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Review of *The Fall of a Black Army Officer: Racism and the Myth of Henry O. Flipper* By Charles M. Robinson III

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The Fall of a Black Army Officer: Racism and the Myth of Henry O. Flipper. By Charles M. Robinson III. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008. xviii + 197 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95.

In 1881 Lieutenant Henry O. Flipper, the first black graduate of West Point, was accused of embezzlement and conduct unbecoming an officer. A court-martial subsequently found Flipper guilty of conduct unbecoming an officer, but not of the embezzlement charges, and dismissed him from the army. In his 1994 account, *The Court-Martial of Lieutenant Henry Flipper*, Charles Robinson III concluded that “racism affected the sentence. Dismissal was totally out of line with sentences given to white officers for more serious offences.” With this 2008 revision of his earlier work, *The Fall of a Black Army Officer*, Robinson finds Flipper at fault, not racism in the army. He argues that Flipper “was convicted on proper evidence, in a more than fair trial, and dismissed as he deserved to be.” What changed in the interval between publication of the two studies? Certainly Robinson’s interpretation; it was affected by another reading, or more, of the trial records, a careful study of Flipper’s own accusations and Robinson’s inability to locate corroborating evidence for Flipper’s side of the story, new materials, support from conclusions in Barry Johnson’s, *Flipper’s Dismissal* (1980), as well as an implicit belief in the fairness of the military trial.

Flipper’s short-lived military career took place in the Great Plains, first in Oklahoma and then in Texas. At the time of his lengthy trial he was stationed at Fort Davis, Texas, an officer in the Tenth U.S. Cavalry, one of four all-black regiments stationed in the western United States after the Civil War. Flipper served as acting commissary of subsistence and quartermaster; when a change of command occurred, his downfall began. The incoming commander, William R. Shafter, preferred his own person in those positions. Ultimately, to offset a discrepancy in funds under his charge, Flipper lied to his commanding officer, Colonel

Shafter, faked paperwork, and wrote a bad check. Money was missing, although Flipper managed to have it repaid. One unanswered question still lingers: what happened to the missing money?

Robinson’s *The Fall of a Black Army Officer* is a thoroughly researched, well-written, and thoughtful portrayal of Flipper’s trial. The study is must reading for anyone interested in the United States Army in the late nineteenth century. As a result of the trial, Flipper’s career in the United States Army was over; he was, however, eligible for other posts with the national government. Is this the final word? That remains to be seen.

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