
Martin, Joseph Plumb. *A Narrative of a Revolutionary Soldier: Some of the Adventures, Dangers, and Sufferings of Joseph Plumb Martin*. 1830. Reprint, New York: Signet Classic, 2001.

Anne Midgley

Initially published anonymously by the author in 1830, Joseph Plumb Martin's memoir chronicles his role as a private soldier during the American Revolutionary War. Martin wrote and published his story many years after his experiences, yet in most instances it reads as fresh as if it had been written as a journal during the heat of the action. Martin initially enlisted for a six-month stint at the age of fifteen, wishing "only to take a priming before I took upon me the whole coat of paint for a soldier."¹ Despite his better judgment, he reenlisted for three years or the duration of the war in the spring of 1777.

Revolutionary War historians, including David Hackett Fischer, John Pancake, John Ferling, Don Higginbotham and the authors of *Rebels and Redcoats: The American Revolution through the Eyes of Those Who Fought and Lived It*, George F. Scheer and Hugh F. Rankin, have utilized Martin's memoir as a source for their works—Scheer and Rankin used Martin's memoirs extensively throughout their book. In virtually every instance, historians used Martin's memoirs to illustrate the experiences of a common soldier during the war or to provide insight into the social conditions of the day, yet Martin wrote for a purpose beyond simply telling the tale of the hardships that he endured as a private soldier during the war. He wrote his text to prove that Continental Army veterans deserved the gratitude of their countrymen and the financial assistance promised them under the Revolutionary War Pension Act of 1818. Seen from the viewpoint of contemporary conditions experienced by Martin in the 1820s when he chose to write his tale, the book was a powerful exposé. Martin's tale provided insight into the treatment of the common soldier by his officers and the populace in general; all too frequently, a shameful disgrace.²

Though he claimed to have a poor command of grammar and punctuation, Martin's tale is riveting; he forcefully accomplished his purpose to provide to his readers "an idea, though but a faint one, of what the army suffered that gained and secured our independence."³ Martin attacked his work with humor, often inserted in the least expected places, as when he frequently depicted the British as ill-behaved guests. He took historians to task as he sought to set the record straight in his

description of the “famous Kipp’s Bay affair, which has been criticized so much by the Historians (sic) of the Revolution. I was there, and will give a true statement of all that *I* saw during that day.”⁴ He accused contemporary historians of pandering to the highly placed persons of his day; he described a heated battle during the war that received little notice as “no Washington, Putnam, or Wayne [was] there. Had there been, the affair would have been extolled to the skies.”⁵ Martin repeatedly underscored the misery of the common soldier, who suffered with little to no food or adequate clothing, little shelter from brutal weather conditions, and ill treatment from officers and civilians alike. Yet he often delivered examples of situations where individuals, be they officers, civilians, or soldiers broke the mold and provided startling displays of human courage, empathy and charity. One touching incident, which Martin related “excited in me feelings which I shall never forget.”⁶ It described the burial of an unknown soldier, a man who had died in the course of the rebel retreat from New York City. Despite the confusion surrounding the retreat, Martin and his comrades sought to provide a grave for the stranger. Just as they completed their woeful task, two young women from a nearby dwelling joined the soldiers and displayed such sympathy and sorrow for the dead man that it caused Martin to extol their virtues; “yet he had mourners, and females too. Worthy young ladies! You, and such as you, are deserving the regard of the greatest of men.”⁷ Martin recognized the bravery and heroism of certain officers while he derided others for their treatment of the soldiers under their command. He provided glimpses of the harrowing nature of what was essentially a civil war in the Middle States; depicting the “Tories” as murderous villains and traitors to their country. Throughout his tale, he emphasized the soldiers’ lack of sustenance. He depicted his sufferings and those of his fellow soldiers, “keeping up the old system of starving,” yet often called upon to exert uncommon efforts on behalf of the rebels’ struggle against Britain.⁸

Martin frequently reminded his readers that he is writing from memory and that the reader “must not expect to have an exact account of dates . . . as to years and months I shall not be wide from the mark.”⁹ He also not infrequently reminded his readers that he told his story, not an overall history of the war. His story was compelling and clearly supported his argument that the common “regular” soldiers of the American Revolutionary War were the backbone of American military efforts to wrest independence from Britain. He compared and contrasted the contributions of the militia and the regulars; he did not minimize the

efforts of the militia but he “insist[ed] that they would not have answered the end so well as the regular soldiers.” Martin’s arguments compel readers to agree; his contemporaries should not have derided the “good fortune” of the remaining Continental Army veterans to an honorable pension; that pension should have been provided by grateful countrymen for services that were borne by the soldiers through years of suffering yet which proved to bring forth a new nation.¹⁰

Notes

1. Joseph Plumb Martin, *A Narrative of a Revolutionary Soldier: Some of the Adventures, Dangers, and Sufferings of Joseph Plumb Martin* (1830; repr., New York: Signet Classic, 2001), 16.

2. John Ferling, *Almost a Miracle: The American Victory in the War of Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 197, 333, 335-338, 341, 412, 532, 575; David Hackett Fischer, *Washington’s Crossing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 21, 102-103, 106; Don Higgenbotham, *The War of American Independence* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 392; Catherine Kaplan, “Theft and Counter-Theft: Joseph Plumb Martin’s Revolutionary War,” *Early American Literature*, 41, no. 3 (2006): 515-534. <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/docview/215394296?accountid=8289> (accessed October 21, 2012); John S. Pancake, *This Destructive War: The British Campaign in the Carolinas, 1780-1782* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1985), 45-46; George F. Scheer and Hugh F. Rankin, *Rebels and Redcoats: The American Revolution Through the Eyes of Those Who Fought and Lived It* (1957; repr., New York: Da Capo Press, 1987), 168, 180-181, 248-249, 289-291, 329-333, 368-372, 477, 481-482, 487, 493, 495, 502-503.

3. Martin, *A Narrative of a Revolutionary Soldier*, 2.

4. *Ibid.*, 30.

5. *Ibid.*, 83.

6. *Ibid.*, 39.

7. *Ibid.*, 39-40.

8. *Ibid.*, 44.

9. *Ibid.*, 18.

10. *Ibid.*, 63, 249.