

**THE DAHLGREN AFFAIR:
TERROR AND CONSPIRACY
IN THE CIVIL WAR**

By Duane Schultz

W.W. Norton & Co. Inc.

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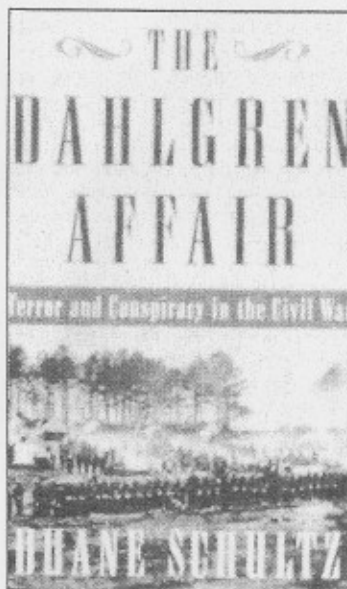
REVIEWED BY SEAN SCULLY

Unconvincing, cliché-ridden 'Dahlgren Affair'

city of South Florida, tells the tale of Brig. Gen. Hugh Judson Kilpatrick's failed 1864 raid on Richmond. Although the raiders managed to do little damage in central Virginia — and failed in their main mission of freeing Union prisoners confined in Richmond — the attack provided one of the weirdest footnotes in a war filled with bizarre episodes.

As the exhausted and defeated Union troops retreated, Confederate militia killed Col. Ulric Dahlgren, commander of a detachment of Kilpatrick's cavalry and son of John Adolph Dahlgren, the famous Union admiral. Dahlgren's troops were supposed to enter Richmond from the south, burn the bridges across the James River and free the Union prisoners on Belle Island while Kilpatrick's main force attacked Richmond from the north.

Shortly after Dahlgren's death, Richmond newspapers published the text of orders purportedly taken from his body. The orders created a sensation in the South



and provoked heated denials in the North: The document commanded Dahlgren's troops to sack Richmond and kill President Jefferson

Davis and other highly placed Confederate officials.

The papers are a source of heated disagreement to this day.

Southerners ever since have pointed to them as evidence of the barbarism and moral bankruptcy of the Union cause. Northerners argue that the papers were a crude forgery to justify the last desperate struggle of the Confederacy, and a dishonorable deception by men who held themselves up as paragons of honor.

Mr. Schultz tells the story in a quick and readable fashion. His experience as a novelist serves well, allowing the reader to feel the desperation on both sides in the fourth dreary year of war. He is particularly effective in describing the turbulent life in both the Union and Confederate capitals.

For all its gloss, however, the book rings hollow. Mr. Schultz falls into the monotonous post-Ken Burns pattern of stringing together rehashed quotes with overwrought narrative.

A quick glance at the bibliogra-

phy confirms an impression from the text: Mr. Schultz seems to rely almost exclusively on previous historians and well-known published accounts rather than on original reporting and research.

That in itself would be no great flaw in a field so thoroughly picked over as the Civil War — were he to provide some new insight or analysis based on the older work. Instead, his conclusion is so tentative that it is difficult to determine what he set out to say.

His book seems to have two purposes: to prove that the papers were forgeries and to argue that the papers gave Davis a prime excuse to overcome his gentlemanly qualms and launch a campaign of terror in the North.

In neither instance does Mr. Schultz make a clear case. He lays out the arguments and existing evidence on both sides of the authenticity debate, giving slightly more weight to the arguments on the side of forgery.

He strings together a series of anecdotes about the South's pro-

gram of unconventional warfare, many of them quite amusing, but he never makes his case that the Dahlgren papers were the trigger that Davis needed to launch a campaign of terror.

Despite his promising premise and skill as a writer, Mr. Schultz's book falls short of its promotional literature — that it is "sure to become a classic of the genre."

Instead, the book shows how easily the genre lends itself to cliché.

Sean Scully is a national reporter for *The Washington Times*.

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