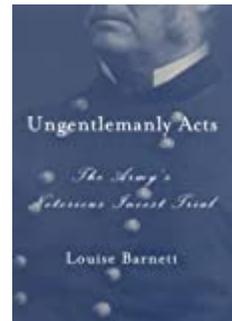




**Louise Barnett.** *Ungentlemanly Acts: The Army's Notorious Incest Trial.* New York: Hill & Wang, 2000. xi + 287 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-7397-9.



**Reviewed by** Gioia Grasso (Independent scholar)

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## A Travesty of Justice

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In 1879, at Fort Stockton, Texas, Captain Andrew Geddes accused fellow officer Lieutenant Louis Orleman of incest with his adolescent daughter, Lillie. Although evidence strongly implicated Orleman, it was not he, but Geddes who was court-martialed for “conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman” and for deeds “not fit to be specified.” Geddes’ crime was that he brought attention to an unspeakable act, and by so doing, set into motion a chain of events that reverberated all the way to General of the Army William Tecumseh Sherman.

In her book, *Ungentlemanly Acts: The Army's Notorious Incest Trial*, Louise Barnett presents a well-written and impressively detailed account of Geddes’ court-martial and the context of a culture that not only allowed but ordained the accuser to become the accused.

Barnett presents an absorbing and orderly analysis of the events and their outcomes. Although she recounts lurid incidents, she never sensationalizes her material. Barnett’s tone is erudite and intellectual. There is phenomenal attention to detail throughout, but the language

doesn't drag.

The book is not merely an account of the court-martial, but a valuable historical document. Barnett masterfully invokes the dusty climate of the west Texas plains and examines the era’s military mindset as well as the undeniable disadvantages of race, class, and gender that were inherent to the times. She writes, “This was a contest between men in which women, in keeping with their societal powerlessness, were to be used as necessary in realizing male objectives, regardless of the detriment to the women’s own interests.” (p. 192) Her referral to a contemporary episode involving Harriet Beecher Stowe and Lord and Lady Byron is an apt example of the prevailing Victorian attitudes that allowed Lillie Orleman and other women to be victimized without recourse. “The easiest attitude for a public that never spoke about such things was to assume that an accusation of incest could not be true. Even if it were, many would maintain, bringing it to light was the greater scandal, a corruption of public discourse.” (p. 22)

From her extensive research, Barnett presents evidence that was not available to all involved parties at the

time of the trial, thus drawing her conclusions: "As officers and gentlemen, one man sexually abused his daughter, another seduced other men's wives, and many others closed their minds to evidence and reason." (p. 224) Her narrative is comprehensive and clearly outlined, and her chapters relate a broad range of supplementary information that adds force and interest to her summation: "Both

sides told some of the truth; both sides lied." (p. 168)

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