

**J.I. LITTLE, *LOYALTIES IN CONFLICT:
A CANADIAN BORDERLAND IN WAR
AND REBELLION, 1812–1840***

Toronto, Buffalo and London; University of Toronto Press, 2008.

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As an historian of Canada's military experience, whose career and personal choices have landed him in Quebec's Eastern Townships for a significant share of each year, I could hardly avoid reflecting on the military experience of the region. What did the Townshippers do to defend themselves in the War of 1812? Upper Canadians, we know, developed a highly fanciful history of a valiant and loyal militia, fending off Yankee hordes, but the Townships were populated, in large measure, by veterans and sympathizers with the Revolutionary War. Quite apart from the notorious indifference of their Vermont neighbors to the 1812 struggle, why did Townshippers largely escape the attention of both sides?

Even more curious was the region's response to the Lower Canadian rebellions of 1837 and 1838. Before the outbreak, Stanstead voters and their elected members appeared highly sympathetic to the *Patriote* cause. In their location along a long land border with the United States, Townshippers would have played a decisive role by smuggling arms and American sympathizers to the *Patriotes* of the Richelieu valley and beyond. Yet the pre-1837 sympathy vanished after only a handful of arrests. While most of the British and their local allies regarded their neighbours with the mingled suspicion and contempt that underlay much of the local resentment and radicalism, the border held. However ill-armed or deprived of officers, local people did their duty and helped to stifle the cross-border 1838 invasion led by Robert Nelson.

Fortunately for the Townships and for the rest of us who are curious about how political loyalties were shaped and re-shaped in this era of conflict and stress, Jack Little, aided by Georgeville's John Scott, has taken very considerable trouble to explain the political allegiances of a region which defied the simplistic categories applied

by outsiders. Lord Durham may have believed that the Papineau rebellion was a struggle between French and English. No doubt Papineau and most Quebec historians have found this to be a convenient explanation. Why, then, did so many Townshippers send members to the Legislative Assembly who lined up with the *Patriotes* and their 92 Resolutions? Why did they change so suddenly when Papineau's movement drifted toward violence? Without giving much attention to Papineau's arguments, Little insists that francophone *Patriotes* committed a gross tactical error when they turned their backs on Townshippers' grievances, from the lack of roads to the arrogance of the British officials sent to manage their affairs.

A book about regional politics earns its place in the University of Toronto Press's "Social History" series because Little casts aside most conventional categories of political allegiance. Wherever they might have fitted in the partisan spectrum, Townshippers were united by a populist pragmatism born of the hardships and brutal priorities of pioneer life. If many had moved on from the stony Vermont fields they had first occupied, they adapted to the obvious demands of self-interest. In 1812, Governor Prevost sensibly decided to protect Montreal and to forget about the long, indefensible Townships border. Accordingly, he demanded that the Townships' militia abandon their families and farms and march a hundred miles to serve his priorities. Politely but firmly, almost all of them refused. On rare occasions, when Americans invaded their turf, they fought back. Meanwhile, Townshippers made all they could out of smuggling livestock across the line to feed Lower Canadians and Upper Canadians too.

In 1837-38, they were again neutral in practice because their pragmatic sense told them that the *Patriotes* were led by fools, a fact most non-Quebec historians have trouble refuting. When attacked, as in the much inflated raid into Potton Township, they resisted. One of Little's many contributions in this book is to remind readers that Townshippers paid a price for their loyalty. Living close to an unmarked, undefended border, those who had resisted in 1837-38 would be victims of lawless and vengeful marauders for years after, in a series of murders and fires that, more than anything official, dissolved the recurrent official illusion that Townshippers were merely displaced American republicans.