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Review of "Forgotten Under A Tropical Sun: War Stories by American Veterans in the Philippines, 1898-1913" by Joseph P. McCallus

Frank Schumacher

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Joseph P. McCallus. *Forgotten Under A Tropical Sun: War Stories by American Veterans in the Philippines, 1898-1913*. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2017. Pp. 266.

Between 1899 and 1913, the United States fought a highly controversial and costly colonial war in the Philippine Islands. Almost 130,000 U.S. soldiers were deployed in the archipelago against a northern independence movement and subsequently against the Moros in the predominantly Muslim South. Approximately 10,000 American soldiers were wounded or killed while assessments of Filipino casualties range from 250,000 to 750,000. Continuous reports about the misconduct of U.S. troops, in particular the systematic use of torture and indiscriminate warfare against civilians, produced a substantial yet ultimately ineffective anti-imperial opposition to the war on the home front. By the First World War, the war in the Philippines had drifted from public attention as most Americans embraced empire as a precondition for U.S. global power.

According to Joseph P. McCallus, who teaches English at Columbus State University, “[m]emory has not been kind to the Philippine-American War” (p. 1). For more than half a century the war was largely forgotten and remained among the least commemorated in U.S. history. But since its “re-discovery” in the United States during the 1960s, the war’s memories have persistently been instrumentalised to support or critique U.S. foreign relations. The wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq were often interpreted through the lens of the Philippine-American War as either manifestations of a bellicose empire or tactical precedence for successful counterinsurgency operations. In the Philippines itself, memories of the war were long marginalised because of the nation’s close Cold War alliance with the United States. In recent decades, however, a selective history of the war as northern independence struggle has provided a popular nationalist narrative in Filipino historiography while memories of the Moro Wars inform the current independence movement in the southern islands.

McCallus objects to such reductionist perceptions of the war as a series of U.S. atrocities and hopes to provide a more nuanced understanding of the American military experience through a close reading of sixty-two war memoirs and autobiographies by U.S. officers and soldiers from across the United States. The added nuance, however, comes at the price of a clearly formulated thesis as “the book does

not venture to support or condemn the actions of the United States with regard to the war and subsequent annexation” (p. 25). Such retreat from historical judgment is surprising considering that the Philippine-American War was hardly a morally ambiguous affair as much of the robust (albeit U.S.-centric) historiography of its military history, discursive and cultural contexts, and colonial repercussions has outlined in great detail. It was a race war of conquest and subjugation which devastated vast parts of the archipelago and re-enforced questionable practices in U.S. approaches to asymmetrical warfare.

Such refrain from research-informed judgment is even more surprising considering how clearly the empirical evidence and McCallus’ excellent analysis substantiates much of the interpretative claims made by the current state of research. While many studies on the American side of the war previously included only brief commentaries from soldiers often drawn from published and unpublished letters, McCallus’ extensive use of a wide range of autobiographical texts from prominent and little known representatives of all military branches engaged in the islands allows for a much more substantive analysis. Despite the diversity of the writers and variations in the war’s individual campaigns, McCallus skillfully extracts common themes among his subjects such as reflections on their role and mission, the enemy, the war’s conduct, and the combat environment. Extensive source quotes and numerous illustrations provide great texture to the book’s five chronological chapters.

What emerges is that most writers displayed little doubt about the legitimacy of the military conquest or their own conduct. They entertained racialised colonial outlooks, were socialised in cultural settings of settler imperialism, interpreted military operations as an important component of America’s “civilising mission” in the Philippines, and rejected the anti-imperial critique on the home front as detrimental to the war effort.

Their benign interpretations of the military conquest also extended to the harsh treatment of prisoners and civilians alike. Atrocities and the frequent use of torture were commonly justified by the purported inhumanity of the enemy and the overriding necessity of victory. Only one writer, Andrew Pohlman, a soldier with the 1st Infantry, explicitly expressed regret and bewilderment in his discussion of rape during the Samar campaign. For Pohlman, U.S. military conduct in the islands contradicted not only his sense of humanity but also

betrayed his understanding of America's core values of liberty and anti-colonialism. But Pohlman's response and his subsequent anti-war activism were the rare exception; most authors celebrated their own conduct and that of the U.S. troops as chivalrous, morally virtuous, and militarily courageous.

Discussions of the environmental conditions in the islands played a key role in much of the war memoirs. They illustrated the tensions common to many colonial imaginations of the tropics as blessing and curse alike. This traditional duality also informed the writings of U.S. soldiers which simultaneously expressed discomfort, disorientation, and frontier optimism in their exoticised depictions of the Philippines and its peoples. McCallus' analytical emphasis on frontier optimism is one of the book's key observations whose interpretive implications reach far beyond the immediate thematic confines of the war itself.

America's victory over Spain in 1898 and the subsequent creation of a U.S. overseas colonial empire is still commonly interpreted as a temporary departure from a largely anti-imperial historical trajectory. This notion of a radical, albeit temporary, break from the past is fundamentally questioned by most of the autobiographies' emphasis on the continuities of empire-building. In many of these texts the frontier served as a thematic arc of empire with all its cultural implications and ethno-cultural stereotyping derived from a century of continental conquest. As part of these traditional imperial repertoires, military campaigns against indigenous polities in the trans-Mississippi West were frequently used as an interpretative foil by writers who had been militarily socialised during the so-called Indian Wars. As McCallus observes, for many soldiers then, the Philippines constituted an extension of the western frontier: "Kentucky becomes Luzon, the Little Bighorn becomes Samar, and the prairie becomes Mindanao" (p. 218).

The implications of the Philippine War as "fighting for a new West, a new part of American territory" are significant because they interpretatively connect empire-building at home and abroad and thus complicate the narrative of exceptionalist nationalism which claims anti-imperialism as a traditional American core value (p. 71). Ironically such implications also contradict McCallus' own suggestion that "there was no imperial tradition in America" (p. 1). Most of his discussion of the frontier theme indicates otherwise.

Such contradictions highlight the fundamental analytical tension of this book between its aspirations and its findings and unavoidable

conclusions. For example, McCallus hopes to minimise the post-colonial emphasis on U.S. atrocities in the war; in the midst of an outstanding chapter on brutality he reminds the reader that “too much emphasis has been placed on the war’s atrocities and too little on the role the military played in establishing a civilian government [...] while simultaneously developing the country’s infrastructure, including roads, bridges, and a telephone system” (p. 127). But the book’s panoramic evidence clearly suggests that such measures were not only an integral component of a military strategy of reward and subjugation, but were also accompanied by habitual empire-building, frequent racialised mass violence, and the systematic and widespread devastation of large parts of the archipelago.

Forgotten under the Tropical Sun thus provides important empirical evidence and skillful analysis at the height of current research on the U.S. military and the Philippine War but fails to draw clear interpretative conclusions. The contested commentaries by the current U.S. president on John J. Pershing’s purported counterinsurgency insights from the conquest of the southern Philippines provide an important reminder that this war is not forgotten, that its political instrumentalisation will likely continue, and that a retreat to empiricism without historical judgment under the disguise of historical complexity is no intellectual option in this age of “alternative facts.”

FRANK SCHUMACHER, *UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO*