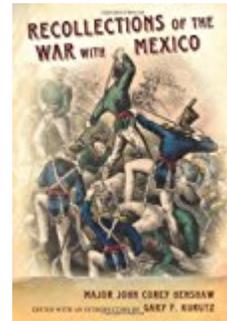


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John C. Henshaw. *Recollections of the War With Mexico*. Edited by Gary Kurutz. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008. xii + 253 pp. \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8262-1799-8.

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The war that brought the United States today's California, Utah, and Texas, much of Arizona and New Mexico, and some of Wyoming and Colorado remains on the margins of the American public's remembered past—surprisingly so given the country's ongoing demographic transformation. Year by year, publishers churn out insightful reinterpretive syntheses of the war (e.g., Timothy J. Henderson, *A Glorious Defeat: Mexico and its War with The United States* [2007]), needed biographies and specialized treatments (e.g., Tom Reilly, *War with Mexico! America's Reporters Cover the Battlefield* [2010]), and richly informative editions of soldiers' letters, diaries, and reminiscences of the war (e.g., Nathaniel Cheairs Hughes Jr and Timothy D. Johnson, eds., *A Fighter from Way Back: The Mexican War Diary of Lt. Daniel Harvey Hill, 4th Artillery, USA* [2002]). Yet the U.S. media allowed the war's sesquicentennial a decade and a half ago to pass by mostly unnoticed, in sharp contrast to what is transpiring regarding the Civil War's sesquicentennial even as I write this review.

Gary F. Kurutz's edition of surviving documents of the wartime regular army lieutenant/captain/brevet major John Corey Henshaw is a valuable addition to published literature on the conflict, though its title requires deconstruction. Rather than a transcribed, printed version of a seamless, postwar handwritten memoir, *Recollections* offers a transcription, thorough annotation, and cosmetically improved version of a cumbersome, handwritten manuscript at the California State Library ("es-

entially one long paragraph loaded with lengthy sentences, strings of compound phrases, and quixotic punctuation," p. 28) supplemented by extracts from Henshaw's wartime letters to his wife Amelia—a majority of which only survive as transcribed by her after she deleted passages that apparently made her uncomfortable. Using italics to differentiate letter extracts from memoir, Kurutz inserts the former at chronologically appropriate points in the latter, a process also adopted for a separate document that Henshaw wrote about his experiences during the Mexican siege of Fort Texas (opposite Matamoros) in May-June 1846. Additionally, for clarity and readability, Kurutz breaks up Henshaw's manuscript into chapters (supplying appropriate titles) and divides the author's block text into paragraphs and sometimes shorter sentences. Kurutz further notes that Henshaw apparently authored most or all of his narrative while still in Mexico (thus it is a memoir with considerable immediacy) and that the so-called *Recollections* crosses literary genres, since it incorporates "daily journal entries written in the present tense" within its narrative structure (p. 3). Kurutz explains that Henshaw definitely derived his account of the siege of Fort Texas from diary materials, and may have used diary entries for other elements of his story.

So what do we glean from Henshaw's take on America's war of conquest? Henshaw served in the Seventh Infantry Regiment, which participated in General Zachary Taylor's campaign in Texas, the contested Rio

Grande borderland, and in northern Mexico from March 1846 until January 1847, and subsequently under General Winfield Scott in the coastal landing, marching, and fighting that took Mexico City. He begins his account with narrative material on the Polk administration's decision to send U.S. regular troops to Corpus Christi in 1845 and ends the memoir with a November 6, 1847 journal entry, while in Mexico City, about visiting the famous Basilica de Guadalupe where the Virgin Mary reportedly appeared in 1531 (which Kurutz follows up with Henshaw's letter to his wife from Mexico City dated December 5). Along the way, Henshaw provides meticulous, richly descriptive impressions of terrain, flora and fauna, ranchos, towns and cities, Mexican garb, diet and liquors, habits and customs including gambling, lassoing skills and cockfighting (the Mexicans he sees hug but neither kiss nor handshake), churches, occupation experiences, most of the major battles of the war, negotiations over prisoner exchanges and surrender terms, and much more. Henshaw's account is particularly valuable on the buildup of tensions before fighting erupted in Texas, the siege of Fort Texas, the landing at Vera Cruz, the fighting near Mexico City, and the occupation of the enemy capital. In many ways, Henshaw's narrative is so comprehensive that it is easier to identify what is not covered thoroughly than what it features. There is little here, for instance, on the role of war correspondents or disease in the ranks. Yet this was the first time in U.S. history that war correspondents traveled with American armies and it was a war in which several times more U.S. soldiers died from illnesses than in action or from battle wounds. Henshaw also seems to have been oblivious to or uninformed about ongoing campaigns that he was not a part of, particularly invasions of New Mexico, Chihuahua, and California by U.S. forces, and ignorant about or uninterested in the Wilmot Proviso and other congressional struggles over slavery initiated by the conflict.

Highly opinionated, Henshaw has little respect for the army's high command, early on chastising a brigade colonel of "wicked heart" for keeping junior officers in the dark about pending fighting, thus denying them the chance to write "farewell letters" to friends and family (p. 41). Henshaw repeatedly blasts General Taylor, who ignores the obvious vulnerability of Fort Texas's position on a point of land easily caught in enemy crossfire, stupidly neglects calling on the governor of Texas for reinforcements during his advance on Matamoros, fails to adopt the "stringent police regulations" necessary to protect Mexican civilians in Matamoros from his own soldiers (p. 71), and foolishly agrees to an armistice af-

ter his victory at Monterrey that allowed the enemy to keep their personal arms. Damning General Scott as a "Pot House demagogue" for allowing officers to command by brevet appointments, Henshaw gives the impression that Mexican blunders such as failing to oppose Scott's landing at Veracruz had as much to do with Scott's conquests as the general's limited command abilities. General David Twiggs issues orders that are so obvious they are unnecessary. General Robert Patterson is unfit for high command. General William Worth exaggerates dangers, foolishly advises Taylor's concessions during armistice negotiations, and orders the Fifth Infantry into a totally unnecessary and horribly costly charge on Molino del Rey in the fighting for Mexico City. Henshaw's account here contradicts most secondary literature on the battle, which attributes the charge to Scott's orders. Toward the end of his service, Henshaw concludes that the only time U.S. generals displayed brilliance was at Buena Vista, a battle he had not participated in. Further, Henshaw hardly lets lower-ranking officers off the hook. Captain Seth Thornton, who led the Second Dragoons into the skirmish that triggered hostilities, "betrayed that lack of Judgment and forethought so much more essential a quality in the soldier than that headlong rashness too often miscalled bravery" (p. 51) in disregarding the advice of a Mexican guide and interpreter that a trap lay ahead.

Most of Henshaw's account provides reinforcement for arguments already pervasive in Mexican War scholarship, rather than material for new interpretations. Paul Foon's bibliography for *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair* (2002) does not list Henshaw manuscript materials, but Henshaw's writings confirm many of Foon's points in elaborate detail, such as differential responses to U.S. occupation and annexation according to Mexican social class. Whiggish in his perspective, Henshaw simultaneously rails at the war as unjust and commenced by a government unprepared, given an inadequate peacetime establishment, to wage it effectively (p. 66). Major Samuel Ringgold's "Flying Artillery" performs brilliantly at Palo Alto, while Mexican artillery fire is mostly ineffective. U.S. volunteers, especially Texas Ranger "Cossacks" (p. 79), commit so many depredations they alienate the Mexican populace and provoke guerrilla resistance. Apparently Henshaw had an interest in Russian history and culture, because he also alludes to Peter the Great when discussing the military potential of the common Mexican soldier. Like many U.S. soldiers, Henshaw lambastes Mexico's Catholic Church for exploiting its parishioners. Priests "wring from the infatuated people every stiver

they possess” (p. 143).

Still, there are surprises and nuances that will be useful to scholars. Reading K. Jack Bauer’s highly regarded *The Mexican War: 1846-1848* (1974), for example, one would hardly realize that Captain Edgar S. Hawkins, who showed great “bravado” (p. 52) in refusing to surrender Fort Texas under Mexican bombardment, was actually a “despicable” coward (Henshaw’s words, p. 59) who had to be rallied by a stubborn council of his fellow officers. Scholars of the naval war will welcome Henshaw’s description of the porous U.S. blockade of Veracruz. Scholars of gender will note that Henshaw gives an impression that more of the U.S. atrocities in Mexico were of a sexual nature than is generally understood. And his graphic descriptions of fighting caution against romanticizing the U.S. military’s accomplishments in Mexico. At Fort Texas, an enemy shell bursts in the ground near a soldier, “blowing his skull and brains in every direction” (p. 56). At Cerro Gordo, men with mangled limbs crawl for safety; there, too, Henshaw reluctantly leaves to die a horribly wounded soldier with “entrails hanging out” (p. 134). Henshaw’s description of amputated limbs smacks of countless books about Civil War surgery. But to me, the book’s most intriguing passages have to do with Henshaw’s attitudes about killing, which remind of U.S. World War II army historian S. L. A. Marshall’s famous finding that an overwhelming percentage of U.S. soldiers did not fire their weapons at the enemy. Henshaw tells his wife in March 1847, after soldiering against Mexico for about a year, “I never attempted to kill, nor have I killed a human being” (p. 113), noting also that he hated the sight of blood and would only shoot to defend his own life. Even at the climax of the fighting for Mex-

ico City, in September 1847, Henshaw insists his hands remain “as yet unstained with blood” (p. 170), so much so that General Gideon Pillow censured him for passing up an opportunity to shoot at Mexican looters.

Kurutz supplements Henshaw’s account/s with an excellent introduction that contextualizes and highlights key points in the document/s, illuminates Henshaw’s prewar and postwar biographies, and alerts readers to other Henshaw documents available not only at the California State Library but also the Library of the Massachusetts Historical Society and the John Hay Library at Brown University. Additionally, this volume includes superb illustrations and maps and a fine index with helpful sub-entries. Explanatory endnotes are informative, thorough, and well documented.

Recollections provides an important contribution to the literature of Manifest Destiny. In the final pages of his account, Henshaw denounces all Mexican politicians as greedy and suggests the war will terminate in U.S. conquest of the entire Mexican nation. The United States, he opined, should then “keep possession of the whole country under a territorial government till there is intelligence enough among the people to appreciate what true liberty is and the blessings of a republican government. Then they might be left to govern themselves or be annexed” (p. 180). The United States could facilitate this outcome, he averred, by confiscating clerical estates, disestablishing the Catholic Church, paying off Mexico’s national debt, and opening up Mexico to “immigration” (p. 180). However much Henshaw may have seen the war as unjustly commenced, he welcomed its eventuating in empire.

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