Film Review:

"The Patriot."

Directed by Roland Emmerich
(Centropolis Entertainment. July 2000)

Washington's army at Valley Forge, the Declaration of Independence, and tricorn hats. Push beyond these images and you rapidly reach the limit of most Americans' knowledge of the Revolutionary War. Yorktown was good, Cornwallis was bad. Few today, however, understand much more about the war that won American independence, including its complexity and the brutal nature of eighteenth-century warfare. Despite its fair share of historical inaccuracies, "The Patriot" raises public awareness of what has become an almost mythical war, and creates an opportunity for teachers and students to gain a deeper understanding of the era.

Criticisms of "The Patriot" abound from professional historians, with listserves being the clearinghouse for a laundry list of the movie's shortcomings. The story's villains, Lieutenant Colonel Tavington's merciless dragoons, wear red coats instead of green worn by their historical counterparts, Banastre Tarleton's British Legion. Tavington meets a just fate on the bayonet of Benjamin Martin, the movie's protagonist played by Mel Gibson, whereas the eighteen-century Tarleton survived the war. At Guilford Court House, the setting for the climatic battle scene, Gibson's reluctant patriot leads his fellow revolutionaries to victory, but in the 1781 version of the engagement, the Americans were driven from the field by Lord Cornwallis's army. And the flag patriot Martin uses to rally the troops and turn the tide, the Betsy Ross version? No record exists of its use at Guilford Court House. Aware of these inaccuracies, the filmmakers chose to include them because they feared British soldiers in green uniforms would create confusion for the average moviegoer, and that for general audiences the Betsy Ross flag was a recognizable symbol of the American Revolution. (See Lucinda Moore, "Capturing America's Flight for Freedom," *Smithsonian*, July 2000, 44-53). They are likely correct on both counts.

So has the release of "The Patriot" set the nation's understanding of the Revolution back 225 years? Hardly. The film has its shortcomings, but if we look beyond the trivial to issues of consequence, the movie has much to offer. In contrast to the typical Revolutionary War story set-

tings of Boston, New York, or Philadelphia, "The Patriot" stage is the southern theater, the least familiar part of an unfamiliar war. There was more to the fighting in the South than Yorktown, as this film makes clear. Hatred, personal animosities, and brutality characterized the war in the Carolinas and Virginia. The character of Captain Wilkins, the loyalist militia officer who aids Tavington in his storm of savagery, exemplifies the divisive nature of the Revolution in the Carolinas as families and friends deteriorated into bitter enemies, initiating the United States' first true civil war. Even the more congenial disagreements in the South Carolina General Assembly show that among those with no great allegiance to the king, differences remained over the questions of independence and taking up arms. Of course many did shoulder their muskets, enduring the violence and ordered chaos of eighteen-century linear tactics. Artillery fire, musket volleys, and bayonet charges illustrate the horrors of combat while avoiding the common pitfalls of most war movies, either gratuitous violence or bloodless battles. The final battle scene is impressive in its scope, combining events of Guilford Court House and the battle of Cowpens, including a cavalry charge. But for classroom use, the fight between Al Pacino's patriot militia and Donald Sutherland's British regulars in the 1985 film "Revolution" remains superior.

The Revolution's southern campaign is a story of high drama, needing little help from Hollywood writers. The disastrous fight at Camden, a stunning victory at King's Mountain, the militia miracle at Cowpens, Cornwallis's relentless but foolhardy pursuit of Nathaneal Greene across the rolling piedmont of North Carolina, and the British "victory" at Guilford Court House carry enough action, emotion, heroes, and villains for any movie script. Nevertheless, "The Patriot" is not, nor did its makers intend it to be, a documentary of the southern campaign; this is a movie meant for general audiences. But like "Saving Private Ryan" (whose author, Robert Rodat, was the screenwriter for "The Patriot"), this film generated interest among a public that is woefully unfamiliar with American history. In the classroom, teachers and professors can nurture this curiosity and guide students to more substantial sources like Lawrence E. Babits's outstanding *A Devil of a Whipping: The Battle of Cowpens* (Chapel Hill, 1998), and John S. Pancake's survey of the southern phase of the war, *The Destructive War: The British Campaign in the Carolinas, 1780-1782* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 1985). We as historians will always quibble, and rightly so, over the inaccuracies and imperfections of historically-based movies. But after acknowledging the deficiencies, we should seize the opportunity these films present to encourage an awareness and appreciation for our collective past. "The Patriot" with all its shortcomings, gives us that chance.

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