

## Review of *The Battles of Kings Mountain and Cowpens*

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*The Battles of Kings Mountain and Cowpens: The American Revolution in the Southern Backcountry.* By Melissa Walker. (New York and London: Routledge, 2013). Xv, 193pp, documents, notes, bibliography, index.

Melissa Walker's account of the southern backcountry at war during the American Revolution is part of Routledge's "Critical Moments in American History" series, edited by William T. Allison. Walker, professor of history at Converse College in Spartanburg, South Carolina, seeks to provide an overview of the war for American independence in the backcountry South for college students. The author contends that a "surprising reversal of British fortunes" from their victory at Charleston in May 1780 to the ignominious surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown in October 1781 "was largely the result of bitter warfare in the Carolina backcountry and the two turning point battles—at Kings Mountain and Cowpens." (2) The book includes a timetable, sidebars, and a "documents" section of ten primary accounts for readers to further examine the subject.

Walker starts with a brief overview of the concept of a southern backcountry, and events of the 1750s and 1760s there. She includes descriptions of Anglo-Cherokee relations and warfare, as well as the Regulator movements of each of the Carolinas. The South Carolina Regulation, she writes, was a result of smoldering "social, political, and religious animosities ... between coastal elites and backcountry settlers for decades," combined with a lack of government structures and social order. (9) Walker's brief account of the North Carolina regulator movement also shows an East/West split between established elites and newly arrived settlers, the latter often taken advantage of by abusive officials. These two movements also "sowed the seeds of bitter enmity both among backcountry settlers and between backcountry and lowcountry folks that would persist into the years of the Revolution." (15)

Following the introduction, the author provides a capable narrative of key events during the Revolutionary War in the South leading up to the two battles she regards as "pivotal," Kings Mountain and Cowpens. These include the imperial crisis culminating in the break with Great Britain, efforts to win the "hearts and minds" of the population in the colonies, the Snow Campaign (1775), the Cherokee War (1776), and the British campaign in the South beginning in 1778, which included the capture of Savannah and Charleston by 1780. Although based almost exclusively on secondary sources, the author's account of military operations leading up to the two pivot battles is clear and organized, with enough details to keep student readers interested in the dramatic events.

This level of detail and description of military and political events in the South, however, is also one of the book's chief curiosities, if not flaws. Although her subtitle is *The American Revolution in the Southern Backcountry*, Walker spends almost the entire the first half (about 50 pages) of the narrative describing events, population groups, and movements that

are not associated with or specific to the backcountry. Readers learn about the rights of Englishmen, lowcountry politics and elites, the Tea Act, slaves, royal governors, declaring independence, the siege of Charleston, and a host of other topics, which are all well-presented but have little to do with a text purportedly about the backcountry. Slavery is not predominately a backcountry story, but gets much attention in this study. While several of the author's numerous sidebars are directly on topic, others are not, such as those on "women and the boycott of tea," and "Boston King." As written, the book is in effect a history of the South during the Revolutionary War, with a pronounced emphasis on South Carolina. Virginia is hardly mentioned, while Georgia and North Carolina get short shrift. North Carolina's military leaders—Griffith Rutherford, Richard Caswell, and Benjamin Cleveland, for instance—get no mention at all. In addition, the author does not appear to have used the important works of Hugh Rankin, Wayne E. Lee, Ronald Hoffman, and David Hackett Fischer on North Carolina and the backcountry during the Revolutionary struggle.

After the fall of the American garrison at Charleston in 1780, the war in the Carolinas was primarily a backcountry conflict. Walker leads students through the military campaigns of Cornwallis, Gates, Greene and Morgan, from the American disaster at the battle of Camden, South Carolina (August 1780) through the pyrrhic British victory at Guilford Courthouse, North Carolina in March 1781. She also puts smaller engagements into the backcountry context, especially those involving militia units, such as Huck's Defeat, Blackstocks, and Cedar Springs (all in South Carolina). In fact, one of the book's strengths is its emphasis on the "civil war" nature of the conflict in the South. Walker points out the different and often fluid loyalties Whigs and Tories espoused throughout the war, and the fact that the conflict was fought between opposing militias, not redcoats and Continentals, on many occasions. She also details the violence between Whigs and Loyalists, which often affected civilians and their property in cycles of retaliation characterized by murder, arson, and theft.

If there were a "critical moment" during the Revolutionary War in the South, then the two American victories at Kings Mountain and Cowpens, separated by three months in the fall and winter of 1780-81, may well be it. Some scholars might argue that until Maj. Gen. Nathanael Greene blunted the British advance through the Carolinas at Guilford Courthouse, the British were strong enough to subdue Patriot support in the South even with their prior defeats. Nevertheless, Walker (like others before her) holds that the Tory militia defeat at Kings Mountain was "an enormous defeat," (87) one that set the British campaign back for weeks during a critical time for American forces trying to collect and organize under newly-arrived Southern Department commander Nathanael Greene. Her statement, however, that the violent treatment of Loyalist prisoners by Whigs after the Kings Mountain "tarnished the important victory" is more about twenty-first century sensibilities far removed from the actual events than the bitter feelings of the combatants of 1780.

Walker's account of Cowpens, which she acknowledges is based primarily on Lawrence Babits' work, is a solid summary of events that makes the rather nuanced battle quite clear. She also emphasizes that the American commander, Brig. Gen. Daniel Morgan, recognized

and exploited the idiosyncrasies of backcountry militia in his pre-battle preparations and troop deployments, to his ultimate advantage.

As a teaching tool, *The Battles of Kings Mountain and Cowpens* seems to offer a welcome addition to the classroom, particularly for those interested in military history. The inclusion of primary source materials at the end of the book may be valuable too, although the author provides no guidance as to how teachers can use them, why the particular letters and accounts were chosen, or student goals. Moreover, modern battle maps of Kings Mountain and Cowpens would have enhanced the book's value to students.