

Zitierhinweis

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The literature surrounding British attitudes toward the American Civil War has a long history extending almost back to the conflict itself, in part because it speaks to a question that has long intrigued academic and popular readers alike; namely, how might the outcome of the conflict been different if the British government had extended diplomatic recognition to the Confederacy or even intervened militarily on its behalf? The earliest treatments of the subject, taking their cues from the beleaguered dispatches of Charles Francis Adams while serving as the American minister to the Court of St. James, saw Confederate sympathizers in Lord Palmerton's government scheming to overthrow the Union at every turn while the working classes, even those employed in the textile mills who had been most adversely affected by the diminishing supply of Southern cotton, rallied to the Northern cause. Recent literature tends to eschew these simple binaries of conservative pro-Confederate aristocrats and liberal Union-sympathizing working-class reformers, to embrace more nuanced analyses of British public opinion. *Persuading John Bull: Union and Confederate Propaganda in Britain, 1860-1865*, covers much ground that will be familiar to readers acquainted with these historiographical developments, yet it affords a degree of fresh insight by focusing on the efforts of two periodicals that were especially vested in the outcome of the conflict - the *London American*, a pro-Union newspaper, and *The Index*, advertised as a *Weekly Journal of Politics, Literature and News Devoted to the Exposition of the Mutual Interests, Political and Commercial, of Great Britain and the Confederate States of America*. From their respective editorial offices on Fleet Street, these two newspapers traded shots in what the author characterizes as a war for British hearts and minds.

At the time of its founding, the *London American* was quite similar to its ideological rival in its tone and commercial orientation. Under the editorial leadership of John Adams Knight, the paper published a prospectus in its inaugural number on 2 May 1860 announcing its intention to focus on commerce, US politics, British emigration, and patent law, all subjects of mutual interest to the transatlantic community. The outbreak of the Civil War, however, disrupted the very exchange networks that furnished *London American* with news and constituted its primary readership. The paper, like much of the Northern press in the United States in the interim between South Carolina's secession and the opening shots of the war at Fort Sumter, vacillated between hope that the Union could be preserved without bloodshed and hawkish demands that the rebellious states be punished. Initially, the paper's ire was reserved for the seceding states, but following the Federal blockade of Southern ports and Britain's resultant proclamation of neutrality, a measure that many loyal Northerners perceived as pro-Confederate, Knight suspected John Bull to be in league with Johnny Reb and adjusted his editorial tone accordingly. Following the seizure of Confederate diplomats from the RMS *Trent*, when war between the United States and Great Britain seemed all too possible, Knight's paper took many of its cues from the Anglophobic New York press and hinted at the vulnerability of Canada to invasion should Britain take the Confederacy's side.

As his sabre-rattling during the *Trent* Affair demonstrated, Knight showed no great talent as a propagandist and his task would only become more difficult with the arrival in London of Henry Hotze. Unlike Knight, the Swiss-born Confederate agent possessed both financial support from his government and a clear understanding of his audience. In addition to reiterating the illegality of the blockade and the suffering in Lancashire occasioned by the Cotton Famine, Hotze's *Index* capitalized on the supposed atrocities committed by Federal troops in the occupied South, particularly General Benjamin Butler's tenure as commander of New Orleans. Butler's ill-advised General Order No. 28, which stripped the city's women of the protection their gender had afforded them from the consequences of indecorous demonstrations against the occupying Federal troops, proved to be a particular boon. In expressing its outrage and demanding Butler's removal, the *Index* mirrored the attitudes of the mainstream London press, a factor that Thomas Sebrell sees as facilitating its acceptance by a British audience. Such concurrence of opinion problematizes the assertion that one of the paper's successes 'was its role in Butler's removal' (p. 71), but it does suggest that the *Index* was operating effectively within the London metropolitan press. Hotze's paper was similarly attuned to the tenor of public opinion when news reached London in October 1862 of Lincoln's preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. Instead of winning immediate foreign approval, as Lincoln had hoped, the measure met with a great degree of scepticism in the London metropolitan press, which questioned the sincerity of the president's commitment to black freedom. The *London American* may have been placed in a minority position as a cautious defender of emancipation as a necessary war measure, but it was nothing compared to the long-term challenge the *Index* faced as a proponent of slavery as a positive good. Stationed in a nation proud of its anti-slavery credentials, Hotze undoubtedly walked an ideological tightrope as the official agent of a government whose Vice President had once claimed racial inequality as its cornerstone. Regrettably, the attention *Persuading John Bull* devotes to exploring this balancing act is all too brief. It's clear, however, that the *Index*'s rare missteps often involved its defence of the South's peculiar institution. The *London American* was never able to capitalize on this weakness, however, as financial mismanagement and dwindling readership forced the paper to cease publication in early 1863. The premature demise of Knight's paper presents a narrative challenge to *Persuading John Bull* as the latter chapters of the book focus almost exclusively on pro-Southern propaganda efforts and the activities of societies formed to promote Confederate interests abroad such as the Southern Independence Association and the Society for Promoting the Cessation of Hostilities in America. This creates a rather one-sided impression of efforts to shape British public opinion. Sebrell explains the demise of the *London American* and the decline of pro-Union propaganda efforts in general as an indication that growing Federal naval power, particularly in the form of ironclad monitors, had effectively deterred British intervention. While the threat of foreign intervention had greatly diminished by the time of the *London American*'s collapse in 1863, the

suggestion that 'Knight's journal might have proven more necessary in staving off British recognition' 'had the *Monitor* not entered Hampton Roads in February 1862' (p. 203) overlooks the continuing efforts loyal Northerners made to influence British public opinion. As the work of Richard Blackett and Duncan Andrew Campbell has demonstrated, far from conceding defeat, supporters of the Union cause continued to publish pamphlets and convene public meetings throughout the war, many of which enjoyed far greater circulation and impact than Knight's ill-fated paper.(1) The extensive campaigning carried out by members of the transatlantic anti-slavery network, Lincoln's address to the workingmen of Lancashire who gathered on New Year's Eve in 1862 to reaffirm their commitment to emancipation and the Union cause; the fêting of Goldwin Smith, a prominent Northern supporter, during his visit to the United States in 1864; the arrival in Liverpool of the relief ship *George Griswold* filled with supplies sent by the citizens of New York and Philadelphia to alleviate the suffering occasioned by the Cotton Famine, all attest to Northerners' ongoing concern with the optics of the Union cause in Great Britain. The competition between the *Index* and the *London American* makes for a fascinating case study, but by making it the primary focus of its survey of propaganda, *Persuading John Bull* gives short shrift to equally important diplomatic overtures and discursive contexts.

More problematic than these omissions is the lack of conceptual clarity regarding the purpose and definition of propaganda. In many respects, it is difficult to distinguish the work being done by the *Index* and the *London American* from that of the mainstream press. Both papers had clear political orientations that drove their interpretation of events, but in this respect, they were little different from other 19th-century newspapers, the vast majority of which were openly affiliated with political parties, religious sects, or particular social reform movements. In the case of the *Index*, several members of the editorial staff even wrote for other papers, further blurring the line between propaganda and mainstream reporting. The two journals undoubtedly attempted to shape perceptions of the conflict, but neither achieved anything like a 'systematic form of purposeful persuasion', to quote Richard Alan Nelson's definition of propaganda.(2) Both newspapers were subject to delays as the transmission of war news across the Atlantic took approximately two weeks, a problem that, for the *Index*, was likely exacerbated by the ever-tightening Federal blockade. These constraints greatly limited the editors' ability to shape their narratives, particularly as their weekly format meant that other daily newspapers were able to break the latest news before they even went to press. Even when they were able to move forward with their stories, the receipt of subsequent information frequently required the papers to modify their initial reports or retract them entirely, a process that did not lend itself to narrative consistency. This was perhaps most evident in the *Index's* discussion of the character of the South's slaves. Hotze ran the gamut of racial stereotypes, presenting blacks as loyal, childlike dependents one day and bloodthirsty brutes the next. In addition to these jarring contradictions,

the two papers sometimes engaged in practices that would seem to have undermined their very ability to promote their respective causes in Great Britain. The *London American* frequently took a belligerently Anglophobic tone which seemed more calculated to alienate its British readers than to win them over to the Union cause, a fact which likely accounts for the reason that over half of the subscribers that Sebrell has identified are American expatriates and explains why 'it is not likely that the pro-Union journal had any real effect on members of the political classes who were anti-United States and influential with politicians' (p. 46). The *Index*, while generally more politic than its erstwhile adversary, similarly ran afoul of British sentiment for its unapologetic defence of slavery as a positive good. Ultimately, neither journal managed to effect its desired foreign policy outcomes, a failure that largely explains why these sources have largely been overlooked in the historical literature. Setting aside the seeming naïveté of their respective editors, however, a fuller discussion of the possibilities and limitations of propaganda as a medium in 19th-century London would better facilitate historians' reassessment of their significance.

These limitations aside, *Persuading John Bull* represents the most comprehensive study of Union and Confederate propaganda to emerge in recent years and readers will find in it much of interest. Lengthy quotations from the *Index* and the *London American* keep the source material at the forefront of this study and reveal the surprising scope of the journals' editorial content. Alongside events such as the *Trent* Affair, which received extensive contemporary coverage and have been awarded much attention by subsequent historians, can be found incidents that were designed to elicit sympathy or provoke outrage on a completely different register. Stories of individuals who found themselves at the mercy of enemy cruelty or bureaucratic callousness illustrate that, for readers of these two newspapers, the American Question was not merely a question of abstract constitutional principles and offer a partial explanation of why the Civil War resonated so deeply for certain classes of Britons. And it is these individuals, even more than the duelling propagandists, which emerge as the central characters of *Persuading John Bull*. Using published lists of the journals' subscribers, Sebrell has identified a significant number of the individuals who consumed the reports of the two journals, chipping away at the frequently monolithic interpretations of British public opinion in the process. Of course, it is difficult to determine whether the efforts of propagandists brought these individuals into the fold or whether they sought out sources of information that aligned with their preconceived notions of the conflict. In some respects, however, that question decreases in relevance given that the *Index* actually enjoyed some of its greatest successes not as an evangelist to the undecided but in preaching to the pro-Confederate choir. Sebrell notes how the paper became a forum of expression for Southern sympathizers in Britain but, more importantly, the extent to which it facilitated a sense of community among them. The paper kept readers apprised of what was being done to promote the Confederate cause and encouraged further buy-in through the purchase of Cotton

Loan bonds and participation in events like the Grand Southern Bazaar held in Liverpool to raise funds for Confederate prisoners of war. Even after the prospects for Southern independence had dimmed, the paper, by publicizing campaigns to fund memorial statues of Confederate leaders, set the stage for the emergence of the Lost Cause mythology.

Persuading John Bull suggests the potential utility of the *Index* and, to a lesser extent, the *London American*, as entry points into these communities and affords historians an opportunity to better understand the dynamics of the voluntary associations that underpinned the formation of British public opinion during the Civil War.

Perhaps the book's greatest contribution, however, is the suggestion of a new avenue of research that holds the potential to revitalize the study of the international dimensions of the American Civil War, particularly with respect to Great Britain. Rather than deploying Federal and Confederate propaganda merely as barometers of public opinion, Sebrell demonstrates them to be worthy of study in their own right. The idiosyncrasies of Knight and Hotze's respective enterprises aside, an analysis of the rhetorical tactics deployed by propagandists on both sides of the conflict yields a great degree of insight into the extent to which the Civil War was embedded within larger discourses of sovereignty, international law, and national legitimacy. The intersection of these ideas offers historians of Anglo-American relations an opportunity to move beyond trite repetitions of key parliamentary debates and better situate the Civil War as part of the succession of liberal-democratic revolutions in the long 19th century. The potential of this approach is glimpsed most clearly in the chapter on naval controversies. Some of the incidents analyzed, such as the construction of vessels for use as Confederate privateers in Liverpool, have been well chronicled in the historical literature but others are virtually unknown beyond a small subset of specialists. This is particularly true of the *Saxon* Affair, which has received little treatment beyond its mention in Stuart Bernath's work on US Navy prize cases and Anglo-American diplomacy.⁽³⁾ In October 1863, the USS *Vanderbilt* seized the British bark *Saxon*, off the coast of West Africa upon finding property associated with the Confederate cruiser, *Tuscaloosa*. What would have been a straightforward prize case was complicated when a member of the boarding party discharged his pistol and killed one of the British sailors. Although the death of Second Mate James Gray was later ruled to have been accidental, the incident precipitated a major controversy in Britain, with several MPs threatening war if the United States failed to make proper restitution. The crisis never quite reached the same proportions as the *Trent* controversy, though it did furnish the *Index* with ammunition for a series of stirring editorials. In reviewing these and other samples of propaganda surrounding the incident, Sebrell offers a glimpse at the possibilities that close reading of the intersections between international maritime law and public sentiment may yet afford.

Historians of Anglo-American relations and of the global connections of the Civil War more generally will undoubtedly find this book a welcome addition to the burgeoning literature on British public opinion. Hopefully,

it will also serve to increase awareness of the *Index* and the *London American* as valuable historical resources and inspire further interrogation of the many themes that arise in their coverage of the conflict.

Notes

1. R. J. M. Blackett, *Divided Hearts: Britain and the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2001); Duncan Andrew Campbell, *English Public Opinion and the American Civil War* (London, 2003).
2. Richard Alan Nelson, *A Chronology and Glossary of Propaganda in the United States* (Westport, CT, 1996), pp. 232-3.
3. Stuart L. Bernath, *Squall Across the Atlantic: American Civil War Prize Cases and Diplomacy*, (Oakland, CA, 1970).