While the American Revolution is a popular topic for both authors and readers, the history of that conflict south of the Mid-Atlantic States has garnered less attention. Lawyer/journalist John Oller intends to remedy that situation with his new book, *The Swamp Fox: How Francis Marion Saved the American Revolution*, which focuses on the exploits of the partisan leader in the eastern third of South Carolina from 1780 to 1782. The author makes clear from the outset that his volume is intended to separate fact from the better-known fiction surrounding Marion, thanks to Parson Weems’s fanciful portrayal and the equally history-light Mel Gibson movie, *The Patriot*, in which Marion himself might not have recognized the subject. In particular Oller notes that Marion was never referred to by anyone, even the British, as the “Swamp Fox” during his life. As a positive term, that sobriquet dated from an 1829 poem and the first professional biography of Marion, written by William Gilmore Simms in 1844.

In July 1780, General Horatio Gates became the new commander of the American Continental Army in the south, two months after Charleston, South Carolina, had fallen to the British. A former major in the British Army, Gates was no fan of either irregular warfare or the cavalry, straining relations with Marion, who specialized in irregular warfare and preferred to fight on horseback. Nevertheless, in that year Marion took command of a group of militia known as “Marion’s Brigade,” located in the Williamsburg Township area northeast of the Santee River. In describing the unit’s early actions, Oller notes that the losses his unit inflicted were “individually small but cumulatively a large drain on British resources and morale” (9), a recurring theme in the volume.

In his first chapter, Oller—no doubt aware that many readers might be overly dismissive of the American Revolution as fought in a pocket of South Carolina—notes that more Revolutionary War battles were fought in South Carolina than in any other colony, that 20 percent of all battle deaths in the Revolution occurred in South Carolina, and that of the 1,000 Patriots who died in battle in 1780, two-thirds did so in South Carolina. The British had adopted the so-called “Southern Strategy,” which meant that they would occupy Georgia and subdue Virginia and the Carolinas in preparation for a final conflict with Washington in the north. The author also stresses that the war in Marion’s home state was especially vicious and personal, driven less by ideology than by a desire for localized revenge. Men often switched sides in the conflict, and friends and neighbors often faced each other in battle.

Born in 1732—the same year as George Washington—Francis Marion became a prosperous indigo farmer at his inherited property, Hampton Hill, while learning the techniques of the British royal government force fighting Native Americans. As Oller points out, this experience taught Marion both the arrogance of the British commanders and the fickleness of the colonial militia, lessons Marion would have cause to remember. By 1776, Marion was serving in the state legislature and had become a professional soldier, a captain of militia.

For the next two-and-a-half years, Marion often found himself alone, or nearly so, in leading militia forces against the British within South Carolina, as regular Continental Army troops were seldom in the state. He continually pleaded with Gates for news, support, and even orders, and his commander’s routine lack of response to the messages Marion dutifully sent was a continuing vexation for him. Nor did Gates’s successor, the 33-year-old Major General Nathaniel Greene, who arrived in Charlotte, North Carolina, in December 1780, have any particular use for militia troops. But if his commanders tended to ignore Marion, the British did not—particularly after he led one of the first of his trademark hit-and-run raids on 25 August 1780, to rescue 150 Continentals from being marched to British prison ships. This raid elevated the previously unknown Marion to the official status of a thorn-in-the-side of the British, most notably that of Lord Cornwallis. Although subordinates repeatedly assured him that South Carolina was secure, Cornwallis had to...
dispatch a number of troops to deal with this “cautious
and vigilant” pest. (72)

With Greene’s arrival and Marion’s withdrawal to win-
ter quarters on Snow Island in late 1780, Marion in effect
became the former’s director of intelligence. Marion, who
always prided himself on his savvy with people, be-
friendied the local Whig population on the island, already
pre-disposed to oppose the Tory threat. Oller points out
that Marion was one of the first militia leaders to curry
favor with the locals, a tenet of Mao Tse-tung’s winning
strategy in China and now a component of US Army offi-
cial doctrine—interesting assertions on which the author
does not comment further.

Through 1781 and into August 1782, Marion and his
troops continued engagements with the British and at
times with marauding loyalists from North Carolina. At
that point he served at the pleasure of South Carolina
Governor John Rutledge, to whom the militia answered at
this stage of the Revolution. When the Continental Army
entered Charleston as conquerors on 14 December 1782,
both Greene and the governor decided the militia would
not be allowed into the city due to the threat of loyal-
ist-militia fights. Shortly thereafter, Marion dismissed
his troops, mounted his horse, and rode off to Pond Bluff
Plantation, where he spent the rest of his days.

Although Marion—sometimes referred to as the
“Washington of the South”—had taken part in some two
dozen engagements during the war, all had been small,
both in numbers of men committed and casualties. But
Marion’s influence upon those he led for several years
was profound; one of the militia members who had been
with him since the beginning, William Dobein James, de-
scribed him as follows: “His appearance was not prepos-
sessing, his manners were distant, but not repulsive, yet
few leaders have ever been so popular among their men;
none ever had more of their confidence . . . ” (236)

In the years following the war, Greene and Marion
grew estranged, in part because the state legislature of his
native Rhode Island had granted Greene 10,000 guineas
as a “thank-you” gift, while Marion received . . . nothing,
least for a while. In 1783, the South Carolina Senate
did award Marion a gold medal and commendation and,
two years later, a 302-acre land grant. The following year,
the lifelong bachelor married his first cousin, Mary Esther
Videau, who outlived him by 20 years. He resigned from
the militia in 1794 and died the following year at Pond
Bluff at age 63. In an interesting sidenote, Oller mentions
that for a man so concerned about the well-being of those
he led, he never freed any of his slaves, including the
half-dozen or so who had faithfully served him through-
out his life.

The Swamp Fox makes for an engaging read, with sat-
isfyingly-rich footnotes and three useful maps, although
a volume replete with innumerable small-unit military
actions would greatly benefit from additional graphics.
The fact that Oller includes 80 pages of footnotes to com-
plement 250 pages of text reflects his research skills and
adds to the academic credibility of the work. The book’s
dust jacket highlights that Oller’s volume is the “first ma-
jor biography of Marion in more than forty years,” likely
a reference to Robert D. Bass’s Swamp Fox: The Life
and Campaigns of General Francis Marion, published
in 1974. However, the publisher’s gratuitous comment
ignores the 2012 work by US Marine Corps colonel and
irregular warfare historian Scott D. Aiken, author of The
Swamp Fox: Lessons in Leadership from the Partisan
Campaigns of Francis Marion, which Oller consulted.
Readers of Oller’s volume should approach it with the
knowledge that accounts of small-unit tactical actions, in
which the number of troops on both sides seldom exceed-
ed a few hundred and never more than 2,000, get tedious
after a while.

The major criticism of The Swamp Fox, however, con-
cerns the subtitle—“how Francis Marion Saved the Amer-
ican Revolution” which is, at best, an exaggeration, and
at worst, flat-out wrong. The impression most readers will
have after reading the book is that, while Marion certainly
“helped save” the American Revolution, it was hardly a
one-man show, and most historians would agree that, at
best, the war in South Carolina—even given the casualty
figures—was a sideshow to the war in the Mid-Atlantic
States and New England. Similarly, it is hard to believe
that had Marion never been born, the British would have
won. Nevertheless, a new biography of Marion is wel-
come, especially one that in general goes to great lengths
to separate fact from fiction in discussing the near-mythi-
cal militia commander.

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