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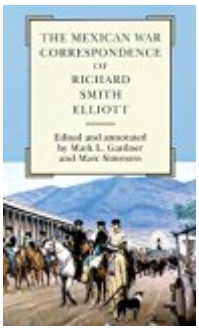

Richard Smith Elliott. *The Mexican War Correspondence of Richard Smith Elliott.* Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997. xi + 292 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8061-2951-8.

Reviewed by Hans Vogel

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One of the most pleasant and interesting ways to study the past is the reading of so-called ego documents: letters, memoirs, diaries and other writings left by the very witnesses of events. When history became an academic discipline in the nineteenth century, students were taught quite extensively how to edit documents, since the editing of manuscript sources was then considered to be a vital public task of the historian. Though today at many universities the editing of sources is still taught at some point in the curriculum, it is quite seldom a required course. The modern historian often believes his field is a "social science," where the methods, techniques and terminology of our anthropologist and sociologist cousins play a crucial role. Hence the daily bombardment in conferences, corridors, learned articles and monographs, with the depressing ordnance of representation, subalternness, otherness, identity, ethnicity, engendering, construction and so on and so forth. It would seem that, in their urge to interpret and to be "scientific," many academic historians have strayed quite far from what their discipline once was, which is only natural because things change over time. The average consumer of history, the reader, however, retains a preference for simple, straightforward, artisanal historical work.

Every so now and then, one encounters a sample of "old-fashioned" history, and the term is not meant to imply any kind of condescension. At any rate, this old-fashioned history today seems to be concentrated at the local level, especially in what is sometimes called in centralized European countries, the provinces. The phenomenon is a universal one: today, there are so many history graduates, and their ranks swell year by year with so many thousands of newcomers, that there is simply not enough room for them in education. Yet while living away from the academic centers and while mostly making a living in any field but history, these highly-trained individuals often retain a deep interest in history, for such is the nature of historians. The many regional and local historical associations (in the United States and in many Western European Countries) would never be able to survive if it were not for the participation of countless history graduates. As a matter of fact, local history is a booming industry, and

thank God it exists, for without it, we would all be suffocating in the terrifying straitjacket of "academic correctness!"

Such is in broad strokes the context in which Gardner and Simmons--both independent historians--have collected, edited and annotated the letters written by lieutenant Richard Smith Elliott and printed in the ***Reveille***, a St. Louis paper published from 1844 to 1850. The ***Reveille*** presented itself as a "light and agreeable news sheet," and was published in both a daily and a weekly edition, the latter containing a selection of the "week's news, gossip, verse and light fiction." Elliott was one of about a thousand Missouri volunteers who enlisted for the war with Mexico in the Spring of 1846. Elliott's unit, the Laclede Rangers (named in honor of the founder of St. Louis), was one of a hundred mounted riflemen--or light cavalry, in generic terms. After having elected its officers, the Laclede Rangers left for Fort Leavenworth, from where they were to depart for New Mexico under the command of General Kearny, of whose Army of the West they formed a part. After some six weeks, the expedition had reached and occupied Santa Fe. Lt. Elliott was to stay there for the rest of his one-year enlistment, until June of 1847. During this year, he kept a diary -- which, unfortunately, has been lost--and wrote letters for the ***Reveille***. The latter were published under the pseudonym of John Brown. It has never been easy, even for an officer, to pursue interests beyond the strictly military, especially when on campaign. As Elliott put it, "every man in the company, from Captain down, is kept busily employed--so much so, that I find the keeping of a diary, even with brief notes, quite an interference with other calls" (p. 50). Even so, the letters are lively and give an interesting perspective on campaign and garrison life. If anything, the overall conclusion to be drawn is that the daily life of a soldier was pretty similar everywhere in the nineteenth century. Elliott's letters are not that different from what European colleagues of his have written.

Like soldiers everywhere and in all ages, Elliott was especially proud of his own unit, noting with satisfaction that "not one of our men has been drunk, or deserved a reprimand, since we have been on the move" (p. 23). After all, cooks and mechanics are often as proud of their company as the men in guard regiments. Like his colleagues everywhere and in all ages, at the beginning of the campaign, before any shot had been fired in anger, and before disease and fatigue had done their nasty work, Elliott was enthralled by the "poetry of war" while being on guard at Fort Leavenworth (p. 29). A few months later he exclaimed " oh! the romance, the poetry of war! whither have ye fled!" (p. 94). At that time, scurvy, military fevers, diarrhea and other scourges were taking a heavy toll among the soldiers. Food was monotonous and generally inferior, payments were months in arrears, prices were high, and diversions few and far between. Small wonder that at Santa Fe, most men devoted themselves to liquor and cards: "the gambling 'hells' are quite numerous here now, and some of them open the live-long night" (p. 187), bringing Elliott to the sad conclusion that "we have actually, as to morals and manners, become contemptible in the eyes of this most contemptible of all people--the Mexicans!" (p. 188). The American soldiers looked filthy, they lived in awful quarters, often not much better than pigsties: "in truth, the most wretchedly dirty and filthy men I have ever seen are among the Missouri 'free and independent' volunteers!" (pp. 173-74). Discipline was so lax that officers could not do very much to improve this condition.

For the Latin Americanist, this volume holds an occasional interesting surprise. It is, of course, widely known that the military in Latin American countries have long had a marked propensity for organizing secret groups either for their own advancement or with the purpose of reforming society. Most officers of the Independence armies were freemasons. One is also reminded of the positivist groups in the late nineteenth-century

Brazilian army and of the GOU, led by Peron in the1940s. Apparently, something similar was afoot in the Army of the West, where Elliott was among the founders of a "Brotherhood of the E.S.T.D., a secret association for the promotion of morals and social intercourse ... with a promise of indefinite extension" (p. 192). Elliott was clearly hoping this old boy network of soon-to-be veterans could be beneficial both to himself and to his state: the E.S.T.D. society in St. Louis would doubtless soon "be the heart of a brotherhood whose ramifications will extend to all parts of the State of Missouri" (p. 194). Apparently, there was less of a difference between nineteenth-century U.S. soldiers and their Latin American counterparts than many North Americans would today be prepared to believe.

Elliott and his colleagues had ample opportunity to engage in extracurricular activity, for there was actually hardly any fighting to be done. Apart from a few actions, such as the punishment of the village of Taos for murdering some Americans and some skirmishes with Indians, and apart from a few forays into Mexican territory, the Army of the West did comparatively little fighting. Of course, the numbers involved and the distance from the centers of population in Mexico and the United States--given the nineteenth-century nature of war--were the determining factor. The real action was going on elsewhere.

The letters by Elliott are a good read and provide an insight into the mind of a nineteenth-century American living in the expanding frontier region. No doubt there is little here that was not already known, nor is our appreciation of mid-nineteenth-century military affairs greatly altered by this volume of war correspondence. Yet the book is attractive for several reasons, not the least of which is the meticulous care the editors have taken to provide relevant and sober notes. The publisher has put out an attractive volume with slightly off-white paper and a pleasant type-face. As I suggested at the beginning, this volume is a fine example of good, old-fashioned, solid, artisanal work, and all the more refreshing for the candid limits of its pretensions. I enjoyed it.

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