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## Spiers, Edward. *The Victorian Soldier in Africa: Studies in Imperialism*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2013. 212pp. [Book Review]

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**Spiers, Edward. *The Victorian Soldier in Africa: Studies in Imperialism*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2013, v + 212 pp.**

The “human experiences” of the Victorian soldiers who fought in Africa to expand the British Empire at the turn of the twentieth century have received little scholarly attention. Yet, as Edward Spiers presents in *The Victorian Soldier in Africa*, recently released in paperback, letters “from the front” by soldiers to acquaintances and weekly newspapers at home reveal their combat experiences and their close connections with the army and the civilian community in Britain. Often composed by soldiers enduring extremely demanding terrains and climatic conditions, the letters convey views of imperial wars rarely expressed in the official dispatches, corroborate the testimony of contentious issues, provide fresh insight about the men’s experiences in various aspects of the same campaign, and supply a greater range of perspectives from soldiers in different regiments (2). Significantly, the letters also soften the image of the army in Britain during the period when men hardly considered careers in the military and “few families had a positive image of the army as a career” (12).

The value and significance of these letters cannot be overstated. But Spiers cautions against taking them at face value, because of what he has identified as their “shortcomings.” He cautions that some authors “were profoundly shocked by the experience and were not always lucid in their recollections; others embellished their accounts” (40). Soldiers without a clue about the casualty figures provided imagined estimates, made factual errors, and downplayed the enemy’s resilience, essentially authoring letters that are “limited in perspective” (28). Creating further complications, these communications passed through the hands of military censors and local newspapers editors who likely tinkered with their tone and meaning. Notwithstanding, the letters convey eyewitness accounts of the Victorian army in action and reveal the hardships the soldiers encountered in Africa.

Structurally, the nine chapters of the book follow chronological order, covering twenty-eight years of Victorian wars in Africa (1874–1902). Spiers begins by discussing the British military success in West Africa against the Asante people of modern Ghana, a victory ascribed to the soldiers’ valor and the superior firepower of breech-loading Snider. In the second chapter, the author examines similar imperial campaigns and victories in the Ninth Cape Frontier War and the Anglo-Zulu War in South Africa. In both campaigns, however, the Victorian soldiers encountered “a succession of assaults,” especially from the Zulu warriors who sent them to “eternity” (49, 50), before reinforcements began to arrive. Spiers’s third chapter, also on South Africa, highlights the British campaign in battling the Boers

in the First Anglo-Boer War of 1880–1881. Over the next three chapters, which consider the war in northeastern Africa, Spiers focuses on British intervention in Egypt, the fight against the Mahdists, and the Gordon relief expedition. While the seventh chapter brings back the discussion to southern Africa, in Bechuanaland (modern Botswana), the penultimate chapter takes the reader back up north—to the war in Sudan, whose purpose was to reconquer the region after the essentially failed Gordon relief expedition. Spiers concludes by “re-engaging the Boers” in the Second Anglo-Boer War in southern Africa (1899–1902).

The book’s strength resides in its significant use of substantial primary materials in the form of personal letters and diaries that convey the soldiers’ “human experience” in their own voices. To the benefit of scholarship on the subject, Spiers allows the men to speak for themselves, adding commentary on their views and assessing key actors, such as native auxiliaries in Africa and politicians in London. For these reasons, Spiers’s book is a valuable contribution to the scholarship.

But the book is not without fault. One wishes that Spiers would have discussed at much greater length the social relationships between the soldiers and non-combatants, especially women—a topic he covers very briefly in two paragraphs, one in chapter six and the other in the epilogue section. The book’s cursory treatment of the soldiers’ social interactions produces the unsettling and, indeed, cliché, image of an impassive Victorian man completely lacking human connections. As the book has it, the men seem to have cared about more victories, the possibilities of earning promotions and medals, and increased self-esteem (93, 180) than they did about native bearers, laborers, and traders, whom they often subjected to physical punishment whenever they felt that they had been cheated (185).

Nonetheless, this book fits squarely within the literature of imperial, colonial Africa, and military histories, as well as in the capacious field of Victorian studies. College instructors in these disciplines who wish to use the book as a classroom text will surely find this paperback edition affordable and useful. Although fairly short, its chapters convey deep meanings about British wars in pre-colonial Africa. Undergraduate students should find the chapters easy to read and comprehend. The book carries visual images in general maps—eight in all—simplifying the work of readers seeking to identify the major theatres of the wars. Unfortunately, the lack of other visual elements (e.g., photographs and charts) may limit the ability of the uninitiated to contextualize the conflicts.

Viewed narrowly, *The Victorian Soldier in Africa* captures imperial war stories in Africa, accentuates the hyper-masculinity of British soldiers, and hints at the aggressive nature of the British Army. Speaking broadly, however, the book challenges our perception of the meaning of nineteenth and twentieth century

imperial expansion in Africa, encouraging its readers to think critically about a transformative period that in many ways determined the fate of the continent for many generations to come.

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