Review Essay: George Rollie Adams, General William S. Harney; Prince of Dragoons and Theo F. Rodenbough, From Everglade to Canyon with the Second United States Cavalry; An Authentic Account of Service in Florida, Mexico, Virginia, and the Indian Country

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When the Civil War erupted, the U.S. Army had five mounted regiments—a combination of dragoons, cavalry, and mounted riflemen. Within four months all of these regiments had lost their original names through reorganization. To this day only one, the Second U.S. Cavalry (originally Dragoons), has inspired an appropriate, published regimental history, now out of print for more than 125 years. Even more neglected in these antebellum horse units are most of their early colonels, who prosecuted the frontier campaigns. Some were great leaders; all were colorful lions. While the lives and military careers of Philip St. George Cooke, Albert Sidney Johnston, and Robert E. Lee have, of course, been well covered, others like

David E. Twiggs, Edwin V. Sumner, William W. Loring, and William S. Harney are barely known to us, and only then through a few specialized journal articles and three valuable but unpublished doctoral dissertations.

Now to the rescue come George Rollie Adams, the president of Rochester's Strong Museum, and Edward G. Longacre, one of the nation's foremost authorities on the nineteenth-century cavalry. Adams has provided a first-rate biography of Harney while Longacre has revived the rare, extraordinary regimental history of the unit that Harney led during 1836–1858. With this fortuitous coincidence, students of the U.S. Army's frontier campaigns have a fresh opportunity to learn about army leadership, soldiering, and campaigning during the crucial middle third of the nineteenth century.

Rollie Adams's book retrieves Harney from the shadows of ill-deserved neglect induced by the passage of time, his truncated Civil War role, and a paucity of personal papers. The result is a sterling biography that revives the exploits of an important but deeply flawed military leader who was the veritable Forrest Gump of the mid-century frontier. Harney was everywhere prior to the great, climactic Indian campaigns that began on the Plains in the 1870s. The terse inscription on his monument in Arlington National Cemetery ("Gen. William S. Harney — 2nd Dragoons—1800–1889—Commissioned 1818—Black Hawk—Seminole—Mexican—Sioux—War of the Rebellion") is far from complete. Adams not only provides valuable accounts of these campaigns but also illuminates Harney in additional, eclectic roles as Andrew Jackson's protégé, Wisconsin Territory peacekeeper, Texas Indian fighter, arbiter of federal authority in Bleeding Kansas and Mormon Utah, and the catalyst of the Pig War in the Pacific Northwest.

Perhaps the greatest strength of Adams's book is its skillful, forthright portrayal of Harney as a mixed bag of behaviors and talents. In the process, Adams provides general readers and military specialists with a case study in the quarrelsome, litigious, and self-indulgent leadership that wracked the U.S. Army at mid-century and that did little to help steady a nation already embarked on a decades-long slide toward the blood bath of disunion.

Adams lays the thoughtful and skillful Harney, who served effectively in both Florida and Kansas, alongside the impulsive and short-sighted Harney, who charged disastrously into northern Coahuila at the beginning of the Mexican War and mishandled the volatile political scene in Missouri at the outbreak of the Civil War. Harney was a religious man capable of great kindness to both animals and humans, yet he was a husband and father long estranged from his own family. Prone to losing control when crossed, Harney
displayed volcanic temper, profanity, and violence. A tall, athletic man, Harney beat (or was himself thrashed by) army enlistees, teamsters, and other civilians. Clearly the most tragic victim of his violence was a female household slave whom Harney pummeled to death in St. Louis during 1835. Small wonder that Mrs. Harney and their three children subsequently emigrated to Paris or that during the winter of 1855–1856 at Fort Pierre, Nebraska Territory, a band of Sioux dubbed Harney “Mad Bear.”

The army reacted to this vicious behavior by relieving Harney of command repeatedly and by court-martialing him on four different occasions. A Missouri civil court brought him to trial a fifth time for the slave homicide. Notwithstanding this record—appalling by today’s standards and unusual even then—Harney still managed to thrive within an antebellum army tolerant of brutality and desperate for leaders with energy, aggressiveness, organizational skill, and personal valor, military virtues that he displayed on disparate frontiers when at his best. By the late 1850s Harney’s impressive record in dealing with the native tribes of Florida, the Upper Midwest, Texas, and the northern Plains had made him the preeminent Indian fighter of his time. The combination of his military record, personal luck, and political manipulation allowed Harney to trowel over his significant liabilities. By 1846—with the promotion of Twiggs—Harney was made colonel of the Second Dragoons at an age when many of his contemporaries were still captains. With the onset of the Civil War, Brigadier General Harney was an army officer junior only to Maj. Gen. Winfield Scott and Brig. Gen. John E. Wool.

His professional career and political prestige came crashing down while he was commander of the Department of the West in St. Louis, a post to which he had been returned in 1860 following his ignominious role in the Pig War. When civil tensions and then war came to Missouri, Harney was beset simultaneously not only by border military maneuvering but also by political forces of overwhelming complexity, ambiguity, and duplicity. In June 1861 President Abraham Lincoln reluctantly relieved Harney of his command and instructed him to await further orders that never came. In 1863 Harney was unilaterally retired; two years later he was promoted to brevet major general for long and faithful service.

In the late 1860s Harney returned to active duty for several years to serve with the postwar commissions designed by Congress to negotiate peace with the Plains tribes. In this—his final military role—Harney performed credibly while commanding a patent respect and even affection from his former tribal adversaries unthinkable for the government’s other, more senior military and
civilian emissaries. Here again Harney displayed the ambivalence and behavioral crosscurrents so pronounced throughout his long career. In this instance it took the form of an ability to understand, respect, and even lobby for tribes whom he had earlier vanquished while acquiring the nickname "Squaw Killer." In 1889 Harney at age eighty-eight died in Florida—the theater of his earlier campaigns against the Seminoles. He left this world nursed by a second wife decades his junior and estranged from his children whom he had vindictively disinherited in a property dispute.

When the University of Nebraska Press first released General William S. Harney, its ad copy contained a typographical error that rendered a key word in the book's subtitle as “Dragon” rather than “Dragoon.” The irony is that Harney's career-long behavior was such that either term would have been appropriate. Not only has Rollie Adams successfully presented the complexity of William Selby Harney's personality and leadership style, he has done so in prose that is uncluttered and direct. The book's fourteen chapters are models of clarity. Each begins and ends with an unobtrusive summary that—together with adequate maps—helps the reader to retain the significance of Harney's cross-country and Mexican assignments. Chapter 10 ("Civil Unrest in Kansas and Utah") is an especially well-researched, insightful description of Harney's Herculean efforts to organize and launch the Utah Expedition on short notice against his own advice. The book is well-made with high quality paper and a well-chosen textual font. Displaying running heads and page numbers at the bottom of each page frees the reader from the visual distractions of more traditional layouts.

If General William S. Harney: Prince of Dragoons has a shortcoming, it is that Adams has missed several opportunities to illustrate more compellingly the point that he makes aptly throughout his biography—that Harney's volcanic displays of temper and even insubordination (he once preferred charges against Winfield Scott, the general in chief) took place within the cultural context of a notoriously prickly officer corps. The book also bypasses the fact that Scott had himself been court-martialed and suspended from duty for a year, and that Twiggs—Harney's mentor and superior in the Second Dragoons for ten long years—was court-martialed twice and ultimately dismissed from the army on the eve of Lincoln's inauguration. Adams does note tension and long-standing enmity between Harney and Col. Edwin V. Sumner of the First Cavalry, Scott's protégé, but he misses Harney's role in Sumner's two 1857-1858 courts-martial as well as his vindictive attempts to try Sumner a third time. These incidents were not just minor, colorful peccadil-
loes; they were examples of self-indulgent, disruptive emotionalism that cascaded from the antebellum army's highest ranks downward into its very core at a critical and volatile time in U.S. history.

Within the Second Dragoons alone, Twiggs's petulant behavior set an unfortunate long-term example for Harney and other regimental officers. An observer of both officers in the 1850s, Capt. Parmenas Taylor Turnley later wrote, "Harney's lack of brains and anxiety to ape a superior, made him a willing student . . . yet nature had given Harney a less cold and obdurate heart than Twiggs possessed." Philip St. George Cooke, Harney's executive officer and successor, observed and absorbed the behavior of both commanders at oppressively close quarters. Accordingly, Colonel Cooke pelted both the secretary of war and general in chief with petitions about promotion procedures on the eve of the Utah Expedition and pursued his professional vendettas against Capt. Henry Hopkins Sibley and Col. Albert Sidney Johnston during the campaign, the most daunting forced march in his regiment's history. Although Adams chronicles Harney's long list of medical problems, he chose not to speculate on the cumulative impact of fevers, wounds, and venereal disease on his subject's emotional health during nearly nine decades of life.

Perhaps the most unfortunate omission from Adams's biography is an account of Harney's telegraphic cudgeling of Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan. On 30 August 1861, several months after Harney had been relieved in St. Louis, McClellan, acting out of respect for Harney and in response to reports that Harney desired to return to active field service, offered him the command of a division in the Army of the Potomac. Now envisioning himself as the national savior, McClellan added, "I feel sure that in the present emergency you will waive all consideration of previous rank & will cheerfully give to this army the prestige of your name & presence." Indignant at Little Mac's presumptuousness, Harney immediately wired back: "Your telegraph is just received. I consider your conduct to say the least of it exceedingly impertinent." Later that night a stunned McClellan replied, "I was much surprised and grieved when I received a few moments since, your telegram. . . . Supposing that you wished to serve in the field I embraced the earliest opportunity to offer you the highest position in my gift, and took no little trouble to accomplish this purpose. You have chosen to pursue a very extraordinary course—your telegraphic message is, to say the least of it, difficult to explain. . . . I do not feel that you have any longer any claim upon me as a fellow soldier—though I was this morning very anxious to see you." And so Bill Harney spent the rest of the Civil War on his St. Louis veranda. Lost in the
acrimonious exchange with McClellan was Harney’s ticket out of military oblivion and his exceptional combat prowess, which his country desperately needed in its hour of greatest peril.

Harney served half his antebellum career with the Second United States Dragoons, whose exploits Theophilus F. Rodenbough recounted in *From Everglade to Canyon with the Second United States Cavalry*. Edward G. Longacre, a historian not easily given to hyperbole, describes the book as “the finest depiction of the service life of any regiment in the nineteenth-century American army” (p. 7). Longacre and the University of Oklahoma Press have done a great service by reprinting in paperback a classic whose single edition has been out of print since 1875. Heretofore available only in research libraries, Rodenbough’s *From Everglade to Canyon* has recently been commanding one thousand dollars or more on the antiquarian book market.

Three years after Harney was promoted out of the Second Dragoons and a month before the fall of Fort Sumter, Rodenbaugh entered the regiment from civilian life rather than West Point. Although Rodenbaugh never rose above captain while campaigning with the Second, he did serve as the regiment’s commander for most of the Civil War—a direct reflection not only of officer shortages in the Union Army but also of the valor that earned him four brevets (including that of a brigadier general), the Medal of Honor, and loss of an arm. With the disbandment of the volunteer regiments and the great postwar contraction in the regular army, Rodenbaugh was mustered out of the volunteer Pennsylvania cavalry regiment that he then commanded and reverted to the grade of captain in the Second Cavalry until appointed major in a regular infantry regiment. In 1870 he retired for medical reasons as a colonel and brevet brigadier general. Afterward, Rodenbaugh enjoyed an active managerial and writing career until his death at age seventy-four in 1912.

The book’s subtitle, *An Authentic Account of Service in Florida, Mexico, Virginia, and the Indian Country, 1836-1875*, reads remarkably like William S. Harney’s tombstone. Indeed, Harney served in the regiment for over half the period covered in the thirty-one chapters organized by six distinctive time periods: 1836-42 (“The Florida War”); 1843-44 (“Louisiana—Texas”); 1845-48 (“The War With Mexico”); 1848-60 (“California—Texas—New Mexico—Kansas—Utah”); 1861-66 (“War of ‘The Rebellion’”); and 1866-75 (“Colorado—Nebraska—Wyoming—Montana”). Unlike other regimental histories, Rodenbough’s work offers not only his own narrative descriptions but also an extensive collection of officers’ letters and reminiscences, official reports, and a significant number of accounts by enlisted
troops. Chief Bugler William D. Drown's 1857 journal of the Second's twelve-hundred-mile march to Utah in blizzards fifty degrees below freezing—probably the longest, most arduous winter march in U.S. military history—is alone worth the price of the book. *From Everglade to Canyon* constitutes an extraordinary primary source about several generations of the Old Army's mounted service.

One only wishes that Rodenbough had continued his history beyond 1875, that Longacre had somehow been allotted the space to carry it down to today's Second Armored Cavalry Division, and that Rollie Adams had been able to keep Bill Harney on the psychiatrist's couch a bit longer. But these are the seductive fantasies of a reviewer who needs to be wary of projecting his own wish list onto the work of accomplished historians who have dealt admirably with their subjects and material. We are indebted to Adams, Rodenbough, and Longacre (as well as to their publishers) for rescuing the Second Cavalry and at least one of its early leaders from a fate that Brig. Gen. Delos B. Sacket, a veteran of the Second, once described as the likely lot of a dragoon officer serving on the frontier: "To be killed by an Indian, buried in a ditch and have your name spelled wrong in the newspapers."

Notes

3. Aphorism attributed to Sacket is quoted in Samuel Wragg Ferguson, "The Expedition in 1857, under General Albert Sydney Johnston to Salt Lake City, to Install Governor Cummings," typescript narrative, Ferguson Papers, Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge.