

The Patriot, directed by Roland Emmerich for Centropolis Entertainment, Columbia Pictures, and SONY Pictures Entertainment, is a stirring account of a little-known campaign of a war that has been largely ignored by Hollywood. It tells the story of Benjamin Martin (Mel Gibson), a South Carolina planter and widower with seven children. His horrific experiences in the French and Indian War make him unwilling to take up arms against the British when South Carolina votes for independence in 1776, though his eldest son, Gabriel (Heath Ledger), joins the Continental army. Martin is forced to take sides when the war literally comes into his front yard and British troops harm his family and burn his home. He assumes command of the local militia and becomes the scourge of the British, cutting their supply lines and attacking their outposts. Martin and his men pay a heavy personal price for their patriotism, but they persevere and play a key role in defeating the British army in South Carolina. After Gen. Charles Cornwallis surrenders, Martin and his men return to South Carolina to rebuild in their independent country.

This film is a well-told, well-acted, and handsomely photographed historical epic, and accolades must go to Emmerich and Gibson for tackling a subject that is certainly less than familiar to the average summer movie patron. Adding more credibility to the historical accuracy of this film was the participation of historians from the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History as consultants. The sets and scenery show much attention to historical detail. Colonial Charleston, the plantations, villages, and taverns—all convey an atmosphere of period authenticity. The Fort Carolina set is especially well done; the British built a number of such forts by constructing earthwork and palisade fortifications around plantation houses.

However, much of *The Patriot* is not historically accurate in the interpretation of broad themes or in specific details of the campaign in the South and of warfare in the American Revolution. Gibson acknowledged, "If one were to adhere to historical accuracy all the way, you'd probably have the most boring two hours on earth, but firstly it's entertainment and we've taken license with history to make it more compelling."

Mel Gibson's character is a composite of several partisan leaders, most notably Francis Marion, Thomas Sumter, and Andrew Pickens. Like Marion, Martin makes his headquarters on an island in the middle of a swamp. Both Sumter and Pickens took up arms after their plantations were burned by the British. Aside from those facts, Benjamin Martin has little in common with his real-life counterparts.

The most serious deficiency of *The Patriot* is its almost complete omission of the Loyalists. A significant segment of the population of the Carolinas and Georgia remained loyal, and much of the fighting there was a civil war between Tories and Whigs. Though Loyalist provincial and militia units constituted one-half of the British army in the South, the film portrays only one Loyalist soldier, Captain Wilkins (Adam Baldwin) in Colonel Tavington's (Jason Isaacs) dragoons. Tavington is based on Banastre Tarleton, who commanded the British Legion, a Loyalist provincial regiment. The film gives the impression that Tavington's regiment is British and that Captain Wilkins is the only Loyalist in its ranks. No other Loyalist soldiers appear in *The Patriot*.

The atrocities committed by Colonel Tavington and his troops are highly exaggerated. Benjamin Martin first encounters this bloodthirsty officer after he has opened up his home to treat the wounded of both sides. Tavington has the British wounded removed, then orders the execution of the wounded Continentals and the burning of Martin's plantation. When one of Martin's sons tries to intervene, Tavington fatally shoots him in the back. Tavington and his men subsequently murder slaves who refuse to cooperate with them and go on a farm-burning spree in which they kill the wife and child of one of Martin's men. The culminating atrocity occurs when Tavington descends on the village of Wakefield, which is home to a number of Martin's guerrillas, and has the entire population locked inside the church, which he then sets ablaze.

Though the real-life Banastre Tarleton was a ruthless and brutal officer, he never committed atrocities of the sort depicted in *The Patriot*. The most notorious episode associated with Tarleton was the Waxhaws Massacre on May 29, 1780. In that engagement Tarleton and his legion attacked a regiment of Virginia Continentals. The Virginians fired only one volley before the Tory horsemen broke their line. They then tried to surrender, but a killing frenzy took hold of the Loyalists and most of the helpless Continentals were mercilessly cut down. Three-quarters of the Virginians were killed or so badly wounded that Tarleton left them on the field. An American officer who saw the wounded after the battle estimated that the average number of wounds per man was sixteen.

Tarleton enthusiastically burned the farms of suspected Patriots and summarily executed suspected guerrillas—on several occasions in front of their families. Dastardly as Tarleton's actual behavior was, it pales in comparison to that of *The Patriot*'s Colonel Tavington. There is no evidence that Tarleton executed wounded Continentals, nor that he killed women and children. The British had a very practical motivation for not killing their Continental captives, as it would invite retaliation against British prisoners. The Waxhaws Massacre occurred in the heat of battle and was exacerbated by the intense animosity between Tories and Whigs. In an interview, Gibson acknowledged, "Some of the worst crimes were committed between the Loyalists and the Rebels, the colonists themselves." However, when Tavington is preparing to incinerate the church with the villagers inside, Captain Wilkins, a Tory, is the only one of his men to express any reservations.

The portrayal of African Americans and slavery in the movie has also been a subject of much controversy. Benjamin Martin is a prominent planter in South Carolina and thus would have owned slaves. In order not to stigmatize the film's hero, Martin does not own slaves but employs free black workers, probably the only such labor arrangement in colonial South Carolina. Later, Martin takes his family to a "maroon" community of fugitive slaves on the coast to hide them from the British. In reality, those slaves were hiding from the Patriots. Thomas Sumter often used slaves seized from Tory owners to pay his militiamen.

The military details of uniforms, equipment, and tactics also reveal inaccuracies too numerous to list here. All British soldiers did not wear red uniforms, and very few Continental soldiers had blue coats and white trousers. This latter fact was more accurately depicted in A&E's *The Crossing*, in which audiences see little uniformity in the attire of the Continentals. In the southern campaign most of the American army was militia, and the Continental contingent had no tents and had trouble acquiring clothing or provisions of any kind. *The Patriot* misses an excellent opportunity to show the true depth of suffering and deprivation that the Continental regulars endured for independence. The climactic battle in the film also bears little resemblance to the actual Battle of Cowpens, upon which it is based. Finally, the field artillery available to both sides could not fire exploding shells.

In conclusion, *The Patriot* is a very entertaining film that uses the American Revolution in South Carolina as a backdrop to tell a story about the way the war affected a fictional family. "This is not historically accurate," said Mel Gibson. "In the broad strokes, yes—on other levels, it is sheer fantasy. It's a good thing that historians are going to harangue this and say, 'It's not accurate.' Good. It'll make somebody pick up a book."