

John Oller. *The Swamp Fox: How Francis Marion Saved the American Revolution.* Boston: Da Capo, 2016. 400 pp. \$26.99, cloth, ISBN 978-0-306-82457-9.

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In *The Swamp Fox*, biographer John Oller presents a carefully researched account of the life of South Carolina militia general and guerilla leader Francis Marion, one of the American Revolution's most divisive and elusive figures. With an engaging narrative and a level of detail sure to delight many military historians and enthusiasts alike, Oller reconstructs Marion's participation in the Revolutionary War, focusing particularly on the period between the fall of Charleston in June 1780 and the British retreat in late 1781, when, at various times, irregular forces led by commanders like Marion and Thomas Sumter constituted virtually the only resistance to British rule in South Carolina. It was during this period, Oller argues, that Marion "saved the Revolution" by using guerilla tactics to bleed British and loyalist forces in the South Carolina lowcountry, depriving them of supplies and soldiers and preventing the British government from exercising complete control over the region.

The strength of *Swamp Fox* lies in the meticulous detail in which Oller presents Marion's exploits. Mining military records on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as scholarly works and remembrances from the early nineteenth century to the present, the author guides the reader through each of Marion's battles and deftly reconstructs the swampy arena in which they took place. The

cast of characters around the general are also fleshed out well, as are his British and loyalist opponents, lending the descriptions of campaigns and battles a rich and layered character. This level of detail allows Oller to convincingly portray Marion as "one of the earliest guerilla warriors who understood the importance of moral, material, and intelligence support from the local civilian population," comparing the Swamp Fox to more well-known leaders of popular resistance movements like Mao Zedong (p. 107). Indeed, if nothing else, *Swamp Fox* demonstrates how, at its core, the Revolutionary War in the American South closely resembled guerilla wars in other times and places, and recasting Marion as a canny warrior who understood the intricacies of insurgent warfare may be Oller's greatest contribution to scholarship on the American Revolution.

While well researched and satisfyingly written, however, Oller's text strays in many places toward hagiography, despite the author's stated attention to "sifting fact from folklore" (p. x). Again and again the reader is reminded of Marion's "scrupulous refusal" to allow his men to plunder civilians, his self-abasement in the face of rival commanders—"Never one to let his own ego get in the way of the right decision"—and "the trust and respect" in which almost everyone, from his soldiers to the governor of South Carolina, held

the general (pp. 90, 146, 202). Oller's veneration for Marion is especially pronounced in the author's comparison to South Carolina's other major Revolutionary partisan, Sumter, who Oller portrays and paints as a violent, egomaniacal, and reckless foil to Marion's more virtuous command style. While this argument may have some substance, the consistent focus on explaining away Marion's faults and emphasizing his virtues detracts from an otherwise engaging and often surprising narrative.

In the end, Oller does not prove that Marion "saved the American Revolution," as his subtitle suggests. Despite its detail, his work lacks the breadth and depth of research, or engagement with scholarship on the Revolution as a whole, to demonstrate what, if any, effect that the general's actions in South Carolina had on the outcome of the war. What *Swamp Fox* does accomplish, occasionally despite itself, is a reconceptualization of Marion not as a mythological, virtuous American hero but as an astute student of war, one who understood the intricacies of waging a guerilla campaign against a superior force in a civilian community. In doing so, it joins a growing scholarly tradition demonstrating that the American Revolutionary War was not a simple War for Independence but rather a complex civil war that played out in pitched battles as well as in small communities ravaged by division and conflict.

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