

A Notable Bully: Colonel Billy Wilson, Masculinity, and the Pursuit of Violence in the Civil War Era

Lorien Foote

Texas A&M University, lfoote@tamu.edu

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Review

Foote, Lorien L.

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Cray, Robert E. *A Notable Bully: Colonel Billy Wilson, Masculinity, and the Pursuit of Violence in the Civil War Era.* The Kent State University Press, 2021. HARDCOVER \$55.00. ISBN 9781606354247 pp. 320

Colonel Billy Wilson personified the type of man that genteel Civil War-era Americans labeled a “rough.” A working-class immigrant to New York City, Wilson was a pugilist, ticket-agent, pawnbroker, and street brawler who served as a shoulder-hitter for the city’s Democratic political machine. It was his job to keep opposition voters away from the polls on election day. He threw a chair from the balcony during the Astor Place Riots of 1849. In an altercation outside city hall, Wilson either pounded the head or pulled the nose of 8th District Alderman John Russell. In 1861, he organized and commanded the 6th New York Volunteers, a zouave regiment manned by roughs like himself whose drinking, fighting, and indiscipline made headlines across the United States and Confederacy. The 4th Wisconsin, working alongside the 6th to improve New Orleans’ defensive perimeter, had so many fistfights with the New Yorkers that the midwestern officers built a ring so that the champions of each regiment could duke it out.

Unlike middle- and upper-class “gentlemen,” “roughs” did not leave diaries, letters, and papers for historians to examine their personal lives and private opinions. We know what we know about the roughs from gentlemen’s commentary on their actions and denigration of their manhood, newspaper coverage of their public exploits, and the occasional pension application from their widows. They appear in the disciplinary records of Civil War regiments and in the transcripts of general courts-martial. In the case of William Wilson, a First Ward alderman and commander of a volunteer Civil War regiment, partisan newspapers covered his public persona. Robert E. Cray, professor of history at Montclair State University in New Jersey and historian of the early republic, uses the media circus surrounding Wilson to build a fascinating and easy to read biography of a “notable bully.” This book provides a rare in-depth look at a man who used

violence to assert his manhood, build his reputation, assert leadership, and win or lose political battles.

Cray's flair for storytelling brings to life the scholarly conclusions of gender historians regarding the role of violence in nineteenth-century manhood. Wilson's activities as a pugilist, immigrant runner, and political henchman for Mayor Fernando Wood show how essential violence was to the working of New York City politics and how a violent persona gained men like Wilson clout and attention in political circles. Honor—a man's worth depending on his public reputation among his peers—was essential to Wilson. Insults to inflict shame, rituals to obtain satisfaction, and fights to regain standing were common among northern men. Wilson regularly used the language of honor. In 1857, Alderman Wilson served on the committee to implement a bequest of Andrew Jackson, who willed a golden snuff box to be given to the most valiant New Yorker who fought in the defense of his country. During the ensuing controversy over the committee's choice, Wilson sent a public letter to the *New York Herald* offering satisfaction and a willingness to meet his opponents. Andrew Jackson, Jr. ultimately refused to turn over the box to the committee's choice.

Cray chronicles the shifting public mood toward men like Wilson. His style of bullying no longer worked in New York City politics by 1860. He was out of favor with his former bosses, lost elections, was muscled out of public meetings, and mocked in newspaper coverage. But the Civil War revitalized his public reputation. New Yorkers decided violent masculinity was just what was needed to punish southern secessionists. Stories about Wilson and the alleged toughs and criminals who joined his regiment made great copy. Wilson reportedly told fifteen street gang members that half his regiment would go to hell forty-eight hours after leaving New York for the South. "That's just the place we're bound for, and we'll gladly go with you," the Bowery B'hoys responded. "Then you're just the boys for me," Wilson said (132). Elite ladies presented the Wilson's Zouaves with regimental flags and citizens visited the training camp on Staten Island.

The Civil War experience of the 6th New York illuminates the clash between violent manhood and the professional discipline that was actually needed to suppress the rebellion. When the regiment arrived for its first posting on Santa Rosa Island, Pensacola Bay, the professional officers commanding Fort Pickens were appalled at the unit's indiscipline and effectively sidelined them. Drunkenness, brawls, and discord among officers, along with an

embarrassing response to a Confederate raid on their camp in October 1861, led to an existential crisis for the unit. Wilson tried to spin the situation in the media, but his inept letters to newspapers only brought further embarrassment. The unit's indiscipline and "flagrant misbehavior" in Louisiana in March 1863 required intervention (203). When drunken Zouaves threw men off a river transport, hit the brigade commander in the face with a piece of raw pork, rioted, and plundered the riverboat captain's possessions, Wilson refused to restore order. His superiors cashiered three of the regiment's officers without trial, imprisoned eighty Zouaves in New Orleans for the duration of their service, and arrested Wilson and held him without trial for eighty days. The regiment settled down under new leadership and performed well in subsequent operations in western Louisiana before returning to New York in 1863.

Wilson, despite his poor leadership, rode the notorious fame of his regiment to post-war success. He received a patronage position at the New York City Custom House and lived in Westchester County as a "gentleman farmer." Cray explores the various fortunes of a few of the soldier veterans of the 6th, whose post-war identity was partially shaped by continued journalistic commentary on Wilson's Zouaves. Ultimately, Wilson got something he wanted in life: he stood out from among the other minor political pawns in New York City's Democratic political machine and commanded enough notice from his contemporaries to get the attention of a scholar in the Twenty-first century.

Masculinity and violence are the main themes of this book, but readers will also find insight into ethnic identity, antebellum urban politics, Civil War-era journalism, and memory. Colonel Billy Wilson is not likeable. He was a corrupt bully. But his story is, as Cray asserts, "worth knowing" (254). And the story as Cray tells it, is worth reading.

Lorien Foote is the Patricia & Bookman Peters Professor in History at Texas A&M University. She has two books coming out in September 2021: Rites of Retaliation: Civilization, Soldiers, and Campaigns in the American Civil War (University of North Carolina Press) and The Oxford Handbook of the American Civil War (co-edited with Earl J. Hess).