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Antiquity and Loyalist Counter-Narrative in Revolutionary America, 1765-1776

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Abstract

This study explores one aspect of the American founding that scholarship has not yet fully investigated, namely, the ways in which loyalist advocates used the ancient literature of Greece and Rome to make their case against the Revolution. Neither an apologetic for the loyalist side of the revolutionary controversy nor a survey of loyalist intellectual thought, this study examines how the loyalist persuasion, much like the spirit of Whig patriotism, stemmed naturally from longstanding and earnest convictions concerning the tenets of English liberty, ideas anchored in the models and antimodels of classical antiquity. Like their patriot countrymen, loyalists shared an intense concern with conspiracies against liberty and a profound interest in the literature of the ancient past, and they looked to the classics to help them interpret the signs of the times and add rhetorical force and legitimacy to their polemic. While underestimating the important ways loyalists looked to antiquity to make their case against the Revolution, we have come to assume that classical republicanism naturally favored a radical response to the transatlantic crisis in the 1760s and 70s. However, a closer examination of the loyalists' use of the ancient literature reveals evidence to the contrary; the classical canon served both patriot and loyalist political strategies in the pre-revolutionary years. Affirming the significance of antiquity in the colonies for all British Americans, the author seeks to recapture a broader view of the ideological origins of the American founding, examining the loyalists' use of the classics to assess the influence of the ancient literature in the colonial imagination and fully appreciate the radicalism of the decade leading up to 1776.

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