

Courage Above All Things: General John Ellis Wool and the U.S. Military, 1812-1863

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Review

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Hinton, Harwood P. and Thompson, Jerry. *Courage Above All Things: General John Ellis Wool and the U.S. Military, 1812-1863*. University of Oklahoma Press, 2020. HARDOVER. \$45.00 ISBN 9780806167244 pp. 523

The subtitle of this scholarly biography of John Ellis Wool lists the dates of 1812-1863, and a casual reader would be forgiven for believing that these refer to Wool's birth and death dates, but they in fact refer to the left and right limits of his military career. Wool's life in fact stretched from 1784-1869, while his military service encompassed the War of 1812, the Army's professionalization after that war, its numerous conflicts with Indian tribes, its various duties suppressing civil disorder, the Mexican War, and the greatest American conflict of the nineteenth century—the Civil War. Wool's long career thus highlights how the U.S. Army played a critical role in some of the major historical processes of Civil War-era America—western expansion, state consolidation, and the sectional controversy over slavery and freedom. In this able biography, Hinton and Thompson draw on Wool's extensive collection of personal papers to give us the definitive biography of a general officer whose career deserves more scholarly attention than it has received in the past.

The prominence of Winfield Scott, Wool's better-known contemporary, may help explain the relative lack of scholarship on Wool, despite the latter's large collection of extant personal papers (unlike Scott). While we have seen two relatively recent biographies of Scott, Timothy D. John's *Winfield Scott: The Quest for Military Glory* (University Press of Kansas, 2015) and Allan Peskin's *Winfield Scott and the Profession of Arms* (Kent State University Press, 2004), we have seen no comparable recent coverage of Wool. Some of this stems from Scott's obvious importance as a senior officer during the War of 1812, notable postwar reformer, conqueror of Mexico City, Presidential candidate, and General-in-Chief at the outset of the Civil War, but Wool also took a prominent part in many of these events so this new biography serves as a companion piece of sorts to the recent scholarship on Scott. It also smoothly slips into the stream

of the larger recent literature on the 19th century U.S. Army: Samuel Watson's two-volume magnum opus, *Jackson's Sword: The Army Officer Corps on the American Frontier, 1810-1821* and *Peacekeepers and Conquerors: The Army Officer Corps on the American Frontier, 1821-1846* (University Press of Kansas, 2012-13); Robert Wooster's *The United States Army and the Making of America, 1775-1903* (University Press of Kansas, 2021); and the reviewer's own *West Pointers and the Civil War: The Old Army in War and Peace* (University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

Because of Wool's astonishing longevity—a military career that spanned more than a half century—his life embraces multiple strands in the larger literature on the Old Army. For example, Wool's career highlights the question of American military professionalization after the War of 1812. His early service as an Inspector General and his travel to Europe to procure information for artillery reforms that later became profoundly significant for American victory during the Mexican War certainly supports William Skelton's important argument in *An American Profession of Arms: The Army Officer Corps, 1784-1861* (University Press of Kansas, 1992) that the officer corps became professionalized after the War of 1812. However, Wool's active participating in partisan politics throughout his career, including a barely concealed attempt to run for the Presidency in 1852, raise some questions about Skelton's mostly accepted argument that the Old Army generally avoided partisan politics (207).

Indeed, even behind his own political ambitions, Wool's military service frequently involved deep involvement in politics, ranging from his role in Indian removal to his service in San Francisco during its vigilante crisis in 1856. The Army's role in maintaining civil order in sometimes fractious frontier regions receives thorough examination in Watson's two-volume opus, but Hinton and Thompson extend that treatment to the period after 1846, which also includes Wool's occupation duties as a military governor during both the Mexican and Civil Wars. Indeed, Wool's fraught time imposing civil order in sometimes-violent Baltimore and New York, important cities in the "loyal" North, highlight the broad continuities in the U.S. Army's role as an institution enforcing Federal order against enemies, foreign and domestic. This theme, already covered to some degree by Watson's and Wooster's aforementioned monographs, deserves further treatment in the scholarly literature. Like any individual, Wool was his own man with his own peculiarities, but his prickly sensitivity to questions of honor and

fastidious attention to military protocol was paired with a cautious pragmatism in politically controversial questions of civil order that reflected the Old Army's larger institutional culture.

Finally, *Courage Above All Things* began its life as a dissertation by the late Harwood P. Hinton, who taught for thirty years at the University of Arizona. He passed away in 2016 without having finished his published biography of Wool, and Jerry Thompson, Regents and Piper Professor History at Texas A&M, completed the manuscript and shepherded it to completion. Dr. Thompson deserves much credit for ensuring that his late colleague's life-long project finally saw the light of day as a handsome book, ably illustrated with period photographs.

Wayne Wei-siang Hsieh is an Associate Professor History at the United States Naval Academy. He is the author of West Pointers and the Civil War: The Old Army in War and Peace (UNC, 2009), and co-author of A Savage War: A Military History of the Civil War (Princeton, 2016).