

### Soldiers in the Southwest Borderlands, 1848-1886

Samuel Watson

*United States Military Academy at West Point*, [samuel.watson@westpoint.edu](mailto:samuel.watson@westpoint.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Watson, Samuel (2020) "Soldiers in the Southwest Borderlands, 1848-1886," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.22.2.05

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol22/iss2/5>

## Review

Samuel Watson

Spring 2020

**Lahti, Janne (Ed.)** *Soldiers in the Southwest Borderlands, 1848-1886*. University of Oklahoma Press, 2017. Illustration, index. Pp. x, 234. ISBN 978-0-8061-5702-3, \$29.95 cloth.

*Soldiers in the Southwest Borderlands* explores the diversity of western soldiers, their service and their lives before and after service, before, during, and after the Civil War. Each essay explores a single individual, all of them enlisted soldiers rather than officers, some U.S. regular army, including African American George Goldsby, others Mexican militiaman Santiago Brito, Nuevomexicano volunteer Homobono Carabajal, and Apache scouts Mickey Free and John Rope. Repeated themes are resilience and the benefits of service, including a notable degree of integration by white soldiers into western society, whether by European immigrants (Emil Bode and Louis Geck) or easterners (Harry McConnell), and indeed by Santiago Brito. Yet Goldsby and Carabajal faced prejudice and harassment and fled the service after their resistance resulted in death; Goldsby became a minor legend, portrayed by Frederick Remington, but Carabajal escaped the death sentence through an insanity defense that does not appear to have been disingenuous.

Any collection of essays, especially one dealing with the lives of ten rather diverse individuals, faces the question of synthesis and aggregation: were there patterns? One wishes Lahti had done more in his introduction to identify these, and some of the essays are virtually all narrative, with little conclusion. While Lahti refers to settler colonialism in his introduction, few of the authors follow that approach. The “average” life of a soldier in the American Southwest began when their profession brought them there. None of them were long-service professionals; soldiering was part of a varied life for most of these men. Despite their differing experiences before or after service, their lives were shaped by violence. That violence often predated their service in the Southwest, both in their personal experiences and in larger U.S. bids for control over the

southwest, escalating in spirals and cycles, with Anglo settlement. Another commonality was that soldiering taught these men discipline which helped them to pursue individual and familial security and autonomy after their service. If the men fit within the confines of racial hierarchies, this security and autonomy enabled some to pursue upward mobility.

Three quotations can help illustrate the complex, often contradictory dynamics these men were compelled to engage. James Leiker observes that we ultimately know very little about George Goldsby: his “borderless life illustrates better than most the salience of situational identity, the human capacity to shift modes of thought, relations with others, and even self-identification depending on circumstance. In an existence filled with border crossings . . . violence remained his only true constant” (p. 155). Yet Victoria Smith emphasizes the agency of Mexican-born Apache scout Mickey Free, “whose extraordinary life was defined by . . . shifting personal identities born of three nations wrestling for control” over Apacheria: “Captured as a child . . . forced to rely on violence and on arbitrarily assigned identities for survival,” he “triumphed over adversity by exercising resiliency . . . and by maximizing his unique tricultural skills” (p. 191). Another Apache scout, John Rope, “made military service suit his needs. He had escaped outsider control on the reservation, gained a source of income in times of dreadful poverty, and used what the service offered to suit his own ideas of manliness” (p. 205). The ultimate story here is one of agency, the agency of violence and agency in the face of violence.

**Samuel Watson** is professor of American and military history at the United States Military Academy, where he has taught an elective on American frontiers. His books *Jackson's Sword* and *Peacekeepers and Conquerors*, on the U.S. Army officer corps on the frontiers between 1810 and 1846, were published by the University Press of Kansas in 2012 and 2013; he is working on a similar volume for 1784-1812, and editing the *Oxford Handbook of American Military History*. His email is samuel.watson@westpoint.edu.