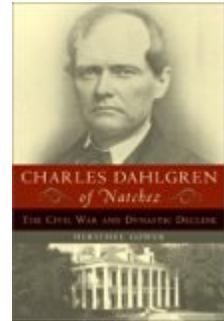


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Herschel Gower. *Charles Dahlgren of Natchez: The Civil War and Dynastic Decline*. Washington: Brassey's, 2002. xvii + 293 pp. \$26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57488-394-7; \$17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57488-525-5.

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Sentiment versus History

Herschel Gower relates the story of Charles G. Dahlgren, a Philadelphia-born banker and businessman who served as a brigadier general in the army of the Confederate States of America. Gower stumbled upon the legacy of Dahlgren while visiting friends at the "Dahlgren cottage" in Beersheda Springs, Tennessee. There he learned that in 1860 the original owners of the family cottage had etched their initials into a boulder; Gower decided to tell the story of the signatories. His instincts proved correct as Dahlgren's saga encompasses the sweeping tumult of the Civil War era. Gower succeeded in his quest: he produced a moving account of Charles Dahlgren and his family. No doubt this book will sell well in the tourist shops in Natchez. But many scholars will be disappointed with Gower's product. Gower has written a sentimental biography rather than a vigorous history. Instead of an honest and objective appraisal of the man and his era, Gower has written a nostalgic tribute to a man who continually failed to live up to his own perceived grandeur.

Dahlgren was born in 1811, the second of four children. His father Bernard, a Swedish emigre who served briefly as his homeland's consul in Philadelphia, captivated his children with his "spellbinding escapades amid the turmoil of the Napoleonic Era" (p. 5). Charles worked as a scribe, then at age sixteen, followed his older brother John to sea, working as a Merchant Marine. Soon after he returned to Philadelphia, Dahlgren found employment as the private secretary to Nicholas Biddle, president of the Second Bank of the United States. In 1835, at

the age of twenty-four, Dahlgren accepted a position as a teller in the BUS branch in New Orleans. Soon thereafter, Dahlgren transferred to the Commercial Bank in Natchez, Mississippi.

Natchez became Dahlgren's primary home until he returned to the North in 1870. He participated enthusiastically in the hurly-burly economic boom of the antebellum Southwest that propelled many to great wealth. He opened a supply store and purchased tracts of land in both Mississippi and Louisiana. In 1840, he married Mary Routh Ellis, a land-rich but debt-laden widow whose financial encumbrances and four disgruntled children would plague Dahlgren long after her death in 1858. This union landed Dahlgren in the social and economic elite of Natchez. By 1860, he owned over seven thousand acres of prime land and approximately two hundred slaves (pp. 36-37).

Dahlgren married Mary Edgar Vannoy of Nashville in 1859, and purchased property in Beersheda Springs so his family "would no longer have to make the long journeys to Sarasota Springs and Newport where Southerners had begun to encounter misunderstanding and criticism" (p. 33). When the Civil War began, Dahlgren was appointed brigadier general, State of Mississippi, and given command of the 3d Mississippi Brigade (p. 47), directing at one time up to two thousand soldiers (p. 51). Dahlgren wrote long missives to the governors of both Louisiana and Mississippi, Secretary of War Judah Benjamin, and Confederate President Jefferson Davis, offer-

ing his “expertise” on how best to defend the South and procure arms, but his suggestions were ignored. The success of his older brother, John Dahlgren, inventor of the Dahlgren gun and commandant of the Union’s Washington Navy Yards, cast suspicion on Dahlgren’s sympathies. “Lack of confidence in his leadership was common among his men, among his superiors in Jackson, and within the Confederate War Department in Richmond” (p. 51), we learn, yet Gower dismisses this as a lack of understanding on the part of the general’s detractors. When Dahlgren offered his resignation in January 1862, it was accepted readily; he was appointed commissioner for gunboat construction along that section of the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

When Natchez was attacked in September 1862, Dahlgren’s attempts to muster citizens to defend the city failed (he inspired only fourteen recruits). Later Dahlgren claimed to have led the “first successful repulse” at Vicksburg in 1862 (p. 85), but even Gower dismisses this claim. Dahlgren moved his family to Georgia in 1863 where they remained until 1865. He invested in land and Confederate notes, both of which lost their value at the end of the war. In June 1865 he returned to Natchez, where everything but his and his deceased wife’s antebellum debts had been ravaged by the war. The following year, Dahlgren turned to his older brother John, now an honored admiral, arriving at his home in Washington with only ten dollars in his pocket, begging for help in securing a pardon. After exploring various options, Dahlgren deposited his wife and seven young sons in Nashville, and in 1870 moved to New York to re-establish himself as a businessman and family provider. Mary and the family joined Dahlgren in 1876. Dahlgren worked in what we now call financial services (accounting, trust supervision, and advising) while his sons took a variety of odd jobs to help make ends meet. While in New York, Dahlgren created a persona that reflected the efforts of many Southerners to fortify the “Lost Cause” of southern independence. According to Gower, Dahlgren “became a soothsayer looking backward as he voiced what might have been, a sage vigorously inventing his curriculum vitae” (p. 198). Dahlgren died in 1888, leaving his wife, eleven children, and four stepchildren.

Gower writes exceptionally well, and gives the narrative a flourish and bravado that makes sections of this book true page-turners. His account of the death of Ulric Dahlgren, a colonel in the Union army, oldest son of John, and Charles Dahlgren’s favorite nephew, poignantly describes the tragedy of loss during war, and the particular sorrow of Civil War families with divided alle-

giances. Gower’s depiction of the raucous atmosphere in 1840s Natchez is entertaining and informative. His detailed transcription of Charles Dahlgren’s diary during the journey from Georgia back to Mississippi, as well as the time Dahlgren spent in Washington attempting to secure a pardon, will provide useful resources for future researchers.

This book is hampered, though, by Gower’s refusal to give an honest appraisal of Charles Dahlgren or the era. Dahlgren’s many mishaps are blamed on a variety of exogenous forces: “greedy Yankee speculators” (p. 69), unruly and self-indulgent stepchildren, inattentive Confederate leaders, even “floods and tax collectors” (p. 170). Gower concludes that Dahlgren can be viewed as a “seriocomic figure” who entertained young men in New York with “anecdotes” and “thunderous tales” of his part (p. 237), but still finds him heroic. A more nuanced and dispassionate examination of Dahlgren’s life may indeed convince a reader that Dahlgren’s attempts to overcome post-bellum adversity were valiant, but Gower’s sentimental attachment to his subject provokes more skepticism than sympathy. Why is a northerner like Dahlgren, who moved South before the war to exploit the resources of the area and make his fortune, considered a hero, whereas northerners who moved South after the war to exploit the resources of the area and make their fortune considered greedy Yankees? What created the tension between Dahlgren and his siblings? Were they galled by Dahlgren’s sudden, enthusiastic embrace of the slave-owner lifestyle and political leanings? Gower does not tackle these questions, as they would complicate his narrative.

Gower’s insistence on repeating the most egregious caricatures of Civil War literature rankle and dissuade the reader from taking both the author and his subject more seriously. Northerners (except Charles Dahlgren) are portrayed as arrogant, selfish, and unsympathetic Yankees before the war, and “miscreant carpetbagger” Yankees thereafter (p. 174). Southern women are described as virtuous but strong-willed belles. But Gower presents Dahlgren’s younger sister Matilda (Patty) as a bitter and vengeful spinster (and after her marriage, a bitter, vengeful, childless matron) who caused the rift between Charles and his brothers—John, and the dashing and elusive William. When Dahlgren invited Patty to stay at his plantation in 1841, Gower comments that, “every household with children needed an ‘old maid’ aunt in residence” (p. 18).

Most troubling is Gower’s depiction of the African

Americans in Dahlgren's life. We learn, for instance, that when plantation owners moved north each summer, "overseers were left to keep order and see that the slave drivers applied the whip to surly work gangs" (p. 17). Gower informs us that "Natchez became a center for an unemployed, unruly black population" after the "day of Jubilee" (p. 83). Also, Gower unreflectively reports that, "A. L. Wilson, master of Rosalie, took his people west to save them as he pronounced, from the 'degrading effects of Emancipation'" (p. 87). Gower remarks that Dahlgren moved his family away from Natchez after the War when he "saw the demoralizing effect that they [Negro troops] had on his servants" (p. 136). On the next page, Gower repeats journalist Whitelaw Reid's "distress at the passion for whiskey and 'lack of virtue' among them [freedmen]" (p. 137). Taken individually, these statements reflect an author's attempts to report the thoughts and perspective of the subjects of this study. However, the sum of these statements leads the reader to wonder if Gower truly believes emancipation had a degrading effect upon the freedmen. If not, then he needs to add at least one statement that tempers these nineteenth-century statements and observations. These references, which I suspect were innocent attempts at objectivity,

demonstrate the pratfalls of dabbling in areas outside of one's expertise without careful preparation. Professor Gower, a professor emeritus of English and American literature at Vanderbilt University, needs an update on recent Civil War scholarship. Sentimental biographies can succeed without the fetters of historiographical summaries, but his narrative and bibliography need buttressing from current secondary literature, starting with Eric Foner's *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (1988). Once read, he will understand this critique is more than PC scolding, but instead an attempt to re-establish the foundation of honesty and objectivity that must underlie all historical nonfiction, even that predicated on sentiment.

This book also needs a thesis. Who does Charles Dahlgren represent? How did his experiences reflect the opportunism of pre-Civil War America? What does Dahlgren's fate say about the "Lost Cause" of the Confederate nation? How do Dahlgren's many economic lives reflect the economic promise or disgrace (depending, again, on your historiography) of the United States during this tumultuous time? Unfortunately, this book does not penetrate the complicated intellectual questions that have drawn scholars to study the Civil War era.

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