

The Cleveland Grays: An Urban Military Company, 1837-1919. By George N. Vourlojianis. (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2002. x, 150 pp. Paper, \$12.00, ISBN 0-87338-678-7.)

Within the military history genre, regimental and other small-unit studies retain a popularity perhaps second only to campaign volumes and “battle books.” Interestingly, early regimental histories appeared en masse on the American scene while the Civil War still raged, providing veterans and home readers accounts of epic deeds performed on blood-stained fields from Manassas to Missionary Ridge and beyond. Over the next one hundred years, the basic format remained nearly unchanged: “Regimentals” (as they are widely known) recounted in painstaking detail the stories of camp and battle, with scant mention of the social, political, and cultural forces that called these men, often hailing from a single community, to duty in defense of their homes. In fine, such studies provided precious little context of the world from which the soldiers came, serving instead as quintessential “pot-boilers,” accounts that stirred arguments among rival units and latter-day adherents rather than encourage meaningful understanding for subsequent generations of scholars, students, and enthusiasts.

The past thirty years, however, have witnessed the advent of truly integrated small-unit works, volumes that are as much community studies and social histories as they are military tomes. George N. Vourlojianis, assistant professor of history at Cleveland’s John Carroll University, attempts to contribute to the “new military history” in producing *The Cleveland Grays*, a reworking of his own 1994 Ph.D. dissertation. This reviewer took encouragement from the book’s first sentence, one that modestly decreed it a “work on a bit of Cleveland history” (ix) rather than a mere institutional or chronological narrative.

An independent militia company formed in 1837 during ongoing tensions between the United States and British Canada, the Grays was from its birth considered a special military and social organization. Its membership came almost exclusively from Cleveland’s elite commercial and political class, whose considerable stake in society necessitated vigilance against real or perceived enemies, both at home and abroad. Its political culture was distinctly conservative; at first Whiggish, by the 1850s it had embraced a nascent nativism and finally fell under the aegis of the Republican Party. Throughout the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century, the Grays provided support for the city’s leadership (to be sure, many city fathers were also members of the Grays), carrying out police functions against a growing labor movement that was seen as a threat its own hegemonic interests. The company too served, if somewhat sparingly, in nearly all of America’s major military conflicts from the Civil War through World War One. One of its officers, Lieutenant Albert Baesel, was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his actions at Meuse-Argonne in September 1917.

Yet by the turn of the twentieth century the Grays came under increasing criticism from a society changed by the cumulative effects of urbanization, industrialization, and

professionalization. Working-class and Progressive detractors considered the Grays' privileged members (with some justification) "tin soldiers" who were perfectly willing to stay at home during times of war, all the while supplying low-born substitutes to fill up depleted ranks. Regular Army officials and National Guardsmen also harbored grievances against independent militia companies, whom they judged "incompetent, erratic, boastful, and wasteful" (79). The Grays, however, endured these myriad barbs, maintaining cohesiveness and camaraderie through the leadership of committed and well-connected commanding officers. Long after the disappearance of similar units throughout the U.S., the Grays still live on (unofficially) as Company B, 145th Infantry, Ohio National Guard.

The Grays' footprint upon the social and military history of Cleveland was perhaps large, yet the fatal weakness of Vourlojianis's work is the perfunctory treatment of the many forces that molded not only the company but also the community from which it came. Indeed, readers will find little contextual analysis within this thin volume. The opportunity to examine the Grays against the background of nationalism, sectionalism, Whig and Republican political culture, urbanization, professionalization, and labor strife is largely lost as Vourlojianis attends to mundane and repetitive anecdotes detailing the Grays' many summer encampments, parades, and social soirées. In addition, the author's warm regard for his subject at times clouds his historical vision; one cringes upon reading references to "angry leftists" (109) and the company's role as "a bulwark against anarchy" (49). Present as well are some factual and interpretive errors, including a reference to brass Civil War-era cannon barrels (they were bronze) and the claim that American-British friction during the 1830s was "muted and even nonexistent on a national level" (14). Finally, Vourlojianis culls few primary sources that might provide a fuller picture of the company as a whole. There is, for example, no use of census or tax lists to underscore the Grays' socioeconomic dominance, and no comprehensive roster of the unit's membership.

In the end, *The Cleveland Grays* accomplishes very little of what it sets out to do. As institutional, narrative history, it is of some use to the general reader or to those with a special interest in Cleveland's military past. As a window through which scholars might examine an American past, its deficiencies are manifest.

Christopher S. Stowe
University of Toledo
Toledo, Ohio