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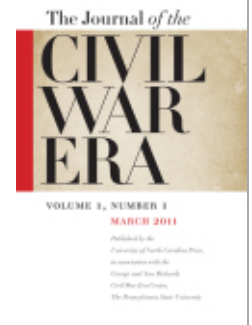
Gustavus Vasa Fox of the Union Navy: A Biography (review)

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Singleton Mosby organized by Winfield S. Hancock at the end of the war. Hancock prepared a punitive raid against Mosby's civilian supporters to begin on the morning of April 15, 1865. His raiders were under orders to lay waste to "Mosby's Confederacy" in Loudoun and Fauquier Counties, Virginia, burning the homes of Mosby's supporters, confiscating all live-stock, and arresting all able-bodied men. At 1:00 A.M. that day, Hancock received word of Abraham Lincoln's assassination and canceled the raid. Mountcastle's valuable, well-organized, and well-written book strengthens the revision under way that guerrilla warfare contributed vitally to Union victory in the Civil War.

JAMES A. RAMAGE

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Gustavus Vasa Fox of the Union Navy: A Biography.

By Ari Hoogenboom. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. Pp. 387. Cloth, \$40.00.)

In the span of less than one hundred years, two persons bearing the name of the founding monarch of modern Sweden, Gustav Vasa, struck important blows in the worldwide struggle against slavery. The first authored the *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, published in London in 1789. Its idyllic depiction of a privileged childhood in an Igbo village, its horrifying account of the Middle Passage, its nuanced rendition of slavery in various settings in the Americas, and its redemptive tale of Christian conversion helped spawn the abolitionist movement. The second, Gustavus Vasa Fox, was the assistant secretary of the U.S. Navy during the Civil War. Fox, working closely with Secretary Gideon Welles, vastly increased the number of warships, promoted technical innovation, dismantled the seniority system, and developed a successful naval strategy against the Confederacy. Although Fox likely knew nothing of the *Interesting Narrative*, he nonetheless helped bring Equiano's dream of abolishing slavery to fruition.

Unlike Equiano, whose privileged existence ended with his capture, Fox enjoyed a middle-class Massachusetts upbringing. He studied law with Isaac O. Barnes, a prominent attorney and politician, until the urge to pursue a naval career became overwhelming. Barnes's brother-in-law, Levi

Woodbury, a congressman from New Hampshire and former secretary of the navy, enabled Fox's appointment as a midshipman. After an extended courtship strained by his absence at sea, Fox married Woodbury's daughter Virginia.

The sea profoundly influenced both Gustavus Vasas. Its hold over Equiano survived the horrors of the Middle Passage. As a slave he served the captains of vessels who were his owners, and he continued to work as a seafarer after purchasing his freedom. He served in the British navy during the Seven Years' War, participating in several battles. "Happily I escaped unhurt," he reported, "though the shot and splinters flew thick about me."¹

For Fox, the sea was an honorable profession. During a cruise to China between February 1848 and June 1851, circumnavigating the globe, he met key members of the international shipping fraternity and observed working diplomats at close range. After returning home, he was detached to work with private shipping companies to gain experience with steam vessels, which he soon saw as the navy's future. Fox abandoned the sea for Virginia Woodbury and superintended several textile factories in Massachusetts. He was exploring new business opportunities when Abraham Lincoln won the 1860 presidential election. President James Buchanan's inept handling of the budding crisis at Fort Sumter stirred Fox to action. He worked political connections in Washington, most notably his wife's brother-in-law, Montgomery Blair, to advance a plan for resupplying the fort. With Lincoln's blessing, Fox organized and led the resupply expedition, which prompted the Confederate assault on Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861. Lincoln insisted that Fox be appointed assistant secretary of the navy under Welles to make the most of Fox's numerous talents.

Thus began a notable Civil War partnership. Welles relied on Fox to manage naval operations. Plying his connections in the shipping industry, such as John Murray Forbes and George D. Mason, Fox oversaw the rapid expansion of the fleet. In addition to powering warships by steam, he advocated armor plating and heavy ordnance. He worked closely with the brilliant naval architects and engineers John Ericsson and James B. Eads in developing monitor-type vessels. The two secretaries overrode the entrenched seniority system and appointed squadron commanders based on proven ability. Fox encouraged combined operations with the army in certain situations, despite his "chauvinism" regarding the navy's operational primacy along the rivers and coasts of the Confederacy (152). Naval officers respected Fox as one of their own. Lincoln also prized Fox's companionship. Both were gifted storytellers, and as word of General George B. McClellan's stalled Peninsula campaign reached the president

in June 1862, Fox “kept the President in good spirits telling anecdotes” well into a summer’s evening (128).

Fox displayed an ambivalent mix of curiosity and condescension toward different cultures. His interest in Native Americans spawned a fascination with “the beautiful Indian names of our country,” which in turn inspired such names for warships as *Onondaga*, *Shawnee*, and *Tecumseh*, to name just a few. Fox, Hoogenboom notes, “disliked slavery but . . . abhorred the African victims more than he despised its perpetrators” (25). It is likely that Virginia Fox, whose early impressions of African Americans also combined pity with disdain, helped deepen his sympathy for the enslaved. Fox reached ready accord with the fervently antislavery Welles on enlisting former slaves into naval service, both to relieve manpower shortages and to undermine Confederate morale.

Hoogenboom provides a valuable assessment of Fox’s particular contributions, although striking the proper balance between the subject and his contemporaries poses a challenge. His treatment of Fox’s interactions with key naval officers and civilian shipping agents, naval architects and shipbuilders is more satisfying than that of central figures in Lincoln’s cabinet. Virginia Woodbury Fox reported that Montgomery Blair was the person whom, “Next to myself . . . Gus loved . . . better than anyone on earth” (310), but that closeness never comes off the page. More significantly, Hoogenboom underdevelops Fox’s relationship with Gideon Welles. Whereas Hoogenboom relegates Welles to the shadows, William H. Roberts’s *Civil War Ironclads: The U.S. Navy and Industrial Mobilization* (2002) positions Welles at center stage. The epilogue would have benefited from further assessment of Fox’s influence on the subsequent history of the navy, its ships and ordnance, the officer corps, and the relationship between civilian and naval officials in time of war.

While not without flaws, Hoogenboom’s study offers numerous offsetting virtues. Fox was a central figure, both in the development of the Union navy and in the realization of his earlier namesake’s dream of abolishing slavery.

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NOTES

1. Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, rev. ed., ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 83.

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