

Military Education and the Emerging Middle Class

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Review

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Green, Jennifer R. *Military Education and the Emerging Middle Class*. Cambridge University Press, \$80.00 hardcover ISBN 9780521894937

Martial Education in the Antebellum South

Many historians of the American South characterize the region as one more prone to violence than the rest of the United States. In her new work, Jennifer Green studies public military schools—institutions, one would think, that would only enable the aggression that is thought to have been endemic to the antebellum South. Green's *Military Education and the Emerging Middle Class in the Old South* might surprise some readers who expect a laundry list of cadet-on-cadet violence in the testosterone-fueled atmosphere of a military college or vignettes about the formative years of future Civil War soldiers. Green takes neither of these approaches, and her tack is ultimately much more satisfying. Using the diaries, letters, and memoirs of some one thousand matriculates to southern military schools, Green compiles a prosopographical sketch of their families, their values, and their aspirations. Arguing that public military schools in the South trained the emerging middle class, she traces the effects of their education on the more traditional southern values of honor, mastery, and independence, as well as ideas about community and identity.

Rather than a carbon copy of the northern middle class, southern cadets enrolled in state sponsored public military schools fashioned their own notion of manhood that drew from both the regionalisms of the South and the teachings of their instructors. Cadets did adhere to the southern code of honor, but according to Green, they created a hybrid system based on more traditional values and mixed with the middle class values of obedience, self-discipline, industry, and even submission. Indeed, in the entire antebellum period, Green never found a single case of dueling at a military school, but she notes that during the same period "at least one duel at South Carolina College killed a student and a University of Virginia student shot a professor" (76). Students at military

academies adhered so strictly to their tenets of self-control and obedience, they effectively curbed much of their aggressiveness precisely because of the middle class values they took to heart—no easy feat for most young men.

The changing nature of southern middle class values did not simply reflect the growth of military schools. The middle class itself formed first in southern society, and as they grew more prominent they sought a cheaper and more efficient means of educating the next generation of southern doctors, teachers, and lawyers. Southern public military schools, of which the Virginia Military Institute was the first established in 1839, became a way for young men of modest means to afford a practical education allowing for social and economic advancement. Public and private schools were only beginning to transition away from a style of education that favored the elite and their preferred subjects, Latin and Greek. The burgeoning middle class, on the other hand, hardly had the means to pay for a more traditional university education and found it hard to justify one, as it would not prepare their sons for their chosen careers. As education reforms that emphasized a practical education consisting of science and math gained traction in the South, southern legislatures also began to fund scholarships for military schools at a greater rate than they funded students at other public universities. State scholarships, in effect, provided a paternalistic relationship with the families of cadets. According to Green, “Rather than owing deference to an elite neighbor or relative, cadets in the developing middle class contracted with their states” (54). While the middle class in the South found it beneficial to use government aid to reform education laws, it did not, like the northern middle class, turn to other types of reform like abolition or women’s rights.

This relationship with state governments signaled an awareness for their growing class, and Green demonstrates that the middle class in the South began to think along class lines and developed a consciousness of sorts. Concomitant with this shift in self-awareness was the privileging of professionalism, social status, and upward mobility. Most historians would agree that for white antebellum southerners economic advancement rested on the ownership of land and slaves. Green argues that the men of the southern middle class “began to redefine status into professional, nonagricultural occupations and standards they could achieve” (154). Consciously removing themselves from the standards set by elite plantation owners, members of the southern middle class used professionalism to set their own standards of success and respectability which Green calls status. Communal reification of an individual’s status (most would

use the term honor to describe a community's affirmation of an individual) was nothing new in the South, but the middle class's fixation on status demonstrates not just their own southernness, but also their penchant for creating values that would aid them in their quest for respectability and standing.

Having removed themselves from the paternal relationships with planters, members of the middle class likewise refashioned more traditional bonds of community. Replacing paternal and even kinship ties, graduates from southern military schools utilized the bonds that had formed between them as cadets to find jobs and create a sense of professionalism that permeated the entire region. This new style of community, one that "located employment and redefined mobility for middle-class southern men" dovetailed nicely with other middle class notions, especially status (219). Former cadets had little desire to regress economically, and used networking to improve their chances of locating work and maintaining economic and social stability. According to Green, some 85% of alumni succeeded in enjoying a comparable or more profitable occupation, and thus standard of living, than their fathers (171). The ability of young men in the southern middle class to progress economically speaks to the ability of military schools to churn out motivated, educated, and successful young men who went on to prosper in the antebellum South in the professions that had little in common with plantation agriculture.

Overall, Green's argument and narrative are both satisfying. Though she could have put more emphasis on slaveholding and its acceptance by the middle class, she nicely traces the evolution of southern colleges and their influence of the growth of the middle class in the antebellum South. Even though she discusses the role of cadets in the Civil War—many used those networks they had cultivated to stay out of fighting—she could have traced the importance of a military-style education in the South in the years after the war, especially regarding the prominence of land grant schools and reserve officer training programs that still thrive at most Southern public schools. Still, Green's efforts and research should be lauded, as should her focus on the rise of a middling class in the South, a group that is too often overlooked.

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