I met Lachlan McIntosh in 1972 during my second year of graduate study at the University of Georgia. I had been told by third-year students that if I wanted to finish as I planned, I needed to have a dissertation topic identified so that I could begin research during that second year and write a few seminar papers on the subject. This would allow me to get organized and focused. Taking this advice to heart, I approached Professor G. Melvin Herndon. He had agreed to direct my dissertation.

I told him that I would like to get started and asked if he had a topic in mind. The conversation, as I recall, went something like this:

Me: “Any idea on what I might write?”
He: “Ever heard of Lachlan McIntosh?”
Me: “No.”
He: “Go check him out.”

Thus began my relationship with the man who would be my close companion in the coming years—General Lachlan McIntosh.

Early on I discovered that the foundation for my work had already been laid by collectors, archivists, librarians, and editors—those important but often unsung heroes of historical scholarship who preserved, transcribed, and published McIntosh material that was scattered from as far north as Pennsylvania to as far south as Savannah. They made my task much easier.

Of these, the most gracious and helpful was Mrs. Lilla Mills Hawes, director of the Georgia Historical Society and editor of this collection. She was and remains the preeminent authority on the man we came to call “the General.” Though this volume contains only the Lachlan McIntosh papers in
the University of Georgia Libraries, its introduction and copious notes point
the way to other McIntosh material, which, taken as a whole, reveal a treasure
trove of eighteenth-century documents. They tell the story of how a colony
became a state and how a man became a hero to many and a villain to others.
So thorough was her research and so insightful was the introduction she
wrote that there were times when I seriously wondered if there was much I
could add.

Happily, for me, there was more to the McIntosh story. Happily, for you,
what you have here are letters, reports, and accounts that take you into the
heart of the colonial and Revolutionary eras in a depth seldom matched in
similar collections. Though Lachlan McIntosh remains little known today
outside of Georgia and a few locations in Western Pennsylvania and Ohio, his
career placed him in the middle of critical events in the history of the nation
he helped create and which he served well.

The incidents revealed in these papers tell the story of a country growing
up and a man growing with it. From his arrival as a boy of eight, one of a
contingent of Scots brought to Georgia to guard the colony’s southern frontier
from Spanish incursions, he and his family found themselves part of events
larger than themselves. Outlined in Mrs. Hawes’s introduction, these events
serve as preliminaries to what is contained in the papers and give readers an
idea of the frontier conditions that helped make the man.

The papers also illuminate the man himself. One such revelation is found
in the oldest document in the collection, a 1755 wedding discharge, in which
John and Ester Cuthbert not only give their daughter in marriage to Lachlan
McIntosh but also promise “never to make any charge” to him for “her Board,
Clothing, Lodging, Washing, Schooling, or any thing else whatsoever from
her birth to this day.” It was a document typical of a man wishing to enter into
a relationship unencumbered by anything that might prevent him from doing
what he intended when he intended.

Subsequent documents—some McIntosh collected, some he wrote—
reveal a mature man with that same attention to detail, though in these
later documents, the details were different. They mostly dealt with the
growing strain between England’s colonies, especially Georgia, and the
Mother Country. Seldom are the American grievances better laid out than
in the petition passed in 1775 by fellow members of the Darien Committee included here. Drafted and edited by McIntosh, it is one of the earliest statements of solidarity with the colonial cause to come from the lower South, and it marks an important turning point in the rise of the Whig movement in Georgia.

From that point forward the letters deal with items that range from the mundane (a request for a promised cask of rum, “as I am much in need of it”) to the more significant, such as the management of labor (underscoring the degree to which the colony’s economy depended on slaves). Contained here are accounts of the setting up of a Revolutionary government, the Council of Safety, and the organization of a military force under his command.

From the Revolution onward, documents that once dealt with plantation management turned to problems facing then-colonel Lachlan McIntosh and difficulties that a largely inexperienced commander faced in raising, training, and maintaining an army. True, he came from a Scottish military tradition, but how much of that prepared him for what lay ahead can only be surmised. Nevertheless, the widely held belief that the ability to lead was not something learned but was innate seems to have been proven in McIntosh. Despite his lack of formal training in strategy, logistics, and the art of war, at least on such a large scale, he displayed a talent for grasping a situation, placing resources where they were needed, and getting the best from his men. The promotion to general that soon followed was well deserved.

The letters also reveal a man sensitive to insult, especially when his reputation and that of his family were involved. When he acted in defense of his honor, he booked no quarter. A case in point was his well-known duel with Button Gwinnett, radical politician and signer of the Declaration of Independence. McIntosh passed this sensitivity along to his son, William, whose horsewhipping of George Walton, another signatory of the Declaration of Independence and the chief justice of Georgia, was little known until the publication of these papers. Walton had insulted William's father and family, something no gentleman could tolerate. In his defense, William denounced Walton, as his father had earlier denounced Gwinnett, and, declaring that such a scoundrel deserved whipping, confirmed that father and son were cut from the same cloth.
Hounded by his political enemies after Gwinnett’s death, Lachlan McIntosh was transferred to Washington’s army in Pennsylvania, where he endured the bitter winter of 1777–78 at Valley Forge. There he so impressed General Washington that in 1778 the future president put McIntosh in charge of the Western Department, and he served with distinction as commander of Fort Pitt. Significantly, he led an expedition that pushed American claims into the Ohio River Valley, where he established an outpost that he named for himself, Fort McIntosh. Modesty was not one of the general’s virtues.

After returning to Georgia in 1779, he was part of the unsuccessful attempt to take Savannah from the British and an equally unsuccessful effort to defend Charleston from the same enemy. Included in the McIntosh papers and published here are journals of these trying times that were kept by McIntosh, John Habersham, and an unidentified subaltern. Taken prisoner when Charleston fell, McIntosh was subsequently exchanged and spent the rest of the conflict trying to provide for his wife and children, who were displaced by the fighting. The impact of the war was felt far beyond the battlefield.

When peace came, McIntosh returned to Georgia, where he hoped to resume life as he had known it. However, he found his plantations destroyed, his slaves stolen or strayed, and his financial future uncertain. No doubt inclined to sympathize, he maybe even agreed with his Loyalist friend and son-in-law, Robert Baillie, who, after the conflict, wrote that “this cursed War has ruirnd us all.” McIntosh spent considerable time and energy in efforts to gain compensation for his losses. These were only partially successful, so he left his Altamaha home and relocated to Savannah. There, still seeking the recognition he felt his due, he joined other officers of the Continental Army in forming the Order of the Cincinnati in 1783, a veterans’ organization widely criticized by more-republican-minded Americans for harboring monarchist sympathies.

A man of decidedly conservative sentiments, McIntosh had political leanings similar to those of his much-admired commander George Washington and his close friend and financial partner Henry Laurens. He gave his support to the Philadelphia convention that drafted the new Constitution because of the men who wrote it, though he remained skeptical of the document itself.
However, his other postwar problems were so great that he had little time for politics. Occasionally he was called on to serve the state in various capacities, appointments that recognized his ability to organize and negotiate but that also made the most of his reputation. The papers here make little mention of these. Instead, not surprisingly, the postwar documents he saved that have come down to us in this collection deal mostly with matters of business—who owed what to whom, how to prove losses when vouchers did not survive the war, how to get the new governments (state and national) to pay him what they owed, and how to get compensation from Britain for damages done and property taken during occupation.

Taken as a whole, it is a catalog of what McIntosh, and so many others like him, sacrificed for American independence.

During the last years of his life, McIntosh was a grand old man to many and an irritant to others. To himself and to his family and friends he remained true. When he died in Savannah on February 20, 1806, shortly before his seventy-ninth birthday, he had outlived most of the generation who had fought for American independence. He was buried in what is today Colonial Park Cemetery in Savannah with all the honors due a hero of the Revolution. He would have liked that.

Harvey H. Jackson III
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