

The Swamp Fox: How Francis Marion Saved the American Revolution

John Oller (Da Capo Press, 2016), 368 pp., maps, notes, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by David A. Foy

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 Caro-

lina, 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

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dispatch a number of troops to deal with this “cautious and vigilant” pest. (72)

With Greene’s arrival and Marion’s withdrawal to winter 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, befriended 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 official 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 loyalist-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, described him as follows: “His appearance was not prepossessing, 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, at 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 throughout his life.

The Swamp Fox makes for an engaging read, with satisfyingly-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 complement 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 major 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 exceeded a few hundred and never more than 2,000, get tedious after a while.

The major criticism of *The Swamp Fox*, however, concerns the subtitle—“how Francis Marion Saved the American 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 welcome, especially one that in general goes to great lengths to separate fact from fiction in discussing the near-mythical militia commander.

