

Monday Lecture Explores Myth and Literature of American Revolution

Dr. Melodie Andrews, associate professor of history at Minnesota State University, Mankato, will deliver the lecture: "Return To Sleepy Hollow: The Headless Horseman and his Compatriots in the Literature, Myth, and Memory of the American Revolution."

By Amanda Dyslin

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Everybody knows Washington Irving's famous story, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," featuring Ichabod Crane and the Headless Horseman, the ghost of a Hessian soldier who rides on horseback at night in search of his head.

But few people know the history behind the story, particularly the Headless Horseman and the myths that led Irving to create such a ghoulish figure. Melodie Andrews, associate professor of history at Minnesota State University, plans to share her wisdom on the subject Monday during her lecture "Return To Sleepy Hollow: The Headless Horseman and his Compatriots in the Literature, Myth, and Memory of the American Revolution."

Andrews will focus on how Irving's famous character represents the myths surrounding the Hessians during the American Revolutionary War, why people believed these stories and their effects during and after the war.

"These German troops had the reputation for being the most vicious, brutal and also the most professional troops," Andrews said. "The Americans were shocked their king — their father — would send over these especially brutal soldiers to deal with a quarrel. They felt they were being treated as enemies."

The decision of King George III to hire the German troops played a part in causing the 13 colonies to declare independence from Britain in 1776. Some colonists who still felt loyalty to king and country felt betrayed when they learned Hessians were on their way to force them into submission.

To understand many of the colonists' view of the Hessians, see Christopher Walken's Hessian Horseman character in Tim Burton's version of the "Sleepy Hollow" story, Andrews said. He appears evil and demonic, even baring fangs. Troops from the German states gained their reputation during the European wars. Hessians were viewed as large, brooding thugs.

"There were stories about them having superhuman strength, even stories that they eat babies," Andrews said. "They really got scapegoated by everybody."

King George III knew this when he signed agreements with the Germans to send 30,000 German troops (about half from Hesse-Cassel) to America, which was about one-third of the British forces in the Revolution. Just weeks after the colonists got word of the Hessians on their way to New York, the Declaration of Independence was signed.

Of course, Andrews said, Hessians did not have superhuman strength. They weren't any more brutal than any other soldier, she said. Many were farm boys.

But the power of myth, propaganda and image were powerful. When the Hessians arrived at the New York Harbor in August 1776, they were ordered by Gen. William Howe to parade the bank in deliberately designed uniforms of large, tall hats and stiff collars, made to enlarge and toughen their appearance.

"They wanted to scare the living daylights out of them, and it was partially effective," Andrews said.

During some early engagements involving Hessians, Americans dropped their weapons and fled.

This public perception carried on through the years, even after the war when many of the Hessians stayed and settled in America. However, the defeat of the Hessians at Trenton partly shattered the myth of invincibility.

Washington Irving was born in 1783 at the end of the war in New York, where the Hessians had been stationed. He grew up hearing the stories of the Hessians.

So when Irving became one of the first American storytellers, whose works were widely embraced, it was no surprise he chose a Hessian for his monster character in "Sleepy Hollow." The myths about the troops were alive and well and would continue to flourish and transform for decades.

While many scholars have focused on the character of schoolmaster Ichabod Crane, the protagonist, Andrews decided to focus on the Headless Horseman, whose story has yet to be told, she said. She's doing with "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" what the play "Wicked" (billed as the untold story of the witches of Oz) did with "The Wizard of Oz."

"Myths help create a sense of common identity, they tell really good stories, and they also create a sense of patriotism," Andrews said. "The Headless Horseman is a really fun way to talk about (these ideas)."

The lecture will be 4 p.m. Monday in Centennial Student Union room 201. For more information, contact the history department at 389-1618.