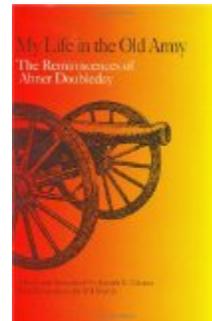


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Abner Doubleday. *My Life in the Old Army: The Reminiscences of Abner Doubleday from the Collections of the New York Historical Society*. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1998. xi + 403 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87565-185-9.

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Of Audiences and Editing

Reading this book forces one to confront many of the questions raised during the recent H-CivWar discussion on the future of and audiences for the history of the Civil War era, for its text is essentially a raw document drawn straight from the archives. The editor, a professor of mathematics at the University of Texas-Pan American, has excised some (though not all) of the repetitions that occurred in the half-dozen manuscripts authored by Abner Doubleday concerning his antebellum career during the 1870s and 1880s, and he has provided biographical data on virtually every character who appears in the book, but the editorial hand is otherwise absent. *My Life in the Old Army* is not annotated in the manner of scholarly editions of personal papers; the notes (concentrated at the end of the work) are almost all biographical, and provide little context for understanding events or interpreting Doubleday's reactions (Chance never gives a more specific sense, or even an educated guess, of the years or the sequence in which Doubleday wrote these memoirs). Similarly, the illustrations (drawings by a modern-day artist) are intended to dramatize interesting incidents; there are no maps with which to follow Doubleday's postings in the United States or his movements during the war with Mexico.

Yet it does not appear that the editor intended to do any more, for his editorial philosophy is to allow the documents to speak for themselves and present "the gentle Doubleday" in the same "light-hearted spirit" (p. 9) of gentle, and genteel, humor in which he wrote these manuscripts. Nevertheless, I simply cannot understand

why Chance (who does provide the scholarly apparatus of notes and bibliography) fails to cite essential works like William Skelton's *An American Profession of Arms* or Bruce Winders' *Mr. Polk's Army*. [1] Given Doubleday's raconteuring, almost stream of consciousness style, *My Life in the Old Army* reads exactly like what the title suggests: the fireside tales of a retiree looking back, usually with more vigor than coherence or analysis, over the amusing incidents of his early career. Chance signals his lack of critical intent by challenging sports historians to disprove that Doubleday organized the first baseball game in Texas at Brownsville in 1848: "after all, he was stationed there for several months during that year" (p. 12). Yet the previous page gives 1867 as the date and Galveston as the place, providing no citations to either case and ripping the "political correctness" that has challenged his hero's stature as the inventor of baseball (the issue never comes up again, in Doubleday's text or the editor's notes). Chance has become enamored of his subject; it is perhaps fortunate that he did not edit with a stronger hand, yet he has lost a rare opportunity to assess officer life in the antebellum army. The publication of *My Life in the Old Army* is cause for gratitude among those who study that army, yet it remains for us to make of it what we will, like a document one reads in the archives.

This idiosyncratic, anecdotal style will appeal to buffs, but the book's contents may not. Chance chose to publish those of Doubleday's manuscripts dealing with the antebellum period, noting that he published his recollections of the crisis at Fort Sumter, where Double-

day was second-in-command, in 1876, and those of the Civil War (where Doubleday served at South Mountain, Antietam—where he commanded the assault against the West Woods on the Union right and earned a brevet promotion for gallant and meritorious leadership, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg, taking up command of the Union forces engaged north and west of the town on the first day and earning another brevet) in 1896.[2]

This is not, then, a book about the Civil War. Nor is it primarily a memoir of the war between the United States and Mexico, of which Chance has edited several. Doubleday served with Taylor's army in Mexico, and provides many interesting anecdotes about the relations between U.S. troops and the Mexican populace, but he only fought at Monterrey, and though apparently cool under fire, his performance did not draw enough attention to merit a brevet for gallantry. Doubleday's recollections of the street-fighting at Monterrey are emotionally acute and tactically informative, and his attention to American morale and the mood of soldiers on the eve of battle valuable, but there is too little of this to please the military buff or analyst. (Nor, despite the author's service in Texas during the 1850s, is there much on army life or Indian-fighting on the western frontier, though the book closes, idiosyncratic to the point of caprice, with an account of a Texas shoot-out.)

Doubleday's reactions to those he met during the war were fairly characteristic of his fellow officers: admiration for the coolness and bravery of fellow officers; paternalism toward and pride in regular enlisted soldiers; and disdain for the lawlessness he perceived in Texas, for the disorder and disorganization of the volunteers, and for all three characteristics among the Mexican populace. Of special interest, he notes a soldier's attempt to assassinate Braxton Bragg by placing a lighted shell under his bed (p. 31), John B. Magruder emerging from an actress's dressing room in the camp at Corpus Christi with "his coat ... nearly torn off his back and his face ... seamed with scratches" (p. 47) (which Doubleday jocularly refers to as the product of "some slight misunderstanding" [p. 47]), and anti-guerrilla operations and the summary execution of bandit-partisans (pp. 120-25 and 135). On the whole, however, Doubleday writes little in depth about the Mexican people and nation, recoiling from physical dirt and political corruption while praising beauty, wit, hospitality, and patriotism. Though Chance suggests that Doubleday was deeply influenced by the religion of his parents, he rarely adverted to religion of any sort in these memoirs, perhaps from a fear of seeming

excessively enthusiastic and lacking in gentility. Thus his references to Mexican religious professions, though charged with a language of "superstition," put greatest stress on his fear of provoking mob violence by failing to kneel. (He did not do so, but hid himself.) Like most regular officers for whom we have records, Doubleday spoke in a rhetoric inflected with class and ethnic chauvinism, while the demands of gentility precluded giving voice to harsher racialist sentiments. The idiom of gentility encouraged romantic allusions to the sublimity of the scenery; a growing consciousness of his own mortality may account for the memoirist's repeated, yet more reflective than sentimental, references to peace, quiet, and death.

What, then, is the principal value of this book? It provides a valuable glimpse of the antebellum regular army in peacetime, and surprisingly few of these works have been published. The published memoirs and diaries of antebellum officers tend to focus on the frontiers (Randolph B. Marcy, George A. McCall, Philip St. George Cooke) and to come from well-connected but unrepresentative men (Cooke, Marcy, McCall, Ethan Allen Hitchcock, and Erasmus D. Keyes) rather than young company officers serving, as the majority did when Doubleday entered the army in 1842, in populated areas along the eastern seaboard and the Canadian border. What do Doubleday's reminiscences tell us about the old army? By and large nothing new, but this should come as little surprise given the thorough analysis done by Bill Skelton and other recent historians of the officer corps. [3] Instead, this book can usefully be cited as a quick introduction to the attitudes of the regular officer corps, as I have already done in one essay. Above all, Doubleday presents us with a portrait of a corps of gentlemen, among whom spirit, "tone," and honor were more highly valued than specifically professional or uniquely military expertise. Thus they phrased battlefield leadership in essentially social and cultural tones, as the product of gentility and self-control rather than flamboyance or bravado. They cultivated a genteel intercourse with respectable local "society," and were accepted therein. Once tensions cooled, they socialized with their British counterparts along the Canadian border, hampered only by their inability to afford expensive silver on which to entertain. (They were able to borrow "quite a creditable" [p. 233] set from the local gentry, however.) They sometimes acted condescendingly, and even violently (p. 36), toward working-class civilians, but were unsympathetic toward sustained violations of civil rights or violations of the principle of military subordination to civil author-

ity in time of peace (pp. 26 and 149). They found German immigrants good soldiers and shared the prejudices of civilian Anglo-Americans toward Irish immigrants (p. 23). The majority of artillery officers actually fought as infantrymen, and army officers were assigned a variety of tasks, both military and civil, as when Doubleday was sent to Mexico to collect evidence about a claim for damages against the U.S. government. Apart from the conquest of northern Mexico, the most politically significant of these tasks was preparedness to repress slave rebellions, a role Doubleday was called on to perform during a panic shortly after his arrival at his first post after graduating from West Point in 1842 (pp. 21-22).

Doubleday's account has two distinguishing features: it contains a narrative (of which there are very few) of service in the "Third Seminole War" of the 1850s, and several strongly worded political statements. The former reads much like narratives of the Second Seminole War (1835-1842): a tale of arduous service in humid swamps where the Indians had little difficulty eluding their pursuers, without the dissension and civil-military conflict engendered by a long war and widespread civilian criticism. Two statements stick out: Doubleday's relation of a phantom patrol, in which a lieutenant and his men attempted to fake obeying orders in order to avoid a day's march (but got lost and had to do it anyway) (p. 186), and his suggestion that responsibility for catching the Seminoles ought to have been contracted out to private individuals (p. 183), a possibility that the majority of officers resisted strenuously when it was raised during the second Seminole conflict. One must wonder whether Doubleday believed this at the time, and if so whether it reflected a new level (absent before the war with Mexico) of confidence in the security of the regular army's jurisdiction over the direction of U.S. military force, or whether this proposal is one of the misleading statements that crop up in any memoir.

Unlike most career officers, Doubleday was a committed Republican, even in the mid-1850s. Perhaps the most intriguing incident in the book has Doubleday warning John C. Fremont of a Virginian plot to seize Fortress Monroe (at the entrance to Hampton Roads) if the Pathfinder was elected, "telling him that I for one intended to throw myself with my company into one of the barracks ... and hold out as long as possible." Fremont supposedly responded by determining "the moment [the result of] this election was announced to anticipate the revolutionists by occupying Fort Monroe with a party of his adherents headed by himself" (p. 182), which if true gives us added reason to be grateful that Lincoln took his

place. Some pages later, referring to the secession crisis, we find Doubleday assailing "timorous northern men ... offering to compromise"; "fortunately the south became more and more arrogant." He closes this editorial, rare in the generally conservative and antipartisan (but during the 1850s increasingly Democratic) officer corps, with praise for "the great Abolitionist member" Owen Lovejoy and Doubleday's doubts whether "compromise however degrading would have been possible" (p. 196). [4]

When concentrated together army officers felt a strong sense of esprit de corps and camaraderie, yet their daily intercourse was rent by personal disputes of all sorts. It is here that Doubleday's testimony is most valuable historiographically, for it reminds us of the persistence of individualism, particularly in the rhetoric of personal honor and its cognates, in an increasingly bureaucratized profession and institution. Doubleday was in a position to observe three of the most significant controversies in the army during the years just before the war with Mexico: that over Winfield Scott's effort to restrain illegal physical punishments against enlisted soldiers (pp. 20-21); Braxton Bragg's insubordinate letters to and disobedience of War Department orders (p. 31), which led to a court-martial and an extended controversy in the army's professional journal; and the debate within the Army of Occupation in Texas over the authority of brevet rank (p. 43), that led to a mass petition to the president and the temporary resignation of William Worth. Though Doubleday does not delve deeply into these quarrels, their mention combines with his own experiences of domineering commanders, rumors of dueling (p. 197), and challenges from counterparts (pp. 118-19) to suggest a less cohesive force than William Skelton has portrayed in his paradigm-setting work on the antebellum officer corps. Indeed, the very character of the disputes Doubleday observed implies a different character in the nature of conflict within the officer corps, for he seems to have encountered comparatively little friction between staff and line or between different branches and regiments. Doubleday did little staff service, and personal quarrels suit his storytelling style better than analyses of institutional conflict, but it may be that his selection of anecdotes proceeded from a more personalistic and less institutionally oriented understanding of interaction, implying limits to the bureaucratization, and what is commonly labeled the "professionalization," of the officer corps. [5]

What, then, to make of this uneven book? Chance states his intention up front: "I have hoped to give ... the reader a glimpse of the Old Army and the strongly individualistic men who filled its ranks. What better way to

view this thin blue line of heroes than through the eyes of a wonderful storyteller[?]” (p. 12). Though tempted to judge his editing harshly, as a professional historian, I am delighted that Joseph Chance collected and TCU Press published these documents, and I think other historians of the antebellum army will be equally pleased.

Notes:

[1]. William B. Skelton, *An American Profession of Arms: The Army Officer Corps, 1784-1861* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992); Richard Bruce Winders, *Mr. Polk's Army: The American Military Experience in the Mexican War* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997).

[2]. Abner Doubleday, *Reminiscences of Forts Sumter and Moultrie in 1860-61* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1876); idem., *Chancellorsville and Gettysburg* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896). These are much more focused narratives, however; the latter was part of a contemporary series about the campaigns of the war.

[3]. Personal puff time: in addition to *An American Profession of Arms* and Skelton's many articles, cited in his bibliography, see my essays "Flexible Gender Roles During the Market Revolution: Family, Friendship, Marriage, and Masculinity Among U.S. Army Officers, 1815-1846," *Journal of Social History* 29 (Fall 1995): 81-106; "Manifest Destiny and Military Professionalism: A New Perspective on Junior Army Officers' Attitudes Toward

War With Mexico, 1844-1846," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 99 (April 1996): 466-98; "Army Officers Fight the 'Patriot War': Responses to Filibustering on the Canadian Border, 1837-1839," *Journal of the Early Republic* 18 (Fall 1998): 487-521; "'This thankless ... unholy war': Army Officers and Civil-Military Relations in the Second Seminole War," in David Dillard and Randal Hall, eds., *The Southern Albatross: Race and Ethnicity in the South* (forthcoming, Mercer University Press, 1999); and "Thomas Sidney Jesup: Soldier, Bureaucrat, Gentleman Democrat," in Michael A. Morrison, ed., *The Human Tradition in the Early Republic* (forthcoming, Scholarly Resources, 2000).

[4]. See Joseph Allan Frank, *With Ballot and Bayonet: The Political Socialization of American Civil War Soldiers* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1998), p. 129, concerning Doubleday's wartime anxiety that proslavery officers would hold up the promotion of Republicans.

[5]. See especially pp. 28-29; but see p. 30 for more emphasis on staff-line conflict.

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