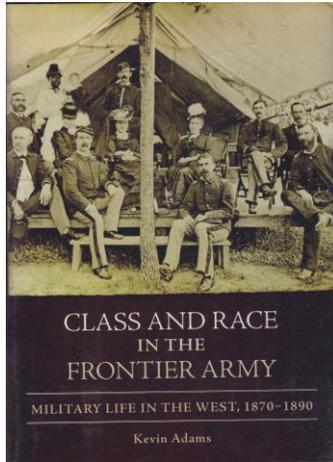


CBHMA Book Review

by Rev. Vincent A. Heier



Class and Race in the Frontier Army:

Military Life in the West, 1870-1890

By Kevin Adams

Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009 Pp. 276; hardcover, \$35.00

In the John Ford classic film *Fort Apache*, the daughter of Col. Owen Thursday visits the quarters of Sgt. Maj. O'Rourke to meet (and court) that non-commissioned officer's son, Lieut. Michael O'Rourke. Her father suddenly arrives, demanding that his daughter leave. In the conversation, the colonel reminds the sergeant major of the class barrier between non-commissioned and commissioned officers.

This episode may be a small plot in a film but it reflects what was a real issue explored in the excellent book by Kevin Adams, ***Class and Race in the Frontier Army***.

For those studying the Indian Wars, the Frontier Army was certainly an enigma. Lacking the *esprit de corps* of the Civil War, almost half of the soldiers in the West were foreign-born. Many had fled difficult social and economic problems. Yet the author emphatically argues that it was the "Victorian class divide" that overshadows these factors.

Adams begins by acknowledging other scholars who have attempted to analyze the 19th Century army in the West and how (despite its inadequacies) it helped to bring about ultimate settlement of the country. He states that enlisted men entered a military establishment that considered them as "subservient drudges." Officers, by contrast, were "gentlemen" whose lifestyle was certainly better than the men who served under them.

Seeing the Frontier Army in light of the "Gilded Age," the author offers keen insights on the subject. The first problem of the post-Civil War army was that it was reduced in both personnel and supplies.

Although popular imagination equates soldiers in the West with cavalry, infantry regiments far outnumbered horse soldiers. Again the common conception is that the military was concerned primarily with fighting Indians. This role was but a small part of its duty. Guarding surveying parties, chasing outlaws, enforcing Reconstruction policies and doing construction projects were all part of the mission of the Frontier Army.

Adams cites interesting data on the men who served. While many were immigrants, just over half were native born. Southerners were certainly under-represented. Officers in both cavalry and infantry units were often inexperienced. Most recruits listed themselves as "laborers."

In examining the officer corps, the author describes them as assured of their place as the elite of society. They often basked in a world of literature, even on field duty, despite the fact that books, newspapers and magazines were not plentiful. This was fully consistent with the culture of the Gilded Age. Officers also actively engaged in scientific activities as they explored the wonders of the western frontier in light of a new appreciation of Darwin.

Work in the frontier military also reflected a deep divide between officers and their men. Although military service was difficult (and sometimes dangerous), most of the time was spent at remote posts where routine drudgery was the rule.

Officers saw themselves as above manual labor and complained bitterly if they performed it. Their job was to manage the soldiers who performed such chores. Moreover, they often employed servants (African-American, Chinese or others) who would perform housekeeping for them and their families. The result was that clear class distinctions were reinforced.

The author describes the social life of army personnel. Leisure "rituals" such as "calling, dining, and hunting" seemed to be the primary focus of officers. These activities, which included wives and dependents, set the social standards and time for most officers on army posts. By contrast, common soldiers filled whatever little free time with sports, theatricals and socials, most of the time without officers and often with alcohol. Hunting, fishing and even reading were very much encouraged. Yet when payday arrived, many soldiers would gravitate to nearby saloons and brothels.

Class differences were also evident in the variant diets between officers and enlisted men. The former often had access to "imported" foodstuffs, drinks and cigars; and many could order the shipment of "finer" items from catalogs. Soldiers existed on poor rations that were enhanced by gardens. Alcohol consumption was very much an issue, sometimes for officers, even more for the troops.

The author states that these practices did not so much produce class distinctions as merely reflected them. Officers saw themselves as competitive, hypersensitive men striving for political and intellectual clout united by a strict social class. The common soldier saw himself as an oppressed worker who suffered under the domineering officers with little regard for their well being. Adams cites a number of journals and diaries that document these very different attitudes.

The only time that these lines were somewhat lost was in combat as both officers and men shared the danger of battle and possible death. Yet such class differences led to the deep seated resentment of the common soldier often forcing him to attempt the one avenue of escape, desertion.

Despite John Ford's movie stereotypes of the hard-drinking Irish or German soldier, Adams clearly demonstrates that ethnicity had little impact on his daily army life. Because enlisted men shared so much danger and hardship together this became the great equalizer. Thus there were few tensions due to ethnic origins.

If there was a real problem, it was due to race. Imbedded in the Frontier Army were rigid attitudes regarding the superiority of whites over blacks. Even though African-Americans had served with distinction in the Civil War and would prove capable on the frontier, their duty was often in the worst, most isolated posts. General William T. Sherman may have advocated integration of the military; yet, the "Buffalo Soldiers" experienced the deep prejudices evident in the social structure of the era.

This book offers excellent background for an understanding of the varied personalities and campaigns of the Indian Wars. Familiar personalities like George and Libbie Custer appear throughout the text as well as other less familiar names. But the author makes a convincing case that the American public has placed its security in men (and today women) whose service reflects the strengths and weaknesses of our society as a whole.

I have only one qualm. Although the title states "1870-1890," Adams often uses examples from the 1860s. Nevertheless, this book is a fine contribution to understanding the Frontier Army and a needed corrective to some of the misunderstandings that have been fostered by movies as well as less competent writers.

Rev. Vincent A. Heier