The Rebecca Byles Letters

Document Analysis

History 131 Julie Williams Dr. Vibert

The Rebecca Byles letters were written around the time of the American Revolution War, November 8, 1777 until March 24, 1784. During the time she wrote the letters her age ranged from 15-22. The letters were mostly written to Rebecca’s Aunt Catherine but at times they were written to her other aunts. Rebecca wrote all of these letters while she was in Halifax, her new home. She left in 1776, with her family, from America due to the hardships the American Revolutionary War had on them.

The Rebecca Byles letters are a primary source but there are unspoken meanings as the letters that Rebecca wrote are subject to inspection. The inspection of letters was because the letters were travelling from American Revolutionary War territories to British territories in Halifax. The reason they ended up moving to Halifax and not another British colony was because it was the closest one. The Byles family stayed in the British colonies as they were extremely loyal to the British Crown. Throughout her letters Rebecca cares for her aunts and wishes “for a Peace” 1 between American and British colonies. Although she would like an end to the war she does wish that the British Loyalists win as that is the side that she and her family have chosen.

Rebecca was the daughter of a respected clergyman who lived comfortably with the help from “the Pension allow’d them by the Crown” 2. Rebecca is the oldest of six children, one being a step sister from her father’s second wife. She attended school at Mrs. Cottnam’s Female Academy in Halifax and was also taught at home. She was well aware of the happenings around her and was not happy with it. She stated that she “will not write again, till I can write & speak with freedom” 3.

The majority of the letters discuss the everyday life in Halifax for Rebecca. She tells her aunts about their neighbours and big events in their lives as well as about her family. She had to be careful of what she wrote in her letters as they were subject to inspection while they were en route to her Aunt Catherine. At times she was brave enough to very vaguely discuss the American Revolutionary War, what side she was on and that she wished the “Universal Confusion” 4 would end. Rebecca was biased in her opinion of the War which was likely to do with her family. Her father was probably a loyalist which means that she can’t side with the opposition. It was also possible that she had never learned anything unbiased about the American revolutionaries and therefore has never had the chance to decide for herself. She was a loyalist living with an “unhappy Barrier” 5 between her immediate family and her extended family.

Throughout her letters Rebecca discussed some of the principles of feminism. As she was a very educated woman for her time she had a good understanding of her surroundings and a forward thinking outlook on the world. She knew that the male members of society will most likely work in the Army, Navy, or in Government and she believed that in these positions no “Knowledge or Honesty [was] required” 6 and that men in society are no longer gentlemanly. The reasons she thought this were not stated explicitly in her letter but she was probably referring to the pioneer nature of the settlers in what now is Canada and the United States. She also criticizes her education to some extent complaining that “a Ladys Observation” is not enough to understand the world 7. Most shockingly at this time is that she expects “to see Women fill the most important Offices [in the] Church and State” in a few years 8. This way of thinking at the time was very rare as men in society were the dominant gender and held all of the positions that she mentioned. She does not specifically state why she thought this but it is possible she believes that females will be in important offices because females think differently than men 9. These somewhat radical perspectives may be linked to the education that she received as well as the fact that her family was well respected in the community. She also lived in a house with mainly women which may have also been a factor in thinking that females aren’t just house keepers, as she had responsibilities given to her by her father as the eldest child.

Over all, this primary document would be useful to a historian because the outlook of a female at this time was not as common as the perspectives of a male. Rebecca, being an upper middle class female, is able to give us an educated written outlook of what life was like for her as a young lady in Halifax at the time of the American Revolutionary War. She also gives a very insightful view on how feminists were thinking at the time. These letters do have some weaknesses due to the fact that Rebecca knew that the letters may be inspected and may not have been able to write her true feelings on certain topics. In particular, topics such as the events of the American Revolutionary War, her loyalist feeling towards it as well as her aunts not being able to tell her what is going on made it unclear on how much Rebecca knew. It would have also been helpful to see the aunt’s letters that corresponded with Rebecca’s but it is possible that the other letters were not available. Yet the point of the letters is understandable and gives tremendous insight on how a lady like Rebecca viewed the world.

Word count: 961

Endnotes

1 Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management, MG 1 vol. 163. Letters from Rebecca Byles to Aunt Catherine (Kitty) Byles, 1777-1784. Published in Margaret Conrad, Toni Laidlaw and Donna Smyth, eds., No Place Like Home: Diaries and Letters of Nova Scotia Women, 1771-1938 (Halifax: Formac Publishing, 1988), 52

2 Ibid, 45

3 Ibid, 50

4 Ibid, 48

5 Ibid, 48

6 Ibid, 52

7 Ibid, 52

8 Ibid, 53

9 Ibid, 53

Bibliography

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Aunt Catherine (Kitty) Byles, 1777-1784. Published in Margaret Conrad, Toni Laidlaw

and Donna Smyth, eds., No Place Like Home: Diaries and Letters of Nova Scotia

Women, 1771-1938 (Halifax: Formac Publishing, 1988), pp. 48-53