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Intentional Omissions from the Published Civil War Diaries of Admiral John A. Dahlgren

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Intentional Omissions from the Published Civil War Diaries of Admiral John A. Dahlgren

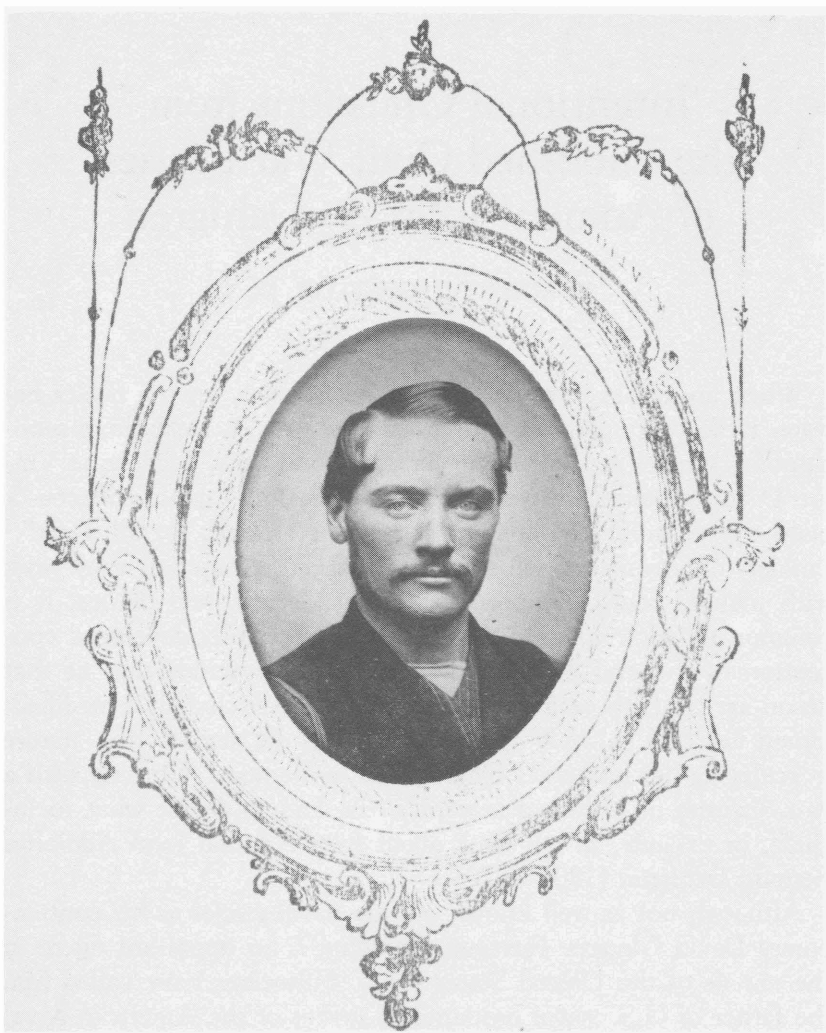
BY ROBERT J. SCHNELLER, JR.

When an author sets out to exalt her subject, let the reader beware. Reflecting upon her book *Memoir of John A. Dahlgren*, a semi-autobiographical account of her late husband's life, Madeleine Vinton Dahlgren said, "I was determined to mass all I could collect—and build the Admiral's monument as high as I could, for all Time".¹ Builders of literary monuments are artists; the materials they work with include books, newspapers, reports, letters, and diaries. It is common for such artists to begin work with a fully developed conception of the end product in mind. Only materials that fit that vision are used, those inconsistent with it are excluded or modified. Given her goal, Madeleine Dahlgren faced decisions of this nature in sculpting her husband's biographical monument. Working with a vast quantity of historical materials, she had to decide what to include, or exclude, in her book about Rear Admiral John Adolphus Bernard Dahlgren (1809–1870).

Although not as well known outside naval circles as his contemporary David Glasgow Farragut, Dahlgren is an important figure in the annals of the United States Navy. Historians have called him the father of U.S. naval ordnance, a maker of the American naval tradition, and one of the five great admirals of the American Civil War.² His signal accomplishments were: fostering the application of

1. Madeleine Dahlgren to Charles Cowley, 17 December 1882, John A. Dahlgren Papers, Syracuse University Library (hereafter cited as DS).

2. Clarence Stewart Peterson, *Admiral John A. Dahlgren: Father of U. S. Naval Ordnance* (Cynthiana, Ky.: Hobson Book Press, 1945); James C. Bradford, ed., *Captains of the Old Steam Navy: Makers of the American Naval Tradition, 1840–1880* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1986); Clarence Edward Noble Macartney, *Mr. Lincoln's Admirals* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1956), vi.



Previously unpublished photograph of John A. Dahlgren, as he appeared ca. 1850.
John A. Dahlgren Papers, Syracuse University Library.

science to naval weapons technology and inventing the Dahlgren gun, widely regarded as the most powerful naval cannon in the world when it first appeared in the 1850s. The navy recognized his contributions by naming three vessels after him, as well as a building at the Naval Academy and a naval weapons proving ground.

Dahlgren's career spanned nearly half of the nineteenth century. He joined the navy in 1826 at the age of sixteen. For the next six years he served on board the vessels *Macedonian* and *Ontario*, learning the ropes of seamanship and the rudiments of being an officer. Then followed a brief stint on board a receiving ship, after which the navy assigned him to the United States Coast Survey, one of several scientific enterprises sponsored by the United States government during that period. Dahlgren excelled in this work, but labored so hard, day and night, that he injured his eyes and was threatened with blindness. For this reason he was forced to take a leave of absence for several years. Shortly after returning to active duty, Dahlgren embarked on a Mediterranean cruise that the threat of war with Mexico cut short. Following his return from the Mediterranean, the navy assigned him to the Washington Navy Yard, where, under the auspices of the Bureau of Ordnance and Hydrography, he began his ordnance work, the longest single phase of his career and the one that produced his most significant accomplishments. During the first two years of the Civil War, Dahlgren rose to the rank of rear admiral and became chief of the Bureau of Ordnance. In 1863 he took command of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron and spent the next year and a half trying to take Charleston. After the war he served in various posts, notably in command of the South Pacific Squadron.

Dahlgren was nothing if not controversial. Those who knew him held decided opinions of his character and abilities. His close friend Andrew Hull Foote, ardent social reformer and commander of the Mississippi Squadron during the Civil War, highly regarded Dahlgren's "attainments—literary—scientific—& moral". Charles Cowley, a member of Admiral Dahlgren's staff during the Charleston campaign and later a friend of Madeleine Dahlgren, "respected and honored him as a son would a father". Samuel F. DuPont, Dahlgren's predecessor in command of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron, thought him "a diseased man on the subject of preferment and position". Charles B. Sedgwick, chairman of the House Naval Affairs Committee during the first two years of the Civil War, believed that Dahlgren, as head of naval ordnance, was "not *up* to business details & affairs & will necessarily suffer by trying to manage them". Percival Drayton, a good friend who worked with Dahlgren on ordnance and served as Farragut's flag captain during the Civil War battle of Mobile Bay, said that he had "a great regard for Dahl-

gren”, but like other officers, did not believe that he was “up to the command of the Charleston Squadron”. Charles Knap, an owner of the Fort Pitt Foundry, an industrial firm which produced Dahlgren guns for the navy, deplored Dahlgren’s “constant readiness to wait upon and devote himself to whomsoever may be in power”. Gideon Welles, secretary of the navy during the Civil War and an astute judge of character, remarked that Dahlgren was intelligent but did not possess the fighting qualities of a Farragut. There were materials here for a high monument, but they would need some chiseling.³

Her impulse to vindicate her husband in the eyes of his contemporaries was not the only reason that Madeleine Dahlgren wrote *Memoir*. She had noted that the admiral “always cared *much more*, for posterity than for the present”. The “recognition he most ardently desired”, she reflected, was “the recognition of posterity”. But apart from considerations of her husband’s reputation, Madeleine Dahlgren wrote the book, it seems, partly to satisfy needs of her own. When Dahlgren died, he left an estate of twenty thousand dollars for his widow and surviving children. Apparently unsatisfied with this amount, Madeleine Dahlgren petitioned Congress for payment of royalties on Dahlgren’s patented ordnance inventions. She spent seven years before Congress and two years in the courts battling for her claim. As she told her friend Charles Cowley, “*the least sum for a just and proper compensation to our estate would be \$1,374,000*”. She was incensed about the final settlement, receiving, as she put it, “an insolvent percentage of \$65,000—and ten thousand . . . was at once required to meet the expenses of this pro-

3. Andrew H. Foote to John Dahlgren, 30 October 1847, John A. Dahlgren Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (hereafter cited as DLC); Charles Cowley to Madeleine Dahlgren, 2 August 1870, DLC; Samuel F. DuPont to Gustavus V. Fox, 8 October 1862, *Confidential Correspondence of Gustavus V. Fox: Assistant Secretary of the Navy, 1861–1865*, eds. Robert Mears Thompson and Richard Wainwright (New York: Naval Historical Society, 1919), 1:160–61; Charles B. Sedgwick to Henry A. Wise, 2 July 1863, H. A. Wise Papers, New-York Historical Society; Charles B. Sedgwick to Henry A. Wise, 30 July [1863], H. A. Wise Papers, New-York Historical Society; Percival Drayton to Henry A. Wise, [?] September 1863, H. A. Wise Papers, New-York Historical Society; Charles Knap to [?], 1 February 1863, H. A. Wise Papers, New-York Historical Society; Gideon Welles, *The Diary of Gideon Welles*, ed. Howard K. Beale (New York: W. W. Norton, 1960), 1:62.

longed suit!" It is probably no coincidence that Madeleine Dahlgren wrote *Memoir* during this same period.⁴

Much of the book was drawn from her husband's diaries. John Dahlgren chronicled his entire career in a journal, in which he habitually recorded his reactions to the people and situations that he confronted in his life and work. He told us why:

Some people have not the talent, some have not the leisure, and others do not possess the requisite industry, for keeping a private diary or journal; and yet there is probably no book which a man could consult with half so much advantage as a record of this sort, if it presented a faithful transcript of the writer's fluctuating feelings and opinions. As a mere psychological curiosity, it must be interesting to observe the advancement of our own mind; still more so to trace it's [sic] caprices and contrasts. Changes of taste and opinion are generally graduated by such slow and imperceptible progressions, that we are unconscious of the process, and should hardly believe that our former opinions were diametrically opposed to our present did not our faithful Journal present them to our eyes on the incontestable evidence of our own hand-writing.⁵

Like many of his fellow officers, he kept meticulous records, and along with his journal, amassed an ever growing archive of personal papers that documented his existence. "In a social role constructed of such material as honor, fame, and glory," writes military historian Peter Karsten, "the guarding of sources that might aid one to recon-

4. Madeleine Dahlgren to Charles Cowley, 10 March 1890, DS; Madeleine V. Dahlgren, *The Petition of Madeleine Vinton Dahlgren, Widow of the Late Rear-Admiral Dahlgren, Asking Compensation for Property Taken and Used by the United States, With Proof of the Facts Set Forth in the Petition* (Lancaster, Pa.: Inquirer Printing and Publishing Co., 1874), copy in Box 37, DLC; Madeleine Dahlgren to Charles Cowley, 21 November 1882, DS; Madeleine Dahlgren to Charles Cowley, 22 November 1877, DS; Madeleine Dahlgren to Charles Cowley, 19 April 1880, DS.

5. An anonymous quote in Dahlgren's hand in "Private Journal of John A. Dahlgren U.S. Navy on Board the U.S. Frigate Macedonian on a Voyage from Norfolk Va. to the Coast of Brazil", Box 32, DLC.

struct the past may have been deemed axiomatic".⁶ And as we shall see, Dahlgren's experience in the Civil War proved especially problematic for Madeleine Dahlgren in this respect. Chapters 14 through 16 of *Memoir* consist exclusively of journal entries dating from 1 January 1863 to 12 July 1865. Madeleine Dahlgren wrote:

The writer of this memoir has thought it best for the truth of history, to let Admiral Dahlgren—through his private journal written by his own hand, day by day—narrate for himself, unwittingly, as it were, the events of his personal life as connected with the civil war. . . . And it is with the aim to give *original* sources that the journal is now published—as the reader has seen—*verbatim*. . . . During all the course of this history the writer has never used her own words where those of the Admiral could be found to tell the story. . . . She has rigidly adhered to the journal left by her husband.⁷

The George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University contains an important collection of John Dahlgren's papers, including his Civil War diaries, and thus offers a unique opportunity to examine Madeleine Dahlgren's assertions about her book. Given her husband's unpopularity and the fact that she wrote *Memoir* while lobbying for her claim in Congress, it is reasonable to wonder whether she edited the diaries to portray the Admiral in the best possible light. In a letter preserved at Syracuse University, Madeleine Dahlgren asked Charles Cowley, then a judge, to examine the proof sheets of *Memoir* concerned with General Quincy A. Gillmore, who, while in command of the Union army forces during the Charleston campaign, had become involved in a bitter dispute with John Dahlgren:

I have to day written a "confidential" letter to Mr. James R. Osgood, head of the publishing firm, regarding the near approaching forthcoming "Memoir" of the Admiral—

6. Peter Karsten, *The Naval Aristocracy: The Golden Age of Annapolis and the Emergence of Modern American Navalism* (New York: Free Press, 1972), 76.

7. Madeleine V. Dahlgren, *Memoir of John A. Dahlgren* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Co., 1882), 516–17 (hereafter cited as *Memoir*).

I have become somewhat *nervous* regarding several passages about General Gillmore.

While there is nothing not strictly true, yet there may be sentences which might bring me within the technical liability to the law of “libel”—I am not disposed to let Gillmore off, one iota; of that just condemnation which he merits—but in trying to give a true idea of the difficult position of Admiral Dahlgren—I will do him more harm than good if I fail in being prudent. As to how far *true* statements can be construed as libellous, I know not. I have suggested to Osgood—that as a good & devoted friend of the Admiral it would be prudent to ask you to read over very carefully the printed private journal—and if you think it safer, to indicate those places which ought to be expunged—of course if by any misadventure I should subject my book to any suit for libel, it would do the memory of the Admiral harm, and be playing into the hand of the enemy—This, I wish to avoid, and in the Admiral’s true interests protect his memory.⁸

Did Madeleine Dahlgren edit her husband’s diaries so as to repaint his portrait for posterity? A comparison of chapters 14 through 16 of *Memoir* with the corresponding original diaries provides an answer.

There are discrepancies. In her editing Madeleine Dahlgren made both mistakes and conscious alterations. She usually touched up her husband’s grammar and spelled out his abbreviations. Sometimes she added italics to emphasize certain points. Occasionally she misplaced portions of one entry under the date of another.⁹ As these changes do not substantially alter the style or content of the original, they are not really significant, although they emphatically nullify her claim of copying the original diaries verbatim. But what Madeleine Dahlgren actually omitted from her *Memoir* merits closer scrutiny. She

8. Madeleine Dahlgren to Charles Cowley, 10 October 1882, DS.

9. Compare the 21 April 1863 entries in *Memoir*, 390, and John A. Dahlgren Diaries, John A. Dahlgren Papers, Syracuse University Library, vol. 9 (hereafter cited as *Diary*) for corrected grammar; the 9 May 1864 entries in *Memoir*, 452, and *Diary*, vol. 12 for spelled-out abbreviations; and the 31 March 1863 entries in *Memoir*, 389–90 and *Diary*, vol. 9 for added italics. *Memoir*, 437, includes a portion of the entry dated 23 January 1864 in *Diary*, vol. 11, under the date 22 January 1864.

did in fact delete sentences and even entire entries where her husband emerged in ways she did not wish to have known.

A bare-bones account of Dahlgren's role in the Charleston campaign will give the context for discussing these omissions. Because Northerners considered Charleston to be the nursery of the rebellion, the Navy Department determined to take the city by storm with its new ironclad fleet, and thereby win public acclaim in an exclusively naval victory. Samuel F. DuPont led the first assault, but failed to take the city. When DuPont refused to try again, the Navy Department sacked him. As DuPont had learned, a system of intricate defensive works, featuring interlocking fields of fire, made Charleston the Confederacy's most strongly fortified port. Fort Sumter, standing in the middle of the harbor, both covered and was covered by a ring of batteries built on the surrounding islands. Underwater obstructions and mines complemented the frowning guns. Navy Department officials reluctantly concluded that the city would not fall without army cooperation. The Federal general-in-chief had doubted that a joint operation against Charleston could succeed, until Brigadier General Quincy A. Gillmore, an engineer experienced in knocking down forts, convinced him otherwise. Gillmore's plan sounded simple. If the navy could put the army within a mile and a half of Fort Sumter, he guaranteed that he could knock it to pieces as he had Fort Pulaski in Savannah earlier in the war. With Sumter demolished, the navy's ironclads could enter Charleston harbor and demand the surrender of the city. Gillmore assumed command of the army's Department of the South on 12 June 1863, with the understanding that his limited task was to destroy Fort Sumter for the navy.¹⁰

Dahlgren succeeded DuPont in command of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron, the organization responsible for naval operations in the vicinity of Charleston, on 6 July 1863. Both Dahlgren and Gillmore had assumed their respective commands without specific instructions from their superiors and were thus free to pursue their own plans. Four days after his arrival, Dahlgren supported an

10. This account of the joint army-navy operations in the vicinity of Charleston relies on Rowena Reed, *Combined Operations of the Civil War* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1978); Samuel Jones, *The Siege of Charleston* (New York: Neale Co., 1911); and E. Milby Burton, *The Siege of Charleston, 1861–1865* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1970).

assault made by Gillmore on Morris Island, a long, low sand island, the northern half of which lay within range of Sumter's guns. Two Confederate forts, Batteries Wagner and Gregg, defended this northern end. Gillmore intended to establish his own batteries on the island in order to pound Sumter into rubble, and so enable Dahlgren's fleet to clear the underwater obstructions and dash into the harbor. Gillmore established a beachhead on the southern end of Morris Island on 10 July and assaulted Wagner the next day, but failed to carry it. A week later a second assault on Wagner, preceded by a terrible bombardment both from Gillmore's batteries and Dahlgren's ships, also failed. The two Union commanders then decided that a different tactic was called for. They agreed that Gillmore's troops, supported by the guns of the fleet, should construct siege lines to approach Wagner. By 8 August the Federals had reached a position 500 yards from the fort, but Confederate gunfire from Sumter halted their advance. To remedy this situation Gillmore and Dahlgren agreed on a joint bombardment of Sumter, which began on 17 August. The shelling silenced Sumter's guns within six days. Without cover from Sumter, the Confederates realized that it was only a matter of time before Wagner would fall. On the night of 6 September the defenders evacuated the island, making a clean getaway.

With Morris Island in Federal hands, Sumter became the main target. Dahlgren moved quickly in the wake of the Confederate evacuation. Hoping to exploit the ensuing confusion in the rebel ranks, the Admiral on the night of 8 September sent a force of 500 sailors and marines in small boats to capture Sumter. Gillmore independently determined to send a similar force of soldiers, but neither leader learned of the other's plan until late that day, when they communicated their intentions by signal flags. The Confederates intercepted their messages, and lay in wait for the attack. As Dahlgren's men approached Sumter, the Confederate batteries opened fire at once, spreading panic and confusion among the attackers, who withdrew in less than an hour, leaving behind 125 of their number as prisoners. Gillmore's soldiers never left their starting point. Following the failed boat attack, Gillmore and Dahlgren cooperated in a forty-day bombardment of Sumter from 26 October through 4 December.

By the end of 1863 the campaign had more or less degenerated

into a stalemate. Because the Navy Department never sent Dahlgren the ships he needed for an all-out attack, the blockade of the city became his primary mission. Late in February 1864, Dahlgren left for Washington to discuss future operations with superiors in the Navy Department. His fleet captain, Stephen Clegg Rowan, assumed command of the squadron in his absence. While in Washington, Dahlgren learned that his son Ulric, a colonel in the Union cavalry, had been killed in a raid on Richmond to free Union prisoners of war. Dahlgren's absence from the fleet lengthened as he tried in vain to recover his son's body. He did not return until early May, at which time he discovered that Gillmore, who had requested a transfer because the bombardment of Fort Sumter had failed to open a way into the city, had joined Union forces operating in Virginia.¹¹ With the odd exception, the rest of Dahlgren's campaign consisted of the humdrum routine of blockade. Because the War Department was dissatisfied with Gillmore's successor, Major General John G. Foster, Gillmore returned to his old command early in February 1865, but made no further offensive moves against the city. Charleston fell only when General William T. Sherman's "bummers" menaced it from behind. The Confederates evacuated the city on 17 February, thus ending the 567-day siege. Dahlgren and Gillmore had effectively sealed off Charleston from maritime commerce, but had failed to achieve their original goal, the capture of the city.

Gillmore tried to place the blame for the failure squarely on Dahlgren and he argued his case about their joint operations during 1863 in a book that was published just before his return to Charleston in February 1865.¹² Gillmore contended that both the Navy and War departments had agreed from the beginning that his own role was simply to secure Morris Island and reduce Sumter. After that, it was to be Dahlgren's ironclads that would clear the underwater obstructions, gain control of the harbor, and force the surrender of the city. Gillmore's role was to support a naval attack; a siege was not origi-

11. *Memoir*, 440–51.

12. Quincy A. Gillmore, *Engineer and Artillery Operations Against the Defences of Charleston Harbor in 1863; Comprising the Descent upon Morris Island, the Demolition of Fort Sumter, the Reduction of Forts Wagner and Gregg. With Observations on Heavy Ordnance, Fortifications, Etc.* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1865).



Brigadier-General Quincy A. Gillmore at the time of the Civil War.
National Archives photograph.

nally contemplated. He reasoned that when the fleet reached the city, the Confederates would abandon their defensive works on the islands around Sumter. But Dahlgren had failed to act at the opportune moment:

The period during which the weakness of the enemy's interior defences was most palpably apparent was during the ten or fifteen days subsequent to the 23d of August, and that was the time when success could have been most easily achieved by the fleet. The concurrent testimony of prisoners, refugees, and deserters, represented the obstacles in the way as by no means insurmountable. . . .

The failure of the fleet to enter immediately after the 23d of August, whether unavoidable or otherwise, gave the enemy an opportunity, doubtless much needed, to improve their interior defences. Of the actual strength of those improvements we had no reliable information, as they were never tested or encountered by the ironclads.¹³

In short, Gillmore argued that he had accomplished all that had been expected of him, while Dahlgren had not.

Dahlgren responded vigorously with the following assertions. Gillmore had missed an opportunity by not assaulting Fort Wagner on 10 July 1863, before Confederate reinforcements had arrived. His attack the next day was poorly prepared, and failed from want of enough troops. Gillmore could not have taken Morris Island without the navy's help. Although Fort Sumter had been battered severely by 23 August 1863, its garrison remained intact, able to deploy light guns and musketry against any attempt to clear obstructions from the harbor. The boat attack on Sumter failed because the army did not support the naval effort. Gillmore had played down the strength of the Confederate batteries. Fire from the undergunned ironclads during operations against rebel fortifications had inflicted only negligible damage. And even if the ironclads had succeeded in forcing their way into the harbor, their presence alone would not have compelled the city to surrender. Getting in was not the real problem, getting out was. As long as the batteries surrounding Sumter remained intact, ironclads could stay in the harbor only as long as their limited supplies lasted. They would have to run the gauntlet of enemy fire a second time with whatever damage they had already sustained when their provisions and ammunition ran low. Captured ironclads could be effectively turned against the wooden blockading fleet. And as

13. Gillmore, *Operations*, 63–66.

the capture of Morris Island had virtually eliminated maritime commerce with Charleston, capturing the city was not a strategic necessity. The fruits of a successful naval attack were not worth the risk. On this point the Navy Department concurred.¹⁴ All told, Dahlgren argued that he had been given an impossible task. If anyone was to blame for a failure, it was Gillmore.

Madeleine Dahlgren's treatment of Gillmore in *Memoir* naturally reflected her husband's point of view. Despite her fear of a libel charge, she published portions of John Dahlgren's diary that dealt with Gillmore in plain language. Many of these entries appearing in *Memoir* concern Dahlgren's accusation that during the war Gillmore had waged a campaign in the press to discredit him. This accusation, the original source of discord between the two leaders, predated the publication of Gillmore's book. Shortly after returning to the squadron in May 1864 following the unsuccessful attempt to recover his son's body, Dahlgren spoke of the matter with General George H. Gordon:

[4 May 1864] Gordon denounced Gillmore. . . . Said he had encouraged, and was pleased with, the war upon me, and used to speak gleefully of the newspaper attacks, and always had in view a scapegoat for the failure to take Charleston, which he knew was not possible. Here is patriotism, and honor, and honesty!¹⁵

On the eve of Gillmore's return to Charleston in February 1865, Dahlgren wrote:

[6 February 1865] I have an entire contempt for Gillmore because of his conduct last year,—harboring scribblers to lampoon me and denying their assertions to my face. . . .¹⁶

14. See for example John A. Dahlgren, "Report of Rear-Admiral Dahlgren, U.S. Navy, regarding Operations against the Defenses of Charleston, S.C.," 16 October 1865, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1894–1922), series 1, 16:429–55; John Dahlgren, "Minutes for Hamersly's 'Records of Living Officers' ", 14 June 1870, in a letterbook dated 15 December 1868, p. 147, Box 18, DLC; and *Memoir*, chapters 17–19.

15. *Memoir*, 451, 4 May 1864 entry.

16. *Memoir*, 494, 6 February 1865 entry.

After seeing Gillmore's book for the first time the next day, Dahlgren wrote:

[7 February 1865] [Gillmore's book appears] to be a vindication of himself, from something, at my expense. . . . Is it not a heart-burning shame that a man who is educated, with high rank, and intrusted with grave responsibilities, should be incapable of pursuing the plain, straight path to duty, without permitting baser motives to mingle in his thoughts, and swerve head and hand from the true course? Gillmore was a Captain of Engineers with the rank of Volunteer Brigadier-General, an ephemeral, fleeting thing. Of course he would like to be a Major-General, and this demanded some brilliant performance. This he thought he could not achieve without having the entire credit. The Navy must not be allowed any share, and the howl that Charleston was not taken came like a shock. Did he fear that he would fail to be a Major-General, and find it necessary to place the failure upon me? He took Morris Island (by his own account); I did not even help. Now I must take Charleston!¹⁷

These assertions, apart from virtually calling Gillmore a liar, accuse him of deliberate and underhanded conduct. In both an era and a profession that placed a high value on honor, such charges fell heavily on the accused. Madeleine Dahlgren published them nonetheless.

However, she did not include in *Memoir* similar things about Gillmore that Dahlgren wrote in his diary. From the May 1864 entry appearing above, she edited out the details of General Gordon's remarks about Gillmore:

[4 May 1864] Gordon denounced Gillmore as untruthful, selfish, and insane for notoriety. . . .¹⁸

Later, she omitted an incident that occurred when Gillmore visited Dahlgren's flagship for their first meeting after the General's return in February 1865:

17. *Memoir*, 494–95, 7 February 1865 entry.

18. *Diary*, vol. 12, 4 May 1864 entry.

[11 February 1865] The gangway was manned as usual. Gillmore came over the side—same old face but quite grave. He took off his hat. I raised my cap—and as he moved towards me he held out his hand. I bowed and said “Please walk into my Cabin”, and turned to show the way.

I doubt if anyone present noticed the offer of his hand, as he had on a short cloak and his hand was just visible to me beneath it.¹⁹

Dahlgren had refused to shake Gillmore’s hand. And again, she thought fit to cut the following:

[7 June 1865] Gillmore and the rest of the party have proved to be a lying skulking set of poor devils.²⁰

All in all, it seems that Madeleine Dahlgren purposely omitted her husband’s most vitriolic denunciations of and actions against Gillmore; and her reason for doing so was that they ran counter to the neo-chivalric image idealized in that era. Dahlgren’s behavior reflected as much upon himself as it did upon others. His wife must have reasoned that publishing his private indignation would have marred his image as a truly honorable man. Honor was an essential quality of leadership, indispensable to the make-up of the heroic naval officer, the archetype of Dahlgren’s navy. Animosity, petty rivalry, and interpersonal tensions were, in actuality, central to the real nature of the nineteenth-century navy, but they had no place in the heroic ideal.²¹ Probably, or at least in part, Madeleine Dahlgren excluded her husband’s most venomous remarks about Gillmore and others because they cast a shadow on his honor.

In a manner comparable to her treatment of Gillmore, Madeleine Dahlgren toned down her husband’s remarks about Stephen Clegg

19. Diary, vol. 13, 11 February 1865 entry.

20. Diary, vol. 13, 7 June 1865 entry.

21. The observations on honor come from Karsten, *The Naval Aristocracy*, 30–31, 392; Leonard F. Guttridge and Jay D. Smith, *The Commodores* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1986), xi; James C. Bradford, ed., *Command Under Sail: Makers of the American Naval Tradition, 1775–1850* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1985), 214–16; and James Calvert, *The Naval Profession* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 178.

Rowan, his second-in-command at Charleston. Before going there, Dahlgren had expressed regret that Rowan had not been made an admiral.²² But after only two months of service with him, Dahlgren's opinion changed, as Madeleine Dahlgren disclosed in *Memoir*:

[26 August 1863] Rowan is a great drawback,—full of objections. . . . Shows no interest, and is ready to cavil at anything. I have nothing from him.²³

Somewhat harsher remarks made in the diaries do not appear in *Memoir*. Just before leaving for Washington in February 1864, Dahlgren had written:

[25–27 February 1864] Old Rowan came on board and was of course duly astonished to hear that I was going North and he was to command—Rowan is too cute to be ambitious of the honor—would not hold permanently if he could help it. . . . the old man does not take the responsibility too cheerfully. . . .²⁴

Both sets of remarks cast aspersions on Rowan's abilities, but the entry omitted from *Memoir* reflected poorly on his character and revealed as well a sarcastic edge to Dahlgren's personality.

The troubled waters between Dahlgren and Rowan ran deeper than words in the diary suggest. An alleged impropriety involving Rowan and the officers under his command on board the ironclad USS *New Ironsides* took place just before Dahlgren's return to the fleet following his son's death. Here is how the incident unfolded in *Memoir*:

[9 May 1864] I was handed a communication from Commodore Rowan, which proved to be letters from Dr. Duval [surgeon of the *New Ironsides*, whose name the Dahlgrens spell inconsistently], reporting, to Navy Department, Commodore Rowan and his executive officer Belknap, and other officers, as being parties to disparaging remarks on myself; which was

22. *Memoir*, 388, 19 February 1863 entry.

23. *Memoir*, 410–11, 26 August 1863 entry.

24. Diary, vol. 11, 25 and 27 February 1864 entries.

producing serious consequences on the discipline of the squadron. Whereupon Rowan indorses them as false so far as concerns himself, and prefers charges against Duval. . . . As Belknap was not exonerated, I decided to begin with him as the senior offender.²⁵

[11 May 1864] I found myself obliged to send a Court of Inquiry to ascertain *what* Belknap had said.²⁶

[14 May 1864] Report from Court of Inquiry, in case of some other officers on board the “Iron-sides” [USS *New Ironsides*, the ironclad which Rowan commanded], charged with disrespectful language. Instead of facts, they favored me with an opinion. Sent it back.²⁷

[16 May 1864] Court of Inquiry again at work on “Iron-sides.”²⁸

[17 May 1864] Court of Inquiry finished. And, after swearing everybody, it seems that nobody ever spoke disrespectfully of me in the “Iron-sides.” Fortunate man!²⁹

Madeleine Dahlgren did not include everything. Here is what she omitted from the diary:

[6 May 1864] The murder begins to come out—this evening Capt Bradford told me that while I was gone, Dr. Duvall said that L. Belknap had been speaking illy of me—believed it came from Commo. Rowan—& that there were others in the Ironsides who were infected in the same way—if true then it seems that I have traitors to deal with. . . . Bradford said that Rowan did everything for popularity—³⁰

[8 May 1864] [an unknown individual (who signed himself “W”) made additional comments in the diary, as indicated

25. *Memoir*, 452–53, 9 May 1864 entry.

26. *Memoir*, 453, 11 May 1864 entry.

27. *Memoir*, 454, 14 May 1864 entry.

28. *Memoir*, 454, 16 May 1864 entry.

29. *Memoir*, 454, 17 May 1864 entry.

30. *Diary*, vol. 12, 6 May 1864 entry; no entry for this date appears in *Memoir*.

by the superscript letters below] Commo. Rowan came on board[.] I had resolved to open the matter at once,^a but Capt. Bradford had to-day requested me not to do so until Dr. Duvall informed me, as he did not wish to be concerned. So when Rowan came in all smiles & welcome I shook hands as usual—

Nothing could exceed the friendliness of the interview—it was entirely unreserved, and among other things he denounced Gillmore for his course towards me & the Navy in permitting *the* correspondence [a reference to Gillmore's press campaign against Dahlgren]—(wonder he never said so before) took tea &c

I told him the present seemed a good opportunity for trying the Rebels at some point & asked him what he thought of an attempt on Sumter; he entirely approved,—but shook his head^b at the idea of going up to the city—might be done with the reinforcements,—would probably lose two or three &c[.] He left after a most cordial evening.

I sent for Bradford and told him that Duval must be mistaken; the Commo. never could have said or allowed to be said anything to my disadvantage that if Belknap had done so, it must have been without the knowledge of Com. R.—for to act the friend to my face & stab me behind was not possible

Bradford did not seem to be convinced^c

^aYou should firmly have done so and so exposed the villainous plotting against you on all sides—W.

^bhow *could* John with all his sagacity persist in being duped by these curs! W.

^cof course not W.³¹

[9 May 1864] Nice business for honorable men and patriots to be meanly, basely & clandestinely decrying their Command while he is engaged with the Rebel enemy in front—³²

[10 May 1864] Expressed my astonishment to Rowan at the alleged state of things in his ship—He said he was astonished

31. Diary, vol. 12, 8 May 1864 entry.

32. Diary, vol. 12, 9 May 1864 entry.

too and that Belknap was as clear of it as he was[.] Told him I could not let B stay in his ship if the charges were true,— he said he could disclaim them for B[.] Received Duvall's answer—could not specify the words of Belknap—they were disrespectful, that was all—Can't frame charges on that—³³

[17 May 1864] Court of Inq. finished—and after swearing every body, it seems that nobody ever spoke disrespectfully of me in the Ironsides; fortunate man! The poor Doctor has to suffer now—³⁴

Although unfavorable comments about one's superior may not seem so important to a civilian, naval officers have always regarded them as evidence of insubordination. Proper respect for authority was considered essential to the military way of doing things.³⁵ Thus, it was not unusual that Dahlgren convened a court of inquiry to look into the matter, although doing so clearly distressed him. The omissions from *Memoir* not only suggest naivete on Dahlgren's part in being taken in by Rowan's cordial and friendly manner, but also reveal a hope that his subordinates' dissatisfaction with him simply did not exist, that the perception of impropriety had been a mistake. No leader likes insubordination. It reflects poorly on his command. By denying that there had been any wrongdoing, Dahlgren erased the threat to his reputation as a leader of men. His remark about the suffering doctor implies that the surgeon had a rough go of it on board the *Ironsides* after the inquiry, for reporting the misconduct of one's senior officer was very much out of line. Although Duvall had tried to help by reporting Rowan's serious breach of military conduct, Dahlgren, who did not wish to believe that such a thing had occurred, abandoned Duvall to his fate at Rowan's hands. The affair was not to end here.

The Rowan and Gillmore themes converged, culminating in an alleged attempt to remove Dahlgren from command of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron. The allegations surface in Dahlgren's account of his chat with Assistant Secretary of the Navy Gustavus Fox, during Fox's visit to Charleston in the spring of 1865 to tour the fallen city. *Memoir* says only this:

33. Diary, vol. 12, 10 May 1864 entry.

34. Diary, vol. 12, 17 May 1864 entry.

35. Karsten, *The Naval Aristocracy*, 88.

[31 March 1865] As things come out, the proportions of that 'Ironsides' and Gillmore coalition begin to show themselves! Gillmore, undermining in the papers, and then preparing his book; while Rowan was ready to take the vacancy! . . . Fox says that the Department intends to try the charges of Duval against Rowan.³⁶

[2 April 1865] Bradford says they badgered him till six o'clock in the evening, trying to upset his testimony [reference to the court of inquiry proceedings of May 1864]. Pretty business for a second in command [Rowan], and one that I have known as a friend for some thirty years, and have befriended when I could!³⁷

Here are passages that Madeleine Dahlgren left out:

[1 April 1865] Gillmore undermining in the papers, and then preparing his book—While Rowan was on the sly to take the vacancy—they explaining where the Ironside conspiracy really lay—and how dexterously Rowan had done the work and thrown the appearance on others—Duvall was right, and the enquiries I ordered were put at every one but the right one [—all] very dirty,—Fox says that the Dept intends to try the charges of Duvall against Rowan³⁸

[27 June 1865] Dr. Duvall called and entered at length on his difficulties—He says that Rowan incited & encouraged the secret expressions against me—That he manifested dislike to me openly on various occasions—That he said on one occasion that I wanted to take the Ironsides into Rebellion Roads, but if I did she would never come back again—Also that Simpson was a prime actor and well known to be opposed to me,—even to expressing it—which seems very strange—for I placed him senior on the Engineers upon the officers charged with having used disrespectful language of me—The Dr. also told me that my effigy was hung up on

36. *Memoir*, 507, 31 March 1865 entry. This entry is dated 1 April 1865 in the original, see below.

37. *Memoir*, 507–8, 2 April 1865 entry.

38. *Diary*, vol. 13, 1 April 1865 entry.



A famous photograph of Admiral Dahlgren. He leans on a Dahlgren gun with the ruins of Fort Sumter behind his right shoulder. Library of Congress photograph.

The Admiral wrote in his diary that day:

Friday April 21 [1865]

Fine day—cloud & shine—much wind from SW—

A day of photographs—Brady's man Mr. [blank] called and asked to photo. me—had asked me in N.Y. two years ago, just as I was about to start for this,—but I declined—rather the first one I fancy who shunned such immortality—he had been so sorry—the Photo. had been so much asked for and would have sold so well—

So I went on board the Pawnee with all the Staff—and between big and little Photos—alone & with the Staff—there were a dozen or more Photos. taken—It used up the working part of a day—

board the *Ironsides* because I retained in the Sqdrn. such of her crew as had 6 mos. to serve, when the *Ironsides* was going home³⁹

It would appear that the May 1864 proceedings on the *Ironsides* should indeed have exposed some sort of misconduct. The statement in *Memoir* about the badgered witness suggests a cover-up. But the book simply does not reveal the full extent of the disgruntlement with Dahlgren's command. More importantly, Madeleine Dahlgren's omissions from the May 1864 and April and June 1865 diary entries show that Rowan had pulled the wool over Dahlgren's eyes about the whole business. It is not surprising that Madeleine Dahlgren rejected these passages.

Because leadership demands social finesse, an officer's good relationship with his men and his peers is especially important.⁴⁰ The ability to get along with others can make or break a leader. *Memoir* characterizes Dahlgren's relationships with Gillmore and Rowan as having been poor. Omissions from the book, such as Dahlgren's refusal to shake hands with Gillmore and the hanging of his effigy on board the *New Ironsides*, show them to have been wretched. Madeleine Dahlgren apparently understood that the exposure of her husband's shortcomings would not reflect well on his reputation as a commander of men. The prescription for successful leadership during the Civil War included a sympathetic understanding of the men's grievances, a wide flexibility in the imposition of discipline, and an instinct for the men's likely reactions. Only rarely and in extreme instances should recourse to military law be sought. Dahlgren's hasty convening of a court of inquiry shows him to have been deficient in this last crucial respect. It could be argued that the sad failure to recover his son's body drove him to emotional extremes. But should a leader be excused for allowing personal grief to interfere in command decisions? Ideally, Dahlgren should have ascertained the pertinent facts and confronted Rowan directly. If he had then deemed a formal investigation to be necessary, he should have headed it him-

39. Diary, vol. 13, 27 June 1865 entry; no entry for this date appears in *Memoir*.

40. The observations on leadership are from John Horsfield, *The Art of Leadership in War: The Royal Navy from the Age of Nelson to the End of World War II* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980), 160–69 and Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: Free Press, 1987), 56.

self and kept it under his own roof without involving the Navy Department. Mishandling the affair as he did left grievances undressed. Those who may have deserved punishment went unpunished, and those who tried to help him were injured. That the problem resurfaced almost a year after the investigation on the *New Ironsides* illustrates the inadequacy of his solution. The *Memoir* version only hints that Dahlgren had botched the affair and that Rowan had duped him. What Madeleine Dahlgren omitted from the book underlines what she herself thought, namely, that Dahlgren had failed to follow a cardinal rule of war: know yourself and know your comrades. Madeleine Dahlgren did not hide her husband's deficiency entirely, but she quite clearly tried to play it down.

Another point about Dahlgren's leadership skills arises from passages in which he criticizes subordinates. Madeleine Dahlgren included only one such passage in *Memoir*:

[31 May 1864] The Captain said when he came on board that the men came aft and said that if the Admiral was going on an expedition they did not want to go. These men had been transferred from the 'Wabash' for discharge, their time being out; the old crew sent elsewhere. A nice set of patriots! The crew of this ship 'Wabash' has been troublesome from the first. When sent ashore to the naval battery on Morris Island they complained that their time was out. . . .⁴¹

Their term of enlistment having expired, these men, quite naturally, were reluctant to re-expose themselves to danger. The enlisted man's less engaged enthusiasm is an understood fact of military life. By itself, Dahlgren's statement is not necessarily indicative of flawed leadership. But the omitted passages in which he criticized his officers suggest a contrary reality:

[21 August 1863] Very vexatious—Too little interest felt in proceedings, *that* is the trouble.⁴²

[21 February 1864] Rowan came on board, then other Captains all looking rather despondent about Torpedoes—It is

41. *Memoir*, 456, 31 May 1864 entry.

42. *Diary*, vol. 11, 21 August 1863 entry.

evident that I am very indifferently supported—no zeal—just a look out for bread & butter—the officers are against the War⁴³

[15 January 1865] [Dahlgren had assembled the ironclad skippers to discuss the possibility of a joint move on Charleston.] The most diffident party that I had yet called together on such an occasion—Not a fire eater among them—yet on the whole it was an excellent band of Capts—⁴⁴

These complaints disclose more than Dahlgren's apparent disappointment in his subordinates. They reveal a long-standing morale problem. As the dates of these entries suggest, the problem lasted throughout Dahlgren's tenure in command of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron. He recognized its existence early, but evidently was never able to solve it. That he failed to do so is another indictment of his ability to command. But Madeleine Dahlgren did not publish the above remarks, and thus, simply eliminated public evidence that might have detracted from history's assessment of her husband's leadership.

Madeleine Dahlgren wrote *Memoir of John A. Dahlgren* with an eye to heighten her husband's reputation. It was not an easy job, for Dahlgren was unpopular. He faced great difficulties as commander of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron, not the least of which was Gillmore's accusatory book. His comrades entertained serious doubts about his ability to lead, and their doubts were not unfounded, as his own Civil War diaries give evidence. With her motives for writing *Memoir*, it is not surprising that Madeleine Dahlgren eliminated some of that evidence. In general, the omitted passages deal with aspects of command—honor, social finesse, judgment about subordinates, the ability to redress grievances satisfactorily, and the maintenance of good morale. Although her deletions modify the final portrayal in *Memoir*, they do not entirely render it false. The Dahlgren that emerges from chapters 14 through 16 is not fundamentally different from the Dahlgren of the corresponding diaries. The editing merely softened the blow that he had already inflicted upon himself by his own words. Madeleine Dahlgren did not repaint her husband's portrait for posterity, but she did touch it up.

43. Diary, vol. 11, 21 February 1864 entry.

44. Diary, vol. 13, 15 January 1865 entry.