

Banastre Tarleton

The name of Banastre Tarleton (striking though it be) would today be entirely forgotten, but for two things: four pieces of silk and a film.

The four silks are, in fact, battleflags, captured by the aforesaid Banastre during the American War of Independence. For many years they hung from the walls of Leintwardine House in Shropshire, once the man's home. One of them, seized by Tarleton at Pound Ridge in July 1779, is the earliest American flag of any kind to survive.

After Tarleton's death in 1833 these proud memorabilia of campaigns past were left to his widow, and so down the family line until 2006, when the latest of that line decided to cash in on the family heirlooms. They had become, he said, too expensive to insure.

Sure enough, when the flags were sold at Sotheby's in New York in June 2006, they realised a colossal 17.4 million dollars, the Pound Ridge flag alone selling for \$12.3 million. Whatever their importance to US history, they were nevertheless sold to an anonymous bidder, and have not been heard of since. Private capital is, after all, part of the American dream too.

So who was this British commander, who reached in and took the very heart out of America, and brought it back to Shropshire ?

Born in 1754, Banastre Tarleton was the second son of a wealthy merchant family from Liverpool. As second son, however, he would not be inheriting the family fortune; instead a little piece of it was deployed to get Banastre an education, deliver him to Oxford, and then set him up in a career, whether in the law or the army. To Banastre the latter was more appealing.

In 1776, then, Tarleton set forth as a dragoon under the command of Lord Cornwallis in what proved to be one of the seminal wars in world history. To call it the American War of Independence is to underestimate its significance (though not to the Americans, of course). It was, as much, a proxy European war, the first of a century and a half of such conflicts, the British on one side, the French and Dutch on the other.

Although he was no more than a junior officer when he arrived, Tarleton's bravery and decision-making soon put him at the heart of the action. His roll-call of victories was impressive: Monck's Corner, Waxhaws, Camden, Fishing Creek, Blackstocks, Guilford Courthouse, all over the course of less than a year. Only in October 1781, shortly before the British surrendered, was Lieutenant-Colonel Tarleton tamed and captured.

But Tarleton's headstrong heroism, for which he later was rewarded with a baronetcy, did not seem so admirable from the other side of the pond. At Waxhaws, in particular, Tarleton's tactics were said to have been especially pitiless, and coined the expression "Tarleton's Quarter", which meant no quarter at all. Of the 400 or so Americans who fought there, more than half were killed or severely wounded, and that after they had offered to surrender.

Quite how brutal the man was is open to debate. But it is the victors' privilege to write the history, and so Banastre is forever condemned to linger in the ranks of military monsters, as "Bloody Ban" or the "Butcher of the Carolinas". Most recently - and this is the other reason Tarleton is better known than he might have been - he appeared as in Mel Gibson's 2000 film, *The Patriot*. Gibson needed a villain to epitomise the British, and Tarleton fitted the uniform perfectly.

As the fictional Colonel William Tarvinton, it is his cruelty against Mel Gibson's family that stirs the all-American patriot to revenge. Accuracy has never been one of Gibson's strongest suits, especially where the English are concerned.

On the other side of the Atlantic, however, Tarleton returned as the conquering hero, one of the most famous figures of his age. He was painted by Reynolds and Gainsborough (the latter portrait was destroyed by the artist when Tarleton failed to pay him), friend to the Prince Regent. And, like all romantic heroes, he gambled away most of his money, and had an affair with an actress, whom he later jilted.

The actress concerned, Mary Robinson, was also a noted poet and novelist, and it is her portrayal of a barely disguised Tarleton in *The False Friend* that summed up the man perfectly. She called him: "Too polite to be religious, too witty to be learned, too youthful to be serious, and too handsome to be discreet".

Only in the later part of his life did Banastre allow domestic bliss to catch up with him. In 1798 he met Susan Bertie, the illegitimate daughter of the Duke of Ancaster, who had also got a little too close to an actress. It was a whirlwind romance: Banastre, Susan and her £20,000 inheritance.

And in 1814 - after various military postings in Berwick and Bath - the pair settled down at Leintwardine House in tranquil and rural retirement. They fished together in the Teme, and painted and sketched together too. Appropriately, when granted his coat of arms as baronet, Sir Banastre chose the legend: *Post nubila Phoebus - After the clouds comes the Sun*.

At Leintwardine church Tarleton was laid to rest, and a great marble monument marked his passing. It reads:

He was a hero; his youth's idol glory
He courted on the battlefield and won.
England exulted in her valiant son,
And stamp'd his name for ever in her story.
Mr Gibson would write a rather different epitaph.