

The Perplexing Debate:
British Sympathies for the Confederacy

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Presentism is a problematic line to balance in the study of history. On one hand, it is impossible to act as if we don't know how it all ended, and yet, that is precisely what we must do. In the case of the American Civil War, we know that Britain remained neutral and, in thus doing, helped preserve the Union. From an American nationalistic standpoint, this has always been viewed as extremely positive. It is therefore difficult for us to appreciate the strong sympathy for the Confederacy that did exist in Britain during the war, especially considering how strongly Britain championed abolition during the nineteenth century. However, understanding this sympathy is critically important to us in grasping more accurately the nuances of the Civil War and the resulting preservation of the United States of America.

British public opinion was a crucial puzzle piece in the war because what the people wanted was strongly represented by the decisions made by their government.¹ Even those on the other side of the Atlantic understood this, as is evident in an article from the *Boston Commonwealth* printed in April 1863 which states:

Let us turn our attention to the English people; not the Government, nor the literary men, nor the giants of the press, but the working men and working women. Let us avow ourselves the friends of these oppressed classes; let us, as we have done, relieve their starvation, offer them homes in the West, give them our sympathy in their political struggles, and in all ways identify our causes with theirs.²

Those pushing to gain this British support had one advantage: they did not have to struggle to convince the people that the war affected them. Most of the country, not just the political leaders, understood the import of the controversy across the ocean and had an opinion on it. There were debating societies throughout the country, "warm street debates" between neighbours, lectures, panoramas and dioramas, and various other activities that showed a genuine concern in the matter by people from all

¹ R.J.M. Blackett. *Divided Hearts: Britain and the American Civil War*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 123. He writes, "In the political culture of mid-Victorian Britain, it was taken for granted that the way the public viewed a particular event influenced, in very concrete ways, the policies adopted by government."

² *Boston Commonwealth*, 17 April 1863 as cited in Mary Ellison. *Support for Secession*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972), 6 as cited in Blackett, 171.

walks of life.³ The frequency of petitions to the British government shows the intensity the people felt towards the issue, and is exemplified by 83 pro-Confederate petitions which were created in the year 1864 alone.⁴

Britain controlled international policy during the nineteenth century. In the case of the Civil War, this translated into Britain dictating the international response towards the conflict.⁵ Intervention on the part of other nations during this war easily could have put the Confederacy in a position of victory, thus leaving Britain as a powerful determining force in the outcome. Member of Parliament John Bright understood this when he said, in reference to the Union, “If you are resolved to succeed against the South, *have no war with England.*”⁶ With this in mind, the sympathy felt towards the Confederacy in British public opinion becomes especially significant.

To begin with, there was a cultural tie with the South and Britain that had existed before the war. The British upper class and the Southern gentry felt a tie of aristocracy that this upper class didn't feel with the industrial North.⁷ When war broke out, this feeling of camaraderie remained in many British circles. The three main issues that did arise during the war, however, which led to Southern

³ Blackett, 179-182.

⁴ Blackett, 157, 161, 164, 171.

⁵ Henry Blumenthal. *France and the United States: Their Diplomatic Relations, 1789-1914*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1970), 80-83. Napoleon III sympathized with the South; however, amongst other reasons, France knew that stepping ahead of Britain would only cause it trouble. Therefore, one huge reason France never supported the Confederacy was because Britain didn't.

See also: Daniel M. Smith. *The American Diplomatic Experience*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972), 162. Russia wanted the North to win because it wanted a strong United States to keep British power in check.

See also: Gortschakoff to M. Drouyn de l'Huys, November 15, 1862 as cited in Adams to Charles Seward, London, November 15, 1862, as cited in U.S. Department of State. *Diplomatic Correspondence: Part 1, 1863*. 38th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1864), 5. Prince Gortschakoff of Russia wrote to the French Minister of Foreign Affairs M. Drouyn de l'Huys in reference to France's desire for mediation between the two sides. He wrote, “It is requisite, above all, to avoid the appearance of any pressure whatever capable of chilling public opinion in America, or of exciting the susceptibility of the nation. . . If, however, France should persist in her intention, and England should acquiesce, instructions shall be despatched to Baron Stoeckl at Washington to lend to both his colleagues, if not official aid, at least moral support.” Therefore, Russia didn't want to upset its Western European competitors, and if they, meaning Britain and France, had both decided to support the Confederacy, Russia may have also lent its support.

⁶ William A. Williams. *From Colony to Empire: Essays in the History of American Foreign Relations*. (New York: J. Wiley, 1972), 128.

⁷ Philip S. Foner. *British Labor and the American Civil War*. (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1981), 13.

sympathies were a distrust of the Union, the troubled British economy, and the political leanings held by many Brits.

Distrust of the North arose for various reasons and didn't necessarily mean that people were pro-Confederate. However, it did serve the Confederate cause well. One reason for the tension resulted from a distrust of the Union's motives, namely in regards to abolition.⁸ The American abolition movement was largely seen as hypocritical in Britain. A passage from the *Illustrated London News*, written in early 1861 describes this:

The eagerness with which the citizens of the United States are accustomed to throw themselves into a political arena has always seemed to us to have sprung as much from a desire for the excitement of the movement as from a serious effort to vindicate and establish a principle.⁹

One reason behind this belief was the anti-slavery of the western United States which did not occur only from of a desire to emancipate the slaves but, rather, was mostly due to the fear of Black migration that would occur if slavery moved west. Another reason was that many of the Northern anti-slavery advocates who spoke against slavery led lives which perpetuated the slave system. To the British, this seemed a grave contradiction which stirred up fears that the North didn't truly care about abolition.¹⁰

Samuel Phillips Day, a special correspondent for London's *Morning Herald*, wrote, "The black man is loathed in the North, and treated much after the same manner as the ancient Jews were accustomed to

⁸ Howard Jones. *Abraham Lincoln and a New Birth of Freedom: The Union and Slavery in the Diplomacy of the Civil War*. (United States of America: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 5.

⁹ "Disunion in the United States," *The Illustrated London News*, January 12, 1861 as cited in *The Illustrated London News*, Vol. 38, No. 1069, 25-26: <http://beck.library.emory.edu/iln/browse.php?id=iln38.1069.004> (accessed November 15, 2009).

¹⁰ Douglas A. Lorimer. "The Role of Anti-Slavery Sentiment in English Reactions to the American Civil War." *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (June 1976): 405-420: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2638570> (accessed November 1, 2009), 406-407. See also: Martin Duberman. *Charles Francis Adams: 1807-1886*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961), 265.

treat people affected with leprosy.”¹¹ President Lincoln also helped confirm the suspicions of the British by continually reinforcing the idea that the North was fighting for the Union, not against slavery.¹²

Several specific events sparked further distrust of the North. First, there was the passing of the Morrill tariff in February of 1861. Some Brits felt that the war had begun over tariffs, and the Morrill tariff, which backtracked on a trend of reducing rates, greatly annoyed them. The Confederate stance on free trade began to look a lot more promising.¹³ Second, the first Battle of Bull Run and the North’s subsequent defeat led to a much stronger British support for the Confederacy. This is exemplified in the British press, led by the *Times*, which began to write in favour of the Confederacy.¹⁴ The strongest hostilities towards the Union peaked, however, during the Trent Affair in 1862.¹⁵ As an American living in London was quoted, “There never was within memory such a burst of feeling as has been created by the news of the boarding of the Trent. The people are frantic with rage, and were the country polled, I fear 999 men out of a thousand would declare immediate war.”¹⁶

Other reasons for supporting the South were tied to the complicated economic issues. As the first industrialized nation, Britain viewed the world through its newly acquired “industrialized” glasses. Life for the British was based on capitalism. Capitalism is the “economic and political system characterized by a free market for goods and services and private control of production and

¹¹ Samuel Phillips Day. “Surely These People Are Not Slaves?” as cited in Belle B. Sideman and Lillian Friedman, eds. 1960. *Europe Looks at the Civil War*. (New York: The Orion Press, 1960), 64-66.

¹² Martin Duberman. *Charles Francis Adams: 1807-1886*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961), 265. Also see Dennis Pettibone, “Emancipation” (lecture, Southern Adventist University, Collegedale, TN, October 9, 2009). Lincoln’s reasoning behind not pushing the issue of slavery was that if they forced anti-slavery throughout the Union, they would lose the support of the five border states that had slavery.

¹³ Blackett, 9, 21.

¹⁴ Foner, 3-4. Also see: Ephraim Douglas Adams. *Great Britain and the American Civil War*. (New York: Russell & Russell Inc., 1924), 69. While the majority of secondary sources all agree that the press did go through this change, there were none I looked at that went into great detail as to how this process came about.

¹⁵ Ellison, 30. Also see Smith, 157: The Trent Affair occurred when Union Captain Wilkes boarded a British ship and captured James Mason and John Slidell, two Southerners on their way to Britain as ministers, in November of 1861. It provoked a huge uproar in Britain which led to the release of the two men by the Union.

¹⁶ Ellison, 29.

consumption.”¹⁷ There were several important reasons why capitalism led many British to support the South.

First, the United States was a huge competitor with Britain. Some felt that dividing it would weaken its power, and thus give Britain the upper hand. The Russian ambassador to Britain believed this was the British opinion and wrote that they wanted two republics “which will watch each other jealously and counterbalance one the other. Then England...would have nothing to fear from either; for she would dominate them, restraining them by their rival ambitions.”¹⁸ Britain would be the top industrialized nation without having to worry about competition from a country an ocean away.

Much of British capitalism was focused on the textile industry, and it is no doubt that one huge struggle the British had during the war was caused by their dependence on Confederate cotton. Britain led the world in the textile industry, working with three million cotton bales a year. While it is true that it had cotton coming from Egypt and India, neither of these was a sufficient supplier, leaving Britain very much dependent on the southern U.S. for this essential commodity. The South knew this and tried to use it to their advantage. In 1861, the South put an embargo on cotton exports, slowed cotton planting, and burned some of their cotton, all in an effort to push Britain and France into supporting them.¹⁹ Later on, the Union placed a blockade on the South, further limiting cotton that was shipped to Britain and causing more frustrations both with the Union and with the war.²⁰

The British working class took a huge hit from this lack of cotton. Three quarters of Lancashire cotton workers were unemployed by November of 1862.²¹ An article in the *Times* during this year published a tale about a boy in Lancashire in which he said, “I cannot pass through a street but I see

¹⁷ *The American Heritage New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, 3rd ed., s.v. “Capitalism.”

¹⁸ Smith, 158.

¹⁹ Smith, 154-155.

²⁰ Smith, 164: The Union even went as far as stopping neutral ships going to the Caribbean because the South would go there to get supplies in avoidance of the blockade. This blockade of the South provoked much controversy in Britain; however, the issues surrounding the blockade is not dealt in much depth in this paper which focuses not as much on government policy, but on the British public themselves and the issues closer to home for many of them.

²¹ Foner, 5.

evidence of deep distress. I cannot sit at home half an hour without having one or more [of our factory women and girls] coming to ask for bread to eat.”²² These horrible results of the Civil War were expressed in a ballad of Lancashire:

Oh dear! if yond’ Yankees could only just see
 Heaw they’re clammin’ an’ starvin’ poor weavers loike me,
 Aw think they’d soon settle their bother, an’ strive
 To send us some cotton to keep us alive.²³

Frederick Douglass, a newspaper publisher and leading abolitionist in the United States, wrote in 1862 that the war was “dealing out stagnation and death to the world’s industry,” and that “England is suffering at this moment untold calamities from the rebellion in this country.”²⁴ The British knew that if the South won, and soon, cotton would be back on the market, and much of their suffering would end. This, therefore, led many to desire a swift Confederate victory.

While the worst of the economic crisis facing the workers had to do with their unemployment, another large aspect of their misery was their exploitation.²⁵ The workers were often treated very much like slaves themselves. The term “white slave” was coined, and in this form of slavery, the slave-owner was none other than the British capitalist.²⁶ Samuel Phillips Day, a special correspondent for London’s *Morning Herald*, compared what he saw of the experience of the Southern slaves with that of the workers in Britain. Despite his ignorance of American slavery, namely in declaring “I never met with human beings so perfectly happy and contented,” he also wrote, “What do beings of that class care for freedom, which would only have the effect of destroying their present happiness, by bringing their labor

²² John Whittaker, “A Lancashire Lad,” *London Times*, April 22, 1862 as cited in Foner, 6.

²³ Samuel Laycock. “Th’ Shurat Weaver’s Song” as cited in John Harland, coll., comp., and ed., *Ballads and Songs of Lancashire: Ancient and Modern*, 2nd ed. (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1875), 508.

²⁴ Frederick Douglass, “War with England,” *Douglass’ Monthly*, January 1862 as cited in Foner, Philip S. *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass Volume III: The Civil War 1861-1865*. (New York: International Publishers, 1952), 192.

²⁵ Foner, 5.

²⁶ Janet Toole. “Workers and slaves: class relations in South Lancashire in the time of the Cotton Famine.” *Labour History Review* 63, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 160-181. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 30, 2009), 165.

into competition with that of the white man?"²⁷ Whether or not one agrees with this statement, it is quite clear that the British workers were dealing with great hardship, and when they were suffering intensely under their own yoke of bondage, it is no wonder that some of the workers felt that freeing the South's slaves made no sense. Why would they advocate freeing slaves from one form of bondage, only to have them placed in another? These workers believed that wage slavery, such as was used by the industrial North, should be destroyed first, before fighting to release the African slaves of the South.²⁸

On the other hand, however, there was the idea that slavery should be eradicated, but that it would end sooner if the South was separated than if the Union was preserved. As the executive committee of the Manchester Southern Union Club stated, "Have we not proofs that 'The North' does not care a straw for the liberty of the coloured man . . . ? 'The Union' has held the slave in bondage; Southern independence will effect his freedom. 'The Union' has crushed and degraded him; Southern independence will humanise and elevate him."²⁹ They felt this way because of their belief that wage labour was more efficient than slavery, and if the Confederacy was left to itself and could not depend on the industry of the North, it would soon learn that it needed its own industry without slave labour to survive.³⁰

Political views were also factors in influencing sympathy for the Confederacy. Union Minister to Britain Charles Adams described the importance of political leanings in Britain in a letter to U.S. Secretary of State Howard Seward on November 15, 1862:

It is a little remarkable that, both in England and France, the tendency of public opinion is gradually to fall into the old channel of party divisions. The advocates of strong power side

²⁷ Samuel Phillips Day. "Surely These People Are Not Slaves?" *Down South*. London: Hurst & Blackett, 1862 as cited in Belle B. Sideman, and Lillian Friedman, eds. 1960. *Europe Looks at the Civil War*. (New York: The Orion Press, 1960), 64-66.

²⁸ Toole, 161.

²⁹ *Bury Guardian*, 30 May 1863 as cited in Ellison, 56.

³⁰ Ellison, 64.

with the rebels, whilst the more liberal and popular party befriend the cause of the government. This is becoming more and more visible as the struggle goes on.³¹

The Whigs and Tories were mostly Confederate supporters largely because they had always seen democracy as a threat to their own form of government. The Civil War now reassured them that their system of government was truly superior, and they felt no urge to support the Union in its defence of democracy. Liberals, on the other hand, were more divided. America had been held in high esteem by them for a long time because of their more liberal constitution and religious views, booming economy, and universal suffrage; however, over time, a picture of a greedy and corrupt society had begun to replace this idealistic image, leading to confusion as to which side they should sympathize with.³²

Outside of party opinions, there were many Brits who felt that the South had the political right to separate from the Union.³³ The North was often viewed as a tyrant, one that made no sense in the context of how the United States itself was formed. William H. Russell, a British journalist who travelled throughout the U.S., expressed in his diary the incredulity that was felt towards the situation: "The American, when he seeks to prove that the Southern states have no right to revolt from a Confederacy of States created by revolt, has by the principles on which he justifies his own revolution placed between himself and the European a great gulf in the level of argument."³⁴

Some British who did not necessarily agree with the South still felt that the Confederacy would nevertheless separate and that there was no point in fighting it. This is shown by the British consuls in America, whose opinions were vitally important because they were key sources of information for British Foreign Minister Russell.³⁵ Robert Bunch, the British consul in Charleston, wrote to Russell

³¹ Adams to Howard Seward, London, November 15, 1862. As cited in U.S. Department of State. *Diplomatic Correspondence: Part 1, 1863*. 38th Cong., 1st sess. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1864.

³² Blackett, 11, 14, 35.

³³ Ellison, 31. Here, Ellison writes, "It was particularly felt that the right of the South to assert its independence was more defensible than that of the North to crush this independence in order to save the Union."

³⁴ William H. Russell. *My Diary of North and South*. (Cambridge: H.O. Houghton, 1863), 9-10.

³⁵ Ephraim Douglas Adams. *Great Britain and the American Civil War*. (New York: Russell & Russell Inc., 1924), 78-79.

describing the South and its various leaders. He had an incredibly low opinion of the South and felt that no European country would support it because of slavery; however, Bunch felt there was no question that the South would become its own nation. Other consuls from the South held similar views; while none of them supported slavery, they all felt the South would separate.³⁶ Russell supported this belief as is evident in a letter written to the British envoy in Washington D.C., “I cannot see any mode of reconciling such parties as these. The best thing *now* would be that the right to secede should be acknowledged.”³⁷

There were British citizens who supported the South’s right to self-determination passionately.

An example of this is expressed in a lecture for St. Peter’s Working Men’s Club.

Grievances, great, deep, and lasting, had existed for years between the North and the South. The Confederates did not wish to secede for having suffered one wrong, nor in consequence of the election of this or that individual to the presidential office; it was because wrongs had been heaped up on them, and because they could stand those wrongs no longer, that they demand separation a necessity. They had borne silently the insults and tyranny of the North; but they could bear them no longer; and they had resolved to fight and die rather than sacrifice their liberty and independence.³⁸

Another example of Southern sympathy was in a pamphlet of the London Confederate States Aid Association which disturbed Adams enough that he sent a copy of it home to Seward. In what was addressed “to the British public and all sympathizers in Europe,” this association encouraged support for the South using extremely inflammatory language. In regards to the Confederacy, the pamphlet stated: “That their invaders are bent on mischief, robbery, murder, arson, and crimes of the most revolting nature, cannot be doubted . . . They are now glutting their hellish rage against the people they seek to destroy in inflicting every kind of torture, punishment, and misery that their fruitful minds can invent.”

³⁶ Adams, 63, 59. It is important to note, however, that the British consuls from the North all supported the Union.

³⁷ Adams, 52-53.

³⁸ *Preston Chronicle*, May 9, 1863 as cited in Ellison, 38.

An action taken out of sympathy for the South was a bazaar held at St. George's Hall in Liverpool in 1864 that raised 17,000 pounds for the relief of Confederate POWs.³⁹ Lord Wharnccliffe, who headed the movement of financial support for the Confederacy, wrote a letter to Adams requesting permission to send the money to the States for this purpose. While he wrote that "no political end is aimed at by this movement" and that it had "received support from many who were opposed to the political action of the South," one can easily see that there was a lot of sympathy for the South amongst the common people in Britain.⁴⁰

Another example of the action taken in favour of the Confederates was the financial support that went from Britain to the South. The London and Confederate States Bank, which had a capitalization of two million pounds, was one result of such support.⁴¹ On March 14, 1863, a preliminary prospectus was released that explained why this bank was needed. It declared that by creating the bank, "it is assumed that the recognition of the southern States must ultimately, if not even very shortly, be an accomplished fact." The British were hoping that this bank would not only help resume trade, but that it would also provide the South with help now which "will, at a future time, tend to cement those good feelings which are so strongly entertained towards them, and which so many in this country earnestly desire should be mutual."⁴²

In conclusion, the British heart strings were truly being tugged by the Confederates, and it was a distrust of the Union, the troubled British economy, and the political leanings of many people that led to Confederate sympathies. It is easy for us to forget all of these issues that were being debated in Britain because we allow history's outcome to overshadow the historical context. It was, however, an extremely perplexing time, as is expressed by Thomas Henry Huxley, a British biologist, "I am in the

³⁹ Sideman and Friedman, 234.

⁴⁰ Wharnccliffe to Charles Adams, Sheffield, November 12, 1864 as cited in *Diplomatic Correspondence, 1864-1865* as cited in Sideman and Friedman, 236.

⁴¹ Sideman and Friedman, 234.

⁴² Southern Aid Movement in England. *Diplomatic Correspondence, 1864-1865* as cited in Sideman and Friedman, 235.

condition of most thoughtful Englishmen. My heart goes with the South and my head with the North.”⁴³

This perplexity is important to understand if we are to gain a more accurate picture of the Civil War and the lasting United States of America. We have much to thank the British for, not just for preserving this nation, but also for reminding us of the complexities we tend to forget in how it was formed.

⁴³ Huxley to Mrs. Scott, May 5, 1864 as cited in Belle B. Sideman, and Lillian Friedman, eds. 1960. *Europe Looks at the Civil War*. (New York: The Orion Press, 1960), 258.

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