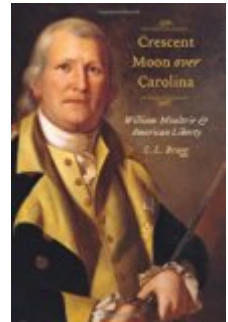


**C. L. Bragg.** *Crescent Moon over Carolina: William Moultrie and American Liberty.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, October 2013. 336 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-61117-269-0.



**Reviewed by** Aaron Palmer

**Published on** H-War (June, 2014)

**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

*Crescent Moon over Carolina* is the first full-length, modern biography of William Moultrie. At first, this fact seems surprising, given that Moultrie is relatively well known for his defense of Charleston during the British assault in 1776. However, Moultrie did not leave a large collection of personal or even public papers behind, so any potential biographer has a major challenge to face in filling in the gaps. Bragg's book, while interesting and well written, only partially succeeds in this effort to prove Moultrie's broader importance beyond the defense of Ft. Sullivan.

Moultrie was not among the top rank of Revolutionary War officers, and he was largely important for only one brief episode during the war. Bragg very much attempts to counter this common view of Moultrie, with limited success. Perhaps due to the lack of personal papers, the narrative sometimes veers away from Moultrie himself or delves into what seem like minor event or asides in sometimes drawn-out detail.

Bragg deals with the military history of the period very well. His narrative of battles and engagements is strong and compelling, although the lack of maps in the book is sometimes distracting. Indeed, this book's major contribution to the literature is to show Moultrie's role in the South Carolina theater of the Revolutionary War. Bragg clearly presents Moultrie gaining important experience during the Cherokee War and using that experience in preparing for the defense of South Carolina in 1775 and 1776. The reader can get a general sense here of how many men who became officers in the Revolutionary War prepared for leadership positions. His coverage of the defense of Ft. Sullivan in 1776 is superb, and the defense of the fort is clearly shown to be Moultrie's moment in the sun. Bragg's treatment, though, of the siege of Charleston in 1780 is less compelling. General Benjamin Lincoln seems to be too easily criticized and dismissed here, quite contrary to Carl Borick's excellent study of the siege.

The book is much weaker in dealing with the political history spanning Moultrie's life. The ear-

ly analysis of the coming of the American Revolution in South Carolina is simplistic (i.e., the imperial crisis as a quest for liberty), and too often Moultrie is just present at committee or assembly meetings without having much else to say or do. The reader gets no sense that Moultrie had any real political importance in the events leading up to independence.

Bragg barely touches upon Moultrie as a slave-owner and planter. When he does broach these subjects, the results are the weakest part of the book. Moultrie's self-described scene of teary-eyed slaves welcoming him home to his plantation in 1782 is accepted without comment or critique from the author. Early in the book, Bragg offers this assessment of Moultrie as a planter: "Moultrie's character and disposition made him a relatively kind and benevolent master, perhaps to a fault. He was later criticized ... by his superior officers for being too easy and goodhearted to maintain proper discipline" (p. 12). The book uncritically accepts the patriarchal view that slave-owners like Moultrie often projected, without much engagement with the well-documented terrors and realities of slavery in the South Carolina low country. Moultrie's position in South Carolina society was derived from his wealth as a planter and slave-owner, and the lack of critical study here is a major omission.

The latter chapters on Moultrie's postwar life and governorship are interesting, especially in how Moultrie became a Jeffersonian Republican and supporter of the Jacobin French envoys and consuls sent to Charleston. However, as with the earlier political coverage, one is often left to wonder just how important Moultrie was in the grand scheme of things. Bragg offers a strong narrative here, but he provides less analysis of the long-term importance (if any) of Moultrie's later political career.

One gets a sense that Bragg likes and admires his subject, which is always a potential trap for biographers. Surely this book is no work of hero

worship. Bragg is willing to criticize Moultrie's military and political mistakes and does so fairly. Bragg provides a fine military study of an able though provincial officer whose impact on the overall course of the Revolutionary War was limited to his own state and even there to just a few major episodes. Unfortunately, *Crescent Moon over Carolina* does not elevate Moultrie to a greater level of importance and will not probably seriously change the overall historical understanding of him. It may be that there can be no definitive biography of Moultrie based on the limited primary source material available. As good as the military coverage and writing are, this book in any case leaves room for a more critical study of the man.

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**Citation:** Aaron Palmer. Review of Bragg, C. L. *Crescent Moon over Carolina: William Moultrie and American Liberty*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. June, 2014.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=40774>



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