



PROJECT MUSE®

Ironclads and Big Guns of the Confederacy: The Journal and Letters of John M. Brooke (review)

William H. Roberts

The Journal of Military History, Volume 67, Number 1, January 2003, pp. 242-243 (Review)

Published by Society for Military History
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jmh.2003.0070>



➔ *For additional information about this article*
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/40496>

the master class, he celebrated sarcastically when “the ungrateful colored population” absconded “without as much as saying good bye” (p. 98). He initially found the former slaves at St. Helen’s Island, South Carolina, “dispirited, suspicious, timid, grossly ignorant and degraded,” but later in the war he temporarily commanded a brigade of black soldiers who showed their readiness “to fight & make men of themselves” (p. 232). In November 1864 Voris reported that “in the army the prejudice heretofore existing against the negro has almost entirely died out”; he predicted—alas, prematurely—that northerners would soon “wonder why they were ever so unwise and unjust as to curse the colored man and damn his friends” (p. 233). These letters do not suggest that religious belief played an important part in the life either of the letter writer or recipient. What emerges instead is an unsentimental and stoic readiness to accept the possibility that he might prove “unfortunate” and never return from the wartime South (p. 103).

Voris, who knew that an army of citizen soldiers was a new thing in world history, wanted his letters preserved. Now expertly edited and fully annotated by Jerome Mushkat, this volume should attract a wider audience than specialists. It belongs on the library shelves at all colleges and universities that offer courses on the Civil War.

Daniel W. Crofts

College of New Jersey
Ewing, New Jersey

Ironclads and Big Guns of the Confederacy: The Journal and Letters of John M. Brooke. Edited by George M. Brooke, Jr. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002. ISBN 1-57003-418-4. Illustrations. Notes. Index. Pp. xv, 257. \$39.95.

This publication of portions of the privately held Brooke papers is a boon to students of Civil War naval history, providing scholarly access to much valuable material that has not been readily available. It mixes entries from John M. Brooke’s diary and letters that he sent or received with occasional illustrative excerpts from other sources such as the papers of Confederate Secretary of the Navy Stephen R. Mallory and Admiral Franklin Buchanan, and the collections of the National Archives.

The bulk of the work is from Brooke’s journal and papers, with an introduction that traces his pre-Civil War career and a brief summary of his life after the war. The material is rich in technical detail that gives a glimpse of the difficulties the Confederacy faced in simultaneously mobilizing its nascent industrial base, adopting new technology, and fighting a war. Besides providing details of the Confederate Navy’s ordnance program, Brooke’s papers illuminate the organization itself. The widespread frustration of Confederate junior officers with “old fogeyism” (p. 96), a Navy bureaucracy “about as poorly officered as possible” (p. 92), and a hopeless promotion system (pp. 98, 111, 113) is evident. Brooke’s continuing correspondence with

his friend Catesby ap R. Jones reveals much about the trials Jones endured in establishing the Naval Gun Foundry in Selma, Alabama.

Notwithstanding its title, however, this work appears to be not “the journal and letters” but “selections from the journal and letters.” It is sometimes difficult to determine whether a particular entry or letter has been given in full, and the mode switches from transcription to editorial comment without warning. The overall value is diminished by the lack of explanation of the principles by which items were chosen or elided. After its beginning summary of Brooke’s pre-Civil War career, the book is practically void of editorial analysis, and even the controversy between Brooke and John L. Porter over the credit for the USS *Merrimack*–CSS *Virginia* conversion is relegated to a footnote.

The proofreading is erratic enough to be annoying, with Roman and Arabic numerals mixed (IX or X1 for IX or XI inch guns) and “if” substituted for “is,” “or” for “of,” and “1963” for “1863.” The promised editorial correction of proper names is inconsistently applied, and some names change between text and footnotes.

All in all, though, the value of the material here is well worth any annoyance. Serious students of the Confederate Navy will want this book.

William H. Roberts

Columbus, Ohio

Charles Dahlgren of Natches: The Civil War and Dynastic Decline. By Herschel Gower. Washington: Brassey’s, 2002. ISBN 1-57488-392-1. Photographs. Illustrations. Charts. Tables. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xvii, 293. \$26.95.

Herschel Gower’s handsome life of Charles Dahlgren treats a secondary figure, whose significance in the Civil War was negligible. The story, however, provides unanticipated interest. Gower convincingly interprets all the Dahlgren brothers as votaries of a romantic honorableness. However politically expressed in the Dahlgrens’ lives, that ideal involved an arrogance, racist and class-based, that proved their undoing. Perhaps dismaying defensiveness, shrouded in truculent self-assertion, arose from an expectation that their august heritage gave them a status too sublime for lesser folk in a relatively egalitarian society to apprehend. While incomplete, Gower’s interpretation of honor as a Dahlgren theme gives rich meaning and life to what would otherwise have been a dull chronicle.

Three brothers—John, Charles, and William—were the sons of Martha Rowan of proud Revolutionary Irish roots and Bernard Dahlgren, wealthy Swedish consul at Philadelphia. In 1824, this Scandinavian aristocrat, renowned for Arctic explorations and bold adventures, died when his children were quite young. The brothers were likewise ambitious and enterprising. A U.S. Navy ordnance specialist, John was later noted for inventing the Dahlgren shipboard gun. Promoted to rear admiral in July 1863, he expertly commanded the blockade of southern ports. Although mimicking the admi-