

Loyalist Perspective: Violence in Wilmington ^[1]

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In the spring of 1775, Janet Schaw, a Scottish lady visiting family in North Carolina, described the "shocking outrages" committed by revolutionary militia and mobs. Schaw, a native of Edinburgh, Scotland, had undertaken a voyage with her brother Edward to the West Indies and North Carolina to help escort the children of [John Rutherford](#) ^[2] back to North Carolina and to visit her brother Robert in Wilmington. He owned a plantation called "Schawfields" along a branch of the Cape Fear River just north of the town. She recorded the experiences and impressions of her trip in a diary, providing a loyalist interpretation of events that she heard of or witnessed.

She visited a number of locations in and around Wilmington and happened to be in the town on a day in early June of 1775 when she witnessed violence committed by local militiamen against the servant of a British loyalist. She describe what she saw as "shocking outrages" and mentions activities such as drunkenness by the militia and the call to tar and feather the servant. She also mentions dining later that day with one of the officers she saw, Colonel Robert Howe who trained with the Brunswick County local militia. Howe later became a major general in the Continental Army.

Janet Schaw's diary was originally published in 1782. In 1921, the manuscript was published by Yale University Press. Today Schaw's original handwritten diary is in the collections of the British Museum.

Read the excerpt below of Janet Schaw's description of what she witnessed in Wilmington:

Good heavens! what a scene this town is: Surely you folks at home have adopted the old [maxim](#) ^[3] of King Charles: "Make friends of your foes, leave friends to shift for themselves."

We came down in the morning in time for the [review](#), which the heat made as terrible to the spectators as to the soldiers, or what you please to call them. They had certainly fainted under it, had not the constant draughts of [grog](#) ^[4] supported them. Their exercise was that of [bush-fighting](#), but it appeared so confused and so perfectly different from any thing I ever saw, I cannot say whether they performed it well or not; but this I know that they were heated with rum till capable of committing the most shocking outrages. We stood in the balcony of Doctor Cobham's house and they were reviewed on a field mostly covered with what are called here scrubby oaks, which are only a little better than brushwood. They at last however assembled on the plain field, and I must really laugh while I recollect their figures: 2000 men in their shirts and trousers, preceded by a very ill beat-drum and a fiddler, who was also in his shirt with a long sword and [a cue at his hair](#), who played with all his might. They made indeed a most unmartial appearance. But the worst figure there can shoot from behind a bush and kill even a [General Wolfe](#).

Before the review was over, I heard a cry of tar and feather. I was ready to faint at the idea of this dreadful operation. I would have gladly quitted the balcony, but was so much afraid the Victim was one of my friends, that I was not able to move; and he indeed proved to be one, tho' in a humble station. For it was Mr Neilson's poor English [groom](#). You can hardly conceive what I felt when I saw him dragged forward, poor devil, frightened out of his wits. However at the request of some of the officers, who had been Neilson's friends, his punishment was changed into that of mounting on a table and begging pardon for [having smiled at the regt](#). He was then drummed and fiddled out of the town, with a strict prohibition of ever being seen in it again.

One might have expected, that tho' I had been [imprudent](#) ^[5] all my life, the present occasion might have inspired me with some degree of caution, and yet I can tell you I had almost [incurred](#) ^[6] the poor groom's fate from my own folly. Several of the officers came up to dine, amongst others [Coll: Howe](#), who with less ceremony than might have been expected from his general politeness stepped into an apartment adjoining the hall, and took up a book I had been reading, which he brought open in his hand into the company. I was piqued at his freedom, and reproved him with a half compliment to his general

good breeding. He owned his fault and with much gallantry promised to submit to whatever punishment I would inflict. You shall only, said I, read aloud a few pages which I will point out, and I am sure you will do Shakespear justice. He bowed and took the book, but no sooner observed that I had turned up for him, that part of Henry the fourth, where Falstaff describes his company, than he coloured like Scarlet. I saw he made the application instantly; however he read it thro', tho' not with the vivacity ^[7] he generally speaks; however he recovered himself and coming close up to me, whispered, you will certainly get yourself tarred and feathered; shall I apply to be executioner? I am going to seal this up. Adieu.

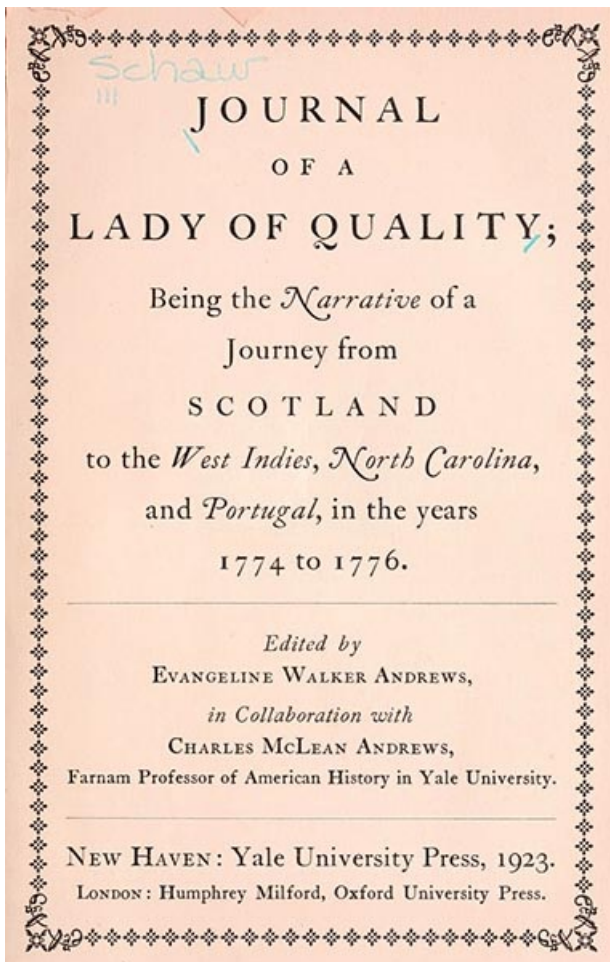
I closed my last packet at Doctor Cobham's after the review, and as I hoped to hear of some method of getting it sent to you, stayed, tho' Miss Rutherford was obliged ^[8] to go home. As soon as she was gone, I went into the town, the entry of which I found closed up by a detachment of the soldiers; but as the officer immediately made way for me, I took no further notice of it, but advanced to the middle of the street, where I found a number of the first people in town standing together, who (to use Milton's phrase) seemed much impassioned. As most of them were my acquaintances, I stopped to speak to them, but they with one voice begged me for heaven's sake to get off the street, making me observe they were prisoners, adding that every avenue of the town was shut up, and that in all human probability some scene would be acted very unfit for me to witness. I could not take the friendly advice, for I became unable to move and absolutely petrified with horror.

Observing however an officer with whom I had just dined, I beckoned him to me. He came, but with no very agreeable look, and on my asking him what was the matter, he presented a paper he had folded in his hand. If you will persuade them to sign this they are at liberty, said he, but till then must remain under this guard, as they must suffer the penalties they have justly incurred. "And we will suffer every thing," replied one of them, "before we abjure ^[9] our king, our country and our principles." "This, Ladies," said he turning to me, who was now joined by several Ladies, "is what they call their Test, but by what authority this Gentleman forces it on us, we are yet to learn." "There is my Authority," pointing to the Soldiers with the most insolent ^[10] air, "dispute it, if you can." Oh Britannia, what are you doing, while your true obedient sons are thus insulted by their unlawful brethren ^[11]; are they also forgot by their natural parents?

We, the Ladies, adjourned ^[12] to the house of a Lady, who lived in this street, and whose husband was indeed at home, but secretly shut up with some ambassadors from the back settlements on their way to the Govr to offer their service, provided he could let them have arms and ammunition ^[13], but above all such commissions as might empower them to raise men by proper authority. This I was presently told tho' in the midst of enemies, but the Loyal party are all as one family. Various reasons induced ^[14] me to stay all Night in the house I was then at, tho' it could afford me no resting place. I wished to know the fate of the poor men who were in such present jeopardy, and besides hoped that I should get word to my brother, or send your packet by the Gentlemen who were going to the man-of-war. In the last I have succeeded, and they are so good as [to] promise to get it safely there to my brother or the Govr who would not fail to send it by first opportunity to Britain. Indeed it is very dangerous to keep letters by me, for whatever noise general warrants made in the mouths of your sons of faction ^[15] at home, their friends and fellow rebels use it with less ceremony than ever it was practised in Britain, at any period.

Rebels, this is the first time I have ventured that word, more than in thought, but to proceed.

The prisoners stood firm to their resolution of not signing the Test, till past two in the morning, tho' every threatening was used to make them comply; at which time a Message from the committee compromised the affair, and they were suffered to retire on their parole to appear next morning before them. This was not a step of mercy or out of regard to the Gentlemen; but they understood that a number of their friends were arming in their defence, and tho' they had kept about 150 ragamuffins still in town, they were not sure even of them; for to the credit of that town be it spoke, there are not five men of property and credit in it that are infect



Title page of the 1921 edition of "Journal of a Lady of Quality," Janet Schaw's travel journal, published by Yale University Press.

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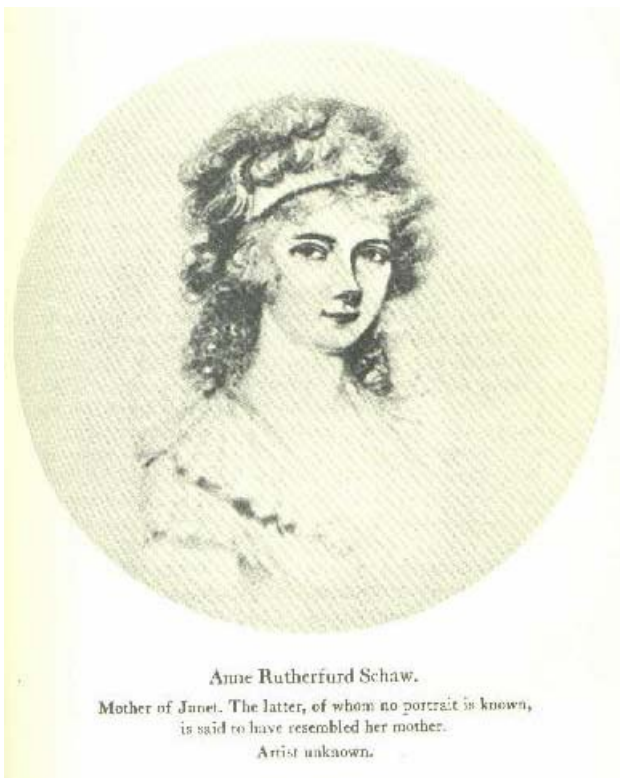
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People:



Anne Rutherford Schaw.
Mother of Janet. The latter, of whom no portrait is known,
is said to have resembled her mother.
Artist unknown.

Janet Schaw ^[32]

(Portrait of her mother, believed to be a good likeness of Janet.)



^[33]Robert Howe ^[34]

Places:



Wilmington, N.C. ^[35]

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Lesson Plan: Loyalists

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Lesson Plan: Patriots

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Primary Sources:



[38] "The Bostonians paying the

excise-man": A political

cartoon, 1774.

3 January 2018

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