PROLOGUE

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;
Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile
The short and simple annals of the poor.
—Thomas Gray, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*

It was the darkness before dawn on January 17, 1781, at a crossroads in the backcountry of South Carolina, a savannah where cattle were overnighted during their amble to the coast. It was called, like other such pastures throughout the Carolinas, a cowpens, and soon it would acquire an honorific capital *C*. It was a series of open pastures of the Inner Piedmont, featuring long, meandering crests with occasional rolling dips and streams; a savannah of switch grass grazed by countless herds, enclosed and dotted by large trees. A mist blanketed the undulated countryside. Joining the mist was the smoke of campfires for almost two thousand men camped at the northern end of the Cowpens. Recumbent forms stretched out around the campfires, the experienced ones with their heads closest to the embers. Men who could not sleep stared into the flames, tossing occasional kindling to stoke the fire and offset the bite of the winter air.

All night the old wagoner meandered between the groups of men huddled around the flames, chatting, joking, telling them exactly

what he expected of them. Some later claimed he had lifted his shirt to show them his back: the white-scarred wreckage left behind by 499 lashes, well laid on by a drummer boy back in 1756. It was one of his favorite stories: how there had been a miscount—showing that he had been conscious throughout the punishment and been keeping count—and that rather than the required five hundred he had been shortchanged one but chose not to argue the point. King George, he would say with a twinkle, mustn't have the opportunity to correct the oversight.

He was done now. Like everyone else on that field, he was waiting for dawn.

This was not the place where he had wanted to fight. He had meant to cross the Broad River and wait for the approaching British force on the slopes of Thickety Mountain, or on some other ground of his own choosing. But Banastre Tarleton was coming on hard and fast, as he always did. Now the old wagoner was caught in open country, six miles from the Broad. Now he had to fight.

He had been fighting his whole life, in one way or another. His body was a palimpsest of violence. Some kind of fight or quarrel had made him leave his home and parents. When he arrived in the Valley of Virginia, he fought to clear land, then fought to make his way as a wagoner. As wagoner, he fought other wagoners to establish his place in life. He fought Indians, and they left their mark on him. He struck an officer and got those 499 lashes in exchange. When there were no more wars to fight, he brawled and fought just for the hell of it. The Revolution meant more fighting, more damage to his suffering body. Now on that cold January morning, all the wounds and scars marked upon his body ached terribly as he waited for yet another fight.

A brawl was what he could expect from Tarleton, a straightahead, head-down fight. So he had put his plans down on paper—or rather his educated aides from Maryland had done so, so that everyone could read the handwriting—and shown it to all his officers. They all knew what they were to do. Now, after his nighttime rounds, his soldiers also knew what to do. There would be no ignorance or uncertainty breeding fear and anxiety, not this morning.

Daylight glimmered beneath the horizon. As men stirred and awoke, hoofbeats came hurriedly up the road from the south. A

scout dashed up to the old wagoner to report. Tarleton was five miles away with his one thousand men, moving fast. Runners began to scatter with the news and with orders. A body servant held his horse, and the old wagoner, Brigadier General Daniel Morgan, mounted. Dressed in his Continental uniform, Morgan lightly spurred his horse through the camp. He began to shout, "Boys, get up, Benny's coming!"

Daniel Morgan was one of the unique personalities of the American Revolution. In addition to engineering the victory of January 17, 1781, at the Cowpens—the most tactically perfect American victory of the war—he was an architect of the victory at Saratoga, which remains one of the most decisive and genuinely consequential military victories in all of American history. He was thus in part or fully responsible for two of the truly decisive victories of the Continental army during the American Revolution.

It was the Revolution that revealed that whatever his other abilities and gifts, Daniel Morgan was a tactical genius. He knew how to lead his men—what to ask them to do and how to get them to do it. He also understood how to place those men on any given bit of ground. At Saratoga he used his chosen band of riflemen and sharpshooters from the Shenandoah Valley as if they were themselves one great sniper rifle under his personal control. He aimed them at the heart of the British army, killing its officers, its artillerymen, and their horses; breaking apart key formations; and allowing other Continental army regiments the opportunity to exploit the chaos he had created.

Yet, Revolution or no, Morgan was also a man of humble origins who wished to be recognized as a gentleman. When he was passed over for command of the new light infantry wing of the Continental army in 1779, he left the army in disgust. The honor of a would-be gentleman demanded nothing less. So he returned to his home, already aptly titled Soldier's Rest.

It was only the return of his friend and neighbor Horatio Gates to command in the South, and a commission as brigadier general by Congress, that drew Morgan out of his Shenandoah retirement. He had not reached the Southern Army before it was destroyed at

Camden in August 1780, and Gates was disgraced for both that loss and his hasty flight from the battlefield. Despite the departure of a man he regarded as a friend, Morgan stayed. The new commander, Nathanael Greene, gave Morgan command of most of the elite formations of the Southern Army and sent him west into the Carolina backcountry to make trouble and yet avoid defeat. That was how Morgan came to be at the Cowpens the night he decided to stop running from Tarleton.

MORGAN'S interest to any reader of American history rests on much more than his success in battle. Morgan was an uncommon man of the common people who washed up in the lower Valley of Virginia, by choice without family, and as a consequence penniless, homeless, and placeless. In nearly every respect he seems to have been a prototypically country-style "good old boy" who liked playing cards, brawling, drinking rum, shooting, and women.

But closer inspection reveals him to have been astute and driven. Like the ambition of Abraham Lincoln—another man dismissed as a backcountry hick—Morgan's ambition was "a little engine that knew no rest."[1] His ascent through the ranks of Virginia society amounts to an outline for how to get ahead in colonial America. From laborer to overseer; from hired wagoner to independent wagoner; and from wagoner to wagon owner, farmer, entrepreneur, and captain in the county militia, Morgan fought his way upward through the social hierarchy with as much vigor as he ever fought a country brawl—or more. When he arrived in the valley he was illiterate, and he remained that way until at least the late 1760s. By the beginning of the Revolution he was capable of writing his own letters, and by the 1790s, reading and writing had given him a talent for confident yet still colloquial self-expression.

Daniel Morgan provides us with a rare opportunity in the history of early America to examine the life of someone who came from the often-silent ranks of the colonial poor. When Lincoln was asked to describe his family's history, he said there was not much there that could not be described with the phrase "the short and simple lives of the poor." He was quoting Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," a poem known to many in Lincoln's

and in Morgan's time. Like Lincoln, Morgan was another one of those who came out from the obscurity of poverty.

But Lincoln knew his Gray, and in his double-edged way was undoubtedly also suggesting some of the succeeding lines in the poem. There the poet muses upon those "simple lives" and wonders what greatness lies around him that never had opportunity to display itself to the world, living and dying in this small corner of existence:

> Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
> Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
> Hands that the rod of empire might have swayed,
> Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre.

Lincoln believed he was one of those special people who had rescued himself from poverty and obscurity and was destined for greatness. It is doubtful that Morgan—who, insofar as he was familiar with self-reflection, purposefully avoided it—articulated his own history as Lincoln did. But in his actions, which were his chosen form of expression, Morgan echoed that same self-understanding.

This is why so much of this book is focused on the context of Morgan's early life rather than speeding directly to the Revolution and the "good part." It is also why so much attention is devoted to Morgan's life after the Revolution. We cannot understand Morgan as a military commander and as a prosperous establishment figure without first understanding—insofar as we can, given the limitations of evidence—his early life in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. Without piecing together context and understanding what lives like Morgan's were like in the 1750s, we cannot understand how a poor homeless boy became a general, or how a country squire in Virginia became an ardent Federalist and anti-Jeffersonian, or how a military hero might establish his postwar legacy.

Morgan provides us with an opportunity to see what independence meant for a man like him, a rising man of property and growing wealth who fought his way up from the bottom of society. That he supported the cause of American independence was by no means a foregone conclusion. After all, he had fought for Britain as a British subject. Independence, and the fight for it, threatened the security of his property and all that he had worked to achieve. Surely it would have been easier to stay with the tried and proven, rather

than take a leap into the darkness. Many other independent property owners chose to do the same, or to carefully avoid the fight.

But like many of those more prominent than he in the Revolutionary era, Morgan "saw in independence a future for himself and for his countrymen that could never be realized in union with England."[2] In Morgan we see what the hopes and fears of independence might have meant to a far-from-average "average" colonial man, to his family and posterity, and to his community.

THERE are other lessons to be learned from Morgan's life that are related to his persona and more generally to all historical biography. The military historian Mark Grimsley has noted that many fascinated by the Civil War are disproportionately interested in the personalities of statesmen and generals. "A team of Clydesdale horses," says Grimsley, "could not make me let go of the notion that what is going on here is a sort of men's studies hidden in plain sight." In confusing times, biography turns out to be a sort of self-help guide.

There are probably worse things that could be done with it. And at its best, this seemingly naive way of understanding personalities of the past understands something essential about the human personality. As Grimsley goes on to observe:

> Behind the general's scowl, the politician's grin, the diplomat's gaze of cool aplomb, are men, mere human beings, wrestling with questions, trying to squeeze them into answers. The questions most important to them rarely concern affairs of state, no matter how momentous. Instead they involve more personal issues, the same puzzles that afflict less famous, less powerful men. Who am I? What is the world around me like? How can I be happy? Which things, in the last analysis, are truly of importance. Each man answers these questions differently, but his answers affect every other decision he makes.[3]

Every human person is a mystery. Some are more mysterious than others, but each one of us has an enigma or riddle inside of us that most of us are unaware of—and in our more enlightened moments we are aware of this ignorance. The great literary answers to this self-ignorance have been the novel and the biography. In both

genres we live the lives of others, and in doing so hopefully come to terms with our own. To read the life of Daniel Morgan while considering one's own life is not a misuse of biography but perhaps its most important use.

Therefore, in the following pages there are three intertwining stories. The first is, of course, Dan Morgan's. The second is something of the history of Morgan's place and his era, particularly as it influenced him and others around him. Finally, there is that story that results from the intertwining of the previous two, that of the era of the American Revolution.

In his dictionary of 1755, Samuel Johnson gave as his first definition of *revolution* the "course of any thing which returns to the point at which it began to move," a straightforward borrowing from Latin. It was his fourth definition that approaches the concept of revolution that is perhaps the most common today: "Change in the state of a government or country." Johnson would certainly have been horrified that future generations might see such a change as a good, and dismissive of extending it to cover the vagaries of an individual's life.

Calling Daniel Morgan's life "revolutionary" also has several nuances of definition. On the one hand, as I have already suggested, it was a perfectly ordinary life. Nor was Morgan by the end of his life, and perhaps never, a radical political revolutionary. Yet his was a life that was revolutionary in both senses of Johnson's term. Following his arrival in the Shenandoah Valley, his departures always brought him back to the point from which he first began to move. Morgan was an American Patriot, but he was also a Shenandoah patriot.

Yet Morgan's revolutions were also ones of changes of state. He began his recorded life homeless and ended it with 125,000 acres of land, two or three houses, a congressional gold medal, and a term in Congress. Certainly this was as radical a change of state as could be imagined.

Finally, in Morgan's life we have the context and the outworking of the Revolutionary epoch, drawing together the tumult and creative energy of late colonial America, the sudden alterations of the Revolution itself, and the difficult creation of the early republic. By studying Morgan's life, or that of any of his contemporaries, we

make the American Revolution and its entire era personal, its stakes therefore more immediate and intelligible. In it we see that it was not the battles or campaigns that were important, not even for one of the finest soldiers of the Revolution, but the life he sought to build before, during, and after the war; how he built that life; and what it meant to him.