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Book Review of, Tribute of Blood: Army, Honor, Race, and Nation in Brazil, 1864-1945

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The Tribute of Blood: Army, Honor, Race and Nation in Brazil, 1864-1945. By

Peter M. Beattie. Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations.

Durham: Duke University Press, 2001. Photographs. Illustrations. Map.

Tables. Appendixes. Notes. Glossary. Bibliography. Index, xxiv, 390 pp.

Cloth, \$54.95. Paper, \$18.95.

Peter Beattie's book uses impressment and conscription as a lens through which to examine broader cultural and political issues. To make this connection, Beattie draws on a wide-range of sources, including eighteenth century songs, soldier's tattoos, congressional records, and cartoons, some marvelous examples of which are included in his book. The result is a highly original work that is not only a political history but also a social study, which evokes the daily concerns and social pressures that people faced in late Imperial and early Republican Brazil. Beattie is able to link micro-level events from the lowest level of the army (or civilians' lives in the rural interior) to important questions of identity, citizenship and state-making in an innovative and theoretically sophisticated manner.

In a sense, Beattie's work reinvigorates political history by uniting it with social and cultural history. What is remarkable about his work is the kind of detail that Beattie's sources have allowed him to recover, so that he can interweave complex political history at the highest level –debates in the Chamber of Deputies– with local incidents. For example, Beattie describes how the draft board in a small town in Minas Gerais was attacked by “a group of fifty women using disguises,

(who) suddenly entered and destroyed the paperwork.” (p. 93). As Beattie correctly notes, given the small size of Conceição de Alagoas it was almost unthinkable that members of the draft board did not recognize some of their attackers, especially as this was the fourth time that women had over-run the board. That it was women who led the assault, and that the authorities could not stop their depredations, tells us about much more than popular resistance to the 1874 Recruitment Law. It is a window into nineteenth century Brazil, which allows us to view issues of honor, patriarchy, and authority.

One has to admire the creativity with which Beattie has found and interpreted sources. He begins with lines from a popular singer and soldier of the eighteenth century. Then he draws on oral history, in particular in his discussion of the “nabbing time” in imperial Brazil, when impressment gangs roamed the interior, to seize the poor and the patronless. This is a period when the popular saying was “God is great, but the forest is greater,” a reference to the ability of the poor to flee the law, and perhaps until now the historical record. Few other scholars would be as comfortable interpreting soldiers’ tattoos as trial transcripts, which allows Beattie to reclaim unexpected areas of military memory.

For more than fifty years Brazil’s armed forces have tried to influence the writing of history, by means such as limiting access to their records, or eliminating unwanted documents from libraries and archives. But Beattie’s inventiveness has allowed him to escape the military’s influence over its own historical records, and to consider topics that the military has considered to be taboo, such as sexuality

and race. In particular, his discussion of homosexuality in the army, in the context of military efforts to portray the barracks as an honorable space in the early twentieth century, may make Brazilian officers cringe. But it is his examination of race within the military that is most significant. Despite the army's own mythology that it was an institution relatively free from the racism that permeated Brazilian society, the reality was that race shaped most aspects of life within the barracks. Finding information on this topic -- especially statistical figures on the racial make-up of the army-- can be fiendishly difficult. Yet Beattie has obtained new material, which he waves into a complex and nuanced discussion of race in his narrative. Beattie is helping to open to investigation a critical question in the history of almost all Latin American militaries.

One of the challenges that scholars of Latin American militaries now have, as David Pion-Berlin has noted, is to connect their scholarship to broader theoretical issues relevant to scholars studying other areas. Beattie's work draws on a wide range of theory concerning issues such as discipline, nationalism and the construction of honor. His study is therefore relevant to a broad audience, not only those interested in Latin American militaries, but also anyone studying state-making in the developing world. Free of jargon, theoretically sophisticated, and based on a rich array of sources, this work will likely become a staple in a wide-range of classes, particularly at the graduate level.

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