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What did it mean to be a man in nineteenth-century New York City? This is one of the questions explored within Robert E. Cray's *A Notable Bully* (2021), an account of the life of businessman, politician, and Civil War Colonel William “Billy” Wilson. Through an examination of the turbulent political scene of antebellum New York, the formation of the raucous “Wilson Zouaves,” and Wilson's postwar legacy, Cray provides a lens through which to consider how violence defined masculinity during the Civil War. In particular, he demonstrates how Wilson (and others) leveraged this transformative wartime moment to recast their public images to their advantage.

*A Notable Bully* contributes to the *Interpreting the Civil War: Texts and Contexts* series through Kent State University Press. It addresses the long Civil War era with special emphasis on local history and the experience of individuals. Cray's work, both biographical in its treatment of Wilson and micro historical in its analysis of New York City, fits well within this series. The book draws heavily upon census records, military records, and newspaper accounts to illustrate Wilson's life and the city in which he rose to prominence. This is done most effectively in Cray's analysis of Wilson's own words to show how he engaged in self-invention. Shining a light on Wilson's sometimes shocking exploits, *A Notable Bully* reframes our understanding of urban politics, violence, and self-making in the nineteenth century.

Wilson arrived in New York in 1842, claimed Irish descent, and profited from immigrant running, boxing, and pawnbroking. Questionable business dealings accompanied the liberal use of brutish thuggery for pecuniary and political ends. Cray provides a detailed account of Wilson's antebellum political endeavors. He served as a member of the New York State militia, and ran successfully for alderman in 1856 and unsuccessfully for the Fourth District Senatorial office in 1858. Wilson appealed to a wide swath of New Yorkers by highlighting his immigrant identity, demonstrating his business acumen, and, when necessary, using physical inducement. On the eve of the
Civil War he emerged as a Union Democrat, opposing secession while denouncing “Black Republicanism.” Widespread popularity led to Wilson’s appointment as colonel of the 6th New York Volunteer Infantry, christened the “Wilson Zouaves.”

By far the most fascinating aspect of *A Notable Bully* are the wartime stories of Wilson’s regiment. Composed of alleged street toughs and criminals, the Zouaves argued that their rough past made them effective soldiers. Ranging from the embarrassing to bizarre, accounts include a rumored blood oath, an attempted mutiny, and endless court martials for drunkenness, fighting, and disobedience. Cray highlights the obvious ineffectiveness of Wilson’s command while demonstrating how he constructed more favorable narratives through military records. Two letters written by Wilson concerning the Battle of Santa Rosa, published in the *New York Herald*, included exaggerations and blanket omissions to generate publicity. Primarily serving as occupying forces in Pensacola and New Orleans, the Zouaves avoided much military combat. Their return to New York in June of 1863 placed the regiment on the eve of the New York Draft Riot. Wilson’s attempts to stay in the spotlight were bolstered by the formation of the Wilson Zouave Association in 1868, an organization that would commemorate the regiment well into the twentieth century.

Although Cray examines Wilson’s ambiguous heritage and the composition of the Wilson Zouaves, the relationship between race, ethnicity, and violence could be explored more broadly. Debates over slavery, abolitionism, and racialized violence in New York City in the antebellum period drove both local and national politics and shaped the way men like Wilson campaigned. New York’s immigrant communities increased while corruption infused local politics and secession threatened to dismantle the Union. Cray identifies that Wilson and his Zouaves cast themselves as patriotic and admirable warriors of the Union cause. However, this was a consciously white masculine identity. In 1861, Black men were not yet allowed to enlist as soldiers. The path undertaken by the Wilson Zouaves to reclaim respect through military service remained closed to Black men until the Militia Act of July 1862. Even then, Black soldiers would face barriers to their authority and autonomy throughout the Civil War. Central to the refashioning of the Zouaves was indeed an assertion of a decidedly white masculinity.

Furthermore, we need to more closely examine how Union military men like the Zouaves condoned, participated in, and reacted to racial violence both on the front lines and in New York City. Cray describes how Wilson’s men brusquely interacted with freed people and took part in the looting of Southern homes. Concerning the New York Draft Riot, Cray questions whether or not they responded, stood idly by, or joined the mob. Cray writes that “some questions are best left unanswered” regarding the Zouaves’ participation in the assault of Black New Yorkers (p. 215). However, racial violence was an important element in the formation of a white masculine martial identity that would shape how (white) Union veterans would engage with Reconstruction politics. Violence enacted by militarily empowered white men against Black communities continues to be a tool of oppression. Further exploration of the racial tensions within the Union Army and New York City would better illustrate claims for suffrage, government protection, and federal aid in the postbellum period.
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