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Charles Dahlgren of Natchez: The Civil War and Dynastic
Decline (review)

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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 (1X or XI 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.

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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-

ral's notorious contempt for common servicemen, his son Ulric became a war hero. At age twenty, he was promoted from captain to colonel. In an ill-fated expedition to seize Confederate chiefs in March 1864, Dahlgren marched 470 troops into a rebel ambush near Richmond. He lost his life along with those of a hundred federals. The third brother, William, constantly wrangled with the family. Belligerent like his relatives, he fought with Garibaldi and during the American war spied for the Union in England.

As Gower subtly reveals, Charles was equally self-promoting. As Nicholas Biddle's protégé, in 1835 he arrived at Natchez, Mississippi, to manage a U.S. Bank branch, married into the wealthy Ellis-Percy-Routh clan, and managed an empire of cotton plantations worth a half million dollars. In violent local encounters, Dahlgren swaggered his claims to honor. As a military commander in 1861, however, he was too dilatory and defensive to win favor with his men or superiors. Nor was he much of an armchair strategist though firing off implausible schemes to Mississippi Governor J. J. Pettus and Jefferson Davis. His dismal performance in the Mississippi theater is hardly worth mentioning. When Vicksburg fell, the Dahlgrens and their slaves retreated to south Georgia where he tried to reconstitute a plantation life. Alas for the Southern cause, there were too many self-inflating Dahlgrens doing little but grumbling loudly about the stupidity of others.

Dahlgren's postwar years mirrored the troubles of so many formerly proud and prosperous slaveholders. Nothing much carried on his vast farmlands but unrepayable debts. Facing ruin and humiliation, Dahlgren moved to New York to open a brokerage business on Broadway. His last years were vainly spent trying to overturn the will of step-daughter Sarah Dorsey. She had bequeathed her property to her idol, Jefferson Davis.

In sum, this otherwise commendable history of Charles Dahlgren could have provided a richer picture of the entire clan and their struggles for status. Late in the book, lengthy verbatim excerpts from the general's mundane diary could have been replaced with more exploration of fascinating interactions. Nonetheless, *Charles Dahlgren of Natchez*, generously illustrated, is most readable, exciting, and informative about an overbearing but ultimately distressed cast of male relations.

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Jefferson Davis in Blue: The Life of Sherman's Relentless Warrior. By Nathaniel Cheairs Hughes, Jr., and Gordon D. Whitney. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002. ISBN 0-8071-2777-9. Maps. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xviii, 475. \$49.95.

The authors of this ambitious study, Nathaniel Cheairs Hughes, Jr., and Gordon D. Whitney, attempt to shed light on one of the Union Army's most controversial officers. *Jefferson Davis in Blue* more than meets their ambi-