

Nicholas Cresswell, portrait by an unidentified artist, ca. 1780

“I am now in an enemy’s country”

An English visitor views the treatment of Loyalists in Virginia, 1774-1777

Selections from the travel journal of Nicholas Cresswell

An Englishman in his early twenties, Nicholas Cresswell travelled widely in the colonies from 1774 to 1777. A keen observer, he took notes on the places he visited and on the customs of their inhabitants, both white and Indian. He also recorded the growth of the spirit of rebellion, which, in his view, was destroying America. While attributing some of the colonies’ troubles to the British, he sees the calculated villainy of Patriot leaders and the puritanical fanaticism of some preachers as the chief causes of the turmoil that is setting the colonists against each other. In the name of liberty, colonial leaders have suppressed dissent and condoned the violent intimidation of Loyalists. Preachers have used religious prejudice to turn their followers against the king. Colonists who have awakened from their “delirium” are forced publicly to assent to the Patriots’ rule but secretly curse it as slavery. “This country turned Topsy Turvy,” he writes upon leaving, “changed from an earthly paradise to a Hell upon terra firma.”

1774_____

24 October. [Alexandria, Virginia]... .

Everything here is in the utmost confusion. Committees are appointed to inspect into the Characters and Conduct of every tradesman, to prevent them selling Tea or buying British Manufactures. Some of them have been tarred and feathered,² others had their property burnt and destroyed by the populace. Independent Companies [of volunteer militia] are raising in every County on the Continent, appointed Adjutants and train their Men as if they were on the Eve of a War. A General Congress³ of the different Colonies met at Philadelphia on the 5th of last month are still sitting, but their business is a profound secret. Subscription is raising [fund-raising] in every Colony on the Continent for the relief of the people of Boston.⁴ The King is openly cursed, and his authority set at defiance. In short, everything is ripe for rebellion. The New Englanders by their canting, whining, insinuating tricks have persuaded the rest of the Colonies that the Government is going to make absolute slaves of them. This I believe never was intended, but the Presbyterian rascals⁵ have had address sufficient to make the other Colonies come into their Scheme. By everything that I can understand, in the different company I have been in, Independence is what the Massachusetts people aim at, but am not in the least doubt but the Government will take such salutary and speedy measure as will entirely frustrate their abominable intentions.

I am afraid it will be some time before this hubbub is settled and there is nothing to be done now. All trade is almost at a stand, everyone seems

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¹ See map, p. 7.

² Tarring and feathering was a common form of intimidation and revenge in colonial America, used against royal officials and offending citizens, and, in the prerevolutionary period, used to threaten Loyalists or others who did not fully support the Patriot cause. The crowd would strip the victim, pour hot tar over his/her body, and then roll the person in feathers that would adhere to the tar. Usually the person was paraded about the area on a cart before being released and perhaps threatened with further violence. Occasionally the victim would die.

³ First Continental Congress.

⁴ In March 1774 Britain closed Boston harbor to all shipping until restitution had been made for the tea destroyed in the Boston Tea Party (Dec. 1773).

⁵ By October, Boston’s food and provisions were low and colonies were collecting funds to send relief to the city.

⁶ Presbyterians and members of other non-Anglican denominations were usually anti-British and pro-independence.

to be at a loss in what manner to proceed. For my own part, did I not think this affair would be over in the spring, I would immediately return home. But I am very unwilling to return in a worse condition than I was when I came out and be laughed at by all my friends. If I return now and matters are settled they will never consent to my leaving England again, and I am very sensible from what I have already seen of the Country, that I can with a small sum make a very pretty fortune here in a little time, if I am any ways fortunate as a Farmer. Mr. Kirk advises me to stay till Spring and take a Tour in the back Country, gives me every possible encouragement, and offers me every assistance in his power. I will take his advice. Am determined not to return till I can do it with credit, without those rascals do persuade the Colonies into a Rebellion.

- ...
- 1 November 1774.** This evening went to the Tavern to hear the Resolves of the Continental Congress. Read a Petition to the Throne and an address to the people of Great Britain.⁶ Both of them full of duplicity and false representation. I look upon them as insults to the understanding and dignity of the British Sovereign and people. Am in hopes their petitions will never be granted. I am sorry to see them so well received by the people and the sentiments so universally adopted. It is a plain proof that the seeds of rebellion are already sown and have taken very deep root, but am in hopes they will be eradicated next summer. I am obliged to act the hypocrite and extol these proceedings as the wisest productions of any assembly on Earth, but in my heart I despise them and look upon them with contempt.
- 2 November.** Writing to my Friends at home. Obligated to put the best side outwards and appear a little Whigified, as I expect my letters will be opened before they get to England.⁷
- 3 November.** Saw the Independent Company exercise [military drill]. The Effigy of Lord North⁸ was shot at, then carried in great parade into the town and burnt.
- 5 November.** Wrote to Mr. Champion. It is very hard I cannot write my real sentiments.
- 6 November.** Went to a Presbyterian meeting [worship service]. These are a set of rebellious scoundrels, nothing but political discourses instead of Religious Lectures.

...
__Cresswell travels to the frontier backcountry of Kentucky and Ohio, returning to Alexandria, Virginia, in October 1775.__

1775__

- 20 October** [Alexandria, Virginia]. Slept very little last night owing to my agitation of mind. To add to my distress, the Moths have eaten two suits of my clothes to pieces. Nothing but War talked of, raising men and making every military preparation. A large army at Boston, another in Canada and another at or about Norfolk in Virginia. This cannot be redressing grievances, it is open rebellion and I am convinced if Great Britain does not send more men here and subdue them soon they will declare Independence.
- 21 October.** I am now in a disagreeable situation, if I enter into any sort of business I must be obliged to enter into the service of these rascals and fight against my Friends and Country if called upon. On the other hand, I am not permitted to depart the Continent and have nothing if I am fortunate enough to escape the jail. I will live as cheap as I can and hope for better times.
- [I]t is open rebellion and I am convinced if Great Britain does not send more men here and subdue them they will declare Independence.*
- ...
- 23 October.** News that Lord Dunmore⁹ was coming up the River with four thousand men to destroy the town. I am determined to get on board the King's Ship as soon as possible.

⁶ For the petition, the letter to the people of Great Britain, and other selections from the official documents of the First Continental Congress (publ. Nov. 1774) see Theme I: CRISIS #7 in this collection.

⁷ Loyalists and English visitors suspected that their mail was opened by Patriots and confiscated if not supportive of the anti-British cause, thus Cresswell "Whigified" his comments, i.e., made them appear more pro-Patriot.

⁸ Lord North: Prime Minister of Great Britain (1770-1782) during most of the revolutionary period.

⁹ Lord Dunmore: last royal governor of Virginia.

24 October 1775. The inhabitants begin to remove their most valuable effects out of town, but I think it will prove a false alarm.

...

27 October. Supped and spent the evening at Captn. Ramsay's. Great political dispute with him. . . .

30 October. The people here are ripe for a revolt, nothing but curses and imprecations against England, her Fleets, armies, and friends. The King is publicly cursed and rebellion rears her horrid head. The people in this Colony and the province of Maryland are in general greatly in debt to the Merchants in England, and think a revolt would pay all.

31 October. Understand I am suspected of being what they call a Tory (that is, a Friend to my Country and am threatened with Tar and Feathers,¹⁰ Imprisonment and the D—1 [Devil] knows what. Curse the Scoundrels.

1 November. News that 300 people on the Eastern shore in Maryland had gone over to Lord Dunmore.¹¹ The Committee took an account of the Flour in town as they apprehend his Lordship will pay them a visit.¹²

...

2 November [Sunday]. No preaching here, for people are too much taken up with the War.

...

15 November. No prospect of getting home this winter, as I am suspected of being a Spy. I am very narrowly watched.

...

31 December [Loudoun County, Virginia]. This is the last day of the year 1775, which I have spent but very indifferently. In short I have done nothing but wore out my clothes and constitution [physical health], and according to the present prospect of affairs, the New Year bears a forbidding aspect. I am here a prisoner at large. If I attempt to depart and don't succeed, a prison must be my lot. If I do anything to get a living, perhaps I must be obliged to fight against my King and Country, which my conscience abhors. I will wait with patience till summer and then risk a [ship] passage.

1776__

19 January [Alexandria, Virginia]. A pamphlet called "Commonsense" makes a great noise.¹³ One of the vilest things that ever was published to the world. Full of false representations, lies, calumny, and treason, whose principles are to subvert all Kingly Governments and erect an Independent Republic. I believe the writer to be some Yankee Presbyterian Member of the Congress. The sentiments are adopted by a great number of people who are indebted to Great Britain.

A pamphlet called "Commonsense" makes a great noise. One of the vilest things that ever was published to the world.

...

22 January. Nothing but Independence talked of.

23 January. Last night the River froze over. Dined at Captn. Conway's with Mr. Buckhamhan. Drank Coffee at Mr. John's.

24 January. Left Alexandria. Dined at Mosses. Got to Leesburg in the evening.

26 January. Nothing but Independence will go down [be accepted in conversation]. The Devil is in the people.

...

¹⁰ See footnote 2.

¹¹ I.e., to fight against the Patriots with the troops directed by the royal governor of Virginia.

¹² Patriots' Committee of Safety. The colonial committees of safety enforced allegiance to the Patriot cause of independence.

¹³ Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, published January 1776; one of the most widely read and influential essays of the revolutionary period.

9 July 1776. At Mr. Kirk's. News that the Sanhedrim¹⁴ had declared the thirteen united Colonies Free and Independent States. That this was intended by the Northern Colonies from the first

...

__Cresswell travels to Maryland, Pennsylvania, and New York, returning in September 1776 to Alexandria, Virginia.__

19 October. . . . Dined at Mr. John Muir's, a merchant in town. This gentleman is looked on as the pattern of hospitality and generosity, but I am far from thinking him a good man. It is true he keeps an excellent table, a glass of good wine, punch &c, but he is an epicure himself and likes a companion along with his bottle. His humanity is not to be commended. He has five children by a negro, woman, slave to a Gentleman in town. They are all slaves for life. He sees them daily wanting the common necessaries of life, without taking the least pity or compassion on their wretched condition. The man who can bear to see his own flesh and blood in this horrid situation without being most sensibly affected is lost to every feeling of humanity and is a degree worse than a brute.

20 October. No service at Church today.

Religion is almost forgotten or most basely neglected. In short, the Parsons are not willing to expound the Gospel to people without being paid for it, and there is no provision made for the Episcopal Clergy by this new code of Laws, therefore Religion

Indeed, the few [clergy] that pretend to preach are mere retailers of politics, sowers of sedition and rebellion, serve to blow the coal of discord and excite the people to arms.

as well as Commerce is at a stand. Indeed, the few that pretend to preach are mere retailers of politics, sowers of sedition and rebellion, serve to blow the coal¹⁵ of discord and excite the people to arms. The Presbyterian Clergy are particularly active in supporting the measures of Congress from the Rostrum, gaining proselytes, persecuting the unbelievers, preaching up the righteousness of their cause and persuading the unthinking populace of the infallibility of success. Some of these religious rascals assert that the Lord will send his Angels to assist the injured Americans. They gain great numbers of converts and I am convinced if they establish their Independence that Presbyty [Presbyterianism] will be the established religion on this Continent. Spent the evening with Mr. Robert Muir and Mr. Kirk.

21 October. This morning I am told that the Committee of this town will not permit me to depart this Colony as they look upon me to be a Spy and that I must be obliged to give security or go to jail. Whether this is done to get me to enlist into their service or some rascal has informed against me I cannot tell. Intended to have gone to Leesburg tonight, but some villain has stolen my surtout coat. Spent the evening at Mr. William Harthorn's.

26 October [Loudoun County, Virginia]. These three days I have spent most disagreeably — nothing to do and all alone. When I reflect on my present situation it makes me miserable. I am now in an enemy's country, forbidden to depart. Little to subsist upon and dare not do anything to get a living, for fear of getting myself ranked as an inhabitant and be obliged to carry arms against my native country. My interest and inclination, unhappy alternative indeed, to turn parricide or starve.¹⁶ Am determined to go amongst the Indians. I look upon them to be the more humane people of the two.

...

28 October. General Muster of the County Militia in town, about 600 men appeared under-armed,¹⁷ with Tobacco sticks in general. Much rioting and confusion. Recruiting Officers for the Sleber Army¹⁸ offer Twelve Pounds bounty and 200 acres of land when the War is over, but get very few men.

...

¹⁴ Sanhedrin: In the Gospels, the Jewish judicial council that paid the apostle Judas to betray Jesus, then tried him for blasphemy and delivered him to the Roman authorities for execution. Cresswell is accusing the Second Continental Congress of being traitors to Great Britain.

¹⁵ Cresswell writes "cole of discord," probably referring to the proverbial expression "blow (up) the coals," meaning, in this case, to promote dissension.

¹⁶ I.e., become a killer of my fellow Britons or be unable to earn money to sustain myself.

¹⁷ I.e., at the training session of the Patriot soldiers, the men had insufficient weaponry.

¹⁸ It is conjectured that Cresswell created the term "sleber" — rebels spelled backward — to refer to the Patriots. William H. Richardson, ed., *The Federalist Fathers and the Founding of Jersey City*, Part 1 (The Historical Society of Hudson County, NJ, 1927).

1 November 1776. Dined at Mr. Kirk's, who persuades me to stay till Spring, but for what reason I cannot tell. Am in doubt whether his advice proceeds from friendship or interested motives. From him I have my present support, by his interest I have been kept out of Jail, and without his approbation I cannot go, and to stay and be dependent on him for bread and liberty is worse than Egyptian bondage. Determined to petition the Congress at all events.

...
__Cresswell travels to New York, determined to leave America.__

1777__

19 July [New York: Long Island Sound, on board the brig *Edward*]. Most part of this forenoon at Anchor, quite calm. At M[idnight]. a light breeze got under way. All this afternoon we have kept close in with the Connecticut shore. The Country seems as if it had been populous, but this cursed Rebellion has totally ruined this part of it. Almost every house seems to be deserted and the Major part of them in ashes. Strange that the artifices of a few designing Villains should have it in their power to ruin such a number of honest, well-meaning people, that they should so far infatuate them by their horrid lies and mean pitiful arts to give up the invaluable blessings of peace, the sweet enjoyment of real and happy liberty in exchange for all the dreadful horrors of War, poverty and wretchedness. All this is done (as the poor deluded wretches are taught to believe) with a view to secure to themselves and posterity what they have long been in possession of, in the greatest latitude of any people on earth, but unfortunately never yet knew the intrinsic value of it. In short, they are like the Dog in the Fable: quit the substance for an empty shadow.¹⁹

If we have good
luck, we shall not be
long before we leave
sight of this unhappy
Country, this Country,

*. . . this unhappy Country, this Country turned Topsy Turvy,
changed from an earthly paradise to a Hell upon terra firma.*

turned Topsy Turvy, changed from an earthly paradise to a Hell upon terra firma [earth/hard ground]. I have seen this a happy Country and I have seen it miserable in the short space of three years. The Villainous arts of a few and the obstinacy of many on this side the Water, added to the complicated blunders, cowardice and knavery of some of our blind *guides* in England, have totally ruined the Country. I wish the Devil had them. These unhappy wretches have substituted tyranny, oppression and slavery for liberty and freedom. The whims, cruelty and caprice of a vile Congress give them Laws, and a set of puritanic Rascals retails the Scriptures and gives them the little religion they have, but for the good it does them, they might as well be without.

These unhappy wretches are as much divided as it is possible to be without actually drawing the sword against one another (I mean in political opinion), but the strict and tyrannical laws, made by the Congress and executed with the utmost rigor by their Committees, deter the more sensible part of the people from declaring their real sentiments. The Congress under the fallacious pretense of nursing the tender plant, liberty, which was said to thrive so well in American soil, have actually torn it up by the very root. In short, these people's pride, obstinacy and folly have brought more calamities on their own heads than ever Pharaoh did by his obstinacy bring upon the Egyptians.

A man suspected of loyalty [to Britain] (which in this place is a more heinous crime than sinning against the Holy Ghost²⁰) is in more danger by far than an Old Woman and her Tabby Cat was formerly in England and Scotland, if she was suspected of witchcraft. To cheat him is lawful, to steal from him is serving the cause and Country. If he is imprudent enough openly to avow his sentiments, Tarring and Feathering was the punishment they at first underwent, but now they are proscribed in the public papers by order of that diabolical infernal set of miscreants, the Congress. Confiscation of their

¹⁹ Aesop's Fables, "The Dog and the Shadow"; see classics.mit.edu/Aesop/fab.1.1.html.

²⁰ I.e., treated as worse than the worst sin. In the Gospels, blaspheming the Holy Spirit is identified as the only unforgivable sin, but the exact nature of the "sin against the Holy Ghost" is ambiguous and debated by Christian theologians.

whole property, imprisoning and hanging, nay, even firing their houses or poisoning them, is thought a sweet smelling savor before the Most High. As the Rascally Presbyterian Clergy have all along been the chief instigators and supporters of this unnatural Rebellion, they commonly honor the loyalists with the title of Tory, atheist, Deist or the most opprobrious name that the most inveterate malice can invent, aided by that cursed enthusiastic, uncharitable, bloody-minded and cruel persecuting spirit which in general constitutes a considerable part of the character of these *fanatic* brawlers, or rather *Bellows* of Sedition and Rebellion. Divine teachers, or Godly teachers, I cannot call them without a vile prostitution of that sacred function.

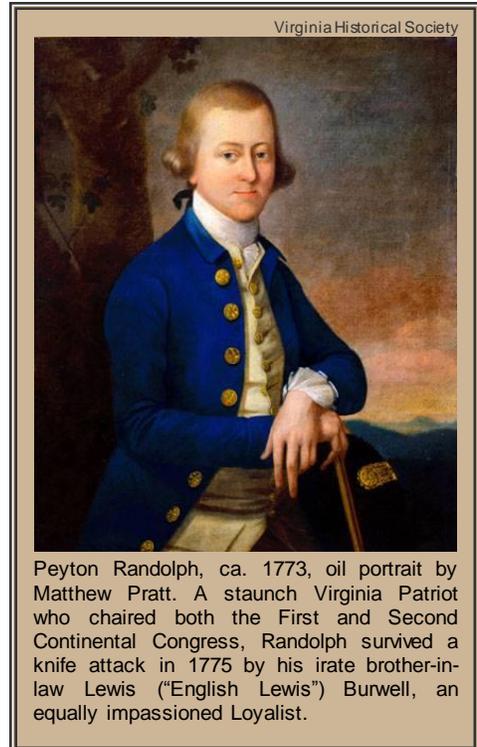
These religious scoundrels have a wonderful knack of reconciling the greatest opposites and uniting the most jarring differences when they have an opportunity to turn those things to their advantage. For instance, a Papist [Roman Catholic], that a few years ago was a more reproachful name than a murderer (amongst the New Englanders) is now become a friendly appellation when applied to any of their friends. At the same time they execrate his Majesty for allowing the Canadians liberty of conscience or a free use of their religious ceremonies.²¹

They endeavor to persuade the people that he is actually turned Papist, that his subjects are all going to revolt and cut off his head. Everything is done to make the ignorant multitude believe that the Kings of France and Spain, the Pope, Pretender, King of Prussia and the Grand Turk will invade England with innumerable hosts in support of their glorious cause. The Empress of Russia, Prince of Hesse, and others who have given any assistance to Great Britain are all to be deposed, and their dominions divided amongst the other European powers who are friendly disposed towards the virtuous Americans. The happy United and blessed Independent States, as a reward for their glorious struggle, are to be put in possession of the Brazils.

Notwithstanding these ridiculous assertions and extravagant bravadoes, vast numbers of the people awake from their delirium, yet are unwillingly compelled to submit to the arbitrary proceeding of Congress. With seeming patience and with apparent reverence, they kiss the rod that so tyrannically strikes them, but secretly curse the hand that unjustly enslaves them under the specious mark of Guardians of their liberties. France is freedom's self compared with America. Freedom of speech is what they formerly enjoyed but it is now a stranger in the Land. The boasted liberty of the press is as a tale that was told.

Many people have been confined in jails for several months without coming to a trial, or even knowing the crimes of which they are accused, and at last discharged without a word, but if they can prove that they are well wishers to his Majesty's Arms, dreadful is their situation indeed. If they are fortunate enough to escape with life, all their property is confiscated and their persons forced into their army. To render their misery complete, their Magistrates are chosen from the most violent part of the people, in general very fond of using their usurped authority without

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Peyton Randolph, ca. 1773, oil portrait by Matthew Pratt. A staunch Virginia Patriot who chaired both the First and Second Continental Congress, Randolph survived a knife attack in 1775 by his irate brother-in-law Lewis ("English Lewis") Burwell, an equally impassioned Loyalist.

²¹ Britain had acquired French Canada in 1763 with its victory in the French and Indian War. In 1774, it expanded the province boundaries to include the Ohio River Valley and permitted the continuation of French law and official religion (Roman Catholicism), infuriating the primarily Protestant Americans who feared a British conspiracy to surround them with a government that did not support traditional English rights and religion.

