

The Personal and the Professional: A Tribute to the Life and Legacy of Esther Clark Wright

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[See table of contents](#)

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The Personal and the Professional: A Tribute to the Life and Legacy of Esther Clark Wright

IN 2016 THE 21ST ATLANTIC CANADA STUDIES CONFERENCE OPENED with a roundtable profiling the life and legacy of historian Esther Clark Wright. Co-sponsored by the Loyalist Research Network (LRN) and the Planters Studies Centre, the panel featured Barry Moody, a professor emeritus at Acadia University; Patricia L. Townsend, an archivist at the Esther Clark Wright Archives at Acadia University; and Keith Grant, a doctoral student in history at the University of New Brunswick (now an assistant professor of history at Crandall University). As the main coordinator of the LRN, it was my pleasure to chair this session. The panelists have graciously consented to have their comments reproduced here, with the addition of a submission by Gail G. Campbell, a professor emerita of history at the University of New Brunswick, who contributed to a vibrant discussion period after the presentations.

The original idea for this panel must be attributed to LRN member David Bell, who reminded us that 2015 was the 60th anniversary of the publication of Esther Clark Wright's *The Loyalists of New Brunswick* and who suggested that something should be done to mark the occasion.¹ We should also note that 2015 marked the 120th anniversary of Esther Clark Wright's birth and the 25th anniversary of her passing. The year of the conference (2016) was also the centenary of her graduation from Acadia University.

The authors' submissions reveal different aspects of Esther Clark Wright's life and legacy. Barry Moody shares his various encounters with Wright over the years – a “tireless historian” as well as a “flesh and blood person.” In 1990, upon Wright's death, Moody and Patricia L. Townsend collected her papers and arranged for their donation to the archives at Acadia University. Townsend comments here on Wright's letters, manuscripts, and research notes – specifically, the many shoeboxes that were full of little slips of paper. Keith Grant, finishing his doctoral dissertation at the time of the conference, reflects on the ongoing relevance of Esther Clark Wright's work to a graduate student studying religious communities in Planter and Loyalist Nova Scotia. And Gail G. Campbell completes this forum by reflecting on the significance of Esther Clark Wright's scholarship, concluding that her work was “too far ahead of the curve to be properly appreciated in her own day. But it ought to be appreciated in ours.”

The subject of our panel wrote 15 books and numerous articles over the course of her life, her last book appearing only a short time before her death.² Many of these scholarly contributions are discussed below. What is clear from this examination is that Esther Clark Wright's work is still relevant and continues to be used by

1 Esther Clark Wright, *The Loyalists of New Brunswick* (Fredericton: self-published, 1955).

2 For a bibliography of Esther Clark Wright's work compiled by Patricia L. Townsend, see “Esther Clark Wright: A Bibliography, 1914-1988,” *Acadiensis* XXVII, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 167-76.

professional historians, students, and the general public. In a 2014 review of Maya Jasanoff's book on the Loyalist diaspora, entitled *Liberty's Exiles*, Philip Ranlet chastises her for not making better use of Wright's book on the Loyalists of New Brunswick: "Despite Jasanoff's interest in quantifying the [L]oyalist refugees, little use is made of the work of a pioneering scholar of the subject, Esther Clark Wright. The author of *The Loyalists of New Brunswick*, which went through several editions, Wright compiled a stupendous appendix of the adult males who settled in New Brunswick."³ It is this "stupendous appendix" that provides the backbone for a new story map project spearheaded by student researchers and the microforms staff at the Harriet Irving Library at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton, entitled *New Brunswick Loyalist Journeys*. A story map is a web application that allows researchers to combine maps with narrative text, images, and multimedia. Using Esri's ArcGIS Online technology, this story map features the lives and Atlantic migrations of Loyalists settling in York County, New Brunswick, and is illustrated through maps and many of the resources found within the Loyalist Collection at the Harriet Irving Library (<https://loyalist.lib.unb.ca/story-maps>).⁴ The team has received accolades for this project, including congratulations from Esri itself for the "beautifully researched and produced series of story maps," and *New Brunswick Loyalist Journeys* is now featured in the Esri story map gallery (<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/en/gallery/#s=30>). In the summer of 2016, student researchers began to reconstruct Loyalist lives and migrations. But where should they start? Leah Grandy, one of the coordinators of the project, notes "the starting point of the project began with the index of [L]oyalists in the Appendix of Esther Clark Wright's seminal work, *The Loyalists of New Brunswick*."⁵ It is a long way from shoeboxes, but Esther Clark Wright would have been pleased that her work is still being used to train student researchers and to disseminate the history of New Brunswick Loyalists in such a new and innovative fashion.

BONNIE HUSKINS

3 Philip Ranlet, "How Many Loyalists Left the United States?" *Historian* 76, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 298.

4 Esri Story Maps are built into ArcGIS, the world's leading mapping and GIS platform. For more information, see <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/en/>.

5 Leah Grandy, "The Project," New Brunswick Story Maps, <http://unbgis.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=074bbc635b0b464e94f72ffc2b4bda6a>.