

Colonel Thomas Brown's, of the Kings Rangers, Reply to David Ramsay's *History of the Revolution of South Carolina*

As found in Rev. George White's *Historical Collections of Georgia: Containing the Most Interesting Facts, Traditions, Biographical Sketches, Anecdotes, etc., relating to its History and Antiquities, from the First Settlement to the Present*, New York City Putney & Russell, 1854. pp. 614-620. Transcribed by: William Thomas Sherman, 1604 NW 70th St., Seattle, WA 98117. wts@gunjones.com

[Rev. George White, p. 614:] The following letter was addressed to Dr. David Ramsay by Colonel Browne [sic], and presented by the daughters of the former to the Charleston Library. We give insertion that our readers may have a fair example of the specious manner in which Colonel Browne attempted to justify himself for his cruelties: ---

“Sir: -- The publication of an extract from your History of the Revolution of South Carolina, highly injurious to my reputation as an officer and a man of humanity, induces me to address this letter to you.

Having professed yourself ‘an advocate for truth, uninfluenced by passion, prejudice, or party spirit,’ you declare that, embracing every opportunity of obtaining genuine information, you ‘have asserted nothing but what you believed to be fact.’

If I am to credit these professions, I must believe sir, that no party motive would tempt you to defame the reputation of an individual, or advance the reputation of your country at the expense of your own.

The scandalous imputation, therefore thrown upon my humanity, must be imputed to the malignity of some wretch as devoid of honour [sic] as of truth, who attempts to acquire fame by ruining that of others. Conscious of the rectitude of my intentions, although I may have erred in judgment, the censure or praise of an unprincipled person who has willfully misrepresented facts, and wantonly departed from truth, ought to be indifferent to me; yet the duty I owe to the officers and [p. 615] men serving under me, and a reverence for the opinion of the world, which often judges from caprice or common report, prompt me to state to you an account of the material transactions on which these charges are founded, lest my silence might be imputed a consciousness of merited reproach. A civil war being one of the greatest evils incident to human society, the history of every contest presents us with instances of wanton cruelty and barbarity. Men whose passions are inflamed by mutual injuries, exasperated with personal animosity against each other, and eager to gratify revenge, often violate the laws of war and principles of humanity.

The American war exhibits many dreadful examples of wanton outrages, committed by both parties, disgraceful to human nature. From the commencement of the war, in the limited sphere in which I acted, it was my duty, and the first wish of my heart, to carry it on agreeably to the rules which humanity formed to alleviate its attendant calamities. The criminal excesses of individuals were never warranted by authority, nor ever obtained the sanction of my approbation

Could violations of humanity be justified by example, the cruelties exercised on my person by a lawless Committee, in the wanton abuse of power, might have justified the severest vengeance; but esteeming it more honourable to forgive than to revenge an injury to those men who treated me with the most merciless cruelty, I granted protection and safeguards to such as desired them. In the discharge of the duties of my profession, I can say with truth, I never deviated from the line of conduct the laws of war and humanity prescribed. In your History of the Revolution of South Carolina, you have been pleased to form a different judgment. From what source you have obtained your information relative to the circumstances of General Screven's [Brig. Gen. James Screven] death,¹ I cannot pretend to determine; but give me leave to say, not from ‘an advocate for truth, uninfluenced by passion, prejudice, or party spirit.’ So malicious a representation requires a brief detail of truth.. The frontier of East Florida being exposed to the incursions of the Georgia Militia, a party of Newport and Medway [Midway] entered the province, plundered and destroyed every home and plantation on Sty. Mary's River, and carried off the inhabitants prisoners, without distinction of age or sex. The garrison of St. Augustine being reduced to great difficulty by an

¹ James Screven (c1744-1778.) Screven had recently been appointed a Brigadier General of the Georgia Militia, and prior to that was a colonel.

extreme scarcity of provisions General Prevost [Maj. Gen. Augustine Prevost] was under the necessity of detaching Colonel Prevost [Lieutenant Colonel Mark Prevost], with a party of light troops, to collect cattle in the settlement of Medway and Newport. With this detachment I had the honour of serving. To enable this light corps to forage with greater effect and security, a party was ordered by the inland navigation, under the command of Colonel Fuser [Lieut. Col. L.V. Fuser], to present itself before Sunbury, to divert the attention of the Americans from us to its security.

After various skirmishes with the Americans near Medway, our spies brought intelligence that their army, said to consist of nine hundred men, under the command of General Screven and Colonel [John] White, was on its march to attack us. Colonel Fuser ordered me to reconnoiter the position and movement of the Americans, and if possible to harass them on their march. The country being full of swamps and difficult passes, I selected thirty-two men from the regiment I commanded [the Kings Rangers], to whose spirit and activity I could trust. About a mile in front of our camp, the ground being particularly favourable to my purpose, and ambuscade [p. 616] was formed in a thicket. General Screven and Colonel White harangued their men to prepare for action. After finishing their harangue, I ordered my party to fire. General Screven and a Captain Struthers fell.² The Americans, I presume, mistaking this for our whole force, instantly retreated. The General (Screven) being grievously wounded was treated with tenderness and humanity. He had the character of a brave, worthy man. I sincerely felt for his misfortune, and ordered him to be conveyed to our camp, where every attention was paid to him by Colonel Prevost, and every assistance given to him by our surgeons. (Vol. ii, page 2)

With respect to the devastations you complain of, I shall decline the ungrateful task of justifying the loyalists on St. Mary's River retaliating on the property of such militia of Newport and Medways as had previously destroyed theirs, and dragged their families into captivity. I only wish to call to your remembrance the generous invitation of the Governor and Council of Georgia, by the proclamation, "to all friends of liberty and independence in and throughout the United States of America" to come and partake of the plunder of East Florida; for which purpose, they had nothing to do but repair to the camp in Burke County, where provisions and ammunition would be supplied gratis, and thence march under the command of the Governor of the State by whom every encouragement would be given, and all captures free plunder.

The account you have obtained relative to the death and sufferings of McCoy [Rannall McKay or M'Kay] and his confederates, in Carolina, is equally delusive. After the reduction of Charleston by Sir Henry Clinton, I was detached by Brigadier-General Clarke [Lieut. Col. Alured Clark, later promoted to Brigadier] to Augusta. On our march, the Carolinians of the districts near Savannah River voluntarily took the oaths of allegiance, and received protection. Among the number, one McCoy, a young man of a character notoriously infamous, applied for protection.

His mother, from a knowledge of the character he bore, accompanied him, and promised she would be responsible for his future conduct; he received protection, and was told if he persisted in plundering and destroying the peaceable inhabitants, he would receive no favour. About twelve months subsequent to this period, numbers of Carolinians who had received protection, formed themselves into plundering parties, under the command of Captain McCoy, robbed and murdered many of his Majesty's peaceable and loyal subjects, and attacked the guards of the public boats navigating the Savannah River, with provisions, ammunition, and clothing, for the garrisons of Ninety-six and Augusta. Having received intelligence that the King's stores had been intercepted, I dispatched Lieutenant Kemp, of the King's Rangers, from Augusta, with ten soldiers and twenty militia, to pursue the plunderers.³

He engaged one Willie as a guide, a man who had taken oath of allegiance, and received protection; this traitor conveyed information to McCoy of Kemp's force, design and intended route, and led him into an ambuscade previously formed. The militia under the command of Kemp fled upon the first fire; he and the soldiers unable to resist a very superior force, surrendered themselves prisoners. Captain McCoy asked Kemp to join his party. On his refusal, he stripped and shot him. The same question was put to the soldiers; nine out of ten refused and shared the same fate. The other joined them to save his [p. 617] life, and in a few days afterwards made his escape, and brought me intelligence of the murder of Kemp and his men, and that Willie and young McCoy were the most active in putting them to death; that the inhabitants in general had converted their written protections into cockades, and had joined a Colonel [William]

² This occurred 28 November 1778.

³ Loyalist scholar Todd Braisted suggests that it is possible "Lieut. Kemp," may be Lieut. John Champ of the N.J. Volunteers, and who was present at both the First Siege of Augusta (September 1780) and Musgrove's Mill in (August 1780).

Harden; that the King's stores taken from the boats were distributed among the plunderers, and secreted in or near their homes. Apprehending a general revolt in that quarter of the country, I immediately marched from Augusta with one hundred and seventy Indians, and I was joined by four hundred militia. About thirty miles from Black Swamp, Colonel Harden, about midnight, attacked our camp, and was repulsed. The militia under my command during the action deserted to a man, joined Colonel Harden, who thus reinforced, at ten in the morning renewed the attack, but his men being totally without discipline, were defeated with considerable loss. Among the prisoners, Willie and young McCoy, and eleven of Kemp's murderers were taken. The identity of their persons and the fact being proved and confirmed by their own confession, they (Willie excepted) suffered on the gallows; and the houses of the plunderers where the King's stores were secreted, were ordered to be burnt. Although I lamented the necessity of having recourse to these extremities, a necessity created by themselves, I am persuaded on a similar occasion, Dr. Ramsay would have done the same. Willie, Kemp's guide, experienced a different fate. An Indian chief, a friend of Kemp, on learning from the soldiers that Willie was the man who had betrayed and murdered his friend, immediately killed him with his tomahawk. This is the only outrage, if it ought to be called one, ever committed by any Indians under my command, and of which you have been pleased to give so truly a tragical and melancholy narrative. After so pathetic a display of your descriptive talents, how ample a field for your fertile genius, without a flight into the regions of fiction, will the Indian expedition of General Pickens [Brig. Gen. Andrew Pickens] afford you – such a scene of devastation and horror! Thirteen villages destroyed! Men, women, and children thrown into the flames, impaled alive, or butchered in cold blood! How different the conduct of those you style savages! Not an outrage was committed on the reduction of Fort Howe, in Georgia;⁴ on that service three-fourths of that detachment consisted of Indians, and the fort was carried by assault; half of the officers with me killed or wounded; yet the Indians, less savage than their adversaries. [White: "The MS. Is here defaced, but I make out that they, the Indians, were touched at the sight of a defenceless enemy."]

The account you have obtained of the events of Augusta is, I must confess, as well adapted to the prejudices of the weak, as the credulity of the ignorant. Your very honourable and genuine informer, with a truly patriotic spirit, disdains to charge his memory with transactions that might stain the reputation of your arms; or it was not convenient to his purpose to remember the shameful violation of the capitulation of Augusta, the horrid cruelties exercised on the prisoners, the barbarous murder of Colonel Grierson [Lieut. Col. James Grierson], and others, with the bloody achievements of Colonels Dun,⁵ [John?] Burnett, and [John] Dooly, previous to the siege. In either case, it will not be amiss to refresh his memory with the following narrative:--

The port of Augusta being invested and besieged near three months, [p. 618] was surrendered by capitulation. From Colonel Lee [Lieut. Col. Henry Lee], who commanded the Continental Legion, a gentleman of the most honourable and liberal sentiments, and from his officers, the King's troops experienced every security and attention; from the militia under a General Pickens, every species of abuse and insult. Colonel Lee and his officers exerted themselves in an uncommon degree and took every possible precaution to protect the prisoners from violence. The King's Rangers were paroled, and quartered at a gentleman's house, with a guard of Continental dragoons, under the command of Captain Armstrong [Captain James Armstrong of Lee's Legion]. The militia prisoners were confined to a stockade fort, where General Pickens and his militia were quartered. After Colonel Lee marched from Augusta, Colonel [James] Grierson, who had rendered himself peculiarly obnoxious to the enemy by his spirited and unwearied exertions in the cause of his country, was under the custody of the main guard, about ten paces from General Pickens' quarters. His spirit and unshaken loyalty in every change of fortune, marked him out as a proper victim to sacrifice to their savage resentment. One of General Pickens' men, named James Alexander,⁶ entered the room where he was confined with his three children, shot him through the body, and returned unmolested by the sentinel posted at the door, or the main guard. He was afterwards stripped,

⁴ Fort Howe, on the Altamaha River, was captured by Brown on 12 March 1778..

⁵ [Brown:] "Sixty peaceable loyalists on the ceded lands were murdered in their own houses in the course of a week by those execrable ruffians."

⁶ [Rev. George White] "'Tarleton Brown, a respectable inhabitant of Barnwell District,' says Dr. Johnson, in his 'Traditions and Reminiscences of the American Revolution,' published in 1843, 'gives the first direct information on this subject. He confirms McCall's intimidation in the following words--'Captain Alexander shooting Grierson for his villainous conduct in the country.' He had exposed his prisoners, among whom was the father of Captain James Alexander, to the fire of their relatives and friends, for the purpose of screening his men from the besiegers.'"

and his clothes divided among the soldiers, who, having exercised upon his dead body all the rage of the most horrid brutality, threw it into a ditch without the fort. Thus fell the brave, unfortunate Colonel Grierson, a man high in the estimation of his country, valued by his acquaintances, beloved by his friends – not by the shot of an unseen marksman, but under the eye of General Pickens, by the hand of a bloody, sanctioned, and protected villain, in shameful violation of a solemn capitulation.

After the murder of Colonel Grierson, another execrable villain named Shields (an unseen marksman,) the same day, in the same fort, under the eye of General Pickens, in the presence of his officers, without interruption from the sentries or guards, called Major Williams, of the Georgia militia, to the door of the prison, and shot him through the body. These outrages served only as a prelude to a concerted plan for murdering all the prisoners. To execute this diabolical design, a hundred of General Pickens' unseen marksmen, accompanied by three colonels, marched with drawn swords towards the quarters of the King's Rangers. Captain Armstrong being informed of their intention, threatened, and ordered his guards to oppose them if they advanced. Then addressing himself to the King's Rangers, he told them, that if attacked, to consider themselves released from their paroles and defend themselves. The determined spirit of Captain Armstrong and Major Washington⁷ who were present, struck such terror into these ruffians, that apprehending an obstinate resistance, they instantly retired.

Enraged at the repetition of such abominable outrages by this band of assassins, not yet satisfied with blood, I wrote General Pickens, reproaching him with a violation of the articles of capitulation, in defense of every principle of honour [p. 619] and good faith, and informed him, that the officers and men, having acted by my orders, ought to be exempt from violence; and if it was his determination that I should share the fate of Colonel Grierson, he would at least find that a man, conscious of having faithfully discharged his duty to his king and country, would meet his fate with indifference.

The prisoners shortly afterwards embarked for Savannah, under the charge of Major Washington, who, apprehending the commission of further outrages, distributed the guards among the different boats. By this precaution, the different detachments from General Pickens' camp, who had taken post on the banks of the river, were prevented, after repeated attempts, from firing into the boats.

Your account of a skirmish between General Wayne's army and a party of militia and dragoons, consisting of fifty men, who composed the advance of a small detachment I had the honour to command, I presume is taken from General Wayne's hyperbolic report to the Congress. As this buckram feat⁸ is altogether a fancy piece, it does not merit a comment.

I have the honour to be, Sir,
Your most obedient, humble servant,
Thomas Browne

Nassau, Bahamas, Dec. 25, 1786"

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At this juncture White recounts how "Colonel Browne was tried for forgery, in the City of London, in 1812 and found guilty." The purported offense related to a scheme on Brown's, or else his agent's, part to obtain lands on the island of St. Vincent in the West Indies by means of a forged document. Omitted here. For more on Thomas Brown see Edward Cashin's *The King's Ranger: Thomas Brown and the American Revolution on the southern frontier*. University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1989. – WTS.

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<sup>7</sup> Not Lieut. Col. William Washington, and probably Capt. Robert Smith of the North Carolina, or possibly Capt. James Armstrong, line is meant.

<sup>8</sup> *Henry IV*, part 1, Act 2, scen. 4.