Researcher in focus podcast, June 2023, with Dr Sophie Jones, Lecturer in Modern British History

# Transcript

NJ

Welcome everybody to this month's Researcher in Focus podcast from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences here at The University of Liverpool. My name is Nick Jones. I'm part of the research and impact team at the faculty, and today I'm very pleased to be joined by Doctor Sophie Jones, Postdoctoral research associate in the Department of History. Today, Sophie will be talking to us about her work, exploring the social and cultural development of the North American colonies and how they shaped political identities during the American Revolution, plus more besides. So first of all, thank you very much for joining us. Sophie, it's lovely to meet you.

SJ

Thank you. It's lovely to be invited.

NJ

Thank you. It's our pleasure. And just by way of a quick introduction, I wonder if you could give us a little rundown of your academic background and career so far and what brought you to the University of Liverpool.

SJ

Yeah. So I'm I'm local to Liverpool. I'm from the Wirral and I'm a first generation university graduate, so I had no idea what I wanted to do when I left school and I knew that Liverpool was my local uni and. It was a good Uni. So on that basis I came here and did my undergraduate in history. And I decided that I wanted to go into marketing, so I'd arranged an internship at M&S Bank in Chester and when I graduated, I did an MSC in consumer marketing, which I saw as sort of a vocational thing, helping me to get marketing roles. And had this big idea of coming back at some point and doing a PhD and picking up an idea that I'd started at undergrad, but no one I needed PhD's, so I didn't ever follow it through and got to a point where I was on a career trajectory at the bank that I didn't really want to be on and it didn't really serve me. I decided to hand in my notice on my safe full time paid permanent job, came back and did an MA at Liverpool in 18th century world and then my PhD. And it just sort of went from there.

NJ

Nice. Nice. It's nice to have a bit of experience outside academia maybe before coming into it. And that's been helpful to you?

SJ

Yeah, absolutely. I I think it's really helped me to mature. So I was a very different person when I was 21 and left university then. Or 22. Then when I came back, I was a lot more confident and speaking to people and making sort of making some type of people. So my job title was a department administrator, but it was a lot more than that and I worked on the delivery of strategic projects and I worked under a lot of pressure. So and was working as part of a small team. So I learned some skills like handling sensitive data, handling lots of data, organisational skills, working to multiple deadlines, conflicting deadlines. Working as part of a team. Resilience Time management, but also things like building partnerships and working with senior management. So there wasn't time in that job to be nervous about doing that. You just have to get on and do it and. I think that's been really helpful. In building relationships and building partnerships in in my current role now.

NJ

Excellent. Thank you so much. And coming back to your research interests and the reason we're here today, your work looks at the development of the North American colonies. What time period does that cover exactly?

SJ

So we'll say the long 18th century. So my PhD covers 1688, which is the Glorious Revolution to the end of the American Revolution. So about 1783. However, each of the North American colonies has their own unique origins, so New York's initially founded as a Dutch colony, and Pennsylvania was founded as a Puritan colony, so I need to have an awareness of what happened in the in the years before, but realistically, from about 1690 to about 1783/85.

NJ

OK, yeah. History, it doesn't really fit into ‘It started here and finished there’ and it's it's very, it slips and slides a little. But what your interest covered the American loyalists. These were people who were named as such for remaining loyal to the British cause. Could you tell us a little about why they might have not done so? What kind of reasons have you found for their loyalism back in those days?

SJ

Yeah. So the main thing to remember is the 13 colonies that went on to become the United States at the time they were part of Britain, and we don't see it that way because we're seeing it from where we are today looking backwards, but they were founded as provinces of Britain, so New York, was a provincial town in the same way that Liverpool, Newcastle, Manchester is. So there's lots of different reasons why people remained loyal rather than joined the cause for independence, there's economic reasons. So there are merchants who have links with suppliers and and traders in Britain, it wasn't in their interests to cut ties and cut economic ties and there are people who had a genuine attachment to Britain and the monarchy. And this is a point that Brendan McConville makes, really clearly in his work. And there are people who were essentially pushed into loyalism by their communities. Anyone who was a bit of an outsider could sort of be held before a committee and accused of being a loyalist. A couple of people that often get groups that get forgotten about black loyalists. So these are people who are either free or were enslaved, but their masters were patriots. The British offered them freedom in return for fighting. And and also Native American loyalists. So the war actually split the houses of some people, depending on the relationships they had with colonial officials. So if the relationship was good, they tended to join the British. If the relationship was poor, they joined to join the American side. But the I think the Brexit campaign, without sort of going too much into into that really brought it home for me that how divisive it was and how you know it it in some places it was community decisions. In some places it was very much an individual decision and everyone still had to live together and sort of get along under these very tense circumstances.

NJ

Yes, that's one of the things that's kind of reading up about your work and preparing for this little chat is, is how it's plus ca change really a little bit, isn't it into in terms of we're talking about these people and the split amongst their society, and yet we live in in such split societies for lots of different reasons, even today and. It just, it just seems to be you can, you can see these things echoing down through time.

SJ

A little bit, if you like. Absolutely, yeah.

NJ

Not that different. So I mean, you talked about people having to get along and still live together in the same communities there. So how were these people, the loyalists, seen and treated by the revolutionaries? Both. I mean, maybe before, during and after the war.

SJ

Very badly. And so the way you would be identified as a loyalist is top take a step back. The American Congress issued an articles of association which was very simply a boycott against British and Irish imports if you signed. And then they established local committees to monitor adherence to that, that boycott. So if you were found to be breaking the boycott, you were very publicly outed in the newspaper and declared a loyalist so people would sort of snitch on their neighbours to these committees and say, ohh, I heard this person supports the king or this person's been trading, so in terms of how people were treated, treated really badly, they were intimidated, hauled before committees and they were put in what were called the Tory prisons. Tories are complicated word, but loyalists are sometimes called Tories by the by the independent side. Acts of violence. Things like tarring and feathering were, I think, quite common. And so physical attacks on people, and this continued after the war. So one of the terms of the peace treaty and settlement was that Americans were American loyalists were supposed to be allowed to go back to the United States to reclaim their their lost property. And. And what happened in practice is that they faced a lot of intimidation. Again, physical violence. So lots of people were too scared to ever go back and their real estate, their property was was all lost.

NJ

So really quite significant impacts on the decisions that you made in those days.

SJ

Yeah, absolutely. And not just for you, for your, for your families as well. So you know, once you didn't have the means to send your children abroad for an education, that that would have a sort of a a big impact down the line as well.

NJ

And related to that, then did these differences and splits in society go on to have an effect on the American identity that we know today in terms of how they see themselves and how they behave.

SJ

Yeah, absolutely. So when Loyalists are remembered, they tend to be misremembered as being quite conservative, quite elitist, but sort of sneaky and dastardly so it's the way they're depicted, and you can see this the way it comes through in sort of film and TV series. So even things like Hamilton, the way that George the Third is depicted as being quite femininely, feminised, and untrustworthy. Jason Isaacs plays a loyalist. He's a Slytherin, so that says a lot. So yes, they are and I I mean that's in very stark contrast to the image we have of the patriot of the sort of a man's man with a sort of honest simplicity. And there's a whole load of stuff to unpack there about masculinity and and things like that. But it also has a big impact on Canadian identity. Because we think about 70 to 80,000 loyalists left the United States after the revolution and about 30,000 of them resettled in Canada. So at that point Britain had not long taken and the current the French colonies from the French. Sorry, the colonies in Canada from the French, from the French. So lots of loyalists went just north of the border and resettled there, replicating the communities and the descendants of loyalists still live in Canada today. I've worked with the. United Empire Loyalist Association of Canada, who were kind enough to give me a scholarship. So I think it has a big impact on Canadian identity and and how they see themselves in relation to to to Britain as well.

NJ

That's interesting that you talked there about Canadians who have, you know, like a lawless society thing going on. Is there still any people in the United States who perhaps still choose to identify with the loyalist kind of anglophiles or people who see it as not so much that we should never have split, but perhaps or slightly more sympathetic.

SJ

Not that I found. I wouldn't be surprised, since there's been movement back movement. Across the border. But they certainly don't have an association that I'm aware of in the same way that Canada does. And they have sort of, it's it's very structured. It has local regional branches and then sort of an overriding institution. And I'm not aware of anything similar in America. So there might be there might be individuals, but they're not organised in the same way.

NJ

Right, it's been a much more kind of washing of the hands of the whole British rule type thing. You also talked about the kind of varying degrees of loyalism or what was interpreted as such within the colonies. Have you got any examples of what that might have looked like and what people may or may not be able to get away with, so to speak?

SJ

Yeah, so my article and I've I've given a link to this in the blog. It's an article in the Journal of Early American History talks about this in depth. And my plan for the book is to give some examples through case studies, but very broadly speaking. And in some places, royalism is seen as a set of actions that you take. So joining a regiment, fighting for the British, and carrying arms. All that kind of stuff that I think we the scholarship more traditionally thinks of being loyal in certain places, loyal loyalism is seen as an attitude. And it's a little bit trickier to define. So what I talked about in that article, just to give some examples of the case studies in Tryon, which is a border county. Right in the frontier. It's sort of, it's on the border with what's now Michigan. There are extremely active and active is a term used at the time. So extremely active Loyalists who pretty much immediately joined the forces upon the outbreak of fighting. Actually, they joined it before there, but that's a different story in Albany. I I've found a group of loyalists who try and sit the war out and try and hope it'll pass them by and just happen around them, and then eventually I'll sort of push them to choosing a side either way. And they can't quite give up that that sort of sense of allegiance to Britain. Because giving that up is quite a radical thing to do and and then in New York City, which is a very different space, it's an urban space. It's a lot more anglicised. It has a lot of the institutions that where we would recognise in 18th century English towns as well. But in New York I've found lots of people who don't really do anything at all, and what they do is they come behind the British lines and seek protection from the from the armed forces. And then say, well, I went around telling all my friends to be loyal. So that makes me deserving of compensation. And a pension. So very different, whether it's whether we define loyalism as attitudes or actual physical physical acts.

NJ

So it's a bit of a spectrum then in terms of how involved you chose or perhaps?

SJ

Very much very much and I think it is my, my, my arguments and people can read the book when it's eventually out and and disagree with me. But my argument is that it's very much shaped by the context that people were living in, and the circumstances in which they have to make those decisions.

NJ

Do you think I'm pretty sure the answer is going to be, I think America is quite proud of the the way it shook off the shackles of the British rule today, speaking to contemporary Americans.

SJ

Oh yeah, absolutely. I mean, even as recently as, it was last March, I had a fellowship in Philadelphia, and they have the Constitution Museum and they have the, a great museum to the American Revolution. They're both brilliant museums. But when I sort of got talking to staff there, it's very much a sense that I work on the losers. These are very much the losers of history. And and yeah, the real sense of of, of pride of. Sort of. The small individual man overcoming the British monarch, but then I do I find it bizarre, sort of they're interested in the current monarchy? So that's people, I suppose.

NJ

Yes, maybe they just want to be interested in us, but that's all.

SJ

Yeah, invested in a safe distance.

NJ

Yeah, probably best as we're living here, we can understand. So before this project, you were also working on a project that was exploring the contribution made by subscription libraries to social, cultural and political change. Again, during the 18th century. You tell us a little bit more about.

SJ

Yeah, so this project. Is a four-year project funded by the HRC and I work as part of a team of researchers from across Britain, the United States and Australia, and I work closely with our partner institutions again from the State Library of NSW. Through local institutions to across to America, and I work closely with the libraries in New York, New Jersey and Philadelphia, and it's a big deal. The Big Digital Humanities project and so subscription libraries are a particular type of library that are unique to the 18th century and actually something that was founded in North America and then spread back towards Britain, which is quite unusual. It's usually the other way round. So that's definitely something to be proud of and. And the way they work is effectively individual that sort of people in the local community club together commit to pay subscriptions and then choose books and form a library. And it's very much led at the community level. So not by the church, not by one individual who’s just endowed his books and this the main output is a Open Access database which is going to be released later this year which allows for investigation and analysis at a scale that hasn't been possible before. And we've got information regarding the members so that people who can pay the subscriptions and we're members at these libraries, we know what, what books they held and and we also for some of them have borrowing records. So being able to see exactly who was borrowing which books and which books were. The most popular. And it's a big interdisciplinary project. It's been really exciting to work on and to work on such a diverse team as well with with a really broad set. Of interests so. I hope to be able to share that. With when it's available.

NJ

Absolutely yes, I. Mean. Can you give us a little insight what have been perhaps the most popular books. Most read books, murder mysteries? What did people read in those days?

SJ

So it's changing. It's it's very much live. So as we are working through borrowing records and updating them, the data is changing, but we're definitely finding a lot more novels than than we're expected. Is a traditional sort of canon of thought that we think people were were reading in the 18th century and. And what we're finding is in practise that wasn't quite true. So some of the some of the big novels, some of the big authors are coming through, as you'd expect, Shakespeare's very popular still, but also are lots of the novels. It's. It's not all the high, high level enlightenment material that maybe we suspected.

NJ

Yeah, people being people again, just reasoning for pleasure and. As they should be.

SJ

My favourite is when people read really heavy, like chemists, like a chemistry book and then and a copy of Tom Jones and read those two together.

NJ

Yeah, you can't just have one without the other can you? Otherwise it's just too much.

SJ

No, you need the light, the light thing for a bit of entertainment.

NJ

So leading on from that, you talk about these subscription libraries being set up at a community level given, yeah. The chronic underfunding of public services that we're seeing so much these days, do you think there's ever going to be a return to community led access to reading?

SJ

You never know. I mean, I can. It's not something I've thought about, and I probably should, but you see this happening more and more on a local basis, people sort of taking the initiative, whether it's I've seen it with things like gardening and sort of cleaning up streets and doing community gardens. I wouldn't be surprised if it hasn't already happened somewhere or it's happening. All I would say is I think that takes a certain level of privilege to be able to do that in in current times, but it also took a certain level of privilege at the time as well. So even though admission prices varied significantly depending on sort of the decade we're looking at and the place we're looking at they were cheap and there were barriers to entry, so it's a certain section of society that we're looking at so potentially, but I think my worry about that would be how open to all it would be and keeping keeping books behind a paywall. It's a bit of a scary thought and hopefully it would be lovely to see a community library book and hopefully it really will be for the community.

NJ

Yeah. Yeah, that's. I mean that was where I was going in terms of, you know, perhaps communities could replace what is being taken from them by Community Action, not that that's how it should be, you know, but we look at things like like tool libraries and things like that is that you can go and borrow a drill or, you know, a certain piece of equipment to do your house up without having to go and buy it.

SJ

Even even like when you see on holiday, when there's the bookshelf where people you know, if you go to an all-inclusive and people leave their books on that sort of level. Yeah, hopefully.

NJ

Yes, yes, I. Mean you do kind of people will have like little kind of like telephone boxes, don't they in villages? Where they have books and things going on. So you know.

SJ

It's that kind of similar community spirit.

NJ

So going back to what we talked about at the top of the interview, where you talked about coming from, you know marketing and working in industry in the blog, you use a very interesting term to describe your career choice which is Squiggly. I wonder what does that mean a squiggly career?

SJ

So I've borrowed that from an amazing book and I've got the book somewhere on the shelf and but it's it's very much based. So I would definitely recommend checking out the squiggly careers book. I think it's about £10. On Amazon. There's also a podcast as well, which is very so it's very much based on the idea that modern careers don't follow a clear trajectory. And and we we sort of go off at tangents and we loop round and we make sideways moves and diagonal moves. But I really like the word and I I couldn't think of a better one. So I think my career has definitely been squiggly. I think it's, I think it's great because it gives it helps you to gain lots of different skills and to bring different skills and different perspectives to a role. And I think the more people talk about having squiggly careers and career paths and not being on a straight trajectory, and I think it makes all of us a lot more accessible to people and. I think for me it's it's, it gives me a bit of a bit of hope and a bit of inspiration when I hear people talking about the the weird and wonderful paths they took to get to where they are, it feels it feels very honest and it's it's nice to see where you could go, you know, the the possibilities are endless. It's just seeing someone. Paving the way and getting there first is nice to see.

NJ

Yes, yes, absolutely. I completely agree. It doesn't really matter, the route you take because everyone's on their own path through life’s journey. So they're going to take a different route and occasionally just for a while, we might all be in the same place. OK, great. But bringing you back to academia, you must get to as a researcher, you must get to see lots and lots of interesting things. But what's the most interesting thing that you've come across the thing that has stopped you in your tracks?

SJ

That's a really good question. So I've had lots of pinch me moments usually to do with when I've given talks and lots of moments of how on Earth did I get here? And I sort of those moments I think are really important to take stock. But I was sat in an archive once and the woman opposite me as she was sort of leafing through her material kept doing lots of gasps and covering her mouth. And Oh my gosh. And I thought I've never had anything that sort of done that for me. And I've found things that are brilliant that this actually answered what I wanted it to do. That's quite rare. But I think one of the things that sort of hit me is I work with compensation claims and that sounds quite dry. It sounds quite impersonal, but once you dig into them, you know and so some of them are a bit, it's just people sort of saying why they think they're they're entitled to to compensation, but there's actually a lot of violence in those claims, sort of hidden, and there's lots of accounts of violence on women for. There's lots of really daring things that people do that they just put down on paper. Lots about emotions. There's lots about the experience of being a refugee in a foreign country where actually you think you know you think you think you fit in and then you get there and you're really homesick. So I think for me I realised after sort of working through a lot of these in a day. It was quite heavy feeling because there's so much emotion contained within these stories, and that's something that I'd really like to do next, and I'm hoping to apply for some funding for is to really dig into the history, the history of emotions and put something onto paper about homesickness and and and and identity during this period. Cause I think we sometimes forget that people in the past had emotions and feelings, and I think it's important on that side as well.

NJ

Yes, absolutely fascinating. Yet again, I think we forget that history is about people. Yes, it's about things that happen, but those things happened, you know, because of the people and they would have had emotional impacts on them. You know what, what was it? What did it feel like to have that happen to you? What to live through?

SJ

I think that's one of the things that really hit home when I work, when I've been working with the loyalists in Canada is remembering that this is, you know, someone's great, great, great grandparent and it's part of it's part of their story and it's part of their identity. So even though, you know, when I do any ethics forms, I don't have to because everyone's, you know, dead. And in the past and and dead for a very long time. But actually that legacy is still there. And just sort of remembering to be sensitive to that is really important.

NJ

Yeah, put ourselves into the position of the people who were experiencing that. Maybe. So this is the question I have to ask because I'm from the Research and. Impact team, so thinking about all your work and you know the impact it might go on to have in the in the, in the real world, so to speak, what's the most significant change you'd like to see as a result of your research?

SJ

So I've got two. The 1st is that I would love to see reinterpretation of Loyalists, yes, in the US, but mainly in the UK. So they are a group that we don't learn about, they're a group that we don't really know anything about in public perception. I'd be surprised if I said to anyone in on, you know, sort of out and about. Ohh, I work on the Loyalists and they they wouldn't know who that was. There's even a loyalist memorial in Chester Cathedral. I've lived. I've lived down the road from Chester all my life. I had no sense of what that meant and what that even referred to so. Yes, I'd like to see a reinterpretation of loyalists. But the other thing is, this period that I look at and the relationship, the emotional and economic relationship between Britain and North America, I would argue, is the very first stages of what we now call the special relationship. And somewhere between the 18th century and Thatcher and Reagan, that's been lost and that's been forgotten about. And even more so, Liverpool is central to that. Liverpool always plays such an important role as a port in exporting people, goods, ideas that help to sustain those relationships. And I'd love for people in Liverpool to have and and and the Liverpool City region more broadly, to have a a better understanding of how important this city is. And how important this region is for forging some of those political relationships that we still live under today. So I have applied for a research grant that will allow me to do that. So if your listeners could all cross their fingers for me, thank you. It's very much appreciated and hopefully I'll be able to do something with that in the future.

NJ

Wonderful. We are all crossing our fingers super hard right now for this.

SJ

Thank you.

NJ

Doctor Sophie Jones, thank you so much for coming to. Join us. That's really, really interesting and lots of stuff that I haven't, I haven't really thought about before. So thank you so much for opening my eyes to to that part of history. It's been a pleasure to have you on. Thank you so much.

SJ

Thank you for having me. It's been lovely to just talk about my research for, for for half an hour or so.

NJ

Well, that's what we're here for. To create that safe space to talk about it all work. So thank you. It's been really, really good. Thank you so much again and thank you all for listening as well. Next week or next month, in fact, we will be joined by Eduardo Coutino, who's a senior lecturer in music psychology, and we'll be learning more about his work. Thank you for joining us.