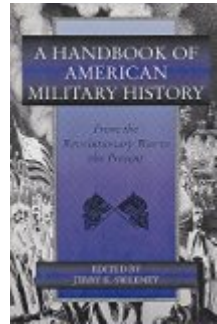


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jerry K. Sweeney, ed. *A Handbook of American Military History: From the Revolutionary War to the Present*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996. xiii + 319 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8032-9337-3; \$7.98 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8133-2871-3; \$69.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8133-8569-3.

Reviewed by Sarandis Papadopoulos (George Washington University)
Published on H-War (February, 1997)



Getting a Handle on American Military History

American military history spans two centuries, is populated by hundreds of participants, and recorded in a literature that is truly enormous and growing every year. Attempting to come to grips with such an expansive field requires the assistance of reference works, and it is such a role that *A Handbook of American Military History* aspires to play. By providing introductory essays, chronologies, battle descriptions, biographies and bibliographies, the *Handbook* sets out to give the researcher a starting point for further work in the field of American military history.

The *Handbook* is divided into six sequential chapters: 1)The Building Period: 1775-1815; 2)The Institutional Period: 1816-1865; 3)The Reform Period: 1866-1914; 4)The Unsettled Period: 1915-1941; 5)The Global Period: 1942-1963; and 6)The Uncertain Period: 1964-1994. Each of these six chapters is in turn divided into five distinct sections: an introductory summary, a chronology, a series of battle descriptions, a set of biographies, and an annotated bibliography. With the coverage of these five components the book attempts to give one a start on most types of questions.

Logically, the *Handbook's* attentions are directed to a broad exploration into, for example, the lesser-known characters in U.S. military history. As a consequence of this orientation, for example, a Horatio Gates receives a longer entry than does a George Washington, and the same is true in regard to Daniel Ellsberg *vis-a-vis* William Westmoreland. Since the two more famous characters of these pairs have published biographies, which are cited in

the *Handbook*, the book reflects the commendable desire of the editors to describe the less-well known and simply cite the appropriate works of the famous for further use. Similarly, the periodization chosen by the editors works fairly well by providing a thematic, as well as temporal, unity to each of the summaries and chronologies involved.

All the same the periodization does impose limits upon the utility of the *Handbook*. The lives of individuals frequently spanned more than one of the periods the book uses which can lead to some confusion in handling the biographies. While Merriwether Lewis, for example, appears in the first chapter's biography section (p. 23), his partner William Clark's biography does not show up until the book's next chapter (p. 69). To be sure the longer-lived Clark's life extended into the 1816-1865 period, but it would have been clearer to have kept the pair together. Similarly the opening events of American involvement in the Second World War, up until 31 December 1941, show up in Chapter 4, while the balance of the war's events occur in Chapter 5. While dividing up that conflict's events does not harm the quality of the two chapters' chronologies, checking the biographies involved becomes trickier with this dividing-line. Another linked pair of individuals gets split up, so that Admiral Husband Kimmel's biography (p. 165) appears in the earlier chapter while his opposite number at Pearl Harbor, Army Lieutenant General Walter Short, appears in the latter (p. 224). An index to the *Handbook* would have neatly avoided this problem, but none is provided.

Errors are inevitable in any reference work and one can excuse the placement of the 1812 battle of Queenston Heights on the St. Lawrence rather than the Niagara River (p. 17). The date of the renaming of the United States Army Air Corps as the Army Air Force, however, is an important institutional reference-point that demands inclusion in the chronology. While the *Handbook's* omission of a biographical entry for Alfred Thayer Mahan is partially alleviated by his inclusion in the Chapter 3's summary (p. 98), the absence of a biography for James Forrestal, and the mere mention in the chronology of the dates that he assumed office as secretaries of the Navy and Defense, is inadequate. The Glossary's inclusion of a definition of "Combat Arms" (p. 309) is handy, but it should have been balanced by definitions of the more obscure "Combat Support" and "Combat Service Support" troops. Space is admittedly always a problem in works of this sort, but these omissions reduce the value of the *Handbook*.

At a more systemic level the utility of this book is limited by its organization. In approaching a topic in a field as diverse as American military history, the use of guides and bibliographies is the first step in dealing with the volume of information available. As conceived by its editors the *Handbook* is precisely designed to be such a

"first step" for a student of the field (p. xi). Summary works such as these should, consequently, link an idea in a reader's mind to the sources and historiographical issues involved and offer tips for further reading. As such the ease of finding information is *the* paramount goal for such guides, rather than a thesis, the adoption of new methodologies, the exploration of obscure topics, or the use of original sources. While the *Handbook* ably avoids these four pitfalls, its structure for tracking down information is not as direct as one would have hoped. Few of us want to spend time scanning reference works at length to find the data that we want. The previously-mentioned lack of an index in this reference work seriously hampers the ability of a reader to track individuals down speedily. Similarly, if one is unsure of the precise date of a battle the lack of an index slows the finding of its description. This structural weakness is a pity since the goal and much of the work in *A Handbook of American Military History* is quite good. A revised edition, with more attention paid to the book's organisation, would truly make the *Handbook* an indispensable guide to American military history.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact h-net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Sarandis Papadopoulos. Review of Sweeney, Jerry K., ed., *A Handbook of American Military History: From the Revolutionary War to the Present*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. February, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=845>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.