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Review by Liam Corley

Veteran Americans: Literature and Citizenship from Revolution to Reconstruction

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Contemporary veterans occupy a contradictory space of social deference and disregard. Their simultaneously secure and precarious social position derives from a long history of how the United States has defined and depicted veteran identity. Yet popular memory of American veteran identity may extend only as far as the Vietnam War or, at best, World War II. Literary and historical work on the depictions of veterans from the founding of the country forward, reveals the limited and contingent nature of contemporary veteran identity and influence. While veteran voices are now frequently heard in debates about the condition and treatment of contemporary veterans, this has not always been the case.

In *Veteran Americans*, Benjamin Cooper unearths a tradition of neglect and appropriation in the representation of veterans in the United States stemming from its founding. Cooper, an assistant professor of English at Lindenwood University, focuses his survey of writing by, or in place, of veterans on texts produced in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He is unabashedly partisan in bringing to the fore neglected writing by veterans because a central premise of his work is that American citizens—and by extension, American writers—are uncomfortable with veterans who speak of their neglect and suffering. Although this way of describing the place of early American veterans sounds very similar to some contemporary complaints by veterans, Cooper does the archival work to show that American veterans have been writing in obscurity since 1776. *Veteran Americans* also considers influential nineteenth-century literary depictions of veterans which Cooper views as displacing the perspective and usurping the authority of the lesser-known veteran writers he foregrounds.

Fully three-quarters of the book cover writing before the Civil War, and this makes it particularly valuable, given how much attention Civil War texts have already received. This is an ambitious book which covers one hundred years of literary history and highlights dozens of texts. Cooper is well versed in both larger trends within nineteenth century literary studies and in the scholarship of the better-known writers he includes.

The first chapter on Revolutionary War captivity narratives provides a rich archive from which Cooper derives some very depressing conclusions about the origins of veteran writing and civilian reception in U.S. literary history. Cooper argues that accounts by Lemuel Roberts, Thomas Dring, and Ethan Allen reacted to a cultural milieu in which veterans were seen as "subhuman and untrustworthy" and "presumed to always be on the make" (47). Cooper draws on earlier work by historians like John Resch's *Suffering Soldiers* (1999), to frame a contrast between patriotic citizens who served in the war and professional enlisted soldiers who remained in ranks for long periods and were viewed by a skeptical public as trying to profit from war. Whether fairly or not, memoirs and petitions by Revolutionary War veterans that were penned to receive or supplement military pensions were viewed as expressions of greed. In a troubling foreshadowing of the worst public discourse about veterans, Cooper notes that veteran prisoner of war memoirists whose experiences of indignity didn't accord with national idealizations of revolutionary manhood found no secure place in public discourse because "second class citizens get second class memories" (53).

When Cooper moves to fiction and memoirs of the 1820s and 30s, this derogatory view of veterans has already become an old story, as readers "increasingly ignored the living memory of veteran suffering found in Revolutionary captivity narratives and veteran memoirs in favor of a collective memory of military experience as a site of disloyalty, subterfuge, and suspicion" (61). Cooper views *The Spy*, by James Fenimore Cooper, as "a second-generation war story (yet told by a veteran of the military) that masquerades as the collective and official memory" and which contributes to a "surprising lack of sympathy among early Americans, especially for veterans and their rhetorical appeals of suffering, loss, and displacement" (68–69). Cooper's discussion of *The Spy* focuses on the execution of a British officer, John Andre, and on claims, denied by Fenimore Cooper, that the novel recasts the experiences of real-life spy Enoch Crosby. Cooper addresses how its treatment of Harvey Birch, the principal (though not only) spy in the novel, indicates that Fenimore Cooper viewed American veterans as unappreciated and misunderstood patriots who did not seek to profit from their wartime experiences.

Although Cooper suggests that the literary history puts civilian and veteran authors in an agonistic, competitive relationship, the real villains in Cooper's telling often turn out to be veteran officers, whose greater economic stability allowed them to pander to civilian expectations that military service required no financial recompense from the nation or permanent institutions to aid or employ them. An officer-enlisted divide has informed many differences of opinion around public policy issues like pensions, disability claims, and size of the peacetime military. *Veteran Americans* does an excellent job in showing how the rhetorical strategies that discredit suffering and indigent veterans are often amplified, if not originated, by more privileged veterans who served in the officer ranks.

Cooper brings more exciting archival material into his argument when discussing soldier-run newspapers during the Mexican-American War. A contrast between amateur veteran writers and professional civilians animates this section, as does a neo-Vietnam War platitude, "You had to be there" claim that soldier writing could never convey to audiences on the home front what soldiers experienced on the battlefront. This dichotomy leads to another of Cooper's key arguments about literary history, namely that veteran writers provided an unacknowledged basis for literary realism's post-Civil War rise, a debt that civilian writers could not acknowledge and could only address indirectly by displacing veterans from their work:

> What we are left with on the eve of the Civil War is a constellation of emotional associations surrounding veteran authorship—hysterical, fraudulent, malingering, buffoonish, opportunistic, unlearned . . . veterans, like amateurs, could never garner sufficient authority to be trusted, let alone read. (134)

This antebellum characterization of veteran authorship allows Cooper to position the huge outpouring of veteran writing after the Civil War in opposition to the professional writing class' virtual dismissal of the war as a subject for fiction. His recovery of John William De Forest's novel, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion,* provides a particularly valuable example of how veteran writers engaged in a form of realism that didn't affirm national fantasies about war experience and meaning. Fragmentation and disillusionment marks De Forest's veteran experience in the novel, not a comforting fantasy about worthwhile sacrifices for liberty and national sovereignty. Cooper sees the novel's battle scenes as prefiguring some of the major stylistic choices of later, civilian realist authors.

One weakness of *Veteran Americans* stems from this guiding premise that there is a tension between veteran accounts and more literary or popular accounts. In championing the lesser-known accounts by largely forgotten veteran memoirists and petitioners, Cooper occasionally sets up a false dichotomy between fiction and non-fiction, veteran writer and civilian writer. In describing the ways novels like Fenimore Cooper's *The Spy* and Herman Melville's *Israel Potter* treat their source materials and veteran informants, Cooper tends to view any divergences as evidence of civilian appropriation

of veteran experience, a movement he calls on more than one occasion, *ventriloquism,* as though transforming source materials into fiction was morally culpable.

Moreover, the book's premise causes Cooper to downplay, in the case of Fenimore Cooper, or overlook, in the case of Melville, the more influential fiction writer's own military service. Melville's year as an enlisted sailor on the USS United States, not only led to a fine philosophical novel in *White-Jacket*, it also helped inform Melville's understanding of how the divide between officers and enlisted could lead to the sorts of inequities experienced by Israel Potter and the national disregard of individual soldiers in his poetry collection, *Battle-Pieces*. A more generous understanding of the range of experiences and military encounters that contribute to veteran experience would have strengthened *Veteran Americans,* as would a more open-minded approach to interpreting veteran depictions in literature diminished by Cooper as civilian. Though brief, Cooper's discussion of Poe's foreshortened military career shows that he does recognize how military service of even limited duration can have lasting effects on literary sensibilities.

"Veterans in Outer Space," the book's conclusion, extends the book's argument about how civilian realist writers appropriated and marginalized veteran attempts to convey authentic experiences of war by considering twentieth century texts in which veterans turn to science fiction writing as a way to escape the civilian realist monopoly on textual authority. As an Operation Enduring Freedom veteran who is writing a science fiction novel, I wanted to stand up and cheer as Cooper discussed Vietnam veteran Joe Haldeman's *Forever Wars,* and fellow Navy veterans and sci-fi writers Robert Heinlein and Frank Herbert's work, as innovative attempts to express veteran experience and sensibility outside of the realist straitjacket of embedding readers in a grunt-level war experience. Moreover, science fiction allows veteran writers to comment on the social, political, and economic aspects of war, which provide a basis for judging current or past American conflicts without having to point fingers at specific historical players. This freedom allows veterans to create art responsive to but not bound by (or embedded within) partisan views of the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Veteran Americans is the inaugural volume in a series on veterans published by the University of Massachusetts Press. The series is edited by two historians, Brian Matthew Jordan, assistant professor of history at Sam Houston State University and author of *Marching Home: Union Veterans and Their Unending Civil War,* and J. Ross Dancy, assistant professor of history at the U.S. Naval War College and author of *The Myth of the Press Gang: Volunteers, Impressment and the Naval Manpower Problem in the Late Eighteenth Century*. The series "seeks to examine veteran status as a source of identity and hopes to illuminate the myriad ways that veterans have interacted with postwar cultures, politics, and societies throughout history (Veterans, n.p.)." That the initial monograph in the series treats literary and cultural history is a promising indication of the interdisciplinary interests of the editors.

On the whole, *Veteran Americans* is an ambitious and well-considered attempt to explain why our current moment's interest in veteran-authored fiction and memoirs is both precious and likely to be short-lived. Cooper's work reveals some powerful and long-lived prejudices against veteran writing that still circulate around the margins of contemporary discourse. *Veteran Americans* is a thoughtful and well-contextualized literary history that provides a necessary corollary to works like John A. Casey Jr.'s *New Men: Reconstructing the Image of the Veteran in Late-Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture* (2015). While scholars may find points of disagreement with Cooper's interpretations of better-known literary texts, they will have to take into account the alternate tradition of veteran writing he has uncovered here.

References

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