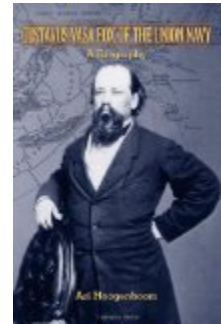


Ari Hoogenboom. *Gustavus Vasa Fox of the Union Navy: A Biography*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. Illustrations, maps. 408 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-8986-8.

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## “A Live Man,” and an Exemplary Official and Gentleman

Students of the Union navy know that Gustavus Vasa Fox was its immensely capable operations director. Ari Hoogenboom has written a very competent biography of this most competent of officers. Hoogenboom highly benefited from the fact that Fox exchanged voluminous numbers of letters with his fiancée and wife, Virginia Woodbury, daughter of Levi Woodbury, secretary of the navy under Andrew Jackson. Hence we are treated to a bright picture of Fox as a young bon vivant and naval officer thirsting for glory, and the couple’s letters and her diary provide delightful insight into official Washington circles.

Fox was born in Saugus, Massachusetts, in 1821, but when he was young his family moved to Lowell where Dr. Jesse Fox entered the textile business. Young Fox’s schooling was superior to most, even in Massachusetts: Lowell High School, Phillips Academy, and ministry studies. Yet Fox’s interest in the navy and his attachment to family friends, Isaac O. and Hannah Woodbury Barnes, set his life course. He studied law under Barnes and eventually married Hannah’s niece. Through his father’s, Barnes’s, and Woodbury’s influence, among others, Fox gained an appointment as an acting midshipman in the United States Navy in January 1838. At that time fledgling officers succumbed to on-the-job training at sea and completed course work at the Philadelphia Naval Asylum. Fox first shipped out on the twenty-gun Mediterranean Squadron sloop of war, USS *Cyane*, Commander John Percival commanding, destination Gibraltar.

In the first few chapters, Hoogenboom tracks Fox’s postings that took him literally all around the world. On May 30, 1844, Fox was certified a passed midshipman and next assigned to the African Squadron to interdict illegal slavers. As a Coast Survey member, he supported naval operations during the Mexican War. As navigation officer, Fox piloted the USS *Plymouth* from Brooklyn to Macao, also supporting diplomatic trips to Manila, Cochin China (Vietnam), Thailand, Borneo, and Malaysia, before being dispatched home via Hawaii and South America.

Fox’s letters describe these exotic locales and state his opinions of them. This prewar portrayal is the most delightful in the book. *Plymouth’s* crew all became caught up in the spirit of this exploration age. Fox collected geological, plant, and animal specimens. The ship was a veritable floating zoo: a gibbon swung from the yard arms and some thirty monkeys were dressed in various garb, complete with gold earrings, and a few even taught to chew tobacco. Fox’s literary skills shine forth in his depiction of their stormy passage south on approach to Cape Horn: “As the day passed away, the waves seemed released from the earth so long their resting place ... behind the roaring sea caused a tremor in the vessel long before it reached us, the motion was as if the very wood and iron felt fear” (p. 44).

Upon returning to the United States in July 1851, Fox was granted a leave of absence to act as master of commercial mail steamships that were contracted by the

navy. With another furlough, Fox was engaged as a manager of a textile mill, and after many years of courtship, he and Virginia wed in October 1855. Subsequently Fox explored other business and political opportunities. He and Virginia traveled for a period and arrived back in her Portsmouth, New Hampshire, home in October 1860.

As of Abraham Lincoln's election as president in November, Fox had served seventeen years in the navy, attaining the rank of lieutenant. As a captain of merchant vessels, he had become acquainted with the titans of U.S. shipping. His work for the Coast Survey familiarized him with the U.S. littoral. Among his political contacts was his brother-in-law, Montgomery Blair, future postmaster general, of the powerful Blair family of Missouri.

In the early spring of 1861, attention turned to Fort Sumter in Charleston harbor, South Carolina, the "nursery state" of the Confederacy. Like Lincoln, Fox felt the fort should be held, and with the aid of George W. Blunt, editor of *Blunt's Coast Pilot*, he drew up a plan to relieve it by sneaking in supplies in shallow draft tugboats at night. Blair forwarded his plan to Lincoln who called Fox to Washington. Fox's mission to Fort Sumter ultimately failed. He rendezvoused off Charleston, on board his old mail steamer, *Baltic*, at 3:00 a.m. on April 12, with Revenue Marine Service cutter Harriet Lane. For a variety of reasons, six other ships and tugboats did not arrive or refused to enter the harbor. When Fox finally approached the entrance, he found Sumter under fire. His ships evacuated Major Robert Anderson's forces the next day. Lincoln, however, was so impressed with Fox's astute diligence that he appointed him assistant secretary of the navy. As Lincoln wrote to Secretary Gideon Welles, "He is a live man whose services we cannot well dispense with" (p. 72).

In the remaining chapters, Hoogenboom portrays the relationship between Fox and Welles as being one of the most productive partnerships in Washington. Welles brought wisdom, firm and bold action, and political skills; and Fox brought energy, a great work capacity, decisiveness (although sometimes impulsive), and vision, particularly concerning ironclads. (Within two days after the *Monitor-Merrimac* ironclad battle, the British Royal Navy had canceled all contracts for new wooden warships.)<sup>[1]</sup>

Fox played a major role in every naval campaign of the war: he participated in the Tennessee River Valley campaign, the *Monitor-Merrimac* battle, Mississippi River operations (including Vicksburg), and the ironclad attack at Charleston; he supported David Farragut at Mobile and Alfred Terry at Fort Fisher; and he fended off

Confederate raiders around the world. To implement the blockade of the Confederacy, Welles and he greatly swelled the naval fleet that in 1863 comprised 34,000 seamen manning 588 ships, patrolling 3,500 miles of coastline, and 5,600 miles of rivers and inlets (p. 224). Welles and Fox implemented many postwar naval reforms as well.

In relating these campaigns, Hoogenboom affords insight into the views and personalities of the grand naval figures of the war—John A. Dahlgren, Charles Henry Davis, Samuel Francis Du Pont, James B. Eads, John Ericsson, Farragut, Andrew Hull Foote, David Dixon Porter, and John L. Worden—through diaries and letters, as well as official navy records. Although these men are well known, Fox's exact role is not. He emerges from the shadows as one of the major figures of the war. As Porter wrote to him, "We are indebted to you more than any other man for our Naval Success" (p. 314).

From Fox's vantage point, one also receives a Washington insider view of decision making that includes both the navy and the army. This reinforces the notion that to truly understand the Civil War, one must grasp both services' operations. For instance, the Confederate army was forced to tie down troops at coastal points occupied by U.S. forces. As Hoogenboom importantly points out, the fall of Fort Pillow on the Mississippi River resulted from not only the naval bombardment but also the fact that Confederates evacuated Corinth, Mississippi. Union forces hence controlled the Memphis and Charleston Railroad, flanking Pillow's position about forty miles north of Memphis. Naval patrols obliterated coastal shipping, which further strained the jury-rigged Southern rail system, which had an impact on the movement of men and materiel.<sup>[2]</sup>

My only real complaint about Hoogenboom's work is that it lacks context. For example, a short discussion of the Anglo-American political and military situation that prevailed in China when Fox was stationed there (1848) would have been valuable, given unrest in the region. By concentrating so narrowly on Fox, important facts are neglected: e.g., by March 1861, control of the Fort Sumter impasse had switched from Governor Francis W. Pickens to the Confederate commander General P. G. T. Beauregard; and according to the *Charleston Mercury*, on April 10, the Confederate cabinet "decided upon inevitable battle," indicating that "an attack will be made upon Fort Sumter." So Fox's hope that relief would prevent war proved unrealistic. In another example, Lieutenant Worden's appointment as *Monitor's* captain was important in

that he was impressed by Ericsson's very experimental design that many were calling a folly and was willing to risk on it his career as well as his life and those of his men. The timing for the advance on Fort Henry in Tennessee in February 1862 was not just linked to water levels. A crisis atmosphere existed at the time: Congress and the public were up in arms over lack of victories; even in its quiescent state, the war was costing millions of dollars a day; and direct European intervention was feared.[3]

Beyond this one major criticism, I cite a few errors and omissions. Ericsson was not responsible for the explosion of the Peacemaker gun on board *Princeton* (I) that killed two cabinet secretaries and six others; he was mainly the ship's designer. The mortar boats included schooners, sloops, and scows. My research shows that the mortar boats' production delay was a major reason why the U.S. invasion route was switched from the Mississippi to the Tennessee River. The Tennessee offered a better strategic opportunity and the boats were not suitable for use on the river. Foote was a renowned naval reformer and a very respected officer when he assumed command of the Western rivers fleet. Getting names correct is important: it is Irvin McDowell, not Irwin; it was the Memphis and Charleston Railroad, not Chattanooga.[4]

Overall, for any scholar or lay person interested in Civil War military and political affairs, this book is a must read. It fills a gaping hole in the literature. Personally I was very pleasantly surprised to find that besides being a very competent bureaucrat, Fox was a dynamic, broad-minded person possessing catholic interests, who was also a devoted husband, sociable raconteur, and a gallant man of action. My hat goes off to Hoogenboom for an assiduously researched, judiciously written, and illuminating, enjoyable work.

#### Notes

[1]. James Tertius De Kay, *Monitor: The Story of the Legendary Civil War Ironclad and the Man Whose Invention Changed the Course of History* (New York: Ballantine Books, Random House, 1997), 221.

[2]. James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 370-371; and C. Kay Larson, *Great Necessities: The Life, Times, and Writings of Anna Ella Carroll, 1815-1894* (Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2004), 374-375.

[3]. Larson, *Great Necessities*, 254-257, 340-341; De

Kay, *Monitor*, 116-118; and William M. Still Jr., *Ironclad Captains: The Commanding Officers of the USS Monitor*, U. S. Department of Commerce, National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, Marine and Estuarine Maintenance Division (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1988), 2-15. In *Great Necessities*, I support Anna Ella Carroll's claim that the Confederates' intention in bombarding Fort Sumter was to drive the four remaining Border States out of the Union over the issue of "coercion," as they were correct in believing that Lincoln would meet the attack with force, viz., his call out of seventy-five thousand militia on April 15, 1861. Regarding Fort Henry on the Tennessee River, Major General Henry W. Halleck wrote to General in Chief George B. McClellan on January 20, 1862, that the true line of invasion was the Tennessee River line. However, Halleck, as well as Foote, lacked manpower. Meanwhile Lincoln advisor and secret agent Carroll had already submitted a plan for a Tennessee River campaign to Lincoln at the end of November 1861. Assistant Secretary of War Thomas A. Scott was sent to the Midwest to organize reinforcements for Grant and Foote for their attacks on Forts Henry and Donelson. Due to lack of attention to Carroll, Hoogenboom was unaware of my research. See my whole Tennessee River campaign chapter online at [www.nymas.org-right sidebar](http://www.nymas.org-right sidebar).

[4]. De Kay, *Monitor*, 20-23; Spencer C. Tucker, *Andrew Foote: Civil War Admiral on Western Waters* (Annapolis: US Naval Institute Press, 2000), xi-xiii; and Larson, *Great Necessities*, 323, 359-369.

*Reviewer's Note:* Many in the Swedish American community have always assumed that Fox's first and middle names indicate he was Swedish American, which is in error. Since Fox can be a derivative of the German name "Fuchs" and many Germans populated southern Sweden, this may be the link. Hoogenboom conjectures that his naming was influenced by Henry Brooke's play *Gustavus Vasa: The Deliverer of His Country* (1739). King Gustav Vasa I (1523-60) is popularly known as the king who liberated Sweden from the Danes and introduced Protestantism. Swedish Americans, mostly midwesterners, strongly supported Lincoln and the Union cause. Many Swedes, including army officers, immigrated to America to fight in the Civil War. Count Ernst von Vegesack, a German Swede, was a Medal of Honor awardee. After Lincoln's assassination, ship flags in Stockholm harbor flew at half mast, as the Swedes considered Ericsson's *Monitor* their own (that included Swedish American Dahlgren's guns).

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