



The Swamp Fox: How Francis Marion Saved the Revolution by John Oller.

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The American War of Independence was more than a rebellion against an imperial power. It included as well a war of colonial expansion against indigenous peoples and a brutal fratricidal struggle for political control of various states. All three types of conflict played out in South Carolina. Internal struggles breed both heroes and villains, and the fighting there was no exception.

The war's heroes included Thomas Sumter, Andrew Pickens, and Francis Marion, while Banastre Tarleton and James Wemyss were clear villains. Marion is the best known of these men in the popular consciousness, if only for his nom de guerre—"Swamp Fox." Lawyer and biographer John Oller brings precise research (and no little courage) to the challenge of writing a realistic, accurate life of a partisan leader whose exploits have made him a centerpiece of American national mythology. That said, his book is flawed by troubling inaccuracies that perpetuate myths regarding the fighting in South Carolina.

Oller does not proceed strictly chronologically. He begins his discussion of Marion's career with the aftermath of the surrender of Charleston (12 May 1780) and the defeats of Maj. Gen. Horatio Gates at Camden (16 Aug.) and Brig. Gen. Thomas Sumter at Fishing Creek (18 Aug.). At that moment, when Whig fortunes in the conflict were at their nadir, Marion stood alone against the British juggernaut. The fighting in the Carolina backcountry for the following eighteen months was distinguished, Oller (like other historians) notes, by "its vicious and personal nature" (14).

The author next examines Marion's family background, Huguenot ancestry, small stature, and the limited education that may have contributed to his taciturn manner. He then addresses his military apprenticeship in the Cherokee War (1758-61), where the young planter developed the tactics he later employed to great effect against the British and their loyalist allies.

As the colonies' relations with Great Britain broke down, Marion joined the Whig faction, opposing British policy. This was not, Oller points out, a natural choice for a planter who had benefited from the trade with the British. He notes that the future partisan's extended family may have played a part in his political decisions.

After these preliminary matters, the book focuses on Marion's service in the War of Independence, his rise through the ranks of the 2nd South Carolina Continental Regiment, and his actions during the British assault on Charleston in 1776. He continued to serve in Charleston while other South Carolinian troops suppressed the Tory uprising in the Snow Campaign, after which much of the deep South remained quiescent until the British returned in 1779. Following its failed attempt to drive the Crown forces out of Savannah, Georgia (9 Oct. 1779), the remainder of Marion's regiment marched back to South Carolina.

As noted, the fall of Charleston launched Marion's career as a partisan leader. Like other partisans he was motivated by two British provocations. The first was the conditions of paroles imposed on militiamen after the surrender at Charleston: instead of merely remaining at home in peace, they were required to actively support the Crown. The second was the purported atrocity committed by Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton's British Legion against Virginia colonel Abraham Buford's troops at the Battle of

the Waxhaws (29 May 1780). Oller asserts that Tarleton did in fact commit an atrocity. Most historians,¹ however, dismiss the clash as a very confused engagement where some of the British Legion lost control. In any case, they maintain, the *perception* that a massacre occurred galvanized the militia to return to the field. Oller does not even address this aspect of the battle's history.

Marion lacked support from the Continental Army in his irregular campaign against the British and their South Carolina loyalists. Its commanders' unhappy track record in the Southern Department reached its low point between Maj. Gen. Benjamin Lincoln's surrender of Charleston and the destruction of General Gates's army at the Battle of Camden (16 Aug. 1780). Finally, on 3 December, Gen. Nathanael Greene, handpicked by General Washington, arrived in North Carolina. Here at last was a Continental Commander willing and eager to support Marion.

One of Greene's first acts as commander was to write Marion a letter of introduction and ask for his aid. This was a dramatic shift from Gates's policy of ignoring the partisans' communications. Though "Marion quickly established a symbiotic relationship with Nathanael Greene" (109), one point of contention persisted throughout the two men's service—horses. Both men were in dire need of mounts for their troops. Oller rightly explains that fighting *en dragoon* was standard practice for irregular troops: they rode to the site of a planned operation, dismounted, made their attack, then rapidly withdrew on horseback. Such mobility was made still more urgent by the partisans' chronic shortages of ammunition

Unfortunately, Oller has little to say about partisan tactics used in Marion's campaigns. Though he has written several previous biographies,² he is a lawyer, not a military historian, by training. This is apparent elsewhere in his discussion of the battle of the Waxhaws and his unnuanced preference for Marion and other militia leaders over the Continental officers in theater. A good example of this is his assessment of Greene's defeat at Hobkirk's Hill (25 Apr. 1781):

Greene had a habit of blaming everyone but himself for his setbacks—at Guilford Courthouse the North Carolina militia failed him, at Hobkirk's Hill it was Sumter's absence and a subordinate Continental officer's order to retreat that were responsible for the loss. And thus he attributed the failed operation at Ninety-Six to the tardy South Carolina militia (and the absent Virginia militia, which Greene faulted Governor Thomas Jefferson for not sending). But Greene might also have looked in the mirror: inexperienced in siege operations, he failed to seize, early on, the small redoubt that protected the defenders' vulnerable water supply. Doing so would have made short work of things, but by the time the redoubt was taken it was too late to make a difference. (165–66)

In covering this issue, the author enters the old debate over who in fact won the Revolutionary War—the militia or the Continentals? Most military historians hold that *both* forces were essential to victory; neither could have succeeded without the other. By ignoring this consensus interpretation, Oller leaves readers with the impression that it was specifically the militia that drove the British and their loyalist auxiliaries from the Carolinas.

The author highlights the restraint Marion routinely showed in his treatment of captured British and loyalist troops, something rarely reciprocated. But his subordinates were not so considerate as their commander. Two of them, a Capt. Maurice Murphy and Lt. Col. John Ervin, burned the houses of several suspected loyalists. Oller comments: "That two of Marion's officers committed what, today, would be considered war crimes goes to show that few commanders could claim a spotless record for

1. See, e.g., Jim Piecuch, *The Blood Be upon Your Head: Tarleton and the Myth of Buford's Massacre* (Lugoff, SC: Southern Campaigns of the American Revolution Press, 2010).

2. Including the fulsomely titled *American Queen: The Rise and Fall of Kate Chase Sprague—Civil War "Belle of the North" and Gilded Age Woman of Scandal* (Boston: Da Capo, 2014).

their soldiers' atrocious conduct during South Carolina's civil war" (65). But what today counts as a war crime was not necessarily so viewed in the eighteenth century. Moreover, rebels were not thought to deserve the same treatment as "legitimate" regular forces. In turn many partisans considered loyalists to be rebels: as insurgents against a duly constituted government, they were not entitled to protection. Marion's actions must be evaluated in the context of the complexities of the contest for control of South Carolina. Oller briefly sketches his postwar activities, which included serving in the South Carolina legislature, where he took a decidedly conciliatory attitude toward his former loyalist foes and worked to protect their property from seizure by the state.

A virtue of John Oller's new biography is his extensive use of Francis Marion's orderly book³ and other papers⁴ to glean interesting details about his day-to-day activities and operations. *Swamp Fox* will certainly attract a wide readership, especially among students and history buffs.⁵ But specialists will dislike its dearth of original analysis and tendency to accept many of the myths it ostensibly seeks to debunk.

3. Patrick O'Kelley, *Unwaried Patience and Fortitude: Francis Marion's Orderly Book* (West Conshohocken, PA: Infinity Publ., 2006).

4. "Both Charles [Baxley] and David Neilan, his co-editor of the forthcoming *Francis Marion Papers*, provided me with ongoing guidance in my research Dave also generously allowed me to review a draft of the Marion papers" (249).

5. To date, 113 Amazon reviewers have given it an average of 4.5 stars.