Review of "Work Or Fight!" Race, Gender, And The Draft In World War One By Gerald E. Shenk

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Catholic leaders collaborated through the Catholic Press Association (1890) and the Commission on Religious Prejudices (1914) and brought the power of litigation to bear upon the papers. More sympathetic Protestant clergy and editors of secular magazines also came to the defense of American Catholics. Many Americans boycotted products advertised in anti-Catholic papers. These combined efforts oftentimes blunted Nativist attacks, drained the coffers of anti-Romanist papers, and diminished the credibility of their editors and writers. The most definitive development in countering these tabloids, however, was witnessed in the contributions made by American Catholics during World War I. By war's end, anti-Catholic papers, once numbering about sixty, had slipped to a mere handful.

While most textbooks provide coverage of the Know-Nothing movement, the American Protective Association, and the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s, very little, if anything, is ever mentioned about anti-Catholicism in the Progressive Era. Nordstrom's book fills that void. His examination of anti-Catholicism through print culture enables historians and communications specialists to determine how effectively some groups used modern information resources for negative purposes. If there is a shortcoming, Nordstrom clearly states that his research was fragmented due to the lack of extant records among these newspapers. Nevertheless, he has brought to the surface enough evidence to enable scholars to carefully examine anti-Catholic journalism so often overlooked in the Progressive Era.


“Work or Fight!” Race, Gender, and the Draft in World War One is an ambitious book. Shifting our focus away from the halls of Congress and the offices of the War Department, Gerald Shenk examines the workings of the World War I draft in Georgia, Illinois, New Jersey, and California. Rather than detailing the creation of policies from above, Shenk proposes that the operation of the Selective Service System in individual communities reveals much about race and gender in American society. Jeannette Keith recently made the same point in her excellent treatment of draft resistance in the South during the
First World War in her book *Rich Man’s War, Poor Man’s Fight: Race, Class, and Power in the Rural South During the First World War* (2004). Ultimately, Keith’s decision to focus on one region rather than four proves more successful. By attempting so much in so few pages, Shenk ends up skimming the surface of multiple issues that deserve fuller scrutiny. In Georgia, Illinois, and New Jersey, for instance, Shenk details how the white elite who dominated the local draft boards used their position to protect the existing racial order. In California, however, Selective Service regulations challenged the state’s prevailing definition of who was white by requiring that local boards classify all men of Asian descent as white. Shenk makes this intriguing point and situates it well in the discriminatory legal environment that created separate schools for Asian immigrants and prevented them from owning land. During the war, Japanese men argued that their economic success demonstrated their “Americaness” while whites viewed their success as evidence of the threat that they posed to white Americans in California. Unfortunately, Shenk details this fascinating dilemma in a few pages, then shifts abruptly to a political scandal involving the draft deferment of the heir to the Scripps newspaper fortune.

The differences between these four states also create a problem of narrative coherence in the book. Shenk attempts to link the quite different economic and racial struggles in each region around the framework of whiteness and manhood. While these are certainly valid analytical categories that Shenk uses to good effect at moments, in the end these theoretical concepts limit his ability to draw broader conclusions from the rich material he presents. Examining whiteness and manhood in each state leads to repetitiveness throughout the book, with each chapter ending with the similar conclusion that white elites sought to use their role in the draft process to consolidate their control over blacks, workers, immigrants, and sometimes women.

Part of the problem is the records of the Selective Service System upon which Shenk relies for many of his conclusions. The local records, as Shenk demonstrates, aptly reveal that regional politics and power struggles affected the operation of the draft during the war. The resolution of these struggles, however, becomes reduced in this equation to whether or not a man was drafted. It fails to take into account the ways that marginalized groups expected to use military service to challenge the very racial and economic oppression that powerful whites wanted to preserve or the ways that Americans resisted the draft as an extension of state control into their lives. Perhaps most importantly, the sole focus on the local draft process tends to drop the war out of the equation all together. In an account that privileges
regional political struggles so completely, national debates about the war before America’s entry, newspaper reports from the front, and letters from soldiers about the war have no place, thus disconnecting the operation of the draft too much from the actual war that conscripted men would have to fight.

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In Unknown Soldiers, journalist and popular historian Neil Hanson tells two stories about the missing combatants of the First World War. In the first two-thirds of the book, he draws on a deep and broad array of primary sources—diaries, letters, unit and family histories—to provide a compelling narrative of life and death in the trenches and in the air on the Western Front. In the last third of the book, Hanson tells the story of families and nations—primarily Britain and the United States—and their struggle to find the remains of missing sons, brothers, and husbands and then to commemorate them. Hanson’s main purpose is to reclaim the stories of the missing by reconstructing their daily experiences in warfare, their poignant relationships with families at the home front, and their common bonds with men across the lines. He uses information from monographs, anthologies, and some journal articles but is not primarily concerned with historiographic interpretation or debate.

Hanson traces the experiences of three combatants at the battlefields of the Somme through their letters and diaries and with official reports and histories. At seventeen, Alec Reader joined the British Civil Service Rifles Regiment and became a bomb thrower in a “suicide” squad. Paul Hub served with Germany’s 247th Infantry “Boy” Regiment, soon dubbed the “Regiment of the Dead.” Chicagoan George Seibold’s unit joined the British Twenty-second Aero Squadron, and he trained to fly Sopwith Camels. The bodies of the three, killed in action, were unrecoverable at war’s end. Hanson’s overarching achievement is his ability to interweave their experiences of warfare with a vast number of other primary sources to create an unforgettable account