THE UNITED STATES ARMY AS VIEWED BY BRITISH TRAVELERS, 1825-1860

FRANCIS PAUL PRUCHA

BRITISH travelers in the United States in the decades before the Civil War were alert to all phases of American life. The observations and criticisms which they penned for the information and entertainment of their compatriots—if not for a wider audience — touched upon democratic government, slavery, religion, education, agriculture, manufacturing, literature, finance, and American manners and customs. Many, as well, included in their accounts details and judgments about the military arm of the nation, the regular army.[1]

That they should do this is perhaps no matter of surprise, for Europeans, subjected as they have been to long centuries of power politics, were quite generally aware of military and naval establishments. The army which they discovered in America, however, was far from prominent on the national scene. Indeed, unless they had a lively interest in military things or unless they traveled extensively in the West, where army forts were often the only points of civilization, travelers from abroad might easily have passed the soldiers by. Americans traditionally have been opponents of standing armies in times of peace, and the six thousand regular troops which Congress authorized in 1821 were only slowly augmented as the nation expanded. And these small numbers manned a long string of posts along the Atlantic and along the western and northern frontiers.

The English commentators on the American army were a varied group, and their chance comments on the military institutions of the United States depended upon the interests of the individuals as well as on the contacts each made in America with army men or army posts. Some of the most famous of English visitors—like Harriet Martineau or Charles Dickens—had little or nothing to say about the regular army. British army officers—like Sir James E. Alexander or E. T. Coke—paid closer attention to military matters than did less specialized travelers, but their general accounts of America have only limited value. The early period of British travel in America—up to 1825—which Allan Nevins describes as the period of "utilitarian inquiry," added little to the picture of the American army, for the visitors were primarily "seekers after a living." Not until the "seekers after sights and experiences" arrived did full-blown accounts of the American army appear in works of English observers. These later men, largely conservative in outlook and condescending in tone, though not necessarily hostile in their reports, furnish the best indication of what intelligent Englishmen thought of our army.

---

[1]Analyses of British travelers in America can be found in Max Berger, *The British Traveler in America, 1836-1860* (New York, 1943); Jane Louise Mesick, *The English Traveller in America, 1785-1835* (New York, 1922); and Allan Nevins, compiler and editor, *America Through British Eyes* (New York, 1948). These works contain excellent bibliographies. See also Henry T. Tuckerman, *America and Her Commentators* (New York, 1864); John G. Brooks, *As Others See Us* (New York, 1908); and Lane Cooper, "Travellers and Observers, 1763-1846," in William P. Trent and others, *The Cambridge History of American Literature* (New York, 1917), I, 185-214, 468-490. For selected European observations on America see Nevins, *America Through British Eyes*, and Henry S. Commager, editor, *America in Perspective: The United States Through Foreign Eyes* (New York, 1947).

This article is restricted to accounts of the regular peacetime establishment. A similar study could be made of British observers' views on the American militia.

Their reports, however, must be read with caution. These travelers were generally men of education and some distinction. Their contact with military affairs came at the commissioned level. Visitors to army posts were entertained by the officers; observations which they made, if colored at all by their contacts, were influenced by the attitudes, complaints, and criticisms of the army officers whose hospitality the travelers enjoyed. I know of no visitor who gives what might be called a private's-eye-view of the army. Furthermore, the frontier posts appear more prominently in the accounts than the artillery posts of the Eastern seaboard. The majority of troops were stationed on the frontiers, it is true, but it is also true that the Western posts loomed larger among their surroundings than did their counterparts located near thriving Eastern cities. A traveler in the Mississippi Valley could hardly fail to stop at several forts; one who did not venture much beyond the urban centers might well be unaware of military establishments. Thus the isolation and detachment of army posts made a strong impression on the writers. The Western travelers, moreover, who actually spent considerable time at army forts—men ilke Charles J. Latrobe, Charles A. Murray, and Captain Frederick Marryat—got a fuller measure of personal experience on which to base their judgments than did casual passersby, who perhaps saw no establishment beyond West Point and gathered other materials from published statistics or conversation with army men.

The accounts on the army appear as integral parts of books which cover much broader fields. Writers with a flair for completeness were wont to include a chapter or a section on the military establishment of the United States. If the author had few personal observations on which to draw, he resorted to a statistical account of army strength and organization, culled from official reports. Such accounts, except for an occasional editorial comment, furnish little evidence of British opinions. More valuable are the insights and judgments recorded incidentally by travelers who came in contact with the army on their extended journeys and the criticisms of men who made it a point to investigate the military establishment. One of the latter, who deserves special mention for the completeness of his criticism and its generally hostile tone, was Sir James E. Alexander, who not only published a two-volume account of his travels in North and South America, but published separately in the *United Service Journal* his criticisms of the United States army.[2] These "Notes on the Army of the United States of America" were reprinted on this side of the Atlantic with a careful refutation of many of the criticisms.[3]

What sort of an army did these Englishmen find? How did it compare with the military establishment they knew at home? What criticisms did they level at the regular army of the great republic of the New World?

The picture of the United States army, its personnel, and its posts which was drawn by these travelers was a dark one. The features that almost universally drew attention were not of laudable character, and disdain and contempt, though often softened by sympathy for the soldiers and the officers, were prominent notes in many accounts. Travelers who came in contact with the regular troops were struck by the low status of the enlisted men in comparison with other walks of life in America, and they did not hesitate to point out that such poor conditions turned away men of high character and ability and drew

[2]"Notes on the Army of the United States of America," *The United Service Journal and Naval and Military Magazine* (London), 1832, Part III, 154-161.

[3]*The Miltiary and Naval Magazine of the United States* (Washington), I (April, 1833), 97-108.

instead the dregs of society.

It was a sorry lot of men that made up the rank and file of the American army; recruiting officers, finding few native Americans willing to forsake the opportunities of a growing society for the low pay of an army private, had to fall back on foreign immigrants, who rushed to the recruiting stations in larger numbers. "The great extent of the territory of the states, with the scanty population," wrote Alexander, "causes wages to be high, while provisions are also cheap; generally speaking, therefore, the most worthless characters enter the army, which consists of a *melange* of English deserters, Dutch, French, Americans, &c."[4] Captain Marryat wrote in a similar vein in his *Diary in America:* "The privates of the American regular army are not the most creditable soldiers in the world; they are chiefly composed of Irish emigrants, Germans, and deserters from the English regiments in Canada. Americans are very rare; only those who can find nothing else to do and have to choose between enlistment and starvation, will enter into the American army."[5] At Buffalo James S. Buckingham noted of the troops "that not more than half their number were native Americans, the rest being Germans, Irish, and Scotch."[6] The rambler Charles J. Latrobe described the "rag-tag-and-bob-tail herd drafted into the ranks of the regular army" as consisting "either of the scum of the population of the older States, or of the worthless German, English, or Irish emigrants."[7] Hardly a person who stopped to comment on the army at all could escape the fact of foreign preponderance among the enlisted troops. One noted: "The ranks are usually composed of a *melange* of Poles, Germans, but principally of Irish emigrants, and some few deserters from the British regiments in the Canadas." Another was satisfied with the prosaic statement that "many European emigrants may be found serving under the American standard"; a third declared, with somewhat less discrimination, "The privates are *all* foreigners,—Germans, English, Irish, and Scotch deserters, Poles, Hungarians, but not a single native-born American."[8]

Not all, however, saw in this foreign element a detriment to the army or the nation. Buckingham found that the "German, Irish, and Scotch, are mostly persons who have been privates in the armies of Europe, before coming to this country; and habit having rendered that mode of life more agreeable to them than labour or agriculture, they embrace it, and remain steady in their discipline and obedience"; while Murray asserted, "The most quiet orderly soldiers now in the American army, are the Irish, Scotch, and German emigrants, who are in considerable numbers, and generally remain longer than the above mentioned term [three years]."[9]

The enlisted men were notorious for their heavy drinking, and this vice did not pass unnoticed. It became, in fact, a strong argument for those who condemned the quality of the army troops. "Habits of intemperance are very common in the American army," it was reported; "and, as is to be supposed, al-

[4]James E. Alexander, *Transatlantic Sketches, Comprising Visits to the Most Interesting Scenes in North and South America, and the West Indies, with Notes on Negro Slavery and Canadian Emigration* (London, 1833, 2 volumes), II, 281.

[5]Frederick Marryat, *A Diary in America, with Remarks on Its Institutions* (London, 1839, 3 volumes), II, 305.

[6]James S. Buckingham, *The Eastern and Western States of America* (London, 1842, 3 volumes), III, 447.

[7]Charles J. Latrobe, *The Rambler in North America* (New York, 1835, 2 volumes), II, 230-231.

[8]Francis Wyse, *America, Its Realities and Resources* (London, 1846, 3 volumes), II, 98; E. T. Coke, *A Subaltern's Furlough: Descriptive of Scenes in Various Parts of the United States, Upper and Lower Canada, New-Brunswick, and Nova Scotia, During the Summer and Autumn of 1832* (New York, 1833, 2 volumes), II, 163-164; Edward Sullivan, *Rambles and Scrambles in North and South America* (London, 1852), 163.

[9]Buckingham, *Eastern and Western States,* III, 447-448; Charles A. Murray, *Travels in North America During the Years 1834, 1835, & 1836* (New York, 1839, 2 volumes), II, 167-168.

most all crimes committed by the soldiers, are to be traced to these fruitful sources of evil."[10] Another witness was even more emphatic: "I must say, that I have seen more cases of drunkenness than ever I saw among any troops in the world, and the mistaken humanity or pride that has forbidden corporal punishment, has not apparently substituted any efficient method of maintaining discipline. In fact, the American peasant, though a brave and hardy man, and expert in the use of the rifle and musket, is naturally the worst soldier in the world, as regards obedience and discipline. He has been brought up to believe himself equal to the officers who command him, and never forgets that when his three years of enlistment are over, he will again be their equal."[11]

The low character of the American soldier in the decades between the War of 1812 and the Civil War was exemplified by one fact that seldom escaped notice. This was the heavy rate of desertion, which plagued the army unceasingly during the period. It is small wonder that it should be played up by critical foreigners since it formed such a constant part of the annual reports of the Secretary of War.

"It is an extraordinary fact, but not the less true," said Alexander, "that nearly one-half of the non-commissioned officers and privates of the American army desert every year."[12] The same proportion was reported by others, one of whom added with apparent truth that "from the extensive field to which they can escape, a deserter is very seldom returned to his regiment."[13] Such reports as these, relayed to countrymen at home, seldom came solely from actual observations of the travelers, whose experience was not wide enough to form conclusions as to proportions of deserters. But the statistics were available to all who chose to read, and conscientious reporters filled in gaps in their own knowledge by citing data set forth at length in reports issued by the War Department. Some travelers, like Coke, actually cite the Secretary of War's reports, while for others these reports must have been the ultimate source even though not explicitly stated.[14] Yet it was unnecessary to possess complete statistics in order to mark desertion as a prominent feature of the army. Any extended conversation with army officers must have touched upon this problem, and few posts escaped the scourge. "Even from the small detachment at Fort Mitchell," Thomas Hamilton reported when his travels led him to this outpost in the Creek country, "desertions happened every week. Whenever a man became tired of his duty, off he went, bag and baggage, and pursuit was hopeless."[15] There was a high rate of desertion even among the dragoons at Fort Des Moines, troops predominantly American and recognized as a caliber above the general run of army men.[16]

The phenomenon of desertion, as well as the fact that few Americans of good character joined the army, did not lack explanations. These conditions, Englishmen noted, were but the results of more fundamental evils, and they proceeded to set forth, often in a censorious tone, the situations which produced the blight of ill-disciplined, intem-

[10]Alexander, *Transatlantic Sketches,* II, 283.
[11]Murray, *Travels in North America,* II, 67-68.
[12]Alexander, *Transatlantic Sketches,* II, 281.
[13]Latrobe, *Rambler in North America,* II, 231; Wyse, *America,* II, 100.

[14]Coke, *Subaltern's Furlough,* II, 163-164. The estimates of many foreigners are obviously exaggerated. Official statistics on desertion in the years 1826-1831 appear in *American State Papers: Military Affairs,* IV, 708. Secretary of War Jefferson Davis reported in his annual report for 1853 that between 1826 and 1846 the average annual loss by desertion had been 12¾ per cent. After the Mexican War the average loss climbed to 16 per cent. Davis found a direct proportion between the prosperity of the country and the number of desertions. 33 Congress, 1 session, *Senate Executive Document* no. 1, part 2, serial 691, pp. 7-8.
[15]Thomas Hamilton, *Men and Manners in America* (Edinburgh, 1833, 2 volumes), II, 268-269.
[16]Murray, *Travels in North America,* II, 98.

perate, and absconding troops that disfigured the regular army. Several contributing circumstances were elaborated, in proportion to the intensity of the traveler's critical attitude. Chief among them were the inherent American dislike of army subordination, the distrust of the army as an instrument of aristocracy and possibly of tyranny, the unattractiveness of the army in terms of pay and provisions for retirement, and the isolation and detachment from civilizing forces of many of the army posts. It was not to be wondered, thought the English observers, that the cream of society did not care to enter the peacetime service of the nation.

"The truth is," asserted Buckingham, "that the service is very unpopular and distasteful to the natives of this country generally. They are passionately fond of military parade and display; and this they can indulge, in volunteer companies in their respective towns, and in the service of the militia; but they have a rooted aversion to the strict discipline and constraint which is indispensable to the maintenance of military subordination and efficiency. Accordingly, few enlist in the service as privates, without some powerfully impelling motive that almost takes away from them the freedom of choice, when they have scarcely begun to enter on the duties of their new life, before they feel disgust, and hasten to quit it as soon as they can."[17] "The truth," as discovered by another traveler, "is, that men accustomed to democracy can never be brought to submit patiently to the rigours of military discipline."[18] Latrobe extended his sympathy to the officers who had to deal with the wretched men under their command. "The dislike to personal subordination in which the youth of the country are nurtured from childhood," he pointed out to his readers, "and the possibility of every man who has character making his way in a more creditable manner, prevents the ranks being filled with better subjects; and degraded indeed is the class of men whom the young officer must toil to bring into sober subordination."[19]

To overcome this "rooted aversion," the army had little to offer in compensation. The meager pay of a private was small inducement, and the conditions at Western posts could hardly seem attractive to city-bred men. "Where employment is sure and wages high," observed Alexander Mackay, "men are not very willing to subject themselves to the hardships and rigid discipline of a soldier's life. . . . The life of an American soldier is by no means a pleasant one, considering the unhealthiness of some of their military posts, and the remoteness of many of them from the haunts of civilized man. It is not likely, therefore, that men who can easily make more than a competence at the plough or at their trades, will suffer a military propensity so far to get the better of them as to impel them to enlist."[20] "The mere handful of men, comprising the peace establishment of the army of the United States," another observer logically remarked, "is necessarily scattered over a wide extent of country, principally along the inland frontier, where they are stationed in advance of all civilization, pent up in forts of mere temporary and rude construction, in which they are decreed to pass through a wearisome and monotonous existence." His amplification of these remarks hardly constituted an endorse-

[17]Buckingham, *Eastern and Western States,* III, 447.

[18]Hamilton, *Men and Manners,* II, 268-269. Coke remarked, "The very nature of the government totally unfits the people for strict military discipline." *Subaltern's Furlough,* II, 164.

[19]Latrobe, *Rambler in North America,* II, 230-231.

[20]Alexander Mackay, *The Western World; or, Travels in the United States in 1846-47: Exhibiting Them in Their Latest Development, Social, Political, and Industrial; Including a Chapter on California* (Philadelphia, 1849, 2 volumes), II, 221. An exception to the general criticism of garrison conditions is found in A. M. Maxwell, *A Run Through the United States, During the Autumn of 1840* (London, 1841, 2 volumes), I, 300.

ment of army life that might attract able and ambitious men. The situation of the Western posts, he continued, "are generally unhealthy, ague and intermittent fever the prevailing disease; while the duties are harassing, and the entire life one of privation, without any of the advantages, the emoluments, or honours to be derived from a more active service. Perfectly isolated, as these outposts are—removed at a distance from any town or village, the soldier, apart from the same endless round of duty, is thrown upon his individual resources to pass away the time—to kill the hours of a tedious solitude, and beguile away the extreme loneliness of his situation. The supplies are always brought from a distance, which from accidental circumstances sometimes fail."[21] One traveler warned British soldiers in Canada, who might be tempted to desert to the American service, to think twice about such a venture, for in the United States, among other disadvantages, they were likely to be "draughted into small companies, who frequently spent years on the frontiers, distant thousands of miles from civilization."[22]

And, as if the character of the enlisted men was not bad enough at the time of recruitment, the isolated situations of the posts degraded it further still. "Detached as the troops are in small posts to overawe the Indians of the northwest and western territories," it was feared, "they immediately become demoralized from contact with the wild beings and vagabond hunters in the midst of whom they live."[23] The smallness of the posts prevented the military drill and maneuvers which should form a basic part of army discipline. "The troops being divided into small detachments under subordinate commands," one wrote, "have scarcely any opportunity of being instructed in field movements, or the other duties of a camp, of which they rarely know anything. They neither have the gait, or possess the military esprit belonging to European troops, to assist them in the performance of their duties, or to reconcile them to the change, and vicissitudes of a soldier's life."[24] Nor did fundamental American traits make up for these deficiencies in drill, if Alexander was correct in reporting that "it is a notorious fact, that no American will ever walk when he can sit in a waggon behind a span of horses. All the citizens are disinclined to active sports or pedestrian exercises of any kind."[25]

The severe lack of discipline observed among the troops stimulated an investigation of the means employed in the American army to keep the men in line. Whatever the punishment for aberrations, it seemed to have had little corrective effect, and visiting Britishers were generally convinced that the abolition of corporal punishment by Congress in 1812 had been a sad mistake. Captain Basil Hall—of the British Navy—was the most outspoken on the subject. "The old method of punishing offenses by flogging has been abolished in the American army . . . ," he informed his readers; "and ever since, as far as I could learn, from enquiries in every part of the Union, the discipline of the troops has been gradually declining, and the soldiers becoming discontented, chiefly, I believe, in the consequence of the introduction of a great variety of other punishments." Hall thought flogging the most appropriate method of punishment for the men in the ranks. "In a word—" he wrote, "the whole tenor of their lives and conversation—thoughts, feelings, and actions—are dissimilar to those of gentlemen. Why, therefore, as long as such is their deportment, should not their punish-

[21]Wyse, *America,* II, 101.
[22]Arthur Cunynghame, *A Glimpse at the Great Western Republic* (London, 1851), 168-170.
[23]Alexander, *Transatlantic Sketches,* II, 282.
[24]Wyse, *America,* II, 100.
[25]Alexander, *Transatlantic Sketches,* II, 287.

ment be as widely contradistinguished?" The substitution of uncertain punishments for flogging harassed the soldiers, he maintained, who, "finding their spirits broken by the disgraceful nature of the numberless ways adopted at the caprice, or by the ingenuity, of their officers to enforce obedience, are prompted to desert in great numbers."[26] Another English gentleman heard the same opinion from the officers with whom he talked.[27]

That Captain Hall may have been correct in his analysis is suggested by the punishments which others reported. Captain Marryat found substitutes that were more severe than flogging. "The most common," he reported, "is that of loading a man with thirty-six pounds of shot in his knapsack, and making him walk three hours out of four, day and night without intermission, with this weight on his shoulders, for six days and six nights; that is, he is compelled to walk three hours with the weight, and then is suffered to sit down *one*. Towards the close this punishment becomes very severe; the feet of the men are so sore and swelled, that they cannot move for some days afterwards. I enquired what would be the consequence if a man were to throw down his knapsack and refuse to walk, the commanding-officer of one of the forts replied, that he would be hung up by his thumbs till he fainted—a variety of piquetting."[28] James Boardman saw several deserters at Fort McHenry at work with cannon balls chained to their legs —a method of punishment which he described as "substituted for the inhuman and brutalizing practice of flogging."[29]

Men acquainted with the British army were wont to point out the disadvantages of the American service in regard to benefits which accrued to the faithful soldier. American pay might be higher than the British on face value, but American soldiers had little chance of rising above the lowest grades, and at the expiration of their service they were discharged without pay or pension, and "devoid of those sympathies" which British soldiers met from their own paternal government—a poor recompense for service which won "the contempt of every worthy citizen of the United States."[30] The chance for advancement in the British army contrasted sharply with the limited, almost non-existent opportunities in America, where the officer corps was composed of West Point graduates. "A private in the British army," said Alexander Mackay, "may rise to be a field officer, but not so in America. The private in the latter may be better paid than in the former, but his prospect is by no means so brilliant. There is not an office in the State, but is open to the obscurest individual, if he can beat his multitudinous competitors in the race for it. The army is not so democratically constituted. Its more desirable posts, its dignities and honours, are almost exclusively confined to a few, who have sufficient influence to get admittance to an institution, where they undergo a probationary curriculum. This is enough to discourage many a man from entering the army as a private, who might otherwise do so."[31] It was clear to the English observers why few capable Americans enlisted in the ranks of the American army. "Five dollars are the monthly pay of a private," Alexander summarized it, "and many labourers in the States earn a dollar per day, so that it is obvious there is no great inducement to belong to an army which is

[26]Captain Basil Hall, *Travels in North America in the Years 1827 and 1828* (Edinburgh, 1829, 3 volumes), III, 93, 94, 99.

[27]William N. Blane, *An Excursion Through the United States and Canada During the years 1822-23. By an English Gentleman* (London, 1824), 379.

[28]Marryat, *Diary in America,* II, 306.

[29]James Boardman, *America and the Americans. By a Citizen of the World* (London, 1833), 263-264.

[30]Cunynghame, *Great Western Republic,* 169-170.

[31]Mackay, *Western World,* II, 220.

held in no great estimation by the citizens generally, and has no pension list, or asylum for disabled soldiers." [32] The lack of public sympathy for the condition of the soldiers was explained not only by American distrust of armies in general but by the remoteness of many posts, where the soldiers were removed from public observation. "The people," Thomas Hamilton asserted, "care nothing for a set of invisible beings mewed up in some petty forts on the vast frontier, who have no enemy to contend with, and are required to brave nothing but fever and mosquitoes."[33]

If the enlisted men fared badly at the hands of British writers, some compensation can be found in the remarks made by these travelers about the corps of officers. The officers, the observers found, were of a quite different caliber from the men who made up the rank and file. Drawn from the better classes of society, severely disciplined and educated at the Military Academy, the officers cast favorable shadows in the pages of the foreigners' accounts. This especially was true when the visitors had stopped at army posts in their Western travels and had enjoyed the hospitality of army officers after days or weeks spent in the company of illiterate half-breed guides. The voices of praise were almost unanimous. Charles J. Latrobe, who stopped at several forts in his Western tour, reiterated at each stop his favorable impressions of the officers. At Fort Crawford he found "as warm-hearted a set of fine young fellows, and as staunch and brave an old Colonel as you would wish to see." His intercourse with the inhabitants of Fort Snelling, he said, "only strengthened that feeling of good-will which will always make me happy to meet an officer of the United States' army." At Fort Armstrong he "gleaned again fresh proofs of the unfeigned kindness and gentle bearing of the United States' officers, wherever you meet with them," of which he had had a foretaste at Fort Dearborn.[34] Charles Murray in his travels noted the hospitality at Fort Crawford as an example of what he had experienced everywhere from the officers of the army. "A plate was laid for me at the commanding officer's table," he recorded in praise; "and another gentleman, in whose quarters I lodged, actually insisted upon my ocupying his bed, while he slept on a sofa fitted up with a buffalo-robe." Although Murray found some officers addicted to drunkenness and gambling, he was on the whole favorably impressed by the army officers. "I have become acquainted with a great many on the outposts of both the Missouri and Mississippi; I have been invariably treated with the greatest attention and hospitality, and many of them are gentlemen who, in manners and accomplishments, would do credit to the service of any country."[35] Laurence Oliphant, journeying down the Mississippi toward Saint Paul in 1854, stopped at Fort Ripley, where he found the officers "gentlemanlike, agreeable men, as I have invariably found the officers of the United States army to be."[36] Edward Sullivan, after rambling and scrambling over much of the New World, arrived at Fort Snelling in 1850 and had nothing but praise for the officers whose guest he had been. "More agreeable, gentlemanly, and well-informed men I never wish to meet," he wrote, "and I doubt whether any service can produce their superiors." "I met numbers of United States officers in different parts of the Union," he asserted in another part of

[32]Alexander, *Transatlantic Sketches,* II, 281.

[33]Hamilton, *Men and Manners,* II, 268-269.

[34]Latrobe, *Rambler in North America,* II, 151-152, 219, 229, 235.

[35]Murray, *Travels in North America,* II, 67, 81.

[36]Laurence Oliphant, *Minnesota and the Far West* (London, 1855), 220-221.

his account, "and I always found them the same — gentlemen-like and agreeable, and more resembling Englishmen (though perhaps they will not consider that much praise) than any other class I met in America."[37]

Most of the English observers stopped at West Point, which lay athwart any journey up the Hudson, and the visit to the academy provided a good occasion for them to unburden their minds of opinions and comments on army officers as well as on the principles and management of the military school. As to the value of the academy and the product it turned out there appeared differences of opinion. The casual lay observer was generally much impressed by the physical layout of the school and by the strict discipline and heavy academic schedule, with its emphasis on mathematics and engineering. Men with greater military interest found breaches in the training and pointed them out with the rapiers of their criticism.

Murray, as was his custom, was fulsome in praise. "As far as my acquaintance with American society enables me to judge," he wrote, "I am inclined to believe that the officers of the army and navy afford a more favourable specimen both in respect to manners and attainments, than the average of young men who either follow mercantile pursuits or those who, if nominally engaged in business, devote the greater proportion of their time to amusement. The education at West Point, although it may be faulty in some respects, is more concentrated in its objects, and therefore more complete, than the course pursued at other American academies. Much attention is paid to the mathematical department, and the engineer officers are, generally speaking, thoroughly conversant with the science and practice of their profession."[38] In the mind of another favorable observer, West Point, "for severity of study, for order, regularity, and quiet," far exceeded any place of either military or civilian education he had ever visited "or even heard of."[39]

The characteristic of West Point singled out for the greatest praise was its service as a scientific school, whose well-trained graduates disseminated knowledge and skill, not only in the army, but throughout society generally—for not all the cadets entered the military service. "The College, without considering it merely in a military point of view," even a superficial observer could note, "will be of incalculable benefit to the United States, as a nursery for science; for it is the only place where the higher branches of mathematics are attended to, and the education which the cadets receive is such, that if they prosecute their studies, they may vie with the scientific men of any part of the world. . . . In a short time, the United States, though with a very small army, will be able to boast of a much larger body of scientific and well educated officers, than any other country in the world."[40] Fanny Wright, noting the numbers who "retire from this little military fortress to the shade of private life," found great benefits in the practice of educating young men from all sections of the country and then dispersing them again to spread their knowledge. The object of filling army posts was important, she admitted, but "a further and more important object is kept in view, namely, that of scattering throughout the Union men, imbued not merely with liberal principles, but attached to scientific pursuits."[41] The same goal was commented

[37]Sullivan, *Rambles and Scrambles*, 157, 163.
[38]Murray, *Travels in North America*, II, 212.
[39]Blane, *Excursion Through the United States and Canada*, 375-376.
[40]*Ibid.*
[41]Frances Wright [d'Arusmont], *Views of Society and Manners in America; in a Series of Letters from That County to a Friend in England, During the Years 1818, 1819, and 1820.* (New York, 1821), 112-113.

upon favorably by Captain Hall, although he was more skeptical of its attainment. "The knowledge of one science, we know, always begets the love for others," he wrote; "and if these young and properly educated men, should carry with them to the back-woods, or other remote parts of the States, much well-grounded and useful information, they might be expected to exert themselves, not only to advance farther in this 'march of intellect,' but to impart what they knew to others, and thus to open new veins in the inexhaustible mines of knowledge."[42]

This silver lining of scientific accomplishment did not obscure the dark cloud of criticism which overshadowed the reports of men whose attention was directed primarily to the military discipline and training of the cadets. In this regard the West Pointers conformed less favorably to British or continental standards. Alexander had no good word for the physical appearance of the would-be officers: "They all looked pale and sickly, stooped, and some wore spectacles." And he was no more favorably impressed by what he learned about the accomplishments of graduates of the academy. "I naturally enquired," he wrote, "what figure the cadets who pass the ordeal of West Point make in after life—are they distinguished in the walks of science?—do they contribute to the literature of their country? The answer I received was, that they are never heard of after they leave the Military Academy."[43] Hamilton observed "that the carriage of the cadets was less soldier-like than might be wished. In most of them, I remarked a certain slouch about the shoulders, which demanded the judicious application of back-boards and dumb bells. But, in truth"—he adds perhaps by way of extenuation — "the remark is applicable to the whole population."[44] The unmilitary appearance of the students at West Point struck Captain Hall also, who found that "the cadets were remarkably deficient in the erect carriage and decided, firm gait, which gives what in the old world is called a military air, and is looked upon as a primary requisite in a soldier. Instead of the chest being braced or held forward, it is drawn back into a concavity, while the shoulders necessarily assume a correspondent roundness. To foreign eyes, nothing can be more awkward than this mode of carrying the body."[45] One traveler, disgusted by the common American habit of chewing tobacco, was startled to find it practiced by the cadets at West Point. It surely ought to be discontinued "(by express prohibition, if necessary) by the officers and cadets of the most gentlemanly establishment in the Union, and against which, laughable as it may appear, objections have been raised on account of the aristocratical ideas which the young men bring with them into society."[46] Even habits of dissipation among the cadets could be found to criticize.[47]

Did American officers equal the British? Well, not quite. As one Englishman declared, "The officers of the American army are scarcely to be judged from the high character of those in the British service, though very many excellent men are to be found amongst them—."[48]

Despite the advantages of commissioned service, the officers found the army no more attractive than did the enlisted men. "How many . . . ," one Englishman asked, "who in the ardour and enthusiasm of youth, have entered the profession, and in the bitterness

[42]Hall, *Travels in North America,* III, 85-86.

[43]Alexander, *Transatlantic Sketches,* II, 277.

[44]Hamilton, *Men and Manners,* II, 289.

[45]Hall, *Travels in North America,* I, 91.

[46]Godfrey T. Vigne, *Six Months in America* (London, 1832, 2 volumes), I, 253-254.

[47]Alexander, *Transatlantic Sketches,* II, 277.

[48]Wyse, *America,* II, 95.

of disappointed hopes, in a short while afterwards, quit this most ungrateful and unprofitable service, in which there is neither honour, or advantage of any kind to be obtained — no retiring pension — no half-pay secured for length of service, infirmities, or old age. The reports from the army, are seldom without an account of officers throwing up their commissions in disgust, and disappointment—abandoning a profession, in utter hopelessness of securing any reasonable provision for the personal and admitted sacrifices they had made, in at all connecting themselves with the service."[49] The officers of the American army were better paid than the English, another admitted, but there was this difference between the British army and that of the United States: "no one can enter the latter for pleasure, or to enjoy the enviable privilege of wearing an epaulet and an embroidered coat. The service is one of real and almost constant privation. The troops are scattered about in forts and garrisons in remote and unhealthy situations, and are never quartered, as with us, in the great cities. The principal stations are on the Canadian and Indian frontier, and on the Mississippi, and I imagine the sort of life they lead there would not be greatly relished by his Majesty's Coldstream Guards or the Blues."[50]

Even more sympathetic observers painted no rosy picture of the officers' lot. Latrobe wrote of the difficulties of dealing with worthless men and the heavy desertion and "the frequently complete utter state of exile from good society consequent upon the service, at an age when that is absolutely necessary for the formation of the character of the young and ardent,—the post of an officer on the frontiers is by no means either an enviable, or in the idea of many of his fellow-citizens, an honourable one. The jealousy and suspicion with which even this skeleton of a regular army is regarded by the American people, renders his position difficult in many ways. West Point Academy, from the pupils of which they must draw the few scientific officers they possess, is looked upon with mistrust, as nursing a young brood of aristocrats,—and the arrangements of the war-office attached to the general Government,—wherever they come in collision with the civil arrangements of the individual States, is regarded with equal dislike."[51] "It cannot be a matter of surprise," as Coke noted, "that so many of the young men resign their claims to commissions, the army being scattered in distant and small detachments along some thousands of miles of coast and frontier, many of them removed far away out of the pale of all society, which, in times of peace, tends so much to render the profession an agreeable one."[52]

This recitation casts a dim pall over the peacetime American army in the pre-Civil War decades. The basic features of the regular army—its pay, its benefits to men and officers, the location and condition of its posts, its reception by the mass of the citizenry, its military appearance, and its moral and cultural status—are heavily drawn in dismal tones. Only the bright light of capable, gentlemanly officers and the scientific promises of West Point pierces the gloom generated by the intemperance and low moral character of the rank and file, the constant sources of dissatisfaction, and the phenomenal rate of desertion.

Is the picture painted by these outsiders too dark? Did British prejudices discolor too strongly the judgments rendered by itinerant critics? A categorical answer is hardly to be

[49] *Ibid.*, 97.

[50] Hamilton, *Men and Manners*, I, 265.

[51] Latrobe, *Rambler in North America*, II, 231.

[52] Coke, *Subaltern's Furlough*, II, 163-164.

expected, but an examination of American criticisms of the peacetime army during the same period—strikingly similar to those of the English—suggests a qualified negative. Yet a basic fact must be remembered: the regular army, despite its admitted defects, fulfilled its purpose in a creditable fashion between the War of 1812 and the Civil War and was a highly important constructive force in the advance of the American frontier. On this point the spotty travels of foreign visitors could offer little basis for judgment. Its importance goes far to counteract the long list of evils.

AMI-AHA ANNUAL JOINT MEETING

Members of the American Military Institute, and others concerned with military history, will be interested to know that the annual joint meeting of the Institute with the American Historical Association occurs this year in Chicago, Illinois, where the annual meeting of the AHA is scheduled at the Conrad Hilton Hotel.

Place: Private Dining Room No. 1, Conrad Hilton Hotel.
Time: Monday 28 December 1953, at 10:00 A.M.
Chairman: Brig. General Lawrence H. Whiting.
Speaker: Colonel Vincent Joseph Esposito.
Subject: War as a Continuation of Politics.

General Whiting is vice president of the AMI, and Colonel Esposito is Professor of Military Art and Engineering at the United States Military Academy, West Point, New York. Meetings of this nature are excellent opportunities for AMI members and their guests and friends to get together, under pleasant auspices, with like-minded brethren in the field of military history and, incidentally, help to increase the number of AMI members.