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Robert M. S. McDonald. *Thomas Jefferson's Military Academy: Founding West Point.* Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2004. 233 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-2298-0.

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Sphinx's Army

America's sphinx, Thomas Jefferson, is well known for his cryptic statements and contradictory actions. The owner of slaves who enunciated American independence with an appeal to universal human rights, the agriculturalist who built a nail factory at Monticello, the strict constitutionalist who stretched the elasticity of the Constitution to double the size of the republic with a real estate deal he justified as a treaty, all these examples make Jefferson a founder with whom just about any ideal or inclination can feel at home. His complexity was well documented and infamous to political allies and enemies alike.

But militarist? Jefferson is remembered as the governor of Virginia who fled his home state during the British invasion of 1781. His reduction of the armed forces and building of a "mosquito navy" after his inauguration seemed in line with his suspicion of large standing armies, especially those built under the direction of the Federalists Hamilton and Adams. His ideal of the citizen soldier seemed to exclude his advocacy of an American martial culture.

Theodore Crackel undermined this version of Jefferson with his seminal work on the subject, *Mr. Jefferson's Army* (1987). For Crackel, Jefferson, remembered as a founder of the republic and the University of Virginia, was also the forgotten founder of the American tradition of a republican military culture of professionalism and merit.

Robert M. S. McDonald and the authors of ¬*Thomas Jefferson's Military Academy* further explore Crackel's thesis with great success. According to Don Higginbotham in his chapter "Military Education Before West Point" the foundation of a professional American officer corps was established during the American Revolution. Following a European trend of greater interest in artillery and fortifications, both skills that lent themselves to the engineer's craft, officers in the Continental Army traded European publications with titles like *Military Instructions for Officers Detached in the Field* (1775) and *Manoeuvres, Or Practical Observations on the Art of War* (1770). In fact, a Prussian officer, Johann Ewald, upon investigating captured American haversacks, observed "the most excellent military books. . . . ", including many homemade manuals that officers distributed to their peers (p. 35). American reading habits did not make for a republican military academy, however.

Jefferson's founding of the United States Military Academy was undertaken for reasons more political than ideological. The Military Peace Act, initiated by Jefferson and signed into law in 1802, led to the establishment of the officer's academy at West Point, New York and the restructuring of the military along lines advantageous to Jefferson. In his chapter "The Military Academy in the Context of Jeffersonian Reform", Theodore Crackel argues that the establishment of West Point was part of a broader program by Jefferson to purge the effects of the previous three Federalist administrations and create an officer corps faithful to his Republican ideals (p. 111).

These ideals were inculcated by redefining European concepts of military honor. In the chapter entitled "West Point and the Struggle to Render the Officer Corps Safe for America, 1802-1833," Samuel Watson argues that Jefferson's legacy, via West Point, is that of a civic-minded military. According to Watson, West Point alumni were "an administrative cadre more akin to a national . . . managerial class than any other American social or occupational group prior to the Civil War" (p. 155). This was due largely to Jefferson's appointment of the first superintendent of the academy, Colonel Jonathan Williams. Williams, the chief engineer and inspector of fortifications of the army, established the Corps of Engineers as an elite group within West Point and, therein, inaugurated a culture of technical skill and meritorious advancement in opposition to a European military culture that emphasized individual glory and flamboyant posturing (p. 158).

Sylvanus Thayer, who studied at West Point under Williams' tutelage and was the longest-serving superintendent of the academy (1817-1833), is considered the founder of the West Point of popular memory. Thayer, for example, coined the academy's motto "Duty, Honor, Country." During his tenure, these traditional military ideals took on a meaning in line with Jefferson and Williams's republican vision for West Point. According to Watson, duty meant serving civilian authority under the dictates of the Constitution; even when civilian direction ran counter to military good sense. Honor, rather than representing the essential and easily affronted identity of officer-gentlemen, stood for performing one's duties selflessly. One's honor was established through integrity and dedication to the civic whole. Country, then, provided the "focal point" that "concentrated and legitimated graduates' efforts to perform their duties" (p. 169). By professionalizing the officer corps and dedicating it to the very Jeffersonian ideals of merit, technical skill, and dedication to the republic, Thayer completed the process of producing a particularly republican type of military culture.

What, then, accounts for Jefferson's forgotten reputation as the founder of America's premier military academy? Ironically, West Point's institutional amnesia began this forgetting. Robert M. S. McDonald, in a chapter entitled "West Point's Lost Founder," traces the strange story. It began with the removal of Sylvanus Thayer in 1833 as superintendent of the academy by president Andrew Jackson. Jackson perceived the training at West Point to be autocratic and, when a cadet, H. Ariel Norris, placed a hickory pole (a symbol of Jackson) in the middle of the parade ground and was punished by Thayer, Jackson found his excuse to end the "tyranny" of the superintendent. "[T]he autocracy of the Russias couldn't exercise more power!" Jackson exclaimed upon hearing of the cadet's plight (p. 186).

So firmly had Jackson established his Democratic Party as the inheritor of Jeffersonian ideals, Thayer's removal inspired an antipathy toward Jackson that expunged Jefferson from institutional memory. Thereafter, officers like Winfield Scott and Robert E. Lee, both Whigs, perpetuated the myth that the academy was, at least in spirit, founded by George Washington and Henry Knox. In Lee's case, this revision of West Point's origins also had a personal dimension as the Lees and the Jefferson had a rivalry that went back to 1809 when "Light-Horse" Henry Lee was thrown in debtors' prison and blamed his bankruptcy on Jefferson's Embargo Act of 1807. Jefferson's reputation at West Point reached its nadir in the nineteenth century when Alfred Thayer Mahan declared that Jefferson's military policies guaranteed "a minimum of military usefulness at a maximum of pecuniary outlay" (pp. 192-193).

Jefferson's revival began with the New Deal and the second Roosevelt's egalitarian rhetoric. President Truman, likewise, in support of his Cold War policies, appealed to Jefferson's "hardheaded common sense" in military matters (p. 196). By the late twentieth century, historians like Stephen Ambrose, Thomas Fleming, and Theodore Crackel began to reestablish Jefferson's place in American military history [1].

Thomas Jefferson's Military Academy is a useful book not only for military historians, but also for cultural historians interested in the advent of a very particular American military outlook and the ways in which the U.S. has sought to balance military and civic culture. If I had one request, it would be for a greater analysis of the effect of Jefferson's military academy on American civic culture itself. The authors of this collection do a fine job analyzing the ways in which West Point cadets and officers sought to engage American civic traditions within military training and tradition. It would be worthwhile to analyze the process working in the opposite direction. However, this might make for another very good book.

[1] Stephen Ambrose, *Duty, Honor, Country: A History of West Point*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Theodore Crackel, *West Point: A Bicentennial History*, (Lawrence: The University of Press Kansas, 2003) and *Mr Jefferson's Army: Political and Social Reform of the Military Establishment, 1801-1809*, (New York: New York University Press, 1987); Thomas Fleming, *West Point: The Men and Times of the United States Military Academy*, (New York: William Morrow, 1969).

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