

Glory and Joy Crown the King!

Tory Songs from the American Revolution

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Some university level anthologies of Canadian literature (in English) give as their first poetry samples a few items from the Loyalist writers, Jonathon Odell and Joseph Stansbury. That this recognition is grudging can be judged by the speed with which many professors rush through these few poems, if they discuss them at all during the semester. This attitude is catching; during the three or four semesters I taught CanLit, at least one student complained about the few minutes we did devote to these antique and supposedly inferior writers. I know that even those who did not complain were anxious to get to Margaret Atwood and Leonard Cohen.¹

As a former American, I have at least a slight attraction to these poets; Yankeeland does, after all, treasure this portion of its history, and my memory of reading Johnny Tremain in grade five has always contributed a sentimental pleasure to my adult dislike of contemporary Toryism. Odell, at least, was an agent for Benedict Arnold, the ace, all-American traitor—who says that glamor only entered CanLit with Susan Musgrave?

Like other poets and songwriters of their seething era, Odell and Stansbury wrote for the tavern and political rally, as well as for newspaper publication. Whether either of them ever imagined the possibility of book publication (let alone the notion that "posterity" might take an interest in their work) is impossible to answer; remember that book publication was pretty spotty in North America until well into the century after their war. Indeed, it was only in 1860 that Winthrop Sargent, of Gloster, Mississippi, produced an anthology of their work, and *he* had to go to Albany, New York, to get his volume printed.²

Sargent, who also produced a companion volume, *The Loyalist Poetry of the Revolution*, which included these two poets and a number of their colleagues, calls Odell and Stansbury "the two most important loyal versifiers of the time" (xv), adding that "...it cannot be denied that their productions, as here given, are of very unequal merit and comprise much that, in all probability, they themselves would on occasion have excluded" (xvi).

Suitably for political poetry, Sargent cannot resist a few opportunities to index his own position.³ Not surprisingly, Canada is invisible to this American: "...of the Tory or Loyal party, the general reader can hardly say more than that it was numerous, brave, and intelligent; and that when it was swept away from the face of the land, its members seem to have vanished from the public observation in the same moment with the cause which they had sustained" (Sargent xiii). Well, no, Winthrop, one wants to holler across the century; they came to Canada, and at least some of what concerned them remains significant to many of us.

All of this leaves us with some poetry (I won't repeat the Frosty insult of referring to this as "verse") that is not likely to grab contemporary undergraduates. Not being inclined to sneer at these writers myself (bad karma, if nothing else), I cast about for a way to attempt to make these poems seem worth students' time, to make at least a line or two stick in a very few heads. I very quickly noted that the first Odell piece in the text we were using (the Oxford Anthology) is entitled "Song For a Fishing Party near Burlington, on the Delaware, in 1776" and that the second one is called "A Birthday Song." Of course, until free verse became the norm, it was quite common to equate *poetry*

and *song*, and the first item seems a bit too reflective to imagine it sung, at least in a social context:

How sweet is the season, the sky how serene;
On Delaware's banks how delightful the scene;
The Prince of the Rivers, his waves all asleep,
In silence majestic glides on to the Deep.

.....

We have wants, we confess, but are free from the care
Of those that abound, yet have nothing to spare:
Serene as the sky, as the river serene,
We are happy to want envy, malice and spleen.

.....

While thousands around us, misled by a few,
The Phantoms of pride and ambition pursue,
With pity their fatal delusion we see;
And wish all the world were as happy as we!

But "A Birthday Song" offered greater potential. For one thing, turning the page, one discovers that Stansbury used the very same verse form for his own "God Save the King." This form can be termed a variation of ballad meter. Each stanza consists of two quatrains, all in tetrameter, set off by a line in trimeter. The boundary lines are, obviously, refrains; the typesetting suggests that the empty beat should occur before the final line—if I knew what tune Odell and Stansbury had in mind, this might make more sense to me, but the habit of resting at the end of a line seems so common to me that I hear the verses, as I say, in ballad meter. As it happened, most lines begin with a pickup note, so the downbeated "God save..." and "Glory and joy" lines begin with a firmness that seems to me to reflect the indentations in the printed versions.⁴

The two poems are so similar that I have no doubt that either the melody was known to both writers and to their readers or that one was copying the other. It's also possible that the verse format was simply one used for toasts; toasting was a popular activity in those days, and as the revolutionary era began to threaten the aristocratic establishment, toasting the king and his order became commonplace. In any event, if there had been a tune for these poems, it was lost to me.⁵

Born in London in 1740, *Joseph Stansbury* came to Philadelphia at the age of 27 and was active in the business, literary, and social life of the city. As tension between the colonies and Britain developed, "...his political opinions brought him into direct opposition to a number of his ... friends: but despite the ready wit with which he assailed the whigs and the personal adherence that he gave the royal standard, he still continued to command their good-will" (Sargent 98). While Stansbury strongly opposed both independence and armed resistance to Britain, he was concerned that the colonies receive fair play. As Sargent puts it, he wished to "...resist as Englishmen, not Americans" (98). His "A New Song" (to the tune of "Cesar and Pompey were both of them, &c.") begins

When Britain determined to tax us at pleasure,
We rose as one Man, and opposed the measure.

but concludes

For Freedom indeed we supposed we were
fighting;

But this sort of Freedom's not very inviting.

When the British army retreated from Philadelphia to New York, Stansbury followed them. After the war, he found refuge in Nova Scotia, but was not happy. He wrote a well known poem to his wife, advising her to remain in warm Pennsylvania. Interestingly, he refers to her as Cordelia, the steadfast daughter of Shakespeare's *Lear*. (Was he casting himself as the French king, the steadfast Kent, *Lear* himself?) He returned to Philadelphia, but was hounded out of the city. He destroyed much of his verse, so much of it that Sargent feels that his "genius" is inadequately represented by what survived (102); whether this was done to eliminate incriminating evidence or out of a spirit of reconciliation will never be known. The following poem was written on the back of the manuscript of his version of "God Save The King," both presumably written at the war's end.

The United States

Now this War at length is o'er;
Let us think of it no more.
Every Party Lie or Name,
Cancel as our mutual Shame.
Bid each wound of Faction close,
Blushing we were ever Foes.

Now restored to Peace again,
Active Commerce ploughs the Main;
All the arts of Civil Life
Swift succeed to Martial Strife;
Britain now allows their claim,
Rising Empire, Wealth, and Fame.

The melody I set "A Birthday Song" to was one I had written some years earlier to be able to sing William Cowper's "Sweet Meat Has Sour Sauce," a bitter antislavery poem. Cowper's poem is also in a modified ballad format, so I had to modify the melody only slightly. I brought this melody into my CanLit sections, and I noted that while Odell's lines might not be entirely satisfying as "poetry" to be read silently in the study, they probably worked quite well in the tavern, with a few beers and some elbow-flashing by people who took the cause seriously. I don't know whether or not I convinced anyone that the enterprise was worth taking seriously, but I did make them sing along, and some eyes did seem to twinkle after a few choruses.

Earlier this year, I remembered this exercise and thought it might be useful for the *Bulletin*. I went to the library, looked up Sargent's anthology and some other material on the Loyalist poets, finding them interesting, if topical, and finding that there was considerable justification to think of them as songwriters as well as poets. Stansbury, in particular, had a reputation as a fine singer, and Sargent's volume includes seven items (out of 48) for which airs are recommended.

The poems and songs of Odell and Stansbury offer insights we don't frequently get into the American Revolution. Stansbury's estimation of the motives of the American Patriots,

Ye Members of Congress and Councils of State,
By Rebellion who hope to become rich and great.

reminded me that Jefferson softened up the original concerns of the rebels from "life, liberty, and property," to the familiar, perhaps somewhat equivocal, "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." During some of the dark years of the war, Stansbury asserted that the trouble had all been caused by the selfishness of the colonists, which had grown haughty because the mother country had not stifled it more quickly.

Then cheer up, my lads: if the Prospect grows rougher,
Remember from whence, and for whom 'tis, you suffer:
From Men whom mild Laws, and too happy Condition,
Have puffed up with Pride and inflam'd with Sedition:
For George, whose reluctance to punish Offenders
Has strengthened the hands of these upstart Pretenders.

Stansbury also responded to what scholar M.C. Tyler acknowledges as "the arbitrary and even despotic measures often resorted to by the Revolutionary leaders":

We fondly imagined that all future Story
Should tell of our Justice, our Freedom and Glory:
We laugh'd at Oppression, not dreaming or fearing
That Men would be banish'd without charge or hearing;
For Freedom indeed we supposed we were fighting;
But this sort of Freedom's not very inviting.

As it happened, the story of the birth of that nation did indeed tell only of justice, freedom, and glory; in the histories available to me during my 50s boyhood, tyranny and viciousness were customs of the old world, brought to the new only where Europe (especially southern Europe) maintained its influence.

According to Tyler, while political satirists on both sides of the revolutionary battle followed the old broadside custom of anonymity, "...for obvious reasons of prudence, this habit was adhered to with peculiar strictness among writers on the Loyalist side..." (79). Americans have enjoyed complaining about the vindictive habits of other successful revolutionaries, from France to Cuba, but they were perhaps prevented from creating their own trail of blood only by the ocean between themselves and most of their opponents. Even so, do not mistake tar and feather, the popular punishment for failure to support the Revolution, for anything less than torture—hot tar adheres to delicate skin like napalm. Stansbury hoped to return to Philadelphia after the war, but a letter shoved under his door—suggesting that he might die, but not live, there—warned him away.

It's been many years since I perused an American history text, and I don't know whether even now the USA gets the full account of its birth that the Loyalist poets help to provide. Since Canada now as well as then has been defined by the USA as much as by England (through the always vexed questions, How are we like them? How are we not like them?), and since in some very important ways Canada was founded by the creation of the USA, the story of the Loyalist poets is part of our story and ought to be remembered. In recent years, Northrup Frye and George Grant attempted to convince us that the old time Tories (as well as those who remain of the more ruddy variety) stood for more than self-interest and the might-made right of corporations. The work of Odell and Stansbury sometimes reminds us of this founding vision of Canada:

True Protestant friends to fair Liberty's cause,
To decorum, good order, religion and laws,
From avarice, jealousy, perfidy, free;
We wish all the world were as happy as we.



¹ I stymied them even then—every CanLit survey I was involved in, as TA or instructor, used only the first volume of the Oxford Anthology, which ends with Douglas LePan and W.O. Mitchell. Buy me a good beer, and we can argue about the importance of a grounding in a literature's history.

² Therein, one suspects, lies a tale. Southerners have always been notably zealous patriots (to the USA or the CSA or, as in the case of most Confederate generals, from R.E. Lee on down, to both). Sargent's edition of *The Loyal Verses* was consciously antiquarian, using *fs* for *ss*, *cs* connected to *ts*, and stuff like that. Southerners had a penchant for the antique, the medieval, the courtly (they were great readers of Sir Walter Scott), so perhaps what one song called "The Good Old Colony Times"

Jonathon Odell was an Anglican priest and physician in his native New Jersey after a period as surgeon with the army in the West Indies. Like Stansbury, he objected to many of the actions of Parliament but did not conclude that the proper response to these injustices was independence; unlike Stansbury, he was never able to reconcile himself to the new regime. Interestingly, he was slow to take public action as a Loyalist. Indeed, the "Song for a Fishing Party" reflects his initial willingness to remain out of the fight. However, in 1775, he was arrested by a committee of revolutionists who had opened a couple of his letters and found some Tory phrasing of which they disapproved. Was this invasion of privacy and detention *patriotism* or *terrorism*? I suppose it depends on which side you are on, as usual.

Odell wrote a birthday ode, similar in stance to "The Birthday Song," which was sung (to an air that was not recorded) at a celebration shortly before independence was proclaimed. Because of this and a general awareness of his sympathies, he was put under house arrest until he escaped (leaving his wife and three children) early in 1777. On his way to New York, he suffered at least one very narrow escape, having been hidden in a secret room in a house while armed men ransacked houses looking for Tories.

Odell produced fewer poems and songs, apparently, than Stansbury, but he seems to have had a stronger formal education and wrote several long satires in heroic couplets, after the neoclassical models of Dryden and Pope, in which Error battles with Truth and Anarchy is loosed by Folly, and so on. Definitely *not* material for undergrads these days, even if most references did not require swamps of footnotes!

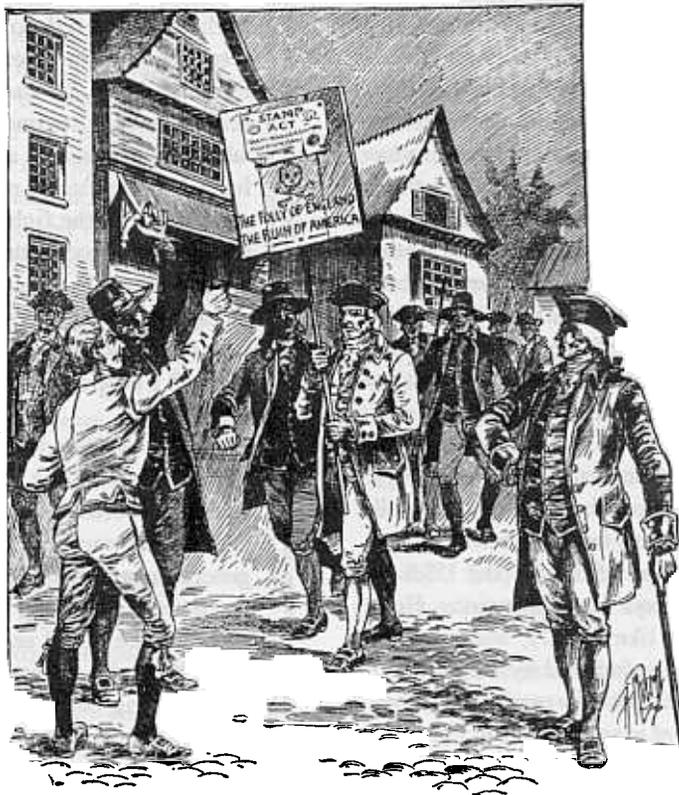
Unlike Stansbury, Odell could not make his peace with the new nation. He, too, went to Nova Scotia, where he remained as a prominent citizen and, according to C. Holliday, "...always had some pet scheme up his sleeve by which he hoped to ... make the United States a Paradise for Loyalists" (136).

were rather more appealing in Mississippi than in Philadelphia.

Sargent bemoaned in his Preface that while the Brits could go to all the way back to Arthurian legend (which isn't exactly true, but it sounded good) for the sources of their national song, "We have no such legendary treasures to draw upon." In a sense, his moan is the old, "We ain't got no folklore because the printing press killed it" rant, tempered with "We ain't as cul-

tured as Europe," and "Europe don't take us seriously." He certainly was looking for roots among the former enemies.

³ The present author happily maintains this tradition of political intrusion. He hopes that his point of view will not cloud his perception, however. Consider Holliday's comparison of the literary abilities of the two groups: "The Tory satires that have been handed down to this day are ... decidedly less talented than similar efforts by the patriots.... But whatever the Tories' sheets lacked in quantity and genius, they apparently endeavoured to make up in epithets, foul language, and an irritating condescension" (107). I have not attempted enough readings of either group to judge that the Tories were more or less talented than the Whigs, but there is neither abundance of epithets nor foul language in the items I've read. "Irritating condescension," I'm afraid, is the stock in trade of all political writers—it's "amusing condescension" to your fellows, but irritating as possible to your opponents!



PROCESSION IN NEW YORK IN OPPOSITION TO THE STAMP ACT.

FAME, let thy Trumpet sound,
Rouse all the World around,
With loud Alarms!
Fly hence to Britain's Land,
Tell George in vain his Hand
Is rais'd 'gainst *FREEDOM*'s Band,
When called to Arms! (Anderson 703)

Sources

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Everyone I've ever met can sing. I think that excepting those people incapacitated by psychological or physiological damage, anyone can sing. Many people sing spontaneously, naturally and joyfully. Some sing to inspire others, some for themselves. Most people sing with little or no thought for what they are doing in technical terms; they just sing, and that's the best way.

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⁴ Many readers of poetry have been dissatisfied with the old system of scansion of English poetry, and there are a number of books and essays on the subject. I have long suspected that musical notation is probably as good a substitute as we're ever going to find; at least musical notation recognizes that syllables

come in different lengths!

I also have a hunch that the tendency of some of these lines not to scan is evidence that they were sung—one can squeeze many syllables into a sung line; if the singer is skillful, the effect is not discordant, and in the case of elbow-flashers, skillful carrying off of a difficult measure will probably bring applause. Poems for silent reading, however, offer more subtle delights and need to stick to a closer measure. A good trick in the tavern may be simply boorish in the study.

⁵ It was clearly *not* "God Save The King" as we know it. This tune was, of course, known and parodied. This parody can clearly be sung to the common tune: