

Sang Hyun Lee

Week 10 - Film Review

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The Patriot

“The Patriot” is an epic historical feature film released in 2000 directed and produced by Roland Emmerich and Dean Devlin, who made sci-fi blockbusters such as “Independence Day” and “Godzilla”. Made at a reported cost of \$100 million, the movie starred one of the most bankable stars of the era, Mel Gibson in a leading role of the main protagonist Benjamin Martin, who enters the American Revolutionary War and fights against the British for his family and his country’s freedom. ¹

Plot Overview

Benjamin Martin is a father and a widower who lives in South Carolina with his seven children. He has recently lost his wife Elizabeth who died of illness. He is a war hero and a veteran of the French and Indian War. In 1776 he discourages open rebellion against Great Britain in a meeting of the South Carolina General Assembly. He votes against a levy supporting the continental army as he doesn’t want war against Great Britain. However, the vote gets passed and his eldest son Gabriel enlists against his father’s wish. A few years later, Martin’s fifteen year old son, Thomas gets killed by Colonel Tavington, the main antagonist and the commander of the Green Dragons. Martin’s house gets burned and destroyed. After losing his young son Martin finally joins

¹ Glancy, Mark. “The war of independence in feature films: The Patriot (2000) and the ‘special relationship’ between Hollywood and Britain”, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01439680500262892>

the war and agrees to accept the offer to lead the rebel militia. With his combat experience from the French and Indian War, Martin leads a band of partisans and use guerrilla tactics to harass British supply lines of General Charles Cornwallis to stop them from moving north to threaten George Washington's army. General Cornwallis orders Tavington to use brutal tactics to stop the guerrillas, and later, Martin's eldest son Gabriel ends up falling victim to Tavington. In the final showdown of Martin and Tavington at the Battle of Cowpens in 1781, Martin avenges his son's deaths by killing Tavington and helps propel the Continental Army to victory. General Cornwallis flees and gets besieged at Yorktown, Virginia where he finally surrenders to the Continental Army and the French navy. In the end, Martin and his family ride towards their homestead and discover his militia men working on rebuilding Martin's home.

Historical Accuracy

To create authenticity in the film, the director Roland Emmerich and his team consulted with experts at the Smithsonian Institution on set, props such as guns and other weapons, costumes, and battle formations. The screenwriter Robert Rodat read some of the actual journals and letters written by colonists before working on the screenplay of the movie. He said "Benjamin Martin is a fictional character made up of real historical figures such as Thomas Sumter, Daniel Morgan, Andrew Pickens, and Francis Marion, and a few bits and pieces from a number of other characters."² For example, Francis Marion, a militia leader who became known as "The Swamp Fox" for his effective stealth tactics and guerrilla warfare in the swamps of South Carolina. He and his men adopted many tactics from the native Americans he fought against, much like Benjamin Martin

² Wikipedia Contributors, "The Patriot (2000 film)", [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Patriot_\(2000_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Patriot_(2000_film))

did in the movie.³ Francis Marion was originally the lead character in the script during early stages of production but was ultimately changed to a fictional character due to controversy on the historical accuracy of the script and for the sake of making the best dramatic impact possible for entertainment and for a box office success. The screenwriter Robert Rodat also said that the antagonist Colonel Tavington is "loosely based on Colonel Banastre Tarleton, who was particularly known for his brutal acts".⁴

The screenwriter Robert Rodat, who is also well known for writing "Saving Private Ryan", used a historic quote made by Boston Loyalist Clergyman Byles Mather and slightly changed it for the scene where Benjamin Martin makes a statement in front of the South Carolina Assembly: "Why should I agree to swap one tyrant three thousand miles away for three thousand tyrants one mile away?" to show how he wants to protect his family and does not want war with the British at the moment.⁵

Despite the efforts from the production team, the movie was heavily criticized for many inaccuracies, especially its portrayal of the main antagonist Colonel Tavington, King George III's redcoats and General Cornwallis. The British were portrayed as pure evil, ruthless, bloodthirsty war criminals. In one scene Tavington and his soldiers are seen burning down a church with innocent women, children and old men inside, which

3 Marion Marsh Brown, *The Swamp Fox* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950); Robert D. Bass, *Swamp Fox: The Life and Campaigns of General Francis Marion* (New York: Holt, 1959)

4 Wikipedia Contributors, "The Patriot (2000 film)", [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Patriot_\(2000_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Patriot_(2000_film))

5 Scott Cummings, *The Patriot Source*, "The Patriot Film Fact or Fiction: Events", <http://www.patriotresource.com/factfiction/events/page11.html>

reminds of Hitler's Nazis. There has never been a historical recording of such brutal act during the Revolutionary War.⁶

The movie was also criticized for the producers' decision not to make Benjamin Martin a slave owner. In the movie he owns a farm in South Carolina, and instead of slaves he has free Black workers who help him and his family with field and housework. He seems to be a family man of many morals and strong Christian faith. One of the main influences of this character, Francis Marion on the other hand, was a slave owner and South Carolina was a state where slavery was common and slave owners had more control over the state government than any other states. Evidence also suggests he was a man who actively killed Cherokee Indians for fun and raped his slaves.⁷ "The Patriot" does acknowledge slavery, but portrays slaves like they were treated as workers who were full of hope for freedom when the war is over and seem happy and cheerful about their positions. In the movie 5 shillings for every month of service and freedom were given to slaves who fought for the Continental army, but this clause wasn't valid in South Carolina.

Cinematic Techniques and Music

The producers originally wanted to cast Harrison Ford as the lead actor of the movie, but he turned the part down because he felt that the movie's script reduced the Revolutionary War to one man's quest for revenge. Many movie-goers criticized the movie, saying that "The Patriot" is a recycle of Mel Gibson's "Braveheart" because of

⁶ Slate.com, "Did the Brits Burn Churches?", 10 July 2000, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/explainer/2000/07/did_the_brits_burn_churches.html

⁷ The Guardian, "Mel Gibson's latest hero: a rapist who hunted Indians for fun", 15 June 2000, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2000/jun/15/news.melgibson>

their similarities including their camera work, lead characters and their anti-British stance. Both films depict war and epic battles, and they both used a third person view and a second person view to make them more exciting to watch.⁸ In both movies the British were evil and they both concentrated heavily on the British brutality which angered many people in the UK. Some people think that Mel Gibson just hates the British, but when they shouldn't make such assumptions because even though Mel Gibson directed "Braveheart", he wasn't a part of the production team of "The Patriot" and wasn't even the first candidate to be the lead actor to begin with.

John Williams, best known for composing some of the biggest blockbuster film scores such as Star Wars, Jaws, E.T. and Jurassic Park, composed the music for "The Patriot" and it matches the movie's epic and melodramatic tone very well. He used the sound of trumpets to accompany the patriotism of Benjamin Martin and his heroic acts.

Comments

The fact that the production team of "The Patriot" worked with the Smithsonian Institute to create props and sets that are more historically accurate and convincing is impressive. The costumes of the Confederate Army and the redcoats, and the epic battle scenes really make you feel like you are part of the battle. However, because of its plentiful historical inaccuracies on its portrayal of the British and the slaves, it is hard to rank this movie on top of the list for American History movies.

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⁸ McCarty, John. The Film of Mel Gibson. Citadel Press Kensington, 2001, pp. 222

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