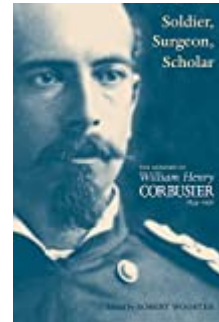


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert Wooster, ed. *Soldier, Surgeon, Scholar: The Memoirs of William Henry Corbusier, 1844-1930*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003. xx + 234 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-3549-6.



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Memoirs recounting life and service in the frontier army abound. Often they were penned by career officers who routinely seized the opportunity afforded to them, through their writings, to combine reminiscences with ambitious self-promotion, in the hopes of advancing their military status or potential political careers once their service ended. William Henry Corbusier's (1844-1930) memoir differs dramatically, though, in its tone and purpose. Perhaps this is due to the timing of their writing, which came after more than forty years in the army and after his retirement from medicine, the military, and essentially public life. Corbusier admittedly attempted to avoid the self-aggrandizing style of his peers and objectively recount the events that defined his military career. Ultimately, he is remarkably successful in his attempt.

Throughout his memoir, Corbusier's descriptions paint a rich and vivid portrait of army life over nearly a forty-year period of service. Rather than focus on his own accomplishments and distort their significance, the memoir instead chronicles the slow advancement of military medicine as well as the conditions Corbusier and others endured together. He opens with his recollections of mid-nineteenth-century New York City, which allude to his humble, but comfortable childhood.

William left the city and all of its potential behind, however, for a life of adventure, opportunity and

medicine. His introduction to the military medical profession came in 1864 when he was hired as a contract surgeon and served with the Union Army. He witnessed first hand the grim reality of battlefield surgery. Despite this he was genuinely encouraged by his experience and embarked on a career in the Army's medical corp. From the eastern battlefields of the Civil War, he followed the army west, winding his way to Arizona in the early 1870s. He arrived there at a time when the Federal government was redefining its relationship with Native Americans. Facing the failure of the treaty and annuity system, as well as mounting costs for managing relations with Indian in the American West, the government became determined to establish and maintain reservations throughout the region. Corbusier witnessed the dramatic effects of this policy first hand, as one of the few medical officers to participate in the relocation of various Apaches to the San Carlos Reservation. While there, he lived among the Yavapai for several years. From Arizona, Corbusier's orders took him to both coasts before he arrived on the northern plains at the height of conflict following the great Indian victory at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. All along the way, Corbusier embraced adventure and was a keen observer, not only of history, but of peoples as well. At one point, he recalls his relationship with Red Cloud and other prominent Native American leaders, whom he forged relationships with during his service in the South-

west and on the Great Plains. He also offers his observations on the language and customs of those among whom he lived. As a result, his memoirs provide added insight into his published ethnographic studies. Before he retired a quarter of a century later, his duties also took him twice to the Philippines and finally the Yukon.

Similar memoirs, in need of a skilled editor and a patient publisher, likely exist—unknowingly—in the attics of ancestors. Fortunately, William Henry Corbusier's memoir found both editor and publisher. Robert Wooster's light-handed editorial approach does not distract the reader from the subject of the manuscript. His subtle editions—correcting obvious spelling errors, and breaking large blocks of text into more readable para-

graphs, for example—combined with his useful notes, not only add value to Corbusier's own memories, they further increase the reader's knowledge of locations, individuals, or events throughout the work. Ultimately, this makes the memoir very accessible beyond those who specialize in this particular era of military history. Although this is not a title necessarily aimed at students, it provides an excellent model that scholars editing future memoirs might follow. Certainly scholars of the frontier military will find Corbusier's memoir useful. When consulted in conjunction with the memoirs of his wife, *Fanny Dunbar Corbusier*, edited by Patricia Stollard, a more complete understanding of the events that shaped the life of a family will be realized.

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