

Lorien Foote. *The Gentlemen and the Roughs: Violence, Honor, and Manhood in the Union Army.* New York: New York University Press, 2010. x + 237 pp. \$39.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8147-2790-4.



Reviewed by Judkin J. Browning

Published on H-CivWar (February, 2011)

Commissioned by Martin P. Johnson (Miami University Hamilton)

Over the past seven decades, historians have published numerous works discussing the character of the young men who served in the Northern and Southern armies as well as the motivating factors that not only sent them to war but also compelled them to remain. However, when it comes to discussing the role that honor played in shaping these men's character, historians have tended to focus exclusively on Southern soldiers, with the implication that the boys in gray were the only ones who were really concerned about such an intangible abstraction. The scholarship indicates that Southerners were the ones who valued honor more highly than all other characteristics of manhood, and they were the ones constantly asserting and proving their masculinity through putative rituals that had been clearly established by their peer groups. Northern soldiers were deemed not to be without honor, but rather not focused on honor as a defining attribute of what constituted manhood. Instead, scholars have argued that honor had waned in Northern men, who instead focused more on restraint, self-con-

trol, and practice of moral virtues as defining characteristics of their manhood. However, Lorien Foote, in a thoroughly researched and innovative approach has sought to dispel that myth. As she asserts at the beginning of her well-written and engaging work, "the central contribution of this book may be its recovery of the place honor held in northern men's conception of manhood and in their daily interactions with one another" (p. 6). Indeed, by creatively poring through regimental order books and Union court martial records, and placing her discoveries in the context of the relevant secondary literature, Foote succeeds admirably in this goal of restoring the honor of Union soldiers.

Foote argues that the Union army found itself divided by class and social status, fighting a war of masculinity within its ranks at the same time it fought the Southern enemy. The divide came primarily, though not exclusively, between those of the upper social crust who considered themselves gentlemen and those of lower strata whom the gentlemen pejoratively dubbed as "roughs." Gen-

tllemen focused on displaying gentility and self-control, and not only believed strongly in the core value of an upright moral character, but expected (and attempted to enforce) others to do so as well. For some gentlemen, the stakes were extremely high, for nothing less than “the success of the Union cause ... depended on the superior morality and character of its citizens” (p. 19). Army regulations reinforced this expectation of high moral behavior, with strict disciplinary measures for drinking, disrespectful language to superiors, reluctance to promptly obey orders, and many other behaviors along this line.

The problem for many of the gentlemen was that there was little agreement on the basic rules of manliness. As Foote’s research reveals, “the behavior that some men judged scandalous or even reprehensible was behavior that other men displayed as conduct necessary to earn a manly reputation among their peers” (p. 33). In this milieu, gentlemen found themselves having to walk a fine line. Self-control was a prized value, but gentlemen could only turn the other cheek for so long before they were emasculated. The difficulty lay in knowing precisely when to use force to defend their manhood. Some lashed out too quickly and risked looking rash and unrestrained to their peers, while others risked coming across as weak and spineless if they endured provocation for too long.

The “roughs” presented a real challenge to the discipline of the army and the gentlemen’s ideals of manhood. The lower class roughs—many of whom entered the army less than enthusiastically in 1863 as conscripts, substitutes, and bounty men—were dispersed fairly widely throughout the army and were frequently contemptuous of any authority. Foote argues that officers began enforcing very strict disciplinary measures in 1863 largely because they believed “that a class of undesirable men had infiltrated the ranks of the army and that these men had to be handled with strict discipline, harsh punishments, and coer-

cion” (p. 129). In this regard, Foote’s conclusions are very similar to those of Michael J. Bennett’s work on the Union navy (*Union Jacks: Yankee Sailors in the Civil War* [2004]), arguing that the roughs were largely cynical, unpatriotic, and unsentimental.

While the gentlemen thought very little of the roughs, and often of lower-class enlisted men in general, those enlisted men frequently viewed their officers with equal disdain. Enlisted men protested treatment that tended to “destroy their manhood,” such as humiliating and degrading punishments for seemingly minor offenses (p. 127). In many cases, the enlisted men offered to fight their superiors if only the latter would remove their “shoulder straps” (p. 152). They believed firmly that only the presence of rank insignia—not any superiority of morality, gentility, social status, and certainly not physical ability—separated officers from enlisted men. The enlisted men frequently sought to demonstrate their manhood and martial prowess to those officers that they felt persecuted them. However, fights were common among all ranks. Even officers engaged in brawls or occasionally attempted to go through the formal rituals of the code duello if they felt that their honor had been insulted in some way. Foote finds that despite the illegality of dueling and the army’s harsh punishment for such actions, there were a surprising number of formal challenges to duels among the officer corps.

As the war progressed, however, officers demonstrated an increasing willingness to use deadly force not with their peers, but with those subordinates who disobeyed their orders. Foote argues that the army hierarchy tended to affirm these measures as necessities in extreme circumstances, and officers who shot and killed enlisted men were usually acquitted of wrongdoing by their peers at court martials, but only as long as they made a defense that was couched in proper language of gentlemanly behavior and honor. Foote argues, however, that these conflicts be-

tween officers and the enlisted ranks, especially the immigrants and roughs, undermined the progressive and democratic tendencies of the army: "By 1864-1865, it looked more like the antebellum regular army, which had long reflected the social divisions of civilian life" (p. 142). Thus, the war and the army did not have the leveling and transformational effects that some scholars have attributed to it. By the time the war ended, social stratification was as entrenched as ever.

Foote developed comprehensive sampling measures and then effectively mined the Federal military records and published primary sources to get at the inner workings of the army. In nearly every vignette she uses, Foote deconstructs the episode and fleshes out the larger meaning of each individual's action. She also amasses an impressive amount of data within her sample to support her thesis. She offers a sophisticated, yet lucid discussion of honor and manhood within the Union army. Along the way, Foote reveals as much about the nature of the army and daily regimental life as she does about the competing concepts of manhood. One cannot help but think that a similar exploration of the much less comprehensively preserved disciplinary records of the Southern armies would also undoubtedly reveal new insights into the nature of that stratified society at war. This is a refreshing book that offers new ways of looking at the Union army, which overcame more than just the ineffectiveness of many of its generals and the skill of its Confederate opponents in order to preserve the nation intact.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Judkin J. Browning. Review of Foote, Lorien. *The Gentlemen and the Roughs: Violence, Honor, and Manhood in the Union Army*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. February, 2011.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30963>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.