

"The Best School in the World": West Point, the Pre-Civil War Years, 1833-1866

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Book Reviews

bling, drinking, and carousing. The work of women in providing a more civilized existence and programs of relief are also covered, as are army health conditions. Particularly good is Coffman's treatment of the background for the progressive medical advances made in the army to practice preventive medicine in relation to illnesses such as dysentery, diarrhea, cholera, and scurvy, along with the more dreaded diseases. The revolutionary advances in bacteriological medicine, antiseptic surgery, and sterile childbirth based on the work of Louis Pasteur, Joseph Lister, and Ignaz Semmelweis were mirrored in the pioneer work of army surgeons such as George M. Sternberg, Joseph J. Woodward, and Walter Reed. Even more revolutionary discoveries in the treatment of yellow fever and malaria would be made during the Spanish-American War and Philippine Insurrection.

It is hard to imagine any historian seeking to cover the same research ground in the near future. Coffman has written a comprehensive work that will rank as the most important and informative treatment of the evolution of the United States army as an institution before the dawn of the twentieth century. The book should be read by everyone interested in the human factor in military matters. It tells of a body of neglected people whose services were so important that they deserve a paraphrase of Winston Churchill's message of praise for the Royal Tactical Air Force. Never in the course of human events had so much been done for so many by so few for so little reward.

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"The Best School in the World": West Point, the Pre-Civil War Years, 1833-1866, by James L. Morrison, Jr. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1986. xii, 255 pp. Illustrations, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$27.50 cloth.

Through much of its 185-year history, the United States Military Academy has been a center of controversy, eulogized by its supporters as the seedbed of American military genius, reviled by its critics as an inbred, authoritarian institution, academically weak and out of step with the larger society. Never was this controversy more intense than during the antebellum and Civil War years, the period examined by James L. Morrison, Jr., in *"The Best School in the World."*

Morrison starts with the resignation in 1833 of Superintendent Sylvanus Thayer, the "Father of West Point," who introduced the basic curricular orientation and disciplinary system that have survived to the present. In Morrison's opinion, the dominant force in shaping the school was the academic board, a small group of long-term professors

who tenaciously resisted all efforts to change the legacy left by Thayer, especially the narrowly technical engineering curriculum. Morrison discusses the socioeconomic circumstances of the cadets, arguing plausibly that West Pointers did not derive from an American aristocracy but instead represented a rough cross section of the middle class. He includes sections on the administrative hierarchy of West Point, cadet life, the academic environment, and the curriculum. One of his most original chapters compares West Point to antebellum civilian colleges; he maintains that the academy resembled more than it contrasted with its contemporaries, sharing with them a preoccupation with mental discipline and "character building." Morrison successfully disproves the claims that southerners dominated antebellum West Point and that graduates were more likely than other southern-born officers to join the Confederacy. He concludes with the reform of the academy in the immediate postwar period which removed the school from the exclusive control of the Corps of Engineers but left the basic curriculum and disciplinary system intact.

Morrison's monograph, a slightly revised version of his 1970 Ph.D. dissertation, is based on extensive research in the official records of the military academy and the War Department and the personal letters, diaries, and memoirs of cadets and graduates. He finds little to criticize in antebellum West Point; his account parallels in this regard the sympathetic general histories of the academy by Sidney Forman and Stephen E. Ambrose. He does provide considerable new material on the administration and curriculum, however, and specialists will find especially useful the forty-two pages of tables in the appendixes covering such matters as the occupations of cadets' fathers, the distribution of cadets by state, and the incidence of academic failure.

Despite his contributions, Morrison fails to address directly one important aspect of the early military academy—its role as an agent of professional socialization. In a brilliant analysis of the modern academy, *School for Soldiers: West Point and the Profession of Arms* (1974), Joseph Ellis and Robert Moore have demonstrated that the school's main function is not to educate well-rounded citizens capable of independent thinking; instead it seeks to isolate cadets from civilian life, immerse them in a rigidly military environment, and mold them into disciplined professional officers. Morrison's findings suggest that the antebellum academy had a similar effect, but he does not systematically assess the influence of the total West Point experience in shaping a collective mentality or laying the foundations for a distinct American military profession.

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