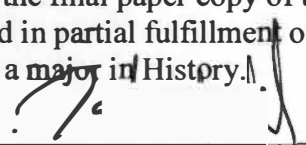


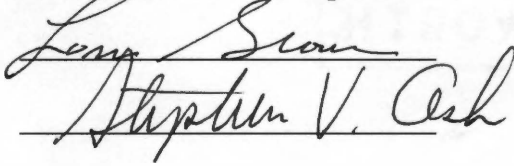
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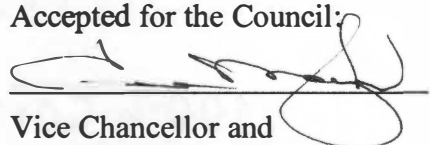
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THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE KING'S MOUNTAIN VICTORS

**A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville**

**Michael Lynch
May 2006**

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ABSTRACT

Hank Messick's 1976 book on the backwoods militia's victory over a large Tory force at King's Mountain is not what most historians would consider to be a full-scale, academic treatment. Lightly documented but vibrantly written, *King's Mountain: The Epic of the Blue Ridge "Mountain Men" in the American Revolution* falls squarely in the category of popular narrative. But Messick's account is as firmly situated in a particular body of interpretation as the most rigorous historiographical work. The most interesting portion of *King's Mountain* is the introduction, in which Messick explains his motives in devoting an entire volume to the Whig partisans' 1780 campaign in the Carolina backcountry. "By achieving better perspective of the past," Messick states, "something may be accomplished in the present." He explains that the book is partly a result of his disgust with American arrogance toward present-day Appalachians. The mountaineer, he argues, "is called various unflattering names today and is the butt of comic-strip buffoonery and the 'villain' of serious works."¹ Messick's book is a chronicle of the King's Mountain victors' achievement, but it is also an attempt to vindicate present-day inhabitants of the Southern mountains.

For many Appalachians, and particularly for East Tennesseans, King's Mountain remains a matter of intense regional pride: it was the area's signal contribution to the American Revolution and a critical turning point in that conflict. The traditional view of the King's Mountain Whigs holds them to be fiercely patriotic and stubbornly

¹ Hank Messick, *King's Mountain: The Epic of the Blue Ridge 'Mountain Men' in the American Revolution* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976), ix-xi.

independent. Accustomed to living in a state of freedom, they were quick to react to the threat of British oppression by employing the deadly skills learned from a life in the wilderness, surrounded by hostile Indians. There is much truth to this traditional interpretation, and the purpose of this study is not to smash pedestals. Rather, the purpose here is to examine how views of the King's Mountain victors evolved over time. The creation of traditional heroes is so common that it is easy to assume that any historical figure can enter the national pantheon, given enough time. But as this study will demonstrate, the path historical figures must travel on their way to heroic status is neither straight in direction nor steady in ascent. Hero-making is sometimes a messy, contentious process, and requires a great deal of effort.

Messick's interpretation has very deep roots in the American historical imagination, and some of his ideas mirror similar works written more than a century before the publication of his book. But although this "incarnation" of the King's Mountain militia has had tremendous staying power, its acceptance was not inevitable. Contemporary views of the King's Mountain Whigs were quite different. The first chapter explores contemporary expectations of American militiamen and how these expectations played out in the King's Mountain campaign. Contemporaries had definite ideas about the nature of American militia, and while most irregular troops failed to fulfill these notions, the King's Mountain victors were in many ways exceptions. They fit the model of experienced frontier veterans who could use partisan tactics to great effect. But many revolutionaries also demanded certain types of behavior from soldiers engaged in war, and it was here that the backcountry militia fell short of expectations. Regular officers such as Nathanael Greene, who assumed responsibility for the King's

Mountain victors when he arrived in the South to take command of American forces there, expected virtuous soldiers to behave according to prescribed rules and customs of war. The King's Mountain Whigs fought the Revolutionary War in their own way, and this clash of military cultures meant that contemporary interpretations of their contribution did not fit the traditional, heroic model. Many early assessments of the King's Mountain victors were surprisingly negative, because they did not behave according to the rules of the mainstream American Revolution.

The King's Mountain men finally became full-fledged revolutionaries after the War of 1812. The legacy of the Revolutionary War was very much on the minds of Americans in this period, as veterans took advantage of the "re-discovery" of the fight for independence to demand the recognition they deserved. The second chapter demonstrates how King's Mountain veterans joined this tidal wave of revolutionary remembrance. Average soldiers applied for pensions or published accounts of their services, while officers feuded over questions of honor that had simmered since the King's Mountain campaign. By asserting their own role in winning American independence, King's Mountain veterans claimed a place for themselves in the legacy of the Revolutionary War. They achieved recognition and acceptance as revolutionaries that had been denied them during the actual conflict.

The third chapter focuses on the view of King's Mountain that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As the Revolutionary War receded from living memory into written history, writers and orators interpreted the King's Mountain victors according to their own needs and preconceptions. The frontier historian Lyman C. Draper was the most important King's Mountain chronicler, elevating the militia to the

stature of genuine heroes. Other chroniclers carried this process farther along, but in the process, they came to identify the King's Mountain militia with particular geographical regions. Writers claimed the battle for their own state or section, shaping history to meet the needs of their own time and place. East Tennessee emerged as the winner in this crucial stage of the militia's evolution, ensuring that King's Mountain would be synonymous with Appalachia well into the modern era, as evidenced by Messick's account.

The influence of nineteenth-century tradition is one good reason to approach King's Mountain using historical memory as a starting point. Another reason is more practical. Primary source material dating from the campaign itself is sparse. Good manuscript material exists, but much of it comes from decades after the Revolution, for reasons explained in detail in the second chapter. This study makes use of manuscript accounts as well as published documentary material. Because the subject is the creation of historical tradition, many later accounts are also treated as primary sources. Treatment of King's Mountain changed so much from 1780 to the early twentieth century that the kinds of primary material used varies greatly from chapter to chapter, from published documentary sources and manuscript recollections from the eighteenth century to popular historical works of the late nineteenth.

This study is also grounded in the relevant secondary literature on the Revolutionary War, historical memory, and Appalachia. Recent scholars have applied the techniques of the "new military history" to the Revolutionary War and produced valuable insights on the way Americans interpreted their battle for independence, and why they chose to fight as they did. This new approach broadens the scope of military

history to examine the impact of society at large on the manner of waging war. The memory of the Revolution, and of war in general, is also a particularly vibrant field; this study operates within a framework very familiar to students of the war's legacy. Finally, the study of Appalachian identity and outsiders' views of the region is also the subject of much good work, and this study employs some of these interpretations. Hopefully the work of these disparate groups of creative historians will shed new light on the men who triumphed at King's Mountain, their evolving image, and the importance of their story.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: “With the Militia Every Body is a Genl”: Nathanael Greene and Wartime Views of the King’s Mountain Victors.	1
CHAPTER 2: “Debt of Honour Due to Us”: Isaac Shelby and the Vindication of the King’s Mountain Veterans.	23
CHAPTER 3: “That Remarkable Contest”: Lyman C. Draper and the Creation of Regional Heroes.	47
CONCLUSION.	84
BIBLIOGRAPHY.	87
VITA.	95

CHAPTER 1

“WITH THE MILITIA EVERY BODY IS A GENL”: NATHANAEL GREENE AND WARTIME VIEWS OF THE KING’S MOUNTAIN VICTORS

King’s Mountain demonstrated the limitations inherent in two great assumptions of the Revolutionary War. The first involved British strategists’ confidence in Loyalist auxiliaries. The British moved operations to the South to tap into widespread Toryism in the Southern colonies. The siege of Charleston in 1780 marked the first phase in the implementation of this Southern strategy. Regular troops, the British hoped, would quickly overwhelm American resistance in South Carolina, and leave occupation and mopping up to Loyalist recruits as they proceeded into North Carolina and eventually Virginia, severing the southern provinces from the rest of the colonies. At first, this strategy worked quite well. British forces delivered two decisive defeats to the Americans, first with the fall of Charleston in May and then against an army under the command of Horatio Gates in August, bringing organized Continental resistance to an end in South Carolina.

As Cornwallis implemented plans to invade North Carolina, he sent Major Patrick Ferguson into the backcountry to recruit and train Loyalist militia. Ferguson’s men and other British units sparred with backcountry Whig militia in the summer and fall of 1780, including partisan bands from the two Carolinas, Georgia, and present-day East Tennessee. This did not stop the North Carolina invasion; Cornwallis directed Ferguson’s corps of about 1,100 men to move along the army’s western flank in support of his march, and Ferguson attempted to cow the western militia into submission by

threatening to attack the “over-mountain” settlements. These mountain Whigs responded by organizing into a force of mounted infantry, and marched into the Carolina backcountry in pursuit of Ferguson, joined by other partisan bands along the way. On the afternoon of October 7, 1780, approximately 900 of these Whigs surrounded Ferguson on a small ridge called King’s Mountain on the border between the two Carolinas, and in a battle lasting roughly one hour they killed or captured nearly the entire force. Ferguson himself was among the dead. Having lost his army’s left wing, Cornwallis abandoned his invasion and retreated into South Carolina. When he attempted to move north a second time, Nathanael Greene and a reorganized Continental Army was ready for him. King’s Mountain dramatically revealed the folly of relying on Loyalist recruits.¹

The second great assumption involved the nature of American militia. King’s Mountain was unique as a significant battle fought almost entirely by irregular troops. The first commentators on King’s Mountain were therefore largely concerned with questions of wartime utility, since King’s Mountain offered observers a test case by which to judge the effectiveness of citizen-soldiers. But in a conflict as inherently ideological as the American Revolution, even the most practical military questions carried significant philosophical and moral overtones. For contemporaries of the battle, practical and ideological questions were so closely intertwined that at times they seemed

¹ The standard account of King’s Mountain remains Lyman C. Draper, *King’s Mountain and its Heroes* (Cincinnati: Peter G. Thompson, 1881), although its position as the definitive work is largely by default, for reasons that will be covered in detail in chapter three. A number of more recent, scholarly works treat the King’s Mountain campaign in some detail, although virtually all authors who followed Draper borrowed heavily from him. John S. Pancake, *This Destructive War: The British Campaign in the Carolinas, 1780-1782* (University: The University of Alabama Press, 1985) covers the development of Britain’s Southern strategy and explains why it failed. John Buchanan, *The Road to Guilford Courthouse: The American Revolution in the Carolinas* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997) is a fine narrative history with an excellent series of chapters on King’s Mountain. His use of extant first-person material is especially good. Henry Lumpkin, *From Savannah to Yorktown: The American Revolution in the South* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1981) also covers the major battles in the Southern campaign.

to be one and the same. For this reason, the first perceptions of the King's Mountain Whigs differed greatly from later accounts that lionized these men. Professional, regular officers admitted that the western militia had won a great victory at King's Mountain, but they were not at all pleased about the manner in which they had done so. To understand why, we need to come to terms with wartime assumptions about the American militia and how these assumptions played out in the fall of 1780.

Disillusionment with the militia system is so familiar to students of the Revolutionary War that it has almost become dogmatic. In the years preceding the war, many Americans idealized the citizen-soldier's virtue and prowess. British Whig writers, who enshrined the militia as a safeguard against tyranny and oppression, heavily influenced eighteenth-century Americans' views on national defense.² Even with the onset of the war, some Continental officers remained convinced that irregular troops were preferable to conventional, professional soldiers. Charles Lee, for example, advocated a reliance on militia and partisan tactics for both ideological and practical reasons. Lee believed Americans would more readily identify with citizen-soldiers than with regular, professional troops. Furthermore, he believed that patriotic Americans would prove more effective in combat than rigorously trained British regulars. As John Shy notes, Lee's observations of guerilla war in Poland convinced him that partisan tactics were superior to the ponderous methods used in formal eighteenth-century warfare. The French and Indian War also bolstered contemporary faith in the native-born American soldier. American militiamen were trustworthy because they were not mercenary automatons

² For a summary of these ideas, see Lawrence Delbert Cress, "Radical Whiggery on the Role of the Military: Ideological Roots of the American Revolutionary Militia," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40 (January-March 1979): 43-60.

controlled by a despot, and they were effective on the battlefield because they were hardy and accustomed to firearms.³

Given a few notable victories in the French and Indian War, and simplistic assumptions that all Americans were raised in the wilderness, it was easy for contemporary observers to believe that a continent teeming with frontier riflemen would prove impossible to conquer. And the early engagements of the Revolution affirmed many of these notions. New England's "embattled farmers" succeeded in harassing the British return from Concord and performed well at Bunker Hill. Furthermore, the Virginia riflemen who arrived at Cambridge lived up to their reputation as deadly marksmen, although they created a discipline problem that foreshadowed future setbacks with frontier irregulars. And yet most field experience convinced many of these idealists (who included quite a few professionally trained European officers) that most American militiamen were neither frontiersmen nor good soldiers.⁴ John Sevier, one of the principal commanders at King's Mountain and a hardened veteran of Indian conflicts, perfectly understood the distinction between most militiamen and genuine frontier warriors like himself. In 1798 he complained that the early reliance on militia was a severe blow to the American war effort, since irregulars were less effective in battle

³ Paul David Nelson, "Citizen Soldiers or Regulars: The Views of American General Officers on the Military Establishment," *Military Affairs* 43 (October 1979): 128; John Shy, "American Strategy: Charles Lee and the Radical Alternative," in *A People Numerous and Armed: Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 138-39; Don Higginbotham, *George Washington and the American Military Tradition* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1985), 9-12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 49; idem, *The War of American Independence: Military Attitudes, Policies, and Practice, 1763-1789* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 102-03; Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1979), 11-12; Orville T. Murphy, "The French Professional Soldier's Opinion of the American Militia in the War of the Revolution," *Military Affairs* 32 (February 1969): 191, 193-95.

against trained soldiers and were much more difficult to control. “The feats performed by the Southern Militia,” he said, “was chiefly done by the frontier post, who had been accustomed to fighting the Indians...They are the best of riflemen, and used to hardship and active lives; and, by being engaged frequently with the neighboring Indians in the field, became much more familiar.” He cited King’s Mountain as an example of what these frontier warriors could achieve, but noted the poor performance of other militiamen as proof that run-of-the-mill citizen-soldiers were untrustworthy.⁵ For Sevier, the lesson was obvious: most American militiamen were not the deadly wilderness soldiers of legend.

But if Sevier’s comments remind us that the majority of American militiamen were not stereotypical frontier warriors, they also remind us that this label *did* apply to many of the Whigs who fought at King’s Mountain. Ferguson’s defeat was the battle that militia apologists had been expecting all along: a band of frontier riflemen, entirely on their own initiative, delivered a decisive victory using the tactics of Indian warfare. And this was not merely the result of a fluke of geography, although the terrain played a role in the battle’s outcome. It was also a function of the militia themselves. The combat experience of the Whig officers varied, but all the principal commanders had some considerable degree of experience in frontier war, whether campaigning against Indians or suppressing backcountry Tories. Sevier himself offers the prime example. From the standpoint of early Tennessee history, in fact, the King’s Mountain expedition is something of a minor interruption in a series of Indian campaigns Sevier and his men

⁵ Samuel C. Williams, “The Executive Journal of Governor John Sevier,” *The East Tennessee Historical Society’s Publications*, no. 5 (January 1933): 157-58.

conducted during the revolutionary era. Most of Sevier's campaigning before the British invasion involved frontier defense; he was one of the principal defenders at the siege of Fort Caswell in 1776, and his most well-known offensive campaigns against the Indians came in the wake of King's Mountain. But by 1780 he had established a reputation as a prominent commander in the Watauga region.⁶

The other officers from the trans-Appalachian region of present-day East Tennessee and Virginia who led the expedition were also hardened frontier veterans. For example, Isaac Shelby, Sevier's friend and fellow colonel from East Tennessee, was a lieutenant in the Indian battle of Point Pleasant in 1774, and served as a commissary for frontier units until the British invasion of South Carolina. Equally striking is the number of Indian war veterans among the average soldiers. The military careers of the King's Mountain rank and file are more difficult to reconstruct than those of the officers. But those veterans who applied for pensions decades after the war did give brief accounts of their military service. The frequency with which they mentioned pre-1780 frontier combat suggests that hardened backwoods veterans were the rule rather than the exception on the King's Mountain expedition. Many of them first enlisted during the Indian troubles of 1776. Nathaniel Davis began his pension testimony by recounting the uproar caused by Cherokees and Shawnees on the frontier in the 1770's. He joined his brother's Washington County, Virginia company and spent most of his time spying independently and returning to the settlements to report. William Brown enlisted in what became Jonesborough, Tennessee during the same period and claimed that for most of his

⁶ Carl S. Driver, *John Sevier: Pioneer of the Old Southwest* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1932), 22; Samuel Cole Williams, *Tennessee During the Revolutionary War* (1944; reprint, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press for the Tennessee American Revolution Bicentennial Commission, 1974), 45.

service “he was engaged against the Indians,” noting that he was a veteran of eight Indian battles. James Glenn enlisted as a substitute for his father to fight the Cherokee in 1775 before joining what he called a “troop of mounted Riflemen” to round up Tories. He then spent a tour guarding the frontiers against Indians, and finally signed up with another band of “mounted Riflemen” and made his way to King’s Mountain.⁷

The Wataugans and Virginians who engaged Ferguson at King’s Mountain therefore deserve their historical reputation as Indian fighters who learned frontier tactics through hard-won experience. Many of the militia from east of the mountains who had similar credentials. South Carolina’s experience with Indian war was still fresh enough in 1780 that many of the commanders who emerged in the wake of the British invasion got their first taste of military life while campaigning against Cherokees. Many of the principal Carolina officers in the King’s Mountain expedition were among this group. Frederick Hambright was a captain in the 1776 Indian campaigns, and Joseph Winston became a veteran at seventeen when he joined a small ranger band that walked into an ambush in 1763.⁸ Rank and file veterans from east of the mountains also described Indian combat experience in their pension applications. Josiah Culbertson of the Ninety-Six region of South Carolina served for two weeks against the Cherokees in 1776, and was in “several campaign from 1775 to 1780 against the Indians Tories and British....”⁹ This type of experience acquainted the King’s Mountain Whigs with the rapid

⁷ J.D. Bailey, *Commanders at Kings Mountain* (1926; reprint, Greenville, SC: A Press, Inc., 1980), 81-82; Nathaniel Davis, pension, 20 May 1833, Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land-Warrant Application Files, Microcopy 804 (Washington: National Archives and Records Service General Services Administration, 1969), Roll 762; William Brown, pension, 19 May 1834, Revolutionary War Pension Files, M804, Roll 381, NA; James Glenn, pension, 16 October 1832, Revolutionary War Pension Files, M804, Roll 1082, NA.

⁸ Bailey, *Commanders at Kings Mountain*, 177, 370-1.

⁹ Josiah Culbertson, pension, 18 September 1832, Revolutionary War Pension Files, M804, Roll 707, NA.

deployment and guerilla tactics that helped ensure Ferguson's downfall. As Clyde Ferguson argues, the militia system in the Southern backcountry was not the defunct defense force that regular officers found elsewhere. Well before King's Mountain "the patriot militiamen had become veterans through months of field duty and had achieved organization superior to that of 1775."¹⁰

But just as Daniel Morgan's Virginia riflemen proved to be undisciplined as well as proficient when they arrived at Cambridge, so the King's Mountain Whigs exemplified both the best and worst of frontier militia. While their previous combat experience against Indians and backcountry Tories prepared them to deploy rapidly, subsist on their own meager provisions, and utilize partisan tactics in the King's Mountain expedition, it also created serious command problems. Wayne E. Lee's incisive study of violence in revolutionary North Carolina explains the forces of restraint and escalation that determined the behavior of both militia and regular troops. Militiamen were much more reluctant to obey commands than were their regular counterparts. Irregular units lacked many of the formalized means of control that were available to Continental officers; if a militia commander's men stepped over the line, there was little he could do to restrain them. The tempo of militia service also created agitation. As Lee notes, "When the Whig militia were called up, whether drafted or enlisted for their three-month term, or raised as a volunteer unit in response to a specific crisis (such as the force that marched to King's Mountain), the soldiers expected to *do* something." This led to frustration when

¹⁰ Clyde R. Ferguson, "Functions of the Partisan Militia in the South During the American Revolution: An Interpretation," in W. Robert Higgins, ed., *The Revolutionary War in the South: Power, Conflict, and Leadership* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1979), 252.

action failed to materialize.¹¹

This information puts Isaac Shelby's 1823 pamphlet account of the expedition in a new light. Shelby was a principal architect of the march against Ferguson and commanded North Carolina's Sullivan County militia in the campaign. When the expedition began, there was no central commander, but a loose conglomeration of western units with a common goal in mind. Shelby recounted that "little disorders and irregularities which began to prevail among our undisciplined troops, created much uneasiness in the commanding officers...the Colonels commanding regiments." The colonels began the expedition by meeting each night to make joint decisions, but this technique was clearly not working. The commanders decided to "send to head-quarters for a General Officer to command us," and until he arrived they would continue to make command decisions jointly, "and appoint one of our own body to put them into execution." Shelby feared this approach would take too much time; if the Whigs wanted to intercept Ferguson, they would have to move quickly. He proposed appointing William Campbell of Washington County, Virginia the commander. As Shelby said, he respected Campbell, and the Virginian commanded the largest unit present. What he did not say at the time was that he suggested Campbell in order to quash any attempt to place Charles McDowell in command. Shelby and some other officers "considered him [McDowell] too far advanced in life and too inactive for the command of such an

¹¹ Wayne E. Lee, *Crowds and Soldiers in Revolutionary North Carolina: The Culture of Violence in Riot and War* (Gainesville: The University Press of Florida, 2001), 206-08, 201. This is one of a very few scholarly recent works to seriously examine the war in the South. Lee has done nothing less than provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the application of violence in the eighteenth-century Carolinas, and my debt to this book in organizing the present chapter is tremendous.

enterprize [sic] as we were then engaged in.”¹² In this one brief passage, Shelby revealed the unconventional command structure on the expedition and the problems it helped create. At first, the King’s Mountain Whigs had no real commander; when the officers were unable to control their men, they decided to appeal to the regular army to obtain one. Headquarters never complied, and Campbell continued to lead the expedition in name only and by consent of the other officers. It was an ad-hoc solution to the problem of militia discipline, and one that ultimately did little to give the expedition any cohesion.

There were even worse command problems developing among the South Carolina militia who drifted into Campbell’s camp when the expedition entered the Palmetto State. Just as Shelby’s pamphlet remains the principal source on the over-mountain men, so our only glimpses of the wrangling among South Carolina’s officers comes from the memoir of William Hill. Hill’s account is remarkable for its detail, but is also problematic in its partisanship. His narrative was the last shot in a nasty dispute over the behavior of James Williams, the highly controversial South Carolina militia officer whose role in the campaign is still a matter of debate. According to Hill, Williams was less interested in the American cause than he was in usurping the authority of Thomas Sumter, commander of South Carolina’s backcountry militia in the wake of the British invasion. Williams first ran afoul of Sumter when he misappropriated some supplies during a stint as Sumter’s commissary general. For many of Sumter’s followers, this was enough to condemn him, but Williams continued to alienate the South Carolina militia as the British

¹² Isaac Shelby, *Battle of King’s Mountain: To the Public*, pamphlet, 1823, 4, Draper Collection of Manuscripts, 17DD6, State Historical Society of Wisconsin (Chicago: Department of Photographic Reproduction, University of Chicago Library, 1973). Shelby was hardly impartial, for reasons that will be explained in the next chapter. But as he himself noted, the officers kept no minutes of this exchange, and he is the main primary source for the expedition’s origins.

invasion proceeded. After he joined Isaac Shelby and Elijah Clarke for a successful engagement against some of Ferguson's recruits at Musgrove's Mill on August 18, 1780, Williams escorted the prisoners to John Rutledge, South Carolina's exiled governor. Hill claimed that Williams took credit for the battle, and Rutledge gratefully promoted him to brigadier general. When Hill arrived in Sumter's camp with his commission and tried to assume command, Sumter's followers refused to serve under him. Instead, Sumter set out to plead his case before Rutledge.¹³

The South Carolina militia was therefore in an uproar when the over-mountain men arrived looking for Ferguson. According to Hill, Williams saw the mountaineers' arrival as an opportunity to secure his own interests in the Ninety-Six region and plunder the Tories there. He accordingly tried to divert the over-mountain men in that direction before Hill and Edward Lacey informed them of Ferguson's true course. Hill, Lacey and the other South Carolina militia determined to join the mountaineers in pursuing Ferguson; Williams and his band tagged along, although they kept a respectful distance as Sumter's followers threatened them and pelted them with rocks. When this combined force of backcountry partisans surrounded Ferguson's corps on King's Mountain, Williams himself was one of the fatalities. Hill firmly believed that Williams was shot not by a Tory, but by one of the Whigs, who used the battle as an opportunity to be rid of an obnoxious and troublesome officer.¹⁴ This may or may not have been true, but the fact that Hill so strongly believed it (and testified that many others agreed at the time) is

¹³ William Hill, *Col. William Hill's Memoirs of the Revolution*, ed. A.S. Salley, Jr. (Columbia: The State Company for the Historical Commission of South Carolina, 1921), pp. 15-18; Robert D. Bass, *Gamecock: The Life and Campaigns of General Thomas Sumter* (1961; reprint, Orangeburg, SC: Sandlapper Publishing Co., Inc.: 2000), 74-77.

¹⁴ This account is taken from Hill, *Memoirs*, 20-24.

testimony to the precarious nature of command among backcountry militia.

The informal nature of the expeditionary force, and the poor discipline of the soldiers, became most evident after the victory was won. The most important factor that led contemporary observers to call the King's Mountain Whigs' virtue and usefulness into question was the fate of the six hundred Tories that fell into their hands. Criticism centered on two separate but closely related issues: denial of quarter and mistreatment of captives. First-person accounts agree that some Whigs continued to fire even when the Tories raised white flags, but they differ in explaining why it occurred. The most simple rationalization was confusion. Formal, set-piece battles often led to mass confusion; the melee on the slopes of King's Mountain magnified these conditions, making it difficult for the average soldier to get a sense of what was happening. Some men who were scattered during the fight were apparently unaware of what was taking place as they arrived at the summit, where the Tories were positioned. Believing the battle was not over, they continued to fire for lack of information.¹⁵

Other men who kept up their fire did so for more sinister reasons. Charles Bowen, mistakenly believing that his brother was dead and finding his company commander mortally wounded, flew into an irrational rage. He was reportedly the man who killed the first Tory attempting to raise a white flag. Col. Benjamin Cleveland, not recognizing Bowen, demanded he give the counter-sign; Bowen attacked him with a tomahawk before both men realized their mistake. Similarly, John Sevier's son Joseph heard a false report that his father was a casualty and fired repeatedly on the surrendering

¹⁵ Draper, *King's Mountain and its Heroes*, 281-82.

Tories.¹⁶ Personal revenge killings of this sort certainly did not originate with King's Mountain, but the informal nature of the militia engaged made such incidents more likely. Many of the men were closely related: Bowen and Sevier were not unusual in fighting alongside brothers and fathers. Combined with the officers' weak handle on discipline, this created an emotionally charged atmosphere in which men easily ran out of control.¹⁷

But willful killing was not limited to the "mindless rage" exhibited by Bowen and Sevier. In fact, most of the men who denied quarter were quite conscious of what they were doing, and their behavior was consistent with the atmosphere of war in the Carolina backcountry. The most widely accepted explanation for the continued firing was that the killing was retaliation for the "Waxhaws massacre," the supposed murder of Col. Abraham Buford's Virginia Continentals by Banastre Tarleton's British Legion on May 29, 1780. Reports that Tarleton's men struck down the Virginia troops as they tried to surrender, thus denying the established rules of formal warfare, made excellent propaganda for Whigs trying to arouse anti-British sentiment in the Carolinas. Shelby himself, in his 1823 pamphlet, claimed that the Waxhaws incident was very much in the minds of the King's Mountain militia; the men who denied quarter to Tories were simply striking blow for blow, since the British stepped over the line first. This "justification by retaliation," as Wayne Lee terms it, was extremely common among militia in the Revolutionary Carolinas. Whether real or exaggerated, the behavior of the invading

¹⁶ Ibid., 262-63, 282. Draper's sources for these incidents were Bowen himself and G. W. Sevier.

¹⁷ Any engagement results in some degree of independence between officers and men, as John Keegan reminds us: "'Battle,' for the ordinary soldier, is a very small-scale situation which will throw up its own leaders and will be fought by its own rules...alas, often by its own ethics." John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (1976; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 47.

British contributed greatly to the breakdown of restraint in 1780-81. Retaliation became not only acceptable, but quite common. The King's Mountain Whigs tapped into a widespread attitude among Carolina militiamen and applied it in the arena of full-scale battle.¹⁸

Mistreatment of the Tories continued long after the heated emotions of battle cooled down. There are a small number of surviving Loyalist accounts of the campaign, and their descriptions of the march away from the ridge and back into the Carolina interior show the breakdown of restraint among the Whigs and the impotence of the officers to stop it. Some men took advantage of the return march as an opportunity to plunder the prisoners. Captain Alexander Chesney, Ferguson's adjutant, noted that he was "stripped of my shoes and silver buckles in an inclement season without covering or provisions untill [sic] Monday night...."¹⁹ Several days after the battle, Dr. Uzal Johnson (who was obliged to treat the wounded from both sides) wrote that on October 12 he "Had the Mortification to see our Baggage divided to the different Corps." Having lost their supplies, the Tories were dependent on the Whigs for clothing and food, and if contemporary accounts are any indication, their provisions were barely sufficient. Johnson complained that nine Loyalists had to divide five extra shirts among themselves: "One old Shirt was sent me, all torn to pieces, by way of fulfilling their promise, as every

¹⁸ Shelby, *Battle of King's Mountain*, 6, Draper MSS, 17DD6, SHSW; Lee, *Crowds and Soldiers in Revolutionary North Carolina*, 194-98. The Battle of Waxhaws is still a matter of dispute. Tarleton himself claimed that the unusually high American casualties resulted from Buford's ineptness and the Legion's belief that Tarleton had fallen. Banastre Tarleton, *A History of the Campaigns of 1780 and 1781 in the Southern Provinces of North America* (London: T. Cadell, 1787), 30-31. For a balanced appraisal of the Waxhaws engagement and the American reaction, see Anthony J. Scotti, Jr., *Brutal Virtue: The Myth and Reality of Banastre Tarleton* (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 2002), 173-78.

¹⁹ Bobby Gilmer Moss, ed., *Journal of Capt. Alexander Chesney: Adjutant to Maj. Patrick Ferguson* (Blacksburg, SC: Scotia-Hibernia Press, 2002), 33.

Field Officer had given his Honour I should have all my Baggage for attending their Wounded. Where honour binds, I find Promise can be broke.”²⁰

There was worse to come. Johnson had the misfortune to run afoul of Col. Benjamin Cleveland, the most vindictive Tory hater among all the principal officers in the King’s Mountain campaign. On the first day of November, still in Whig custody, Johnson obtained Cleveland’s permission to treat some of the wounded prisoners. As the surgeon attended to one Loyalist, “Cleveland came to me and said he was a Damnd Villain and deserved the Gallows. I asked him what he was guilty of. He repeated that he was a Damnd Villain as I was and deserved hanging. He then very passionately said he had found out my Villainies and had a great mind to cut me up.” Cleveland then drew his sword and struck Johnson on the head and hand, continuing to curse and threaten him.²¹

Among the very few contemporary documents produced by the Whigs are a series of general orders, issued under Campbell’s authority, in an attempt to restrain the men’s behavior. Their repetition indicates how little authority the colonels actually had. On October 11, four days after the battle, Campbell stated, “I must request the officers of all ranks in the army to endeavour to restrain the disorderly manner of slaughtering and disturbing the prisoners. If it cannot be prevented by moderate measures, such effectual punishment shall be executed upon delinquents as will put a stop to it.”²² Three days later, Campbell denounced the widespread desertion and plundering of the local

²⁰ Idem, ed., *Uzal Johnson, Loyalist Surgeon: A Revolutionary War Diary* (Blacksburg, SC: Scotia-Hibernia Press, 2000), 76.

²¹ Ibid., 82.

²² [William Campbell], “General Order,” Oct. 11, 1780, handwritten transcript, Draper MSS, 8DD12, SHSW.

inhabitants that plagued his corps, and he urged the other commanders to keep a tight rein on their men and to make out returns each morning to keep track of them.²³ These statements must have had little lasting effect, because on the 26th Campbell repeated the necessity of not mistreating the prisoners. Suggestively, he also forbade the distribution of liquor to the men “without an order from the commanding officer for the time being.”²⁴

But even this sporadic violence was not what most troubled contemporary observers. Rather, the blackest mark on the Whigs’ success at King’s Mountain took place when the small force camped at Bickerstaff’s Old Fields on October 14. After some of the Carolinians complained that the prisoners included a number of former criminals and committers of atrocities, the officers convened an impromptu trial at about 10:00 A.M. which convicted over thirty Tories of robbery, murder, parole-breaking, and similar offenses. Around 7:00 that evening, the Whigs proceeded to hang these men from a tree branch three at a time. Nine Tories died before some of the colonels called a halt to the proceedings. What made this grim scene even more disturbing was the presence of some of the condemned men’s relatives, including two daughters of a Tory captain who were told their father would be pardoned, only to be informed shortly thereafter that he had been killed with the others.²⁵ The incident at Bickerstaff’s represented the policy of retaliation carried to its logical conclusion, but it was also an outgrowth of the militia’s

²³ [William Campbell], “General Order,” Oct. 14, 1780, handwritten transcript, Draper MSS, 8DD13, SHSW.

²⁴ [William Campbell], “General Order,” Oct. 26, 1780, handwritten transcript, Draper MSS, 8DD14, SHSW.

²⁵ The most detailed account of the trial and executions is in Draper, *King’s Mountain and its Heroes*, 330-43; Moss, ed., *Uzal Johnson, Loyalist Surgeon*, 77 contains the anecdote about the Tory’s daughters; see also Lee, *Crowds and Soldiers in Revolutionary North Carolina*, 189-90 for an interpretation of the legitimization of violence in the Bickerstaff’s incident.

previous revolutionary experience. Both Whig and Tory irregulars were responsible for stamping out dissent before the 1780 invasion. Accustomed to using harsh measures against the disaffected, the backcountry partisans in the King's Mountain campaign found the capture of a large Tory force a perfect opportunity to exercise their role as monitors of the community's allegiance²⁶

British officers predictably condemned the abuse suffered by the Tories. The month after the battle, Cornwallis complained that the "cruelty exercised on the Prisoners taken under Major Ferguson" was "shocking to Humanity." Angry over the militia's infringement of the rules of formalized war, he protested to General Horatio Gates, American commander of the Southern Department at the time of the battle.²⁷ But in complaining to Gates, Cornwallis was barking up the wrong tree; Nathanael Greene replaced the luckless Gates on the same day as the Bickerstaff's hangings. Arriving to assume command in December, he responded to the letter of complaint Cornwallis sent the previous month. Greene's reply was a sharp denial of responsibility. He reminded Cornwallis that any excesses committed on the King's Mountain expedition were by volunteer militia, and took place before he assumed command of American forces in the South. There was, therefore, little he could do about it. "However," he continued, "if there was any thing done in that affair contrary to the principles of humanity, and the law of Nations; and for which they had not the conduct of your Army as a precedent, I shall ever be ready to testify my disapprobation of it." Greene then mentioned a few specific

²⁶ Clyde R. Ferguson, "Carolina and Georgia Patriot and Loyalist Militia in Action, 1778-1783," in Jeffrey J. Crow and Larry E. Tise, eds., *The Southern Experience in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 194.

²⁷ Cornwallis to Smallwood, 10 November 1780, handwritten transcript, Draper MSS16DD17, SHSW; Dennis M. Conrad, ed. *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene*. Vol. 6. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press for the Rhode Island Historical Society, 1991), 514.

British offenses, singling out Tarleton's behavior as one noteworthy example.²⁸

But if Greene put on a brave face in dealing with Cornwallis, privately he was painfully aware of the damage the King's Mountain men had done. In fact, although most modern accounts praise Greene for his successful combination of regular and militia forces in the South, he was one of the militia's most unforgiving critics. Regular officers like Greene did more than anyone to ensure that the first view of the King's Mountain militia was far more negative than positive. Greene and his British counterparts shared a belief in the importance of the formal rules of civilized warfare. One of the most basic tenets of eighteenth-century military etiquette was decent treatment of a conquered foe. By firing on surrendering troops, plundering and abusing prisoners, and executing Tories with questionable cause, the King's Mountain Whigs had broken many of the rules of dealing with a defeated enemy. Even Banastre Tarleton criticized their conduct: "The mountaineers, it is reported, used every insult and indignity, after the action, towards the dead body of Major Ferguson, and exercised horrid cruelties on the prisoners that fell into their possession." Desecrating a dead officer was a grievous violation of the customs of war, and the fact that Tarleton singled it out in his account tells us much about professional conceptions of the King's Mountain militia.²⁹

To be sure, Greene's reaction to King's Mountain was not entirely negative. "It is great," he wrote soon after the victory, "and will have good Consequences."³⁰ But as a long-time Continental officer, Greene believed that relying on the militia, as South

²⁸ Ibid., 591-92.

²⁹ Caroline Cox, *A Proper Sense of Honor: Service and Sacrifice in George Washington's Army* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 62-63. Cox notes (p. 180) that burial of officers was a particularly important rite honored by both Continentals and the British, which makes Tarleton's outrage understandable; Tarleton, *History of the Campaigns*, 165.

³⁰ Conrad, ed. *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, vol. 6, 440.

Carolina had done out of sheer necessity since Camden, was inviting disaster. One of the most obvious reasons was their unreliability. Militia were notorious for their short terms in the field, which made long-range campaign planning impossible. In November Greene claimed that he expected many good things from the Southern militia, “if they are not depended upon as a Principal, but employed as an Auxiliary....” But if the Americans expected to rely on the militia, “the Enemy will have only to delay their Operations for a few Months to give Success to their measures.” Greene’s dictums on the militia’s unreliability and the need for a large regular force became something of a creed sprinkled through his correspondence. And in this respect, the over-mountain men were worse than most militia troops, and for the very same reason that they were proficient veterans: the Indians were their primary concern. After their stunning victory over Ferguson, the troops from present-day Tennessee did not remain in the main theater of war in South Carolina, but returned to guard the western settlements. By December Sevier’s men and additional forces from the Virginia frontier were attacking the Cherokee and burning their towns, while Greene prepared to take on Cornwallis in the second British invasion of North Carolina.³¹

The King’s Mountain Whigs also inherited the militia’s eagerness for plunder and retribution. Time and again, Greene lamented the damage unrestrained militia inflicted on the inhabitants of the Southern backcountry, so much so that to cite every complaint in his published papers would be tiresome. “With the militia every Body is a Genl,” he complained, “and the Powers of Govern’t are so feeble, that it is with the utmost

³¹ Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War*, 324-25; Conrad, ed., *Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, vol. 6, 491-92; John Sevier to Joseph Martin, 10 December 1780, ALS, Draper MSS, 11DD91, SHSW; John R. Finger, *Tennessee Frontiers: Three Regions in Transition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 89; Driver, *John Sevier*, 24-27.

Difficulty you can restrain them from plundering one another.”³² It was an apt summary of the first phase of the King’s Mountain campaign, with command structures implemented on the spot and officers unable to keep their men from running wild. Greene also condemned the policy of retribution as a license for escalation. “The Whigs and Tories pursue one another with the most relent[less] Fury,” he wrote, “killing and destroying each other wherever they meet. . . The great Bodies of Militia that have been in Service this year employed against the Enemy & in quelling the Tories have almost laid Waste the Country & so corrupted the Principles of the People that they think of nothing but plundering one another.”³³

On one level, Greene’s objections to the King’s Mountain way of waging war represent a practical debate over the most effective way to defeat the British and secure the South. But for our purposes here, the division between Greene and the King’s Mountain Whigs carried a much deeper significance. Greene, Washington, and many other regular officers advocated a particular *philosophy* of warfare that was diametrically opposed to the methods of the King’s Mountain militia. As David Hackett Fischer states regarding the Trenton-Princeton campaign, “American leaders believed it was not enough to win the war. They also had to win in a way that was consistent with the values of their society and the principles of their cause.”³⁴ Fischer reminds us that a significant part of this attitude involved a “policy of humanity,” the idea that plunder, denial of quarter, and mistreatment of prisoners were reprehensible in their own right and to be avoided under

³² Conrad, ed., *Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, vol. 6, 547.

³³ Idem, ed. *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene*. Vol. 7. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press for the Rhode Island Historical Society, 1994), 17.

³⁴ David Hackett Fischer, *Washington’s Crossing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 375.

all circumstances. Americans distinguished themselves from the British and Hessians by waging a war with intense moral conviction and respect for certain philosophical absolutes.³⁵ The work of Fischer and Charles Royster presents us with an American army whose values were manifest in the way it prosecuted the war. These insights give Greene's criticism of the militia new meaning. Many historians speak of multiple political revolutions at work during the struggle for independence, with an elite leadership working for their own ends while simultaneously trying to restrain the flood of popular protest they unleashed. In the same way, we can see King's Mountain and the controversies it spawned as an expression of multiple *military* revolutions. On the one hand, there was the "official," mainstream war advocated by Greene and the other professional officers. On the other, there was the unrestrained war, the one waged by the backcountry riflemen on their own initiative and by their own rules. Just as the elite leadership needed the popular discontent of the masses to implement their political revolution, so the high command needed to mobilize the rough frontier militiamen to defeat the British and their auxiliaries. But both the popular political Revolution and the unregulated military Revolution had to be channeled and kept on a tight leash.

Of course, this is not to suggest that King's Mountain was a setback for the American cause, or that many mainstream Revolutionary elites did not welcome it. Nothing could be further from the truth. Given the absence of organized resistance in South Carolina in the fall of 1780, King's Mountain deserves to be called a crucial turning point, and the eventual success of the Americans in the South is due in no small part to the militiamen who set out to destroy Ferguson. The twin pillars of mainstream

³⁵ Ibid., 376-79.

Revolutionary authority, the Continental Congress and George Washington, both acknowledged the importance of King's Mountain during the war. Washington included a brief account of the battle in his General Orders for October 27, 1780, adding that the victory "will in all probability have a very happy influence upon the successive operations in that quarter. It is a proof of the spirit and resources of the country." Congress was similarly glad to have some good news in the dark days of 1780, passing a formal resolution on the battle for inclusion in the southern army's general orders.³⁶ The Whigs of King's Mountain had won a decisive victory, but they had done so on their own terms. As such, they were not fully integrated into the mainstream revolution of Washington and Greene, who shared many of the same convictions as the British command on the proper means of waging war. For the King's Mountain militia to become full heirs in the legacy of the American Revolution, they would have to claim that role for themselves. When that legacy became available in the early nineteenth century, they would do so.

³⁶ John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, vol. 20 (Washington: United States Government Printing Office 1931), 258; Gaillard Hunt, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1744-1789*, vol. 18 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1910), 1048-49.

CHAPTER 2

“DEBT OF HONOUR DUE TO US”: ISAAC SHELBY AND THE VINDICATION OF THE KING’S MOUNTAIN VETERANS

Any historian who examines the written record of the King’s Mountain campaign will notice two prevailing features. First, by the standard of many important events, it can be disappointingly sparse. While the lack of evidence is not glaring enough to justify the neglect this episode has suffered, it is sufficient to cause serious problems in reconstructing what took place. Good first-person accounts do exist, but were often written decades after the war.¹ Second, when evidence does appear, it does so intermittently. This is certainly the case with the surviving papers of Isaac Shelby, who was more concerned about the legacy of King’s Mountain than any other participant. Shelby’s manuscripts are a rich source of information on Ferguson’s defeat, but one needs to know where to look. References to the campaign are thick in his correspondence from later years; it is here, and not in the wartime documents, that Shelby’s thoughts on the campaign are available to us.

One such sporadic outburst came in 1814, when a Revolutionary War veteran named William Hill solicited information from Shelby for a written account of the backcountry campaigns. Shelby was only too happy to oblige, claiming that he could provide information “which will afford a more detailed account of the action on Kings Mountain, and the causes that led to that event, than can be given by any other man

¹ A simple glance at the last chapter’s footnotes demonstrates the dearth of contemporary manuscript material. One good reason for treating the memory of King’s Mountain as a scholarly subject is because most of the source material post-dates the war by many years.

alive.” Both Hill and Shelby were thoroughly dissatisfied with posterity’s treatment of their victory. “I have seen no history any thing [sic] like the truth,” Shelby complained.² When Hill assembled his account of his wartime experiences, he stated that he wrote primarily to correct prevailing assumptions, and not because he wanted a scholarly reputation. Hill presented himself as a reluctant author who told his story only because no one else was fully qualified to do so. After waiting three decades for a proper presentation of the truth, he was unwilling to wait any longer. Too many mistakes had gone uncorrected, and since the campaign was “one grand link in the great chain of Providence & events” that defeated the British, it merited an accurate history, particularly given the state of war between Britain and the U.S. at the time Hill was writing.³

In reality, the timing of these documents was anything but random. Sentiments like those of Hill and Shelby were in fact natural reactions to a specific set of historical circumstances which are now fairly well-documented by historians of the early republic. References to King’s Mountain are scarce from the 1780’s to the 1810’s because Americans neglected the military Revolution as a whole. This inattention changed dramatically about the time of the War of 1812. The onset of another conflict with England on American soil was a natural reminder of the Revolution. Equally important was the aging of the generation that conducted the first war. When the smoke from the War of 1812 cleared and Americans began looking at the revolutionary veterans for the first time, many were appalled at what they saw. The common soldiers of the great struggle for independence were now infirm and destitute, and as John Resch has

² Isaac Shelby to William Hill, 4 March 1814, in “King’s Mountain: Letters of Colonel Isaac Shelby,” ed. J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton, *The Journal of Southern History* 4 (Aug. 1938): 368.

³ Hill, *Memoirs*, 4.

explained in detail, the veterans' condition combined with lingering ideas about virtue and patriotic gratitude to create a culture of the "suffering soldier." In 1818 Congress authorized the first pension for destitute veterans; subsequent acts would broaden the eligibility to include more former soldiers. The democratizing spirit of the 1820's, and the wave of nostalgic patriotism that swept America with Lafayette's mid-decade tour of the U.S., combined with this new appreciation of the revolutionary soldier to bolster veterans' self-identity.⁴ When Shelby, Hill, and their comrades from King's Mountain stepped forward to tell their stories during this period, they were joining a larger cultural movement. But the re-discovery of the Revolution would have unique significance for the men who defeated Ferguson. By telling their stories and adopting the language of the revolutionary soldier, these men who had been on the periphery of the "mainstream" Revolution and its ideals during the war would claim their proper place in its historical legacy.

For the common soldier, applying for a pension was a simple but also powerful means to graft themselves into the story of the Revolution. King's Mountain veterans took advantage of this process. Most of the depositions in their applications are straightforward, listing the names of important engagements, officers under whom they served, and the dates of their enlistments and discharges. But some of the pension applications are more detailed, and preserve the attitudes of pride and entitlement that

⁴ For the pension legislation and the culture that produced it, see John Resch, *Suffering Soldiers: Revolutionary War Veterans, Moral Sentiment, and Political Culture in the Early Republic* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999); Sarah J. Purcell, *Sealed with Blood: War, Sacrifice, and Memory in Revolutionary America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 150-51; G. Kurt Piehler, *Remembering War the American Way* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 1995), 25; Alfred F. Young deals extensively with the creation of revolutionary memory in *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999); see 132-36 for a succinct discussion of the "re-discovery" of the war in the mid-1820's.

King's Mountain veterans brought to the rediscovery of the war. The veterans' language reveals the value they placed on both their individual service and the Southern militia's contribution to the overall war effort. The deposition of Nathaniel Davis, for example, is striking for its detail and its assertiveness. Davis first enlisted in his brother's company in Washington County, Virginia in May 1776 and spent much of his time as a spy monitoring Indian activity. "In all this time," he recounted, "I often ran many risks, and discovered many dangers, and discovered and repeated much information to the fort, and to the company." Davis eventually made his way to the Watauga settlements and joined Shelby's command, and remembered the muster and review on "the yellow mountain" on the march to catch Ferguson. Arriving at King's Mountain, Davis and his comrades "met the said Col. Ferguson, and fought a battle with him, in which our troops gained a great victory." John Copland, a native of Ireland who settled in the King's Mountain region, was even more explicit about the significance of the battle's outcome. He remembered that "about the third day after we joined Shelby we attacked the British on [the] mountain & beat them as is known to all who know any thing about the events of the Revolution." He furthermore assured his audience that "your declarant did his part upon the occasion as far as he was able."⁵ Both Davis and Copland were fully aware of the importance of October 7, 1780 and claimed their share of recognition for their own roles.

Pensions were not the only way to identify oneself as a victor of King's Mountain. As Hill's memoir demonstrates, some veterans assembled lengthy accounts for publication. The revived interest in the common soldier meant that even lowly

⁵ Nathaniel Davis, pension, 20 May 1833, Revolutionary War Pension Files, M804, Roll 762, NA; John Copland, pension, 21 July 1834, Revolutionary War Pension Files, M804, Roll 651, NA.

privates felt entitled to tell their stories, and few surviving accounts of the Carolina campaigns are more compelling than that of James Collins. He was only sixteen years old when the war came to the backcountry, but he did not put his experiences on paper until he was in his seventies. Despite his low rank and young age during the war, and his humble circumstances even as an old man, the Revolutionary revival led him to believe that his story was important. He began his short autobiography with a modest disclaimer. In his old age he decided to “amuse myself by writing a few incidents of my life, although they may not be interesting to any one (who may chance to read these pages), yet might be, in some instances, amusing as well as important to some of my progeny when I am no more.”⁶ Hill had assured his readers that he wrote only to set the record straight, and not to gain renown; Collins was even more apologetic. He claimed that he was telling his story as a diversion, and doubted that anyone would notice. Both former officers and common soldiers absorbed the ideology of disinterested republicanism and used it to avoid the appearance of self-aggrandizement. One anecdote in Hill’s memoir describes a British commissioner who harangued a crowd of Americans over the sad state of the independence movement and the need to accept pardon and reconciliation. As Hill related, he stepped in and delivered a rousing, impromptu address which revived the crowd’s spirits and dissuaded them from accepting the commissioner’s offer. But he immediately stressed that he did not include the story to inflate his own image or to imply that he “possessed more public virtue or firmness than other men who acted differently.”⁷

Whether the average veterans of King’s Mountain asserted their revolutionary

⁶ James Collins, *A Revolutionary Soldier*, ed. John M. Roberts (Clinton, LA: Feliciana Democrat, 1859), 11.

⁷ Hill, *Memoirs*, 7.

status as a pensioner or a memoirist, their narratives shared some important traits. One was their tightly focused perspective. Common soldiers avoided the strategic overview when they related the events of the campaign; they were more concerned with their own fate. Battle was a disorienting, chaotic experience over which they had little control. Collins's account of the battle itself is almost impressionistic in its reliance on vivid details and sensations. He remembered breaking out in a sweat soon after the battle began, Ferguson appearing "in full view" and then vanishing, and the fact that he managed to fire six shots.⁸

Collins's narrative is also surprising for its lack of heroism. When the officers exhorted their men before the fight, Collins admitted, he wanted to turn and leave, "but I could not well swallow the appellation of coward." He finally resigned himself to a kind of fatalism, and after the battle he did not know if any of his shots had found a mark.⁹ But if Collins was explicitly modest, the *implicit* picture that emerges from his memoir's contents tells a different story. It was not simply the act of relating his wartime experiences that tied Collins to the Revolutionary revival, but his understanding that his own story was a crucial part of that larger narrative. Even more significant is the fact that Collins devoted much of the book to his life outside the war. He sandwiched his account of the campaigns between recollections of his upbringing and his later life, including his personal reflections on courtship, religion, and drunkenness. His life outside his Revolutionary career, as well as his opinions on larger matters, was significant enough to set down on paper alongside his participation in the backcountry war. Collins was not an

⁸ Collins, *A Revolutionary Soldier*, 52-53.

⁹ Ibid; Gregory T. Knouff, *The Soldiers' Revolution: Pennsylvanians in Arms and the Forging of Early American Identity* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 138-41.

influential man, and his self-deprecating statements show that he knew it. But the act of presenting his story shows that he had a sense of his own importance as one of the men who defeated Ferguson.

Since many average veterans organized their memories around individual impressions, their claims to heroism often relied on tying these immediate experiences to the wider culture of suffering, self-sacrificing Revolutionaries. Wounds were a very common way of doing so, especially when applying for a government pension. John Chittam's application included an account of a wound he received in the chest at King's Mountain. His injury kept him from strenuous work, "and of late years from almost all labour being confined to bed for three or four months in each year" because of his service. King's Mountain historian Bobby Gilmer Moss, who has examined more of the veterans' applications than anyone, notes that some of these depositions become miniature epics in their descriptions of brave deeds in the face of horrible injuries. Leonard Hice's application includes an account of how he continued to fight despite being hit several times, until additional wounds finally incapacitated him. John Duckworth explained that he fought at King's Mountain despite a nasty shoulder wound received earlier at Ramsour's Mill.¹⁰

Other veterans were less concerned with presenting themselves in a flattering light. John Dysart explained that when he was drafted to serve a three-month tour in 1778, he hired a substitute. During his own period of service, his unit faced Ferguson's Tories and suffered what he called a "rout," forcing him and his comrades to seek shelter

¹⁰ John Chittam, pension, 27 January 1815, Revolutionary War Pension Files, M804, Roll 537, NA; Bobby Gilmer Moss, *The Patriots at Kings Mountain* (Blacksburg, SC: Scotia-Hibernia Press, 1990), 121, 71.

over the mountains. When he returned home, it was as a member of the Campbell-Shelby-Sevier expedition, which “went on to Kings Mountain where with Our army we defeated Ferguson & his army.” Possibly the most un-heroic of all King’s Mountain accounts is the pension application of John Franklin. When he returned home to North Carolina from a trip to the Watauga region, he found his native region in an uproar. The British invasion was at its height, and Franklin “did not know what to do, or what party to join.” He explained that Ferguson’s corps was positioned near his home, and “I amongst many other of the people took protection under him as a British Subject....” Franklin’s career as a Tory auxiliary lasted only eleven days; upon taking the oath he was marched to King’s Mountain. As he stated, “I saw my error before the battle was over...So began and so ended my allegiance to the British King.” Making his way to Tennessee, Franklin signed on for eighteen months of service in the American forces, “for the purpose of atoning” for joining the British.¹¹ King’s Mountain allowed at least one former Loyalist to claim the legacy of the Revolution.

The level of detail and clarity of memories varied from veteran to veteran. Davis recalled the names of all the major commanders in the King’s Mountain campaign; most men gave at least the name of a regimental or company commander, since the government solicited this information as concrete evidence of service. The passage of time wore away many other memories. A few details seem muddled in the application of Josiah Culbertson, a native of upper South Carolina. He remembered being involved in “several campaigns,” but “the length of time he served at each he cannot now exactly

¹¹ John Dysart, pension, 2 August 1832, Revolutionary War Pension Files, M804, Roll 882, NA; John Franklin, pension, 1 November 1834, Revolutionary War Pension Files, M804, Roll 1017, NA.

recollect.” Culbertson also remembered “several engagements with Col Fergusons men the tories & Indians” while a member of “the Flying Camp,” so called, he said, because of its mobility. Culbertson was likely referring to “the Flying Army,” an independently operating light corps of cavalry and infantry created by Nathanael Greene and placed under the command of Daniel Morgan before the battle of Cowpens, but *after* King’s Mountain. Culbertson was present at Cowpens, so he likely confused the name of Morgan’s light corps with the other units in which he had previously served, lumping them all together. In other words, he conflated his service against Ferguson and his service under Morgan. He recalled the names of important battles and officers, but his overall sense of chronology did not survive the post-war decades intact.¹²

The most elite veterans of King’s Mountain were more vocal than the average soldiers when it came to matters of remembrance and gratitude. Decades after the war, a nasty dispute erupted among a faction of King’s Mountain officers and descendants of officers over honor and reputation, matters usually associated with regular officers who aspired to some type of gentlemanly status. With the war long over, officers could safely focus on matters of reputation; more importantly, the culture of remembrance made the stakes much higher. The entire nation was scrutinizing its veterans, so even backwater militia commanders were more jealous of their wartime service than ever before.

This is perhaps the only way to explain the bizarre controversy between supporters of Isaac Shelby and the late William Campbell that lasted, off and on, for more than a decade. Its origins lie in a series of letters that passed between Shelby and

¹² Nathaniel Davis, pension; Josiah Culbertson, pension, 18 September 1832, M804, Roll 707, NA; Don Higginbotham, *Daniel Morgan: Revolutionary Rifleman* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1961), 121.

John Sevier in early 1810. On January 1, Shelby reminded Sevier that after the expedition against Ferguson ended, the Virginia legislature granted a horse and sword to Campbell in honor of his role as overall commander. Campbell received the horse, but the legislature was unable to provide a proper sword before the colonel died at age thirty-six in August 1781. As Shelby explained to Sevier, some “friends of Col. Campbell” has recently reminded the legislature of its promise of a sword, and that body accordingly secured one via the American minister in France. Shelby then made his motives clear: “Now, sir,” he asked Sevier, “what did Campbell merit more than you or me did?” As he complained, it was “well known” that Campbell was at least a quarter of a mile from the action when the Tories surrendered. In fact, he claimed, Campbell himself had admitted as much the day after the battle. While it was not Shelby’s intention to “detract from the honors of the dead,” this did not change his convictions about the truth of his assertions. During the war, he reminded Sevier, the North Carolina legislature had resolved to present each of them with a sword and a set of pistols, but at the time could not afford to do so. In February 1781 the legislature had indeed decided to award a sword to the principal officers involved, although Shelby was mistaken in his belief that they had also promised a set of pistols. Since Campbell had been unjustly (if posthumously) honored, he suggested they look into securing their own overdue rewards.¹³

To Shelby’s satisfaction, Sevier agreed that North Carolina needed to deliver on its promise of a sword and pistols for each man, claiming that “in justice to ourselves and our posterity, we ought to have them.” Shelby wrote to him again in February, informing

¹³ Isaac Shelby to John Sevier, 1 January 1810, in G.W. Sevier, “To the Editor of the *Nashville Gazette*,” 1 July 1822, Draper MSS 17DD26, SHSW; James C. Kelly and William C. Baker, III, *The Sword of the Lord and Gideon: A Catalogue of Historical Objects Related to the Battle of King’s Mountain* (Boone, NC: Appalachian Consortium Press, 1980), 5.

him that the state assembly was convening at a later date than he initially believed; he hoped the delay would give Sevier additional time to rally support. In this second letter, Shelby was even more explicit about his understanding of who had contributed most to the victory over Ferguson. He and Sevier, he stated, were responsible for mustering most of the over-mountain militia. In fact, “it was an enterprise undertaken from pure and patriotic motives, without the aid of government...in the great scale of national affairs, it was the *very first perceivable event* that gave a favorable turn” to the American war effort. Shelby was becoming more conscious of his own status as a Revolutionary by explaining the importance of what he and his fellow patriots had achieved in 1780. He was also articulating this consciousness in republican language: the Whigs had only “pure and patriotic motives” in mounting the expedition, which they did with no assistance from any organized government body.¹⁴

Despite Shelby and Sevier’s conviction that they deserved recognition, their efforts to obtain their swords and pistols went nowhere until 1812. By that time Shelby’s desire for vindication had taken a more practical turn: he was running for governor of Kentucky (a post he had held when the state first joined the Union). In August he complained to Sevier that “old Tories and their descendants were joining with his political opponents in spreading misinformation to discredit him. Particularly rankling were rumors that he was not present at King’s Mountain, or that he was in the battle but was not one of the principal commanders. These murmurs were becoming so widely circulated that Shelby asked Sevier to provide him with a letter attesting to his role in

¹⁴ Ibid.; Isaac Shelby to John Sevier, 24 February 1810, in G.W. Sevier, “To the Editor of the *Nashville Gazette*.”

Ferguson's defeat that he could use as evidence against his opponents. By the time Sevier replied on the 27th, he was able to congratulate Shelby on his election, but he still supplied the new governor with the information he had requested. Sevier concurred in blaming Shelby's misfortunes on Tory sympathizers, "as their malice hatred and envy will ever be alive" against the revolutionaries. Allegations that Shelby was not at King's Mountain or held no high rank in the campaign stunned Sevier; he distinctly remembered Shelby's actions during the battle, and agreed that "Coll. Campbell was some considerable distance" from the scene of surrender. He once again agreed to help persuade the North Carolina legislature to acknowledge the "debt of honour due to us and I make no doubt that body will order the swords to be provided." Sevier forwarded Shelby's memorial to the North Carolina General Assembly, who decided that the original resolution to secure the swords had simply been overlooked. Senator Joseph Turner eventually obtained three swords (for Sevier, Shelby, and Joseph Winston) for ninety dollars each.¹⁵

It should be obvious that the Shelby-Sevier correspondence differs markedly in tone from the Collins narrative or many of the other accounts left behind by average veterans. As stated earlier, Collins was implicitly bold in the act of presenting his story, but his autobiography's explicit contents are modest. Indeed, many of his attempts at self-deprecation are almost charming. And while many pension applications reflected the pride of contributing to the war effort, there was an inherent subservience in applying for aid from the federal government. Shelby and Sevier, by contrast, showed no hesitation in

¹⁵ Issac Shelby to John Sevier, 12 August 1812, in *Ibid*; Sevier to Shelby, 27 August 1812, contemporary transcript, Draper MSS, 16DD42; Sevier's sword is of French design, with an ivory grip and gilded hilt. His son donated it to the state of Tennessee in 1843 and it is now on display in the Tennessee State Museum. Kelly and Baker, *The Sword of the Lord and Gideon*, 5-7.

claiming the “debt of honour” as something to which they had a right. By invoking this language, these men differentiated themselves from the average Revolutionary War veteran. The concept of “honor” was one of the only ways to recognize rank in a society lacking hereditary nobility. “Honor was the core of a man’s identity, his sense of self, his manhood,” as Joanne B. Freeman reminds us in her study of the role of personal reputation in early American politics. “A man without honor was no man at all. Honor was also entirely other-directed, determined before the eyes of the world; it did not exist unless bestowed by others. Indeed, a man of honor was defined by the respect that he received in public.”¹⁶ To Shelby and Sevier, elevated in station as they were in both the King’s Mountain campaign and in the post-war period, unfulfilled promises of recognition were a deep personal affront that required satisfaction. Their positions led them to approach the matter of military gratitude in a very different way than the privates who served under them. They acted in a manner consistent with their wartime status as field-grade officers. As Charles Royster describes in detail, Continental Army officers were particularly sensitive to matters of rank and recognition as they reflected on their honor. These men “sought this distance from their men because they believed, as did officers in European armies, that social hierarchy sustained military hierarchy. To have the proper authority over enlisted men, they thought, an officer had to be a gentleman...All of these marks of distinction showed, in theory, that he was part of a superior order of society, entitled to unquestioning obedience from military

¹⁶ Joanne B. Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the Early Republic* (New Haven. CT: Yale University Press, 2001), xvi.

subordinates.”¹⁷ It is obvious from the Sevier-Shelby correspondence that even militia officers from the western backcountry, supposedly the most egalitarian of all commanders, absorbed notions of honor and brought them into play when claiming their share of the Revolutionary legacy.¹⁸

But if Shelby’s identity as a Revolutionary was partly a matter of his private honor in 1812, it was also a matter of public debate. His visibility as a political candidate in 1812 meant that his past activities were open to comment and widespread interest. In July of that year the *Lexington Reporter* published an anonymous article eulogizing his efforts in the Revolutionary War. Having reminded his readers that past actions are the best means by which to judge character, “Narrator” traced Shelby’s services back to the early 1770’s. Describing his role in the King’s Mountain campaign, the author echoed many of the sentiments Shelby himself put forth in his correspondence with Sevier. According to “Narrator,” the two over-mountain leaders “meditated and carried into execution the expedition against Ferguson,” while the “honor of the enterprise has been given Col Campbell most undeservedly.” There were, after all, six colonels present, and “Narrator” claimed that if the men had been polled during the expedition, it would have been Shelby in overall command. But Shelby “had more at heart the interest of his darling country,” and so he generously devised a system to name Campbell as nominal commander of the day to execute the orders created by the council of officers. “Narrator” also repeated the rumor that Campbell was absent during part of the battle, and believed

¹⁷ Caroline Cox, *A Proper Sense of Honor*, 61; Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War*, 86; see 85-96 for Royster’s discussion of the culture of honor and distinction at work among Continental officers.

¹⁸ The South Carolina partisan commander Thomas Sumter was notoriously sensitive to slights and jealous of his authority. See Bass, *Gamecock*, 120-22, 152, 175, 214-15, 220.

that it was Shelby who received the Tories' formal surrender.¹⁹

This attempt to drum up political support for Shelby was understandably offensive to Campbell's surviving relatives. John Campbell complained in a letter to Shelby that although he heartily supported Shelby's political ambitions, he could not ignore the article's statements. Campbell did not believe Shelby had any role in the article's publication, but he asked that he publicly refute the offensive allegations. He was, he noted, acquiring statements from veterans who served under Campbell to refute the charges in the "Narrator" piece. Shelby's reply to this request was hardly what Campbell asked for. Although he had no role in the publication, and claimed that he had informed the newspapers of his disapproval, he would not refute the statements relating to William Campbell. He was convinced that "it is as true as that Heaven and Earth exist, that he was not in the latter part of the action, and that he did apologize to me for it before we left the mountain, and spoke once or twice to me on the subject upon our retreat."²⁰

William Campbell's grandson William C. Preston finally refuted the "Narrator" piece in the *Reporter* a year after the original article appeared. Included in this rebuttal were four statements from King's Mountain veterans testifying to Campbell's good conduct in the battle. William Edmiston stated that Campbell was present and visible throughout the engagement, and that after the Loyalists' surviving commander presented Campbell with his sword in surrender, he heard some of the Whigs commenting on the colonel's exemplary behavior. The Campbell party also resented the insinuations about Campbell's role as overall commander. The statements asserted that the other officers

¹⁹ "Narrator," "Col. Isaac Shelby," *Lexington Reporter*, 25 July 1812, handwritten transcript, Draper MSS, 11DD81.

²⁰ Both Campbell's letter and Shelby's reply are in Draper, *King's Mountain and its Heroes*, 573-75.

overwhelmingly supported Campbell's election to command: "I myself gave my vote for him, supposing him to be the most capable to perform the duties of commander in chief."²¹

It is clear that something more than the Campbell family's feelings were at stake in the "Narrator" affair. The "re-discovery" of the Revolution raised the stakes of any dispute involving wartime conduct, since the general public placed more value on participation in the struggle against Britain. Disparaging a hero's wartime conduct was a strike against his identity as a Revolutionary, and that identity meant more in the early nineteenth century than at any other time. This explains both parties' conduct in the second outbreak of the Campbell controversy. This phase erupted in 1822, when the *Nashville Gazette* published a letter from John Sevier's son G.W. Sevier. According to the younger Sevier, a Tennessee historian had requested some of his late father's documents, and in the process of arranging this material he stumbled across Shelby's King's Mountain letters detailing Campbell's conduct, his and Sevier's own contributions, and the forgotten swords. Sevier believed the letters could help correct many erroneous accounts of the battle, and so he asked the editor of the *Gazette* to print them. Like Shelby himself, he hastened to add that he had no wish to tarnish Campbell's reputation or insult his relatives. He simply wanted to vindicate his late father's role in Ferguson's defeat.²²

The results were predictably explosive. Shelby was "surprised at the imprudence

²¹ [William C. Preston], "To the Printer of the *Reporter*," *Lexington Reporter*, 30 October 1813, handwritten transcript, Draper MSS, 8DD38; Certificate of William Edmiston, handwritten transcript, Draper MSS, 3DD199.

²² G.W. Sevier, "To the Editor of the *Nashville Gazette*," 1 July 1822, Draper MSS, 17DD26.

of young Mr. Sevier, and the disrespect he has shown to his father's memory, in publishing letters written to him in confidence, without first having consulted me...he should have treated such an idea with contempt, as every honorable mind must feel toward it." According to Freeman's description of the early American code of honor, Shelby was correct. In an age when private correspondence was often used as political fodder, the publication of intimate and inflammatory letters was a dangerous violation of formalized etiquette. Sevier's son had not merely been inconsiderate; he had broken one of the key tenets of the code of honor.²³ This was particularly true given the extremely sensitive nature of the Sevier-Shelby correspondence, which involved the honor of a third party who was deceased and thus incapable of defending himself. Shelby admitted that the tone of his own decade-old statements surprised him: "One of them [the letters to Sevier] is more harsh, than I expected to find it." He continued to vent his anger, stating that "*confidential* letters, like private conversation, should be held sacred and not lightly spoken of." At the same time, he believed that "the statements are nevertheless true," but apparently he decided it was not prudent to add more fuel to the fire and crossed this passage out in the copy preserved in his papers.²⁴

If this minor concession indicates Shelby's hesitation to expose himself again in private correspondence, it should not reflect any qualms about fighting back in a public forum. Just as he stood his ground during the "Narrator" fiasco, refusing to placate Preston by refuting the article's allegations, Shelby once again decided to defend himself. Determined not to open himself to further criticism without supporting evidence, he

²³ Shelby to Darby, 10 October 1822, ALS, Shelby Family MSS 2193, Roll 2, Library of Congress (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress Microfilm, 1959); Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, 137-38.

²⁴ Shelby to M.D. Hardin, 10 October 1822, ALS, Shelby Family MSS 2194, Roll 2, LC.

planned to collect statements to support the allegations made in the Sevier letters. Here, again, Shelby was following one of the standardized rules of self-defense via publication as outlined by Freeman. A published refutation carried the weight of authority and “allowed writers to present their case as they wished it understood.” Shelby chose to publish his arguments and evidence in the form of a defense pamphlet. Freeman describes these print weapons in this way: “Signed, structured character defenses brimming with hard evidence, they were legal briefs argued before a tribunal of one’s peers, the writer personally vouching for their veracity.”²⁵ One of the veterans who supplied Shelby with information was Thomas Kennedy. He recalled Shelby rallying the men, “particularly when the enemy charged & drove us at least two hundred yards down the mountain,” and it was his opinion that Shelby’s efforts were the primary cause of the men’s rally and return to the attack after this charge. He added that after the surrender, the men spent half an hour asking for Campbell, who was nowhere to be found.²⁶

Ironically, Shelby’s need for supporting evidence forced him to write to G.W. Sevier, asking permission to publish two of his father’s letters written during the attempt to obtain the swords. He cautioned Sevier that this might open his father’s reputation to criticism; he asked to print the letters only because he needed to defend himself. In this letter, as in all his statements during the Campbell controversy, Shelby asserted that he regretted the entire affair; the controversy, he said, disgusted him. At the same time, he constantly returned to the notion that “the facts stated are as true as the succession of day

²⁵ Ibid.; Shelby to Hardin, 17 November 1822, ALS, Shelby Family MSS 2209, Roll 2, LC; Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, 99, 119.

²⁶ Thomas Kennedy, statement, 25 October 1822, ADS, Shelby Family MSS 2197, Roll 2, LC. There are several versions of Kennedy’s statement preserved in Shelby’s papers. Apparently Shelby disagreed with him about the amount of time that passed between the surrender and Campbell’s appearance on the scene, and suggested a few minor revisions before he obtained one that suited him.

to night” and were widely known to the men present at King’s Mountain.²⁷

While Shelby was busy tracking down veterans and securing written statements, the Campbell faction was doing the same in order to redeem the late colonel’s reputation. Some of their certificates were recycled from the “Narrator” rebuttal, and all of them contained similar information: Campbell was the principal officer, he was active during the battle, and was present when the Tories surrendered. Henry Dickenson not only claimed to have seen Campbell at the surrender, but also stated that personally accompanied Campbell when he received the British officers’ swords. Dickenson remembered the Tories’ reluctance to present the swords to Campbell because “he had no coat on and his collar was open.” When Dickenson informed them that Campbell was the American commander, they bowed and turned their weapons over to him. John Craig also saw “Col. Campbell on foot, in his shirt sleeves, receive the sword from the surviving and commanding officer of the British army.”²⁸

Shelby’s vindication emerged in 1823 as a pamphlet detailing the campaign, the origins of the Campbell controversy, and nearly two dozen supporting documents. The appended evidence was similar to the statement he secured from Thomas Kennedy, repeating the refrain that Campbell fled the field before the surrender and did not reappear until some time later. Shelby’s brother Moses was one of the veterans who testified to Campbell’s absence from the action. He swore that after he was wounded and taken to a creek at the base of the ridge, he personally saw Campbell sitting nearby on his

²⁷ Shelby to Sevier, 26 November [1822], ALS, Shelby Family MSS 2218, Roll 2, LC.

²⁸ Certificate of Henry Dickenson, 30 May 1823, handwritten transcript, Draper MSS, 3DD206-10, SHSW; Certificate of John Craig, handwritten transcript, Draper MSS, 3DD212, SHSW.

horse.²⁹ Other statements relied more on rumor and innuendo, but many of the men who heard about Campbell's absence claimed that this report circulated widely not long after the battle. Henry Blevins, a private in Shelby's regiment, claimed that when the Tories were being executed at Bickerstaff's on the 14th, "Campbell came up, and demanded in an angry manner, why they did not hang all these damned rascals at once! Sevier laughed and replied, 'Why Colonel, if we had all been as much in earnest in the action, I think we should have killed more and had fewer of them to hang.'" In and of itself, there is nothing to suggest that Sevier intended his remark as a censure of Campbell. At face value, Sevier's statement sounds more like a simple attempt at dark humor. But Blevins also believed that two other men (one of whom was Moses Shelby) made similar remarks to Campbell regarding his conduct. And he claimed that he later heard Sevier remark that had he behaved as Campbell, he would not have blamed his men for killing him.³⁰

As compelling as these statements are, it is the text of Shelby's defense that is particularly interesting. In the pamphlet, as well as in his correspondence during the controversy, Shelby consistently presented himself as a reluctant victim of circumstances. He asserted that he had no wish to destroy Campbell's reputation. Indeed, he regretted his own involvement and the pain it would cause Campbell's family and acquaintances. But since his honor and reputation were at stake, he argued that he had no choice but to undertake the unpleasant task of self-defense. "I am not guilty, my countrymen, and before any other tribunal than your's [sic] I would have scorned to reply to the unworthy accusations with which I am assailed." After relating the entire sequence of events from

²⁹ Shelby, *Battle of King's Mountain*, 18, Draper MSS, 17DD6, SHSW.

³⁰ Ibid, 18-19.

the beginning of the campaign onward, and having painstakingly justified his reasons for doing so, Shelby declared that the pamphlet was his final word on the controversy. “I have no fears for my reputation, the hardy growth of many years. I can listen undisturbed to the animadversions of Mr. Preston, and nothing shall ever provoke me to engage further in this contest.”³¹

With all the ink spilled over Campbell’s conduct in the battle, it is one of the most well-documented aspects of the King’s Mountain campaign. But the evidence is so contradictory that it is also impossible to establish what actually took place. The fact that the rumors spread so soon after the battle suggest that there is some truth to Shelby’s allegations. That so many veterans wondered as to his whereabouts for a period of time after the firing stopped is even more suggestive. At the same time, we cannot easily dismiss those veterans who remembered that Campbell was present for the entire battle, since they agreed on specific details (for example, that Campbell fought with his coat removed and his shirt open near the end of the battle). As Carol Reardon notes, the inherent confusion of combat can ruin attempts to correlate first-hand accounts, turning even the most well-documented event into a tangled mess of conflicting evidence.³²

There is enough information to provide some suggestions. Moses Shelby, as noted earlier, claimed that when he was wounded and carried to a creek at the base of the ridge, he saw Campbell sitting on his horse. The implication, of course, is that Campbell shamefully retreated down the slope during the fight. But another veteran recalled that when the Tories charged, driving the Whigs down the slopes, they “retreated to the foot

³¹ Ibid., 1-2, 13.

³² Carol Reardon, *Pickett’s Charge in History and Memory* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 11-38 passim.

of a hill near a branch [creek]. I saw Colonel Campbell with other officers at that place animating and rallying his men.”³³ In other words, Shelby possibly misinterpreted Campbell’s presence at the base of the ridge. Of course, he might have simply been deliberately vague, omitting any mention of Campbell rallying his troops, given his close relation to Isaac Shelby. As for the men who were unable to find Campbell immediately after the surrender, many others attested to his prominence at the close of the battle. Here Reardon’s fog of battle notion has something to offer us. We have seen that confusion was the defining element in the battle’s closing moments. This atmosphere makes Campbell’s “disappearance” more understandable. In fact, some evidence indicates that he was in the thickest part of the action. Major James Snodgrass remembered seeing Campbell throughout the battle, both mounted and on foot. He spotted him again “immediately after the surrender, and before the firing had entirely ceased,” walking away from the encircled Tories and carrying some of their swords.³⁴ Other statements similarly place Campbell near the Tories when the white flags went up. Since confusion reigned at this point, with men unaware of the surrender and officers trying to restore order, the uncertainty of Campbell’s whereabouts does not necessarily indicate his absence. It merely attests to the messy nature of the Battle of King’s Mountain.

As a public dispute over a prominent figure’s wartime conduct, the Campbell controversy was not unique. Sarah Purcell describes similar scandals during the same period, and argues that these episodes constituted a very real crisis in national identity; by shaking America’s faith in classical heroes, these debates called into question the very

³³ Statement of Colonel John Witherspoon, handwritten transcript, Draper MSS, 8DD67, SHSW.

³⁴ Statement of Major James Snodgrass, handwritten transcript, Ibid.

idea of a unified, national memory.³⁵ But given the context in which the Campbell controversy emerged, an alternative explanation seems more likely. The Campbell-Shelby feud was heated precisely *because* the participants thought the classical, heroic ideals of the Revolution still mattered. In fact, given the contemporary Revolutionary vogue, they mattered more than ever. The debate represents the pinnacle of King's Mountain veterans' attempts to claim their share of the legacy of the American Revolution. Once the nation democratized the memory of the war, King's Mountain veterans of all ranks could step forward and demand to be recognized as contributors to the victory over Great Britain. Some acknowledged their humble status with self-deprecating disclaimers or subservience, while elites adopted the rhetoric of honor and reputation. All of them understood that the national remembrance movement gave their victory at King's Mountain added significance.

Thomas Jefferson provided a fitting epitaph to this period in the re-definition of the King's Mountain victors. William Campbell's nephew wrote to him soliciting information to use against Shelby, believing that Jefferson (as wartime governor of Virginia) could provide documentary support of the late colonel's services. Jefferson was unable to supply the sort of hard evidence Campbell wanted. But he assured him that his uncle's place in history was secure. Apparently trying to smooth things over, Jefferson speculated that Shelby's memory was failing with age, and in one touching passage he testified to time's effect on his own mental faculties. Of the King's Mountain victory, he wrote, "It was the joyful annunciation of that turn of the tide of success which

³⁵ Purcell, *Sealed with Blood*, 165-70.

terminated the Revolutionary war with the seal of our independence.”³⁶ The Revolution’s patron saint thus implied that it was time to lay aside old controversies and focus on what the King’s Mountain militia had achieved. Historians of the late nineteenth century would carry out Jefferson’s wishes, turning the King’s Mountain veterans into genuine, larger-than-life heroes.

³⁶ Jefferson to Campbell, n.d., handwritten transcript, Draper MSS, 3DD205, SHSW.

CHAPTER 3

“THAT REMARKABLE CONTEST”: LYMAN C. DRAPER AND THE CREATION OF REGIONAL HEROES

The most important wave of King's Mountain myth-making, and the one that established most of the popular modern-day views about the battle and the men who fought, came in the late nineteenth century. The legacies of war were very much on the minds of Americans during this period. Previously neglected Revolutionary War campsites and battlefields became focal points in efforts to develop a new national character, especially during the centennial. Benson Lossing's collection of illustrations of Revolutionary War sites, together with his descriptions of his visits to them, sparked new interest in a war that was quickly moving out of the realm of memory and into that of history. The Revolutionary notion of sacrifice for a common cause also resonated with idealistic Victorians, creating a mindset suited to commemoration. Furthermore, sectional debate over the causes of the Civil War subsided, so that by the 1890's nationalist Americans could emphasize the heroic efforts of the men who fought and died by preserving the sites of engagements and erecting monuments to honor the fallen.¹ In this atmosphere, it was only natural that the centennial of King's Mountain would be marked by some type of ceremony on the ridge where the backwoods Whigs clashed with Ferguson's Loyalists.

¹ Lorette Treese, *Valley Forge: Making and Remaking a National Symbol* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 14-15; Michael Kammen, *A Season of Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 52; Timothy B. Smith, *This Great Battlefield of Shiloh: History, Memory, and the Establishment of a Civil War National Military Park* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2004), 17-18.

The frontier historian and manuscript collector Lyman C. Draper was conspicuously absent from this occasion. As he informed the Centennial Committee's secretary, "I have for forty years taken unusual interest in everything pertaining to that remarkable contest." His absence was not, however, due to a lapse in his lifelong passion for America's frontier heroes. He was too busy writing his account of Ferguson's defeat. Draper had hoped to finish *King's Mountain and its Heroes* in time for the centennial, but the work was more difficult than he had anticipated. He promised to keep up with the festivities via the newspapers, but he would be unable to make the trip to South Carolina.²

Today Draper's absence from the centennial festivities is ironic, because his book *King's Mountain and its Heroes* is recognized as the definitive account of King's Mountain. Despite its use by students of the 1780 campaign, however, the book contains serious interpretive problems. The primary reason is that Draper, like many of his contemporaries, worked out of a sense of moral obligation to the victors of King's Mountain. He wanted to ensure their legacy as well as chronicle their deeds. In one sense, the story of the writers and orators who commemorated King's Mountain in the latter part of the nineteenth century was a continuation of the earlier veteran experience. Practically everyone who wrote or spoke of the battle from 1850 on explicitly stated the same themes of gratitude and remembrance due to forgotten heroes. In fact, a desire to vindicate neglected patriots of the frontier accounts for most of the King's Mountain literature from this era. The heirs to King's Mountain remained conscious of their role as

² Lyman C. Draper, Madison, Wisconsin, to Secretary King's Mountain Centennial Committee, ALS, 1 October 1880, Draper MSS, 15DD129, SHSW.

guardians of a legacy. John S. Preston put the matter eloquently at a King's Mountain celebration in 1855: "We are the sons of heroes and sages," he declared. "Let us be true to ourselves, be true to our country, be true to the God who gave it to us, be faithful to the blood shed here by our sires, and we will be the sires of freemen as long as the earth owns man for its master."³ But there were two critical points of departure from the veteran era. First, the passage of time allowed later chroniclers to glorify the King's Mountain victors to a higher degree, elevating them to heroes of almost mythic proportions. Second, they operated within a distinctly regional framework. By the late nineteenth century, Americans came to see the battle as a great achievement, but one tied to specific geographical zones. The King's Mountain victors would emerge from the nineteenth century as heroes, but as heroes claimed by particular regions.

For Lyman Draper, this region was the early West. Born and raised in a frontier setting himself, Draper was convinced from an early age that the common settlers of the eighteenth-century border had not received their historical due, and he took the task upon himself with an almost religious zeal. The prominent national histories of his day ignored the rough-and-tumble figures who settled the wilderness of Revolutionary America, so Draper had to build his source base from the bottom up. He spent most of his adult life traveling the former "border states" of the old Southwest, corresponding with and interviewing surviving pioneers and their descendents, and copying or acquiring original documents. His massive manuscript collection at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin (where he became Secretary) remains the most important resource for students

³ Preston's address was published along with an account of the proceedings in *Celebration of the Battle of King's Mountain, October, 1855, and the Address of the Hon. John S. Preston. Together with the Proceedings of the Meetings and Accompanying Documents* (Yorkville, SC: Miller and Merton for the Committees, 1855).

of the early frontier and the men who lived there.⁴

Draper's career overlapped that of his friend and mentor J.G.M. Ramsey, and in many ways their backgrounds were similar. Both men shared a desire to tell the story of the early frontier, both men assembled substantial manuscript collections, and both men operated within a specifically regional framework. But whereas Draper's point of orientation was westward, Ramsey saw himself primarily as a Southerner. Ramsey was steeped in the atmosphere of the early Southwest from his birth to a family of Tennessee settlers in 1797. Many of the prominent figures in the state's early history were guests in his family's home. Ramsey wanted to ensure the memory of the early Tennessee founders by collecting their documents and preserving their stories. The result was *The Annals of Tennessee to the End of the Eighteenth Century*, a book whose immense size masked the fact that it lacked geographical balance. Ramsey was much more attentive to East Tennessee than the state as a whole. In the introduction Ramsey made his motives for writing very clear. He believed that Tennessee's founders had left his fellow citizens with a rich heritage, and he lamented that his contemporaries knew so little about it. "Some of the most brilliant incidents in our early history," he wrote, "are unrecorded, which, if not soon rescued from oblivion, will be lost to the present generation, posterity and the world."⁵

Given their mutual interests, Ramsey and Draper were bound to cross each other's

⁴ The definitive study of Draper is William B. Hesseltine, *Pioneer's Mission: The Story of Lyman C. Draper* (Binghamton, NY: Vail-Ballou Press, 1954). On Draper's manuscript collection, see Donald R. McNeil, ed., *The American Collector* (Madison: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1954), 45-61 passim.

⁵ W.H. Masterson, "J.G.M. Ramsey, Historian of Early Tennessee," biographical introduction to J.G.M. Ramsey, *The Annals of Tennessee to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Charleston: Walker and Jones, 1853; reprint, Knoxville: The East Tennessee Historical Society, 1967), xiii-xv, xvi, xxii; Hesseltine, "Ramsey and Draper vs. Bancroft," 8; Ramsey, *Annals*, 8.

paths, and they became acquainted in 1844, over a decade before the publication of the *Annals*.⁶ Their long friendship was the catalyst behind *King's Mountain and its Heroes*, because Draper's productivity as a writer did not match his zeal as a collector. William B. Hesseltine describes Draper's troubled writing career in his biography of the Wisconsin historian. His constant traveling, his reluctance to commit anything to paper until he had searched out all the relevant material and his recurrent hypochondria ended his book projects before they were finished. Ramsey finally urged him to gather the material he had on Ferguson's defeat and assemble it into his first major published work, since the timing seemed right for a King's Mountain study. By the late 1870's the South was emerging from Reconstruction, the centennial of both King's Mountain and Tennessee settlement were approaching, and a book on the battle would remind the American public that Tennessee was a rightful heir in the nation's heritage.⁷

Draper set to work, but the hassles of writing still plagued him. As noted earlier, he hoped to finish the book in time for the centennial, but the date came and went and the manuscript remained unfinished. The constant delays were a source of great frustration to Peter G. Thompson, the Cincinnati publisher who took on the project. On July 8, 1881, he warned Draper that he "had three letters during the last few days from several [agents], complaining bitterly of our broken promises. I hope you will not lose a moment in bringing it to a close."⁸ A few days later he wrote to Draper again, informing him of problems with the illustrations and urging him to send back material that needed to be

⁶ Masterson, "J.G.M. Ramsey," *ibid.*, xvii.

⁷ Hesseltine, *Pioneer's Mission*, 68-78, 250-52, 270-72.

⁸ Peter G. Thompson, Cincinnati, Ohio, to Lyman C. Draper, ALS, 8 July 1881, Draper MSS, 15DD140, SHSW.

trimmed down as soon as possible.⁹ Thompson's desire to delete any unnecessary material is understandable, given the finished volume's massive size. *King's Mountain and its Heroes* emerged as a six-hundred-page work that began not in 1780, but with the 1765 Stamp Act. This allowed Draper to set his narrative within a broader framework of resistance to British tyranny. But his diatribes on the origins of the war, and on campaigns that needed little coverage, contributed to both the size and cost of the book.¹⁰

Draper's preoccupation with minutiae also played a role. He was not a professionally-trained academic, and as he aged he distanced himself more and more from the emerging community of American historians.¹¹ He was, however, obsessed with accuracy. He took great care to establish the absolute truth of traditions and incidents of seemingly little importance. While Draper's interest in ordinary people have endeared him to some later scholars as a forerunner of modern social history, it combined with his fixation on minutiae to lead his narrative down countless side paths. At one point Draper broke off his account of the backcountry war to describe the family of Major Edward Musgrove, who lived near the battlefield named after him. The anecdotes about the Musgroves' experiences during the British invasion gave way to a discussion of the death and funeral of the Major's two daughters, all in a book supposedly focused on a one-hour skirmish.¹² Accounts of other peripheral characters followed this passage.

Despite these problems, many readers reacted favorably to *King's Mountain and its Heroes*. Charles Phillips of Chapel Hill wrote to tell Draper how much he enjoyed

⁹ Peter G. Thompson, Cincinnati, Ohio, to Lyman C. Draper, ALS, 14 July 1881, Draper MSS, 15DD161, SHSW.

¹⁰ See Draper, *King's Mountain and its Heroes*, chapter 1 passim.

¹¹ Hesseltine, *Pioneer's Mission*, 288-89.

¹² Draper, *Kings Mountain and its Heroes*, 123-26.

reading the book to Francis Preston Venable, a chemistry professor at the University of North Carolina and relative of the Campbells. As for the passages dealing with the Campbell controversy, Phillips prudently decided to “leave them for his own independent, unassisted explorations.” He wanted the books in “our library in N.C.... to show when men our boys ought to make and what husbands our girls ought to choose.”¹³ This statement shows that the notion of patriotic gratitude was obviously very much alive for Draper’s readers. Ramsey claimed to own the first copy in Knoxville and assured Draper that *King’s Mountain and its Heroes* was “a full success.”¹⁴

As far as the publisher was concerned, this was untrue. The book was a financial disappointment, and Thompson thought he knew the reason: “The great trouble is that the book is *too local* in character, & the people in the section of country where it should sell best are too poor to buy it.”¹⁵ A glance at the commendations preserved in Draper’s papers reveals that Thompson was probably correct. Draper received glowing praise from some influential people and organizations, but most were in the South, and specifically from the same states involved in the campaign. J.J. Toon of Atlanta enjoyed Draper’s book but complained that it was not popular even where he lived.¹⁶ *King’s Mountain and its Heroes* simply did not resonate with most Americans in the same way it did with those whose ancestors filled its pages. Frederick A. Parker, President of the South Carolina Historical Society, commended Draper before the book was published for

¹³ Charles Phillips, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, to Lyman C. Draper, ALS, 18 October 1881, Draper MSS, 15DD94, SHSW.

¹⁴ J.G.M. Ramsey, Knoxville, Tennessee, to Lyman C. Draper, ALS, 26 October 1881, Draper MSS, 15DD193, SHSW.

¹⁵ Peter G. Thompson, Cincinnati, Ohio, to Lyman C. Draper, ALS, 24 December 1881, Draper MSS, 15DD172, SHSW.

¹⁶ J.J. Toon, Atlanta, Georgia, to Lyman C. Draper, ALS, 14 June 1886, Draper MSS, 15DD177, SHSW.

striking a blow for Southern history, and suggested that Southerners would find it particularly interesting.¹⁷ Given the outcome, this was a double-edged compliment. Many Southerners did indeed appreciate Draper's efforts, but few others seemed to notice. Adding insult to injury, Thompson's factory burned on October 8, 1884, taking 1,078 copies of *King's Mountain and its Heroes* with it. Thompson sold his book business a few months later.¹⁸

Draper's book thus failed to break the regional barrier on King's Mountain historiography that Ramsey established thirty years earlier. Draper had set out to vindicate the old frontier heroes, but he had paid a considerable price for it; the former "border states" of the Indian wars produced the only real audience for his work. In fact, later writers were even more intensely regional in their outlook. Those authors who followed Draper ensured that the King's Mountain militia would be synonymous not with the South or the early frontier, but with East Tennessee in particular. This was partly due to their own motives for writing, and partly due to the fact that historians from other areas neglected the battle.

For example, William Gilmore Simms included a rather brief discussion of King's Mountain in his 1860 history of South Carolina. Simms had already established himself as the author of several fictional works set in the Carolina theater of the Revolution. Like Draper and Ramsey, he expressed a keen desire to preserve his region's history for posterity. His early work was noticeably nationalist, but by the time he wrote his *Palmetto State* history he was a decided Southerner, using his books to fend off

¹⁷ Frederick A. Parker, Charleston, South Carolina, ADS, 19 May 1880, Draper MSS, 15DD132, SHSW.

¹⁸ Peter G. Thompson, Cincinnati, Ohio, to Lyman C. Draper, ALS, 16 October 1884, Draper MSS, 15DD143, SHSW; same to same, ALS, 15 December 1884, Draper MSS, 15DD146, SHSW.

abolitionist critiques of the slave system and the society that produced it. British oppression became a mirror for Northern persecution. Simms intended his history to be an accessible source for schoolchildren and the average layman. "To say that the great majority of our young people know little or nothing of the history of the state," he moaned, "is to do them no injustice. We may equally charge this deficiency upon the old." At the bottom of each page Simms included a series of basic questions dealing with the text above to ensure that students grasped the main points. Unlike Draper and Ramsey, however, Simms did not make King's Mountain a centerpiece of his work. The problem was not a lack of interest in the Revolution, but a glut of material. So many engagements took place there from 1780 to 1782 that Palmetto State historians had other events to consider besides King's Mountain. In his memorial address, Preston lamented that South Carolinians seemed more interested in the bombardment of Fort Moultrie and the victory at Cowpens. These engagements "belonged" to South Carolina in a way that the defeat of Ferguson did not.¹⁹

State pride did, however, heavily influence the King's Mountain narratives that emerged in South Carolina. David Ramsay contrasted the mountaineers, who he says spent much of the war in relative peace, with the eastern militia, who bore the brunt of the British invasion in 1780. Simms likewise emphasized his own state's contributions, often lifting passages as well as ideas from Ramsay's earlier work. Describing the

¹⁹ Kammen, *A Season of Youth*, 155-56; William Gilmore Simms, *The History of South Carolina from its First European Discovery to its Erection into a Republic with a Supplementary Book, Bringing the Narrative Down to the Present Time* (New York: Redfield, 1860), 5; *Celebration of the Battle of King's Mountain*, 61. To put the Carolina theater in perspective, consider that one-fifth of all combat deaths in the entire Revolution may have taken place in South Carolina in the last two years of warfare alone. John W. Gordon, *South Carolina and the American Revolution* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 1.

expedition's unusual command structure, he noted that South Carolina's James Williams technically outranked the other officers. But the commander "magnanimously suppressed the fact, fearing, perhaps, that its assertion might cause jealousies and distrust; and, by common consent, the general command was confided to Colonel Campbell, of Virginia." Simms was therefore either unaware of the controversy surrounding Williams' conduct or he chose to ignore it. Whatever the reason, the result was that the dispute over his fitness for command became an opportunity for a native son to behave honorably for the good of the cause.²⁰

Despite the strong Virginia contingent in the campaign, nineteenth-century historians of the Old Dominion showed even less interest in King's Mountain than those from South Carolina. Virginia's contribution to Revolutionary leadership and the victory at Yorktown overshadowed Ferguson's defeat. John Estes Cooke's 1883 survey included a substantial section on George Rogers Clarke's Indian campaign, pointing out that it "belongs to the history of Virginia, since the chief actor was a Virginian, his troops were Virginia troops, and the events took place on soil which was part of Virginia."²¹ Lafayette's duel with Cornwallis and the siege of Yorktown also received prominent attention. He did not mention Campbell at King's Mountain.

Perhaps, therefore, Tennesseans focused on King's Mountain almost by default. Since King's Mountain was their state's signal contribution to the war effort, the battle became a central part of early Tennessee history. Ramsey's efforts had already

²⁰ David Ramsay, *Ramsay's History of South Carolina, from its First Settlement in 1670 to the year 1808* vol. 1 (Newbury, SC: W.J. Duffie, 1858), 217; Simms, *History of South Carolina*, 270.

²¹ John Estes Cooke, *Virginia: A History of the People* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1883), 450.

demonstrated this before the Civil War, and post-war authors were even more explicit about their regional pride. They narrowed their focus from the state as a whole to the mountainous areas. The fact that many observers saw East Tennessee as neglected and under-appreciated added a new twist to the notion of patriotic gratitude due to old heroes. Swan M. Burnett called the mountaineer story a “Page of Neglected History” in his 1895 address, noting that East Tennessee’s location and lack of resources had made many Americans indifferent to the region.²² Oliver P. Temple, an influential Knoxville lawyer and political figure, published his history of East Tennessee’s Civil War experiences over thirty years after the war ended, and included a substantial amount of material on the region’s frontier experience. Like his predecessors, he was motivated partly by a desire to keep the memory of the Revolution alive, since he believed that the Revolutionary generation’s achievements were neglected and that patriotism was on the decline. Similarly, Thomas William Humes, rector of a Knoxville church, stated that his goal in writing *The Loyal Mountaineers of Tennessee* was to stir the entire country’s patriotic feelings.²³ On the face of it, these seem to be localist variations of Ramsey, Draper, Simms, and the other authors who wanted to ensure the memory of neglected heroes of the South, the Old Southwest, or a particular state.

In reality, however, Temple and Humes had additional reasons for telling the story of East Tennessee in the Revolution. Both men were fervent Unionists during the Civil War, and these political convictions were as important as regional favoritism in

²² Burnett, “The Over-Mountain Men,” 1.

²³ Oliver P. Temple, *East Tennessee and the Civil War* (1899; reprint, Johnson City, TN: The Overmountain Press, 1995), 39-40; Thomas William Humes, *The Loyal Mountaineers of Tennessee* (Knoxville: Ogden Brothers and Company, 1888), 10-12.

shaping their narratives of King's Mountain. As Noel Fisher points out, Unionists effectively monopolized the memory of the Civil War in East Tennessee; they presented their homeland to the rest of the country as staunchly loyal. This process of self-justification paralleled a similar movement on the national scene, as authors from outside the mountains came to see Appalachia as uniformly Unionist, downplaying the secessionism that existed in many areas. Scholars continue to debate matters of cause and timing relating to this phenomenon, but the fact that Appalachia "became" Unionist in the popular mind after the Civil War is well-documented.²⁴ The impact on King's Mountain historiography was enormous, because these authors interpreted the Revolution in light of the secession crisis. They inherited Ramsey's regional outlook, but abandoned his Southern orientation to give King's Mountain a decidedly Unionist slant.

Unionist chroniclers believed that history recapitulated itself. The same tendencies that characterized Civil War-era East Tennessee were apparent during the Revolution. This idea went much deeper than a simple comparison of wartime conditions. Many Unionists, such as W.G. Brownlow, were convinced that secessionists were descended from old Tory families, and that loyalty in one conflict reflected behavior in another.²⁵ The distant past was a tangible presence for these commentators. When East Tennessee Unionists remembered the mountaineers' heroic efforts to defeat the British, it brought to mind the same perseverance their descendants displayed in their guerrilla war against the Confederates occupying their state. Humes was very explicit

²⁴ Noel Fisher, "Definitions of Loyalty: Unionist Histories of the Civil War in East Tennessee," *The Journal of East Tennessee History*, no. 67 (1995): 58-59; Kenneth W. Noe, "'Deadened Color and Colder Horror': Rebecca Harding Davis and the Myth of Unionist Appalachia," in *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes: Back Talk from an American Region*, ed. Dwight B. Billings, Gurney Norman, and Katherine Ledford (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 67-70.

²⁵ Fisher, "Definitions of Loyalty," 63.

about this historical continuity, arguing that East Tennessee's contribution to the Union war effort was really nothing new: "It was the reproduction, upon the same stage, after nearly a vanished century, of the same broad patriotism...to some extent inherited...which sent a thousand riflemen from Sycamore Shoals on the Watauga River, to win for the American colonies a victory at King's Mountain...." In his published address, Swan M. Burnett argued that the mountaineers were staunch Southerners; they sympathized with the refugees pouring in from Carolina, and they despised Puritan abolitionists. But they had no stomach for the spirit of secession, and like all East Tennesseans throughout history, they refused to abandon the idea of Union. He flatly stated that the battle against the Confederacy was simply a repetition of history. This cyclical interpretation of King's Mountain was not original to East Tennessee Unionists. In fact, during the Civil War, secessionists sometimes invoked the Whigs' expedition to justify resistance against Yankee oppression. During one military ceremony in North Carolina, Confederates trotted out pieces from Ferguson's tea service captured by a local officer to inspire the troops to similar victories.²⁶ But East Tennessee Unionists turned King's Mountain into a defining historical moment; it was more than an example, it was the standard by which they measured regional patriotism. And as Fisher argues, by monopolizing interpretations of the Civil War in Appalachia, Unionists ensured that their vision of the Whig militia replaced the Confederate interpretation. They agreed with secessionists that the King's Mountain men were jealous of their liberty. But they insisted that they were also devoted to the American nation.

²⁶ Humes, *Loyal Mountaineers*, 8; Burnett, "The Over-Mountain Men" 9, 14-15; John C. Inscoe and Gordon B. McKinney, *The Heart of Confederate Appalachia: Western North Carolina in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 64.

Temple's description of the mountaineers' attitudes toward the revolutionary cause also illustrates this sense of continuity. He believed that their willingness to sacrifice for liberty excelled that of any other people during the struggle for independence. Given the events of the Civil War, his description of the Wataugans' relationship to North Carolina takes on a new meaning: "They had been neglected and cast off by their mother, but when dangers threatened and encompassed her like filial children they hastened to her defense. They begged to be reannexed to the mother state in order that they might 'share in the glorious cause of liberty.'"²⁷ This passage recalls the notion of loyal East Tennesseans who maintained their devotion to the Union despite the fact that Federal armies focused their efforts elsewhere, leaving the patriotic mountaineers to fend off secessionist marauders. It was a connection Temple probably wanted his readers to make.

This intense regionalism was thus more sharply focused than that of Draper, who filled the pages of his book with the names of prominent figures from throughout the Southern backcountry. In fact, his mental horizons stretched even farther than the South. *King's Mountain and its Heroes* was to be the initial volume in a series of frontier histories covering the area from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico.²⁸ Temple, Humes, and their contemporaries focused entirely on East Tennessee. Their Unionist interpretation also destroyed the pro-Southern slant applied by some earlier commentators. Southerners who remembered the battle during the secession crisis sometimes emphasized the Whigs as staunch defenders of their own freedom, making them symbols for the cause of states'

²⁷ Temple, *East Tennessee and the Civil War*, 17.

²⁸ Draper, *Kings Mountain and its Heroes*, vi. Draper, of course, never finished any of the projected books.

rights. In fact, the 1855 celebration took on a decidedly pro-Southern flavor. The published account describes a series of toasts to the South, the state of South Carolina, James Williams (the highest-ranking South Carolinian present at the battle), and Calhoun. The attendees lumped the other major players together, and topped off their toasts with a wish that Virginia and the Carolinas would continue to guard “their constitutional rights and liberties against a common foe.”²⁹ These sentiments disappeared from King’s Mountain literature when Unionist East Tennesseans claimed the battle’s legacy.

The attention lavished on Virginia and Carolina also vanished. Temple, in fact, criticized Draper for minimizing Tennessee’s contribution to Ferguson’s defeat. In one passage, Draper had described Campbell’s Virginians in particularly glowing terms. As he envisioned them, the Holston settlers were heirs to a long tradition of Scotch-Irish liberty, fervently religious, honed into fine warriors from years on the frontier, and always ready to put aside their own affairs to take up their rifles for a worthy cause. The Tennesseans, by contrast, “had not been very long settled on the frontiers, were more of a mixed race, somewhat rough, but brave, fearless, and full of adventure. They were not a whit less patriotic than the Virginians; and were ever ready to hug a bear, scalp an Indian, or beard the fiercest Tories wherever they could find them.” He also believed the Virginians “were better educated than most of the frontier settlers, and had a more thorough understanding of the questions at issue between the Colonies and their mother country.”³⁰ Temple resented the insinuation that the Virginians were in any way superior to the men from Tennessee. He pointed out that all the Whigs involved in the campaign

²⁹ *Celebration*, 34.

³⁰ Draper, *King’s Mountain and its Heroes*, 242-43.

had the same Scotch-Irish heritage, the same Presbyterian devotion to God, and that any attempts to make such distinctions among them were misguided. Humes admitted that the Carolina troops may have grasped the critical nature of the campaign better than the Wataugans, but the mountaineers knew perfectly well the critical nature of the struggle and how badly the Carolinians needed assistance.³¹

A favorite anecdote of many Tennessee authors first appeared in Ramsey's *Annals*. It proved to be a useful tool in demonstrating the Wataugans' revolutionary virtue and thus stifling any theories that they were somehow less patriotic or politically conscious than seaboard Whigs. According to Ramsey, Sevier borrowed the money to outfit the expedition from John Adair, entry-taker for Sullivan County. This was technically illegal, since the money from land purchases belonged to the state, but Adair reasoned that "if the country is overrun by the British, liberty is gone. Let the money go too. Take it. If the enemy, by its use, is driven from the country, I can trust that country to vindicate my conduct. Take it." Ramsey was proud to note that he owned the receipt from the legislature proving that Sevier and Shelby made good on their promise to reimburse Adair.³² Few later authors missed this story's significance, which gave the over- mountain men a Revolutionary consciousness fit for Virginia or Boston. Such stories ran counter to the statements of South Carolina historians who claimed that Palmetto State troops held off the British while the mountaineers enjoyed peace and quiet. Tennessee writers insisted that the Wataugans were every inch the patriots their contemporaries were.

³¹ Temple, *East Tennessee and the Civil War*, 32-34; Humes, *Loyal Mountaineers*, 51.

³² Ramsey, *Annals of Tennessee*, 226.

These sentiments are also apparent in the work of James Gilmore, who sometimes used the pen name Edmund Kirke. His *Rear-Guard of the Revolution* is a worshipful account of Tennessee's Revolutionary War years starring a larger-than-life John Sevier. The follow-up volume, *John Sevier as a Commonwealth-Builder*, was a similarly admiring history of the State of Franklin. Like many of his colleagues, Kirke's primary motive for writing was his fear that important historical figures failed to receive their due attention. Many of his methods were similar to those of Draper; he perused old documents and interviewed anyone he could find with relevant information. He was also an acquaintance of Ramsey and admitted to relying heavily on the *Annals*.³³ Like Humes and Temple, he emphasized the superiority of the Tennesseans in the campaign. He described the backcountry Carolinians in very derogatory terms, citing instances of widespread Loyalism and a lack of devotion to the patriot cause. In one particularly virulent passage, he claimed that in driving out the British and liberating the South Carolina upcountry, the mountaineers had "cast pearls before swine," since the inhabitants were obviously unwilling to make the sacrifices needed in the war effort.³⁴

Francis Marion Turner, in his biography of John Sevier, worked from the same motives and carried the same regional bias. He read Ramsey and Kirke (although he disparaged the latter's abilities as a scholar) and determined to tell Sevier's story as fully as possible, using some of the notes Draper had accumulated. He intended his audience to be "those who love to read about the deeds of the heroes who fought for our freedom

³³ Edmund Kirke [James R. Gilmore], *The Rear-Guard of the Revolution* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1906), iii-v; James R. Gilmore, *John Sevier as a Commonwealth-Builder* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1887), v-x.

³⁴ Idem, *The Rear-Guard of the Revolution*, 181-83, 240.

and caused the light of peace and civilization to shine upon our 'land of the free and home of the brave.'"³⁵ More specifically, he wanted to ensure Sevier's status as a favored native son of Tennessee and a worthy national hero. Doing so required a few artful turns of phrase to ensure that Tennessee emerged as the foremost contributor to Ferguson's defeat. Turner stated that when the troops arrived at Cowpens, "they were joined by a few men under Colonel Williams, Major Chronicle, and Colonel Hampbright."³⁶ Whether intentional or not, this dismissive reference to "a few men" downplayed the participation of the Carolinians. In a more obvious bit of rhetoric, he eulogized "Sevier and his invincible Wataugans" in the thick of the action in his account of the actual battle.³⁷

The end result of this increasingly narrow regional focus, from the South to the Old Southwest and finally to East Tennessee in particular, was that the story of Ferguson's defeat lost much of its national appeal. King's Mountain did not "belong" to the entire country's memory. The great nationalist historian George Bancroft attempted to claim the battle for the whole country in his address at the 1855 ceremony. "The men of that day fought," he declared, "not for Carolina, not for the south; they fought for America and for humanity." Commemoration of the battle became an occasion for Bancroft to preach to the Southerners; he hoped that the ideas of freedom and union would "stand like your own mountains, which the geologists tell us are the oldest and

³⁵ Francis Marion Turner, *Life of General John Sevier* (1910; reprint, Johnson City, TN: The Overmountain Press, 1997), xv-xvi.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

finest in the world.”³⁸ But even this die-hard nationalist tended to slip into a regional interpretation when it came to Ferguson’s defeat. Earlier in his address he noted South Carolina’s special claim to the Revolution. The North, he admitted, was lax in attending to the British invasion in the South, and owed its sister section a debt of gratitude for resisting the Redcoat onslaught.³⁹

It is crucial to stress that when placed in chronological order, these authors place more and more emphasis on the King’s Mountain Whigs as “mountaineers.” Ramsey was more interested in the Wataugans as Tennesseans and Southerners than anything else. Draper thought in terms of the frontier experience and categorized them as pioneers, although the seeds of later views are plainly visible in his description of the Scotch-Irish Virginians. Afterwards, and especially in the narratives produced in the 1890’s, the King’s Mountain victors became archetypal mountain people. This was hardly a coincidence. The most obvious reason was the East Tennessee “monopoly” on the King’s Mountain legacy, as writers from that area seized on the battle to vindicate themselves. If King’s Mountain belonged to the Tennessee hills, then the victors must necessarily have been mountain folk. Second, by the late nineteenth century, America began scrutinizing Appalachia as a distinctive part of the country, assigning certain characteristics to the region whether they were universal or not. This process had deep roots in American history, but full-blown Appalachian stereotypes did not emerge in the popular consciousness until the period of Draper, Humes, and their contemporaries.

³⁸ On the differences between Ramsey and Draper on the one hand, and Bancroft on the other, see Hesselstine, “Ramsey and Draper vs. Bancroft.” The Bancroft quote is from *Celebration of the Battle of King’s Mountain*, 79.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 75-76.

After the Civil War, local color writers, social workers, and other outsiders entered the mountains with varying degrees of good intention, codifying many of the assumptions that underlie the modern-day view of Appalachia.⁴⁰

Those observers who identified King's Mountain with the people of the Southern highlands drew heavily from these assumptions, so that the story of the battle and the story of the region became even more deeply interwoven. The most glaring example is Burnett's speech to the Literary Society of Washington. Although he clearly admired both the mountaineers of the eighteenth century and their nineteenth-century descendants, he included simplified assumptions that Appalachian scholars and activists would spend years trying to overturn. Recall that Burnett linked the mountaineers' patriotism with the Unionism of their successors. In his speech he contrasted radical abolitionism with a desire for gradual abolition. Burnett believed the gradual option was more sensible, and assumed that the mountaineers agreed. As he put it, a "simple, unsophisticated mind often sees things in a clearer, whiter light than the astute, worldlier one, whose vision is apt to be blurred and colored by the complicated interests of an intricately organized society."⁴¹ He then tackled the subject of the mountain woman. At times "her awkward, angular, and it may be unkempt, body stood forth in an heroic mold which surpassed

⁴⁰ There is, of course, a very rich literature on the "discovery" of Appalachia. Two of the most influential and comprehensive works on this subject are Henry D. Shapiro, *Appalachia on our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1978), and Allen W. Batteau, *The Invention of Appalachia* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1990). These authors document in detail how outside observers shaped the image of Appalachia according to their own needs and assumptions, creating a persistent notion of a homogenized, isolated part of the country. The essays in Part Two of *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes*, ed. Billings, Norman, and Ledford, also deal with nineteenth-century literature from both inside and outside the region. A helpful introduction to this subject is Richard B. Drake's *A History of Appalachia* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 119-30.

⁴¹ Burnett, "The Over-Mountain Men," 10.

the classic beauty of the Venus of Milo....”⁴² Burnett thus adopted common stereotypes about Appalachian primitiveness and backwardness to illustrate a point about the region’s past. The fact that he saw his historical lecture as an appropriate occasion to expound on the virtues of mountain simplicity shows the depth of the mental connection between the campaign and the Southern highlands.

King’s Mountain chroniclers clearly borrowed from contemporary ideology the idea of the mountains as a sort of primordial refuge where time stood still. William G. Frost, president of Berea College, canonized this view in his highly influential 1899 article, “Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains.” Frost portrayed the mountain people as living in a state essentially unchanged from that of their settler forbears; Appalachian studies scholars have long recognized that he did so partly to raise support for Berea’s efforts to improve the mountaineers.⁴³ This view of isolated, primitive mountain folk appears in King’s Mountain literature. In his historical address, Burnett hoped the mountaineers would maintain some aspects of their “century of isolation” and “remain simple in faith, honest in purpose, patriotic in feeling, and courageous in support of it.”⁴⁴ These remarks unwittingly displayed the dark underside of historical hero as present-day archetype. As they increasingly equated the King’s Mountain victors with their own contemporaries in the mountains, it became easier to project their own prejudicial views on both groups. The idea of nineteenth-century mountaineers living in eighteenth-century conditions led to a view of eighteenth-century

⁴² Ibid., 19.

⁴³ Ronald L. Lewis, “Beyond Isolation and Homogeneity: Diversity and the History of Appalachia,” in *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes*, ed. Billings, Norman, and Ledford, 21.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 23.

mountaineers living in a primordial utopia.

As noted earlier, Draper suggested that King's Mountain helped preserve constitutional rights by beginning his book with the Stamp Act crisis. Most later authors ignored this line of thought, seizing on another of Draper's ideas. His description of Campbell's Virginians quoted above epitomized many of the traits that *all* the King's Mountain victors embodied in the minds of regional authors. The frontier militia fought to preserve freedom and equality that came from a deeper, more primal source than the British constitutional tradition. These authors believed that their liberty was passed down through their Scotch-Irish heritage and inherent in the people themselves. Kirke believed the mountaineers embodied the last vestige of real liberty at the time of the Revolution. In his view, the Anglo-Saxon race was destined to bring freedom to the world, but England had grown far too corrupt to do so. British liberty had to be planted in the virgin soil of America to thrive, and the independent mountaineers lived more freely than any other Americans, so they had a unique historical mission. At one point he pondered the mountaineers' reason for setting off against Ferguson, dismissing money and glory as motives before concluding that love of liberty drove the Whigs over the mountains and into battle.⁴⁵

Turner also saw the mountain settlements as a refuge for lovers of freedom, where "people of the best blood of North Carolina and Virginia...felt secure from the oppression of the colonial government." Burnett claimed that the boldness and audacity of the campaign was a product of the mountaineers' strong sense of individuality. The mountains, then, were one of the few places where men could live free of oversight as

⁴⁵ Kirke, *Rear-Guard of the Revolution*, 316-17.

each saw fit, and the British invasion represented a threat to this simple way of life.

Temple believed that mountain society was egalitarian as well as free. The frontier was not only a sanctuary from colonial oppression, but also from lowcountry deference. He assured his readers that the Watauga Association “was absolutely free, or democratic, both in theory and in practice. There existed no caste, no conventional distinctions. All citizens were equal before the law.”⁴⁶

Isolation in the wilderness therefore preserved the settlers from vice, while constant danger kept them strong. In other words, their environment made them perfect Revolutionary warriors. One of the most explicit examples is in the work of Humes. “They were healthy,” he claimed, “because of the pure, tonic air they breathed...strong, by physical exercise among the hills...alert, by living in dangers from savage foes...equipped with guns, which their sharp eyes and skillfull [sic] fingers made sure of aim and deadly in effect.”⁴⁷ “Pure, tonic air” was evidently a matter of some importance, because Turner also included it in his description of the mountain settlers and their many virtues: simplicity, productivity, cheerfulness, and sociability.⁴⁸

Most of the authors believed that the mountaineers’ hardiness was a function of ethnicity as well as environment. Again and again, these authors returned to the Scotch-Irish origins of the King’s Mountain heroes. Temple devoted his entire first chapter to extolling the virtues of the “Covenanters” who settled the trans-Appalachian frontier, assuring his readers: “A braver, purer or better class of men than these early settlers in

⁴⁶ Turner, *Life of General John Sevier*, 14; Burnett, “The Over-Mountain Men,” 2; Temple, *East Tennessee and the Civil War*, 15.

⁴⁷ Humes, *Loyal Mountaineers*, 44.

⁴⁸ Turner, *Life of General John Sevier*, 19-20.

Kentucky and Tennessee never founded a state. No state in the Union was settled by men superior to them.” Swan Burnett rhapsodized about the “racial composition of this people, Scotch-Irish with a goodly mixture of English and Huguenot, but clean-blooded and of pure and undefiled descent. Could any people on the face of the earth at that time boast of a nobler lineage?” Theodore Roosevelt, as we will see shortly, had serious reservations about the King’s Mountain militia. But he agreed with the “heroic” authors about the importance of their Scotch-Irish cultural heritage. He affirmed that “the old Calvinistic spirit left a peculiar stamp on this wild border democracy. More than anything else, it gave the backwoodsmen their code of right and wrong.” Despite the negative effects of their wild environment, “they at least always retained the fundamental virtues of hardihood and manliness.”⁴⁹

Love of freedom and love of country were closely allied in these accounts, and the mountaineers’ patriotism was an important link with their descendants. Earlier we saw that Unionists such as Temple and Humes used the patriotic and sacrificial spirit of King’s Mountain to illustrate the same behavior among East Tennesseans during the Civil War. Unionists were not the only observers to use the campaign for similar purposes. The secessionist Ramsey invoked King’s Mountain in much the same terms. He claimed that Tennesseans had always been ready to show their devotion to their country in heroic fashion, whether fighting against Ferguson, under Jackson, at the Alamo, or in Mexico, showing “the same fearless disregard of danger, the same inextinguishable love of freedom, the same pure devotion to liberty, the same undying thirst for glory.” John

⁴⁹ Kirke, *Rear-Guard of the Revolution*, 209; Temple, *East Tennessee and the Civil War*, 11; Burnett, “The Over-Mountain Men,” 4; Theodore Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West: An Account of the Exploration and Settlement of Our Country from the Alleghanies to the Pacific*, vol. 6 (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1889; reprint, New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1908), 98.

Allison agreed in his address at the Tennessee Centennial Exhibition. Tennessee's military history from the time of King's Mountain forward, he thought, showed that her native sons were always eager to make the ultimate sacrifice for freedom. He contrasted the King's Mountain heroes, who came out of love of home and country, with Hannibal and Napoleon, who set out to conquer and subjugate.⁵⁰

A key to this interpretation was the fact that a *volunteer* army defeated Ferguson. As Bancroft noted, no political body directed the expedition; rather, the militiamen took their defense and that of the country upon themselves. The expedition's spontaneity deeply impressed many observers, especially given its spectacular success. Allison stressed the volunteer spirit not only of the King's Mountain expedition, but of the mountaineer presence in the whole Southern campaign (and the entire Civil War).⁵¹ The virtuous volunteer soldier, as we saw in the first chapter, was a stock character with even deeper roots in the American mind than the primitive mountaineer. What seems most striking about its appearance here is that this notion still carried such weight with Americans. Interestingly, the interval between the Civil War and the conflict with Spain witnessed a great deal of modernization and professionalism taking root in the American army...the very period with which we are dealing.⁵² As with the emergence of the popular Appalachian stereotypes, the timing was likely no coincidence. In this case, none of the authors made the link as explicit. Military professionalism was therefore not as important as regionalism or Unionism in shaping the authors' views, but it was present

⁵⁰ Ramsey, *Annals of Tennessee*, 5; Allison, "Address," 23.

⁵¹ *Celebration*, 77; Humes, *Loyal Mountaineers*, 56; Allison, "Address," 13-14.

⁵² The scholarship on the nineteenth-century army's transformation is at least as vast as that on the invention of Appalachia. This brief discussion is reliant on Edward M. Coffman, *The Old Army: A Portrait of the American Army in Peacetime* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 269-86.

in a latent, understated form.

Whatever the intellectual link, nineteenth-century chroniclers found the King's Mountain militia's manner of waging war fascinating. Even Simms, who as we saw earlier did not devote much space to the battle, took the time to discuss backwoods combat: "Being all mounted men, and unencumbered [sic] with baggage, their movements were prompt and rapid. Each man set forth with his blanket and rifle, in the manner of a hunter, and as if in pursuit only of the wild beasts of the forest. The earth was his couch at night, and the skies his covering."⁵³ These writers found much to admire in the backcountry troops' hardiness. Their legendary marksmanship and other martial skills learned from years of Indian warfare elicited comment. Kirke filled his *Rear-Guard of the Revolution* with dramatic accounts of Indian battles, and noted the over mountain militia's proficiency with rifles. John Allison also extolled the virtues of backwoods campaigning, noting that each member of the expedition wore his own clothes and supplied his own needs.⁵⁴

Francis M. Turner likely devoted more ink to the nature of partisan warfare than any of the other authors. Perhaps this was due to his fixation on Sevier, given that commander's long career as an Indian fighter, both before and after King's Mountain. Turner claimed that Sevier honed his marksmanship skills while hunting as a youth, a common assumption about over mountain militia. The notion of the Whigs learning their skills from hunting was romantic and appealing, but not all authors agreed. Temple stated flatly that the early Tennessee settlers "were not hunters. More than two centuries before

⁵³ Simms, *History of South Carolina*, 269. Like some other portions of his book, Simms lifted this passage from Ramsay with only slight changes.

⁵⁴ Kirke, *Rear-Guard of the Revolution*, 108; Allison, "Address," 14-15.

they had passed the hunter stage in development.” Perhaps Turner’s preoccupation with Sevier as a partisan warrior overrode any desire to establish the mountaineers as “husbandmen, artisans, teachers, [and] preachers,” as Temple claims.⁵⁵ The notion of the backwoods warrior as hunter, who honed his fighting abilities through years of earning his livelihood to become adept at living in the forest, remained a powerful image. It was also another oversimplification. John R. Finger’s comprehensive study of early Tennessee describes farming, merchandising, stock-raising, and various other economic activities in the region at an early date, so Temple’s emphasis on the mountaineers as farmers is likely closer to the truth.⁵⁶ Turner probably noted Sevier’s hunting activities to establish him as the quintessential partisan fighter. In fact, he tended to see Sevier’s hand in any partisan action, whether he was actually involved or not. In his account of the South Carolina campaign of McDowell and Shelby that preceded King’s Mountain, Turner claimed the troops “had learned Sevier’s mode of warfare, and when the order for battle was given each gave the famous war-whoop and mowed down the enemy with the Deckard.” If Turner could not have Sevier present in these skirmishes, he could at least attribute the militia’s success to his influence.⁵⁷

The most complex military appraisal of the King’s Mountain militia was in Theodore Roosevelt’s account of the campaign in his *Winning of the West*. Whereas most nineteenth-century authors were content to rhapsodize about the militia’s virtues, Roosevelt examined the Whigs with a more critical eye. In fact, Roosevelt was quite

⁵⁵ Turner, *Life of General John Sevier*, 3; Temple, *East Tennessee and the Civil War*, 13.

⁵⁶ See John R. Finger, *Tennessee Frontiers*, ch. 8. Much of Finger’s analysis of early Tennessee’s economic life in this chapter deals with the early nineteenth century, but he also finds some diversification and market activity in the pre-statehood period.

⁵⁷ Turner, *Life of General John Sevier*, 54.

conscious of the uncritical nature of many other works in the field of early frontier history. In a letter to a colleague, he complained that “Draper’s King’s Mountain for instance is not a history at all; it is a mass of matter, some of great historical importance, most of it useless, much untrustworthy, out of which a history can be built by somebody else.” In his book Roosevelt took Draper to task for his inclusion of anecdotes based on the memories of aging witnesses or descendants, and he called some of the statements on the backwoods militia’s proficiency “absolutely worthless as well as ridiculous.”⁵⁸ At first glance, his description of the Sycamore Shoals muster was fairly typical: the mountaineers were Indian warriors and deadly marksmen armed with tomahawks and scalping knives, wearing coonskin caps.⁵⁹ But his analysis of the tiny army in action was much more sophisticated, noting the drawbacks as well as advantages of irregular combat. He explained that the backwoods campaigns “should be carefully studied by all who wish to learn the possibilities of mounted riflemen.” He also allowed that the mountaineers made better soldiers than those from the low country. “Yet they were impatient of discipline or of regular service, and they really had no one commander. The different militia officers combined to perform some definite piece of work, but, like their troops, they were incapable of long-continued campaigns; and there were frequent and bitter quarrels between the several commanders, as well as between the bodies of men they led.”⁶⁰ Contrast this with Turner’s “invincible Wataugans,” or with Preston’s claim that the men “could not desecrate the holy spirit of patriotism, on its battle-fields, by

⁵⁸ Theodore Roosevelt to William F. Poole, 8 October [November] 1889, in George B. Utley, “Theodore Roosevelt’s *Winning of the West*: Some Unpublished Letters,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 30 (March 1944): 503; Roosevelt, *Winning of the West*, 129.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 137-38.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 129-30.

petty and contemptible personal jealousies....”⁶¹

Roosevelt, like Nathanael Greene before him, was also less than impressed with the over- mountain men’s length of service. He argued that Continental regulars would have been preferable to militia at King’s Mountain, since regulars would have been available for American use after the battle, instead of moving back across the mountains to deal with the Indians. Roosevelt compared the mountaineers to Scottish Highland armies who were “greatly dreaded under certain circumstances, but incapable of a long campaign and almost as much demoralized by a victory as by a defeat....”⁶² This was certainly not the sort of statement one would expect from Draper or Temple. Neither is Roosevelt’s claim that the over-mountain troops “were, for the most part, very poor men, whose sole sources of livelihood were the stock they kept beyond the mountains.” Compared to Turner’s assessment of the early pioneers as the “best blood of North Carolina and Virginia” quoted above, Roosevelt’s remark looks surprisingly disparaging. He noted their patriotism in going after Ferguson, but believed that their need to tend the home fires limited their usefulness to the Revolutionary cause.⁶³

Another point of departure between Roosevelt and the other authors was the fate of the Tories. Here is where the deliberate nature of the hero-making process becomes most apparent. If these authors were to succeed in portraying the Whigs as heroes, they had to explain their harsh treatment of their enemies. One way of doing so was to slur the Tories’ behavior to make their fate seem deserved. As Carol Furlong Young noted in her review of early literature on Tennessee’s Revolutionary experience, there was a

⁶¹ “Celebration,” 52.

⁶² Roosevelt, *Winning of the West*, 176-77.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 177.

tendency to lump Tories and brigands together in some accounts because members of both groups filtered into the region during the war. Consequently, the Tories in many nineteenth-century accounts emerge as bloodthirsty thieves who took advantage of Indian depredations or the British invasion to line their pockets and commit atrocities.⁶⁴ Draper made a greater effort than many writers to understand the Loyalists, but even his assessment is somewhat perfunctory and quite negative. He cited an earlier classification of the Carolina Tories into six groups: pacifists, those who misunderstood the causes at stake in the war, those who preferred British authority to an unknown alternative, those who believed victory over the British army to be impossible, those who were motivated by the prospect of fortune, and outright plunderers. He believed that the defenders of King's Mountain were "largely made up of the worst characters which war evolves from the dregs of mankind."⁶⁵ Thus even as careful and meticulous a researcher as Draper assumed that most Tories were either cowardly, ignorant, or villainous.

Draper did, however, compliment Ferguson's conduct in the actual battle. "It was that of a hero," the frontier historian declared. "He did all that mortal man could have done, under the circumstances, to avert the impending catastrophe." In Draper's view, Ferguson's worst crime as a soldier was a poor choice of terrain.⁶⁶ Other authors tended to associate Ferguson with the worst elements in the British forces, using the type of rhetoric normally reserved for the likes of Banastre Tarleton or the notorious Tory Thomas Browne. Preston offered a particularly noteworthy example in his 1855

⁶⁴ Carol Furlong Young, "A Study of Some Developing Interpretations of the History of Revolutionary Tennessee," *The East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications* 25 (1953): 34.

⁶⁵ Draper, *Kings Mountain and its Heroes*, 239-242. The quote appears on 242.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 287.

memorial address. As he narrated the events of the battle, he described the ridge where “the fierce Ferguson lay-crouched [sic], licking his red chops, and glaring on the mountain hunters as they closed around him.”⁶⁷

If the Tories came to loot and pillage, then the Whigs were justified in using whatever means were available to stop them. As Turner argued, both Indians and Tories represented threats to peace and stability. The constant havoc of the revolutionary years would have resulted in anarchy if the settlers had not risen in defense of civilization, so their measures were justifiably and necessarily harsh. Indeed, several authors attributed a deep respect for law and order to the mountaineers. Temple stressed that the mountain settlers were not unruly; their inherent moral sense and deep religious convictions made them eager to maintain the hallmarks of civilization in their homeland.⁶⁸ Here was an idea that complicated the simplistic view of the mountain settlements as a cradle of liberty and egalitarianism that we examined earlier. The westerners exemplified primitive freedom, but they also represented moral stability. Since they valued law and order, the backwoodsmen were justified in using extreme measures to suppress Ferguson’s thugs. The dichotomy between order-loving Whigs and law-breaking Tories was thus one way to justify the harsh measures employed in the campaign.

King’s Mountain chroniclers also found more specific ways of addressing particular incidents surrounding the battle. Many of them took up the issue of firing on surrendering troops. Humes allowed that the Whigs’ long-standing hatred of Loyalists may have gotten the better of them, “for wars between neighbors are apt to be next in

⁶⁷ “Celebration,” 41.

⁶⁸ Turner, *Life of General John Sevier*, 44-45; Temple, *East Tennessee and the Civil War*, 12-13.

bitterness to religious wars.” But given the stress of combat, these excesses were understandable. Some writers repeated the justifications made earlier by officers who were veterans of King’s Mountain. Kirke reiterated Shelby’s remark that some of the militia simply did not understand the significance of a white flag. In any case, once the officers ordered their men to cease fire, he believed that only Sevier’s son continued to do so in his belief that his father was dead.⁶⁹ Draper gave this phase of the engagement his customarily exhaustive treatment, citing Shelby’s recollections of the problems with the white flags, the incident involving Sevier’s son, and the confusion resulting from the return of the foraging party. Significantly, Draper also included both Campbell and Shelby’s attempts to stop the slaughter. Rather than resorting to a simple or dismissive treatment of the killing, Draper was more thorough in his rationalization, although he managed to find several factors which justified what took place.⁷⁰

Not surprisingly, Draper was also more comprehensive than the other writers in explaining the hangings at Bickerstaff’s. After discussing the various condemned men in some detail, Draper turned to the question of their treatment. He determined that the hangings were indeed legitimate, and chastised Bancroft for casting aspersions on their legality. He reminded his readers of the desperate state of the American cause in the fall of 1780, and argued that the victors saw the hangings as a means to stop the execution of their own countrymen by British authorities. Rather than an escalation in the cycle of backcountry violence, then, Draper understood this incident as a means to stamp it out. In all, Draper presented the Bickerstaff’s trial as a lamentable but also carefully

⁶⁹ Humes, *Loyal Mountaineers*, 55; Kirke, *Rear-Guard of the Revolution*, 259.

⁷⁰ Draper, *Kings Mountain and its Heroes*, 281-86.

considered and necessary attempt to rectify an unpleasant situation. The Whigs emerged as prudent jurists who weighed all options thoughtfully before acting. Those writers who lacked Draper's zeal for exactness and exhaustive research had fewer qualms. Kirke relied on the law of retaliation in formulating his defense; the conduct of British troops in the Carolinas justified the severe penalty meted out by the King's Mountain Whigs as a retributive act. Turner was similarly dismissive in his perfunctory account of the trial. His opinion of the affair is evident in his statement that one of the condemned "was the leader of a band of Tory kidnappers in the western settlements." Striking another blow for East Tennessee, he also reminded his readers that it was Sevier and Shelby who put a stop to the hangings after nine Tories were dead.⁷¹

Once again, Roosevelt dissented in assessing the virtue of the King's Mountain victors. The problem, he thought, was not that the backwoods militia disregarded civil treatment of a defeated foe. The problem was "an utter lack of knowledge" of such conventions. His portrayal of the men who set out after Ferguson stands in stark opposition to the order-loving soldiers of Turner, Kirke, and Draper; in his passage on the appointment of the commanders, he flatly states that it was the only effectual means to stop the plundering and bickering that plagued the expedition. Roosevelt understood the conditions of the war in the Southern backcountry, and noted British and Tory brutality. But in his mind the atmosphere of war did not excuse the backwoods Whigs' behavior. He singled out Benjamin Cleveland's wartime conduct as "past excuse," and for good measure condemned Cleveland's wife for her violent proclivities. Roosevelt also understood the opposition between the militia and regulars in terms of defining wartime

⁷¹ Ibid., 336-39; Kirke, *Rear-Guard of the Revolution*, 264-65; Turner, *Life of General John Sevier*, 72.

conduct, noting Continental officers' regret at the prisoners' abuses. (He did, however, concede that after Bickerstaff's the Tories "were, on the whole, well treated.")⁷²

It is important not to overstate Roosevelt's negativity. "The iron men of the border had a harsh and terrible task allotted them; and though they did it roughly," he wrote, "they did it thoroughly and on the whole well." He preferred a more civilized form of fighting, but he admired the backwoodsmen's determined defense of their rights.⁷³ Roosevelt was reserved in his praise for the militia's achievement at King's Mountain, but he still recognized it. For most authors of this period, the most admirable thing about the victors of King's Mountain was their contribution to American freedom and independence. When nineteenth-century observers went looking for the meaning of King's Mountain, they found it in Jefferson's assessment of many years earlier; it remained the "glorious annunciation of that turn of the tide of success." Kirke traced the American victory over the British back to Ferguson's defeat in the Carolina piedmont, invoking the time-worn notion of the suffering soldier who sacrificed everything for the good of his nation and posterity. The King's Mountain Whigs deserved glory because they laid the foundation for independence and all the national greatness that followed after.⁷⁴

It was not just that King's Mountain was an important victory, throwing the British into disarray until Greene arrived to redeem the Carolinas. For many patriotic authors and orators of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, King's Mountain was *the* defining moment in the Revolution. As Ramsey noted in his history of

⁷² Roosevelt, *Winning of the West*, 104, 141-43, 181,

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 106-07.

⁷⁴ Kirke, *Rear-Guard of the Revolution*, 274.

Tennessee, America lay prostrate before the conquering Redcoats until the backwoods militia arrived on the scene with their hunting shirts, tomahawks, and rifles. The timing of King's Mountain, on the heels of Camden and in the absence of organized Continental resistance in South Carolina, added to the victory's luster. Humes considered the over-mountain men's sudden rise to meet the crisis, their chase across the mountains, and the totality of their victory and concluded that King's Mountain should rank as one of the great military achievements.⁷⁵

If King's Mountain was a "glorious annunciation," it was also much more. Temple compared all other campaigns of the Revolution to Ferguson's defeat and found them all lacking: Arnold's Canada invasion was audacious, but did not succeed; Ticonderoga was not as critical to the eventual victory; Clarke's Illinois campaign did not yield such impressive long-term results. One gets the impression that the over-mountain men might have ended the war on their own, were it not for the Indians keeping them busy. Ramsey nearly said as much when he stated that these warriors could well have turned Guilford Court House into Yorktown, if enough of them were available to Greene at the time. Kirke ventured an even more dramatic claim. If only Sevier had been present at Guilford, he speculated, that battle may well have been a decisive tactical victory. He cited Greene's requests that the Wataugans return to South Carolina as proof, and stated that Cornwallis actually depended on keeping Sevier tied down with the Indians so that he could focus on Greene's army!⁷⁶ One hundred years after the campaigns, the wartime view of the militia had been reversed. Now it was the

⁷⁵ Ramsey, *Annals of Tennessee*, 221; Humes, *Loyal Mountaineers*, 56.

⁷⁶ Temple, *East Tennessee and the Civil War*, 30-31; Ramsey, *Annals of Tennessee*, 251; Kirke, *Rear-Guard of the Revolution*, 287-89.

backwoods partisans, and not the hardcore regulars, who were the most crucial to the outcome. Lacking enough of these invincible titans, the American high command had to make do with their professional Continentals. Washington and Greene would have been astonished to read such statements.

The heroes of King's Mountain finally took on almost superhuman attributes. In two remarkable passages, Kirke and Humes brought the "canonization" of the King's Mountain heroes to its pinnacle. The first involved the meeting between Shelby and Sevier at Jonesboro in which the two men first conceived the idea of an expedition over the mountains in pursuit of Ferguson. Kirke found a dramatic narrative means to underscore the momentousness of this occasion. He compared it to an experience he himself had during the Civil War, when he was privileged to witness Abraham Lincoln speaking with his Secretary of the Treasury, Salmon P. Chase. At that time he could not avoid the feeling that he was in the presence of greatness, and that the two figures were under the guidance of a higher power. He imagined that the interview between Sevier and Shelby must have been similar. For Kirke, the beginning of the King's Mountain campaign was a moment marked by destiny.⁷⁷ The second passage heightened the awful tension preceding the confrontation between the Whigs and Tories on the day of the battle. Humes believed much more than the Carolinas or even American independence was at stake. "As that day went," he wrote, "would go the destiny, not only of the infant Republic, but with it, that of hundreds of millions of the human race."⁷⁸ If America was the last refuge of freedom, then much was indeed riding on the shoulders of the

⁷⁷ Ibid., 307-08.

⁷⁸ Humes, *Loyal Mountaineers*, 51.

backcountry Whigs. For Humes, this was one moment when the interests of the regionalist and of the nationalist coincided.

In a way, he and his contemporaries marginalized the King's Mountain victors, because they had ensured their identification with a particular area, rather than with the nation as a whole. They would belong to the South, the border, or to East Tennessee, and not to the United States. The fact that these were increasingly marginalized regions in late nineteenth-century America made the King's Mountain story seem even more localized. And in regionalizing the Whigs, these authors unconsciously adopted language that would plague the people of the same regions they admired and sought to glorify. But if they limited King's Mountain in terms of geography, they magnified it in terms of significance. By the turn of the twentieth century, when Americans looked back at King's Mountain, they no longer saw a raw band of undisciplined militia, but invincible heroes who embodied the best of the Revolution and the nation it spawned.

CONCLUSION

In comparing Hank Messick's 1976 book on the victors of King's Mountain with the work of the chroniclers discussed in the third chapter, it is clear that many interpretations have not changed in the last century. Like his predecessors, Messick uses history for present-day purposes, and identifies the King's Mountain men with modern-day Appalachians. Many of his statements are virtually interchangeable with the ideas found in the earlier books. The mountaineer, Messick states, has always been the first to fight in his country's defense. He has suffered from both ignorant neglect and outright contempt on the part of most Americans.¹ And, interestingly, Messick uses many of the same devices used by Draper, Turner, Humes, and their contemporaries in an effort to vindicate his heroes. For example, in describing the Whigs' desecration of Ferguson's body, he resorts to some very familiar rationalizations. Ferguson, he argues, deserved whatever insults the militiamen heaped on his corpse because he had heedlessly threatened them, the Whigs thought they were still in danger of British reprisal, and they had just endured a strenuous march over the mountains.² The pains Messick takes to rationalize the Whigs' behavior would not be out of place in Draper's book.

In one way, the development of the King's Mountain tradition followed a straightforward trajectory, as the troublesome allies of 1780 became full-fledged revolutionaries in the early nineteenth century, and finally attained almost legendary status thanks to the efforts of later writers and orators. But this interpretation glosses over a critical contradiction in the final stage of commemoration. Draper, Temple,

¹ Messick, *King's Mountain*, ix-x.

Turner, and their contemporaries attempted to glorify the King's Mountain Whigs and return them to a prominent place in American history. In that sense, their aims were not entirely different than those of the militia themselves, as they attempted to graft themselves into the Revolutionary legacy after the War of 1812. But by regionalizing the story, late nineteenth-century chroniclers unwittingly marginalized the story of King's Mountain. Emphasizing the battle's importance to local history made it more difficult to create a national awareness about King's Mountain, as the complaints of Draper's publisher and readers illustrate. "Canonization" of the King's Mountain Whigs in the late nineteenth century was therefore a double-edged sword. The fact that Messick seized on King's Mountain as a means to vindicate mountain people as late as 1976 is proof of how influential the late nineteenth-century interpretation has been.

Also suggestive is the fact that Messick, like his predecessors, is an amateur historian. Marginalization from a national historical tradition led to neglect on the part of academic historians, an unfortunate trend in King's Mountain literature that continues. Draper's book was the first in a series of efforts by dedicated writers, creating a base from which more critical authors could draw as the state of historical knowledge advanced. But professional historians did not step in and fill the vacuum left by these authors. As a result, King's Mountain remains in much the same state of interpretation that existed when the regional/heroic narratives were created. The contradiction the nineteenth-century chroniclers created remains in place. They succeeded in telling the King's Mountain story, but that story and its characters linger on the outskirts of the American imagination, and of the corpus of academic historical literature. Continental

² Ibid., 152-53.

officers, post-war veterans, and nineteenth-century chroniclers approached the backcountry militia from their own biased perspective, and shaped the story of Ferguson's defeat to meet their own needs. But in their own way, each of these groups came to grips with the King's Mountain militia. It is past time for today's historians to apply more sophisticated techniques and analyses to these rough but effective backcountry warriors, and begin to understand them on their own terms.

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