis, Boucher readily admits the carelessness, and sometimes inconsideration, of the Crown. Nevertheless, he decries the revolutionaries as those who are detached from divine law, much in the way Edmund Burke would decry the Revolution in France a decade later. Yet Burke endorsed the American Revolution; what kept Boucher from doing the same? In short, the words of St. Paul.

Citing St. Paul's epistle to the church in Galatia, Boucher decreed in his last sermons that "liberty" carries no political connotation, as patriotic preachers assumed, but rather spoke of release from the dominion of sin.<sup>26</sup> As the Authorized Version has it: "Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage."<sup>27</sup> Also too, in the back of Boucher's trained mind, would exist St. Paul's words to the 1<sup>st</sup> century church in Rome: "Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves."<sup>28</sup> Boucher's congregation did not appreciate his interpretation. Indeed, dissension came to such a head that on the Sundays he was allowed to preach "like Nehemiah," ascending the pulpit steps "with my sermon in one hand and a loaded pistol in the other."<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, Boucher was unable to change his mind. "All the answer I gave to these threats was in my sermons, in which I uniformly and resolutely declared that I never could suffer any merely human authority to intimidate me from performing what in my conscience I believed and know to be my duty to God and His Church."<sup>30</sup> Amazingly, it was not until several escapes from enraged mobs – one which took place in his church – that he "began to have serious thoughts of making my retreat to England."<sup>31</sup>

Boucher was no starry-eyed Romantic for England, its Church, or conservative politics. He was not quaint, confused, or naïve. The totality of his lived experiences shows he was a serious thinker with a deep concern for the truth. He was a disciple of St. Paul. When finally forced to "retreat," as he says, from his country of America to England, the

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<sup>26</sup> Noll, "Tory Believers: Which Higher Loyalty?," 4.

<sup>27</sup> King James Bible.

<sup>28</sup> King James Bible.

<sup>29</sup> Boucher, *Reminiscences of an American Loyalist*, 122.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

former felt foreign to him.<sup>32</sup> There is a profound sadness in his account, which betrays his strong feelings for his flock, friends, and estate, in Maryland. In a parting letter to George Washington, whose son-in-law he once tutored, he writes: “there cannot be anything named of which I am more strongly convinced, than I am that all those who with you are promoting the present apparently popular measures are the true enemies of their country...with your Cause I renounce you; and now, for the last time, subscribe myself, Sir, Your humble servant J.B.”<sup>33</sup> Daniel Richter has recently invited us to view American history *Facing East from Indian Country*; so we might begin to see American history facing Loyally. We may, after all, not agree with Jonathan Boucher’s convictions. At the least may we respect them as the emanations of an imminently respectable man?

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 136-141.