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Emory Upton and the US Army

Paul C. Jussel

Books Reviewed

*Emory Upton:
Misunderstood Reformer*
By David J. Fitzpatrick

*Correspondence of Major
General Emory Upton:
Volume 1, 1857–1875*
Edited by Salvatore G.
Cilella Jr.

*Correspondence of Major
General Emory Upton:
Volume 2, 1875–1881*
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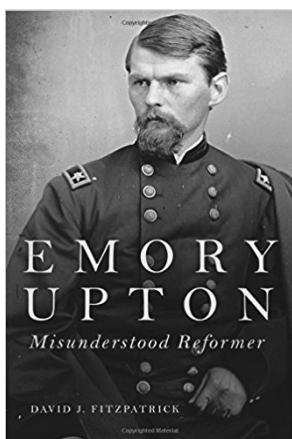
Today, US Army officers know very little of Major General Emory Upton and his reforms, even if they know his name. Yet Upton was one of the great thinkers of our profession at the end of the nineteenth century. His influence is felt today. Yet he and his reforms are very misunderstood, as author David J. Fitzpatrick explains clearly in his book, *Emory Upton: Misunderstood Reformer*. He provides a portrait of Upton that is very different from current perspectives. Fitzpatrick paints a picture of a man who was deeply concerned with the professionalism of the US Army, the officer corps in particular; the civil-military relationship between America's militia, since the United States National Guard had not been fully organized yet; and the regular Army. Why is this portrait so different from current perspectives? Why is it so different from the opinions of such renowned authors as Stephen E. Ambrose and Russell Weigley? What happened to the ideas and proposals of Emory Upton? In short, Peter S. Michie's work, *The Life and Letters of Emory Upton*, published in 1885, is what happened.

In the 1880s, Michie, an 1863 graduate of the United States Military Academy, became an influential and well-respected professor at the academy. His work on Upton served to raise the general to the highest level. His hagiography of the then-recently deceased reformer was not without its faults. While Michie relied on many of Upton's letters to create his portrait, he often redacted or modified the letters to show what he wanted Upton to be: a stalwart, God-fearing, nearly puritanical reformer who despised the national belief in state militia, reviled politicians, and regarded a professional army as the only solution to the nation's ills.

Fitzpatrick shatters that image. The author has lived with Upton for over two decades through the general's letters. Research for the dissertation, articles for the *Journal of Military History*, and now this book have been Fitzpatrick's work as he traced Upton's life. The book's value is obvious as the author starts from Upton's early years, his cadetship at West Point, and the opening years of the Civil War, as very formative times for the young officer. Upton's life at West Point was not without frivolity—he garnered demerits for acting out—while he was certainly a studious cadet. His dislike for politicians traces to his time at the academy when he realized many of his fellow cadets did not attend due to dedication to the ideals of the institution, but rather as political favors from family friends and relatives.

The first years of the Civil War also provided lessons for the somewhat idealistic young officer. First serving with the artillery branch, then the infantry, Upton witnessed random acts of vandalism and barbarity by Union soldiers. Though he eschewed those acts, Upton soon came to

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By David J. Fitzpatrick, *Emory Upton: Misunderstood Reformer* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017), 344 pages, \$39.95

understand what Sherman called “the hard hand of war.” Upton also saw how volunteers could be turned into soldiers when ably and competently led. Fitzpatrick takes the reader through the war’s last years as the young officer rose in rank and responsibility, first as an infantry brigade commander, then as a cavalry division commander. Through these experiences, he ended the Civil War with firm ideas on the value of trained volunteers and the associated horrors when they were not trained.

Fitzpatrick is at his best when he describes Upton’s postwar career. He shows the general as an inspired tactician, a caring husband, and careful observer of foreign armies. The author does not shy away from controversy as he points out Upton’s benign neglect of his duties as West Point’s Commandant of Cadets. Fitzpatrick provides an excellent overview of each of Upton’s assessments of foreign armies, showing how Upton got some mostly correct and others very wrong.

The two chapters on reform are where the author refutes the charges laid at Upton’s feet by following generations of politicians, military leaders, and historians. Fitzpatrick clearly shows Upton favored a volunteer-based army and had strong political support from politicians, but he saw the military as an instrument to suppress “rebellions” in the country, much as the volunteer armies did during the “War of the Rebellion.” Maintaining a skeletal military (a cadre military in current terms) was important to Upton for a variety of reasons. He favored the call for volunteer units if, and only if, there were sufficiently trained officers for them. The practice of forming all-volunteer units—from senior officer to lowest private—was an abject failure in Upton’s mind.

Indeed, Upton favored serious reform to military policy, all of which was in the congressional realm. Not understanding how difficult that reform would be, Upton often fought uphill battles against his political opponents. The year of 1878 became crucial for Upton’s efforts. Through the work of Representative James A. Garfield and Senator Ambrose E. Burnside, a reform bill eventually made it to the Senate floor, where it went down in defeat. Such historians as Weigley have cited the bill, largely based on Upton’s intellectual work, as evidence that Upton wanted a Prussian system for the US military; Fitzpatrick shows “this was not a contemporary concern” (217). Rather, as the author points out, the bill failed for lack of active support by the Army Commanding General William Tecumseh Sherman, who should have been the most vocal military supporter, and by an “intense lobbying effort” from the Army’s staff bureau chiefs (221).

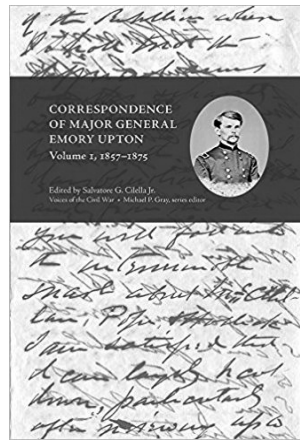
Upton continued to write and promote the idea of military reform for the next several years. Finally promoted to colonel in the regular Army in 1880, he took assignment to the 4th Artillery at the Presidio in California. In March 1881, Upton ended his life with a bullet to his head.

Fitzpatrick does great service in his last chapter, which outlines Upton's continuing influence. The author explains how Secretary of War Elihu Root adopted many of Upton's ideas, modified others, and brought the army into the early twentieth century. What are known as the Root reforms had their basis in many of Upton's proposals. Further, Fitzpatrick examines Upton's alleged "militarism" and "antidemocratic" leanings and finds those critiques wanting. The author tackles the final barrier to Upton's legacy in his assessment of John McAuley Palmer's critiques and dismantles them completely.

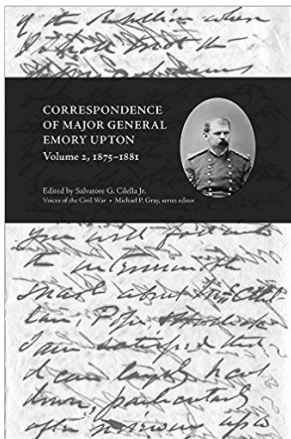
While Fitzpatrick has done great service to anyone interested in US Army reform and the late-nineteenth-century army, Salvatore G. Cilella Jr. has helped even more. In his two-volume work, *Correspondence of Major General Emory Upton*, he offers the reformer's thoughts in Upton's own words. These volumes are invaluable in understanding Upton. Any reader can page through the books to see how Upton evolved through the letters. Starting with Cadet Upton's first letter to his brother John in 1857 and ending with his March 14, 1881, resignation the works tell a more complete story of Emory Upton.

From these pages, Upton emerges as a caring brother to his siblings and a respectful son to his parents. He appears as both a serious and studious cadet, while bemoaning his demerits. As a newly minted officer, he was dedicated to his duties as a staff officer and eventual battery commander, and as a regimental commander and trainer for the 121st New York Infantry. His letter describing Grant's Overland campaign and his plan of attack on May 10, 1864, at Spotsylvania is remarkable not only in its brevity but in its humility (140). While Commandant of Cadets, Upton's letters to the superintendent and members of the House Committee on Military Affairs detail the challenges Upton faced during his tenure at West Point. More importantly, many letters show Upton's efforts at tactical reform, at meaningful national military reform, and his attempts to influence potential and actual stakeholders in those ideas. A reader can almost feel Upton's frustration as he writes his closest friends, James Wilson and Henry DuPont, about his efforts.

Cilella's work is more valuable with the author's notes for every letter in the two books. His research to uncover each person Upton mentions, their relation to the letter's subject, and other background information makes these works more appealing to historians for it gives the background and context for so many of Upton's ideas. While the editor was forced to rely on Michie's century-old biography for some letters, his efforts to find letters Michie missed and redacted makes this new version more valuable. Not only did Cilella research the context for all of Upton's letters to 1881, he also provides context for Upton's world tour in 1875–76. The author's efforts to provide an understanding



Edited by Salvatore G. Cilella Jr.,
*Correspondence of Major General Emory
 Upton: Volume 1, 1857–1875* (Knoxville:
 University of Tennessee Press, 2017),
 406 pages, \$58.00



Edited by Salvatore G. Cilella Jr.,
*Correspondence of Major General Emory
Upton: Volume 2, 1875-1881* (Knoxville:
University of Tennessee Press, 2017),
67 pages, \$58.00

of the different armies Upton's entourage studied over those seventeen months is very impressive.

For both books, the bibliographies and endnotes are very helpful to the professional interested in exploring more from this period. The discussions over large standing armies, a professionalized officer corps, and the role and responsibilities of the National Guard are as vital today as they were in Upton's time. Despite the arguments against the reformer's ideas offered by such experts as Weigley and Ambrose, those involved in national defense and reform will be well served by studying what Upton thought at a time when the Army was under serious pressure to change. Today's Army faces many similar challenges; old thoughts may prove more than useful to modern leaders.