Spring 2010

Review of Class and Race in the Frontier Army: Military Life in the West, 1870-1890 by Kevin Adams

Samuel Watson
United States Military Academy

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly
Part of the American Studies Commons, Cultural History Commons, and the United States History Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2577

Class and Race in the Frontier Army is social history first, military second. Adams has two theses: that an “enormous class division” trumped ethnicity, but not race, and that military historians have sought comfort in depicting the army as socially isolated, a unique institution. A book so critical deserves critique; Class and Race is both a laudable effort to connect military to social history, and a product of late twentieth-century graduate school, producing focused insights and reminding us of the big picture, but leaving the mid-level blurry. Adams’s historiographical undertone is that whiteness scholars have exaggerated the racialization of European immigrants, that the army shows that ethnicity meant little compared to class or, for African Americans, racial oppression. Adams hopes that his study of the army will strike a blow in the whiteness debates, but his approach shows how far this scholarship has come (or drifted) from its original focus on the construction of white supremacy over blacks, which Adams shows to have been just as true in the army as civil society. Since the majority of the army’s immigrants were German or Irish, beginning to escape their earlier non-white status by the 1880s, rather than the “new immigrants” of southern and eastern Europe, and since the economic functions of ethnicity (connections leading to employment) played little part in the army, that institution seems an unlikely test case for his thesis about ethnicity.

Nor do the many military historians I know, including those who read portions of Adams’s work, “prize” an “estranged and isolated army.” Most of them would prefer to identify connections between army and society, where they were present; Adams is laying into a straw man of scholarship more than forty years old. I agree with Adams’s subtext, that class was the most important social force in Gilded Age America, and in its army. I agree that there was an enormous class division, that in class terms officers were “Victorian aristocrats,” and that enlisted soldiers shared the values (egalitarianism, mutuality) of the contemporary working class. But this does not make the army a “mere reflection” of civil society, with rank and command hierarchies irrelevant. Adams consistently conflates rank with class hierarchy; he never hints at the possibility that civil as well as military elites considered authoritarian command necessary to success on the battlefield.

Military historians should critically examine the concepts of military isolation and its relationship to professionalization, but this does not mean that professionalization did not occur, however haltingly. Nor does it mean that officers saw themselves primarily as cosmopolitan gentlemen, rather than combat leaders or representatives of the nation. Most officers agreed that enlisted soldiers should be freed from construction details in order to concentrate on military training; one doubts, on the other hand, whether the soldiers Adams lauds for their military interests actually preferred the idea of eight or ten or twelve hours of drill each day. The real purpose of the army was to show the national flag, chase Indians (conspicuously absent here, because enlisted soldiers did not discuss them much), and wait for a war. Officers and enlisted men alike were being warehoused for war; not surprisingly, both became bored and focused on other things. But the lens of class can be just as reductionist as that of professionalization can be teleological; neither alone explains complex institutions.

SAMUEL WATSON
Department of History
United States Military Academy at West Point