

## Introduction

Eugenio Biagini introduces this special issue of the *Journal of Liberal History*.

# The Liberal Party and t

**B**ENNET BURLEY (LATER KNOWN as Burleigh, the famous *Daily Telegraph* war correspondent) was 20 years old in the summer of 1860, when Britain was mesmerised by newspaper reports of the extraordinary achievements of Giuseppe Garibaldi and his volunteers. For British liberals, radicals and former Chartists, the liberation of Sicily from the Bourbon king's oppressive regime and the Red Shirts' subsequent march on Naples were more than a revolution – it was an allegory of the triumph of liberty over despotism, and of democratic values over aristocratic oppression.<sup>1</sup> The enthusiasm was such that a British Legion was rapidly raised, and soon about 800 volunteers embarked for Italy, where they took part in the last stages of the campaign that resulted in that country's unification. Bennet Burley was one of them. As Elena Bacchin has written, the British Legion in which he served '[was] the result of a kind of nationalism that went beyond national boundaries, involving other countries as well as transnational centres that favoured the circulation, exchange, rearticulation of ideas, values, and narrative practices ... involving aspects of democratization'.<sup>2</sup>

Somehow motivated by such vision, in 1861 Burley decided to become involved in yet another war fought around a people's aspiration to control their own destiny: he became an officer in the army of the Confederate States of America. The Confederates were fighting for independence and – as Tim Larsen notes in his article – there were some in Britain who saw Jefferson Davis as a Garibaldi figure. Indeed, Burley could be seen as a foot soldier in

the line of liberalism which was championed by his fellow Scot W. S. Lindsay, studied by Graham Lippiatt in his article. Nevertheless, Burley's espousal of the rebel cause is surprising, because, as a former Red Shirt, he should have known that his Italian chief and great hero, Garibaldi, was from the start a strong supporter of Abraham Lincoln and the Federal Government.<sup>3</sup> From the surviving evidence, including the correspondence that his father, R. Burley of Govan, exchanged with John Bright, it is not clear why precisely Bennet decided to risk his own life and liberty under 'The Bonnie Blue Flag' – whether it was out of principle or the spirit of adventure which he was to display during the rest of his long life and career. In hindsight – indeed, from as early as 1863 – a growing number of Britons, and most Liberals, agreed that, as Tony Little writes in his article, Gladstone had committed a major error of judgement in his appraisal of the legitimacy of the South. However, the fact remains that the Confederate States were fighting with bravery and determination, and, both at the time and since, many agreed with Gladstone when he said that Jefferson Davis had made 'a nation' (indeed there is a substantial modern literature that explores this very concept in its various applications).<sup>4</sup>

Of course, London had its own experience with repressing or trying to repress independence movements, including those of the American colonists in 1775–83, the United Irishmen in 1798, and the Indian rebels in 1857–8. Yet, British public opinion had often sided with rebels against other allegedly more oppressive empires. Thus, they had supported the revolts of the

Spanish Americans against Madrid in the 1810s, the Greeks against the Ottomans in the 1820s, the Hungarians against both Austrians and Russians in 1848–9, and the Italians against the Austrians in 1859.

In each of these cases, British liberal instincts had happily converged with the *Realpolitik* of the Foreign Office. In 1861, however, the two were in tension: for the British Empire, the only superpower of the time, had global interests which might be better served by an Anglophile Confederacy and a divided North America, than by the Anglophobe and increasingly powerful USA. What tipped the balance in favour of Lincoln was that the secessionists stood out not only for independence, but also for the freedom to preserve their 'peculiar institution' – slavery – which was repellent to most Britons. This created a dilemma: should 'the claims of a nation' be prioritised over 'the claims of humanity'? And was British public opinion ready for the implications of compounding the human degradation associated with slavery, with the institutionalised prejudice of racial segregation? As Alastair Reid shows in his article, advocates of women's emancipation were quick to draw the logical and political consequences that such a situation would have for their cause, which concerned a half of humankind discriminated against on the basis of biological and cultural prejudice. Others did so too, such as the workers' groups that responded to what Shannon Westwood describes as John Bright's 'voice of reason' – a voice, it must be said, also articulating his passionate endorsement of democracy, to which he was 'allied ... in language and blood'.<sup>5</sup>

# The American Civil War

As Timothy Larsen writes, J. S. Mill believed that ‘by destroying ... the prestige of the great democratic republic would give to all the privileged classes of Europe a false confidence.’<sup>6</sup> He ‘was convinced that if the North failed in its struggle then the cause of democracy throughout the world would be set back’<sup>7</sup> – a view which most modern historians endorse. Lincoln’s victory was part of the long-term, global reversing of the defeat of democracy in 1849, while liberal government – which had long been a British and North American experiment – became the new standard of political legitimacy.

However, especially before 1863, as Graham Lippiatt shows, the moral and political challenge which the conflict raised was further complicated by three questions which were lost in translation, so to speak. One was free trade, which for Britain was a great moral, as well as commercial, cause, but one which the Union opposed on pragmatic grounds and the Confederacy supported out of necessity. The second was Jefferson Davis’ mantra about the ‘right of the people to alter or abolish governments whenever they become destructive of the ends for which they were established’:<sup>8</sup> conveniently, the Confederate president neglected to specify that by ‘the people’ he meant only white Southerners, and their boasted right included their claim to own Afro-American men and women as chattel slaves. The third was Acton’s concern for minority rights – again taken out of context. Gladstone fell victim of his own attempt to unpack the complexity of these issues while balancing his own (anti-slavery) views with his duty to

endorse (cabinet) policy, even when the latter edged for the Confederate side. Yet, when he said that ‘if the heart of ... [a] country is set upon separation ... then it is almost impossible’ to repress it militarily,<sup>9</sup> he was anticipating his own (and the Liberal Party’s) view on Ireland, and, generations later, on the rest of the Empire.

That beacon of liberalism in the darkest hour of fascism, Benedetto Croce, insisted that all historians must be ‘liberal’, in the sense of examining contrasting views in the process of making up their mind. That is the approach taken by the *Journal* in this issue, which includes dissenting voices. Focusing on the primacy of material interests, Duncan Campbell presents an interpretation of British responses to America and the American conflict which readers will find contrasts significantly with the interpretation presented by Timothy Larsen, Alastair Reid and Shannon Westwood (and, indeed, by the present author in a previous publication).<sup>10</sup> In particular, his conclusion that British political thought was not influenced by American ideas differs to that of most scholars working in the field, and contradicts more traditional views of the influences on those Victorian campaigners for democracy in this country, their adversaries who denounced the alleged, ongoing ‘Americanisation’ of British politics in the 1860s, or indeed the millions of British emigrants to the USA, including former Chartists, for whom America was the land of democratic hope and glory.<sup>11</sup>

The US Civil War was important for British liberals because it presented them with a series of critical choices between alternative priorities

and principles. Far from being marginal and obscured by other causes, it became obsessive and long-lasting, it influenced the response to the Irish demand for home rule from 1886 and was incorporated in the ideology of Anglo-Saxonism and ‘Greater Britain’ – first popularised by Sir Charles Dilke in 1868.<sup>12</sup> While Dilke’s friend and great admirer of the US, Joseph Chamberlain, followed John Bright in opposing home rule in the same spirit, he claimed, in which Lincoln had opposed secession,<sup>13</sup> for most British Liberals the memory of the American Civil War was more complex. It highlighted the fundamental incompatibility between democracy (although this was a vague concept at the time) and discrimination, and the latter’s insidious and pervasive nature. It forced them to embark on a gradual revision of established attitudes and policies, and eventually brought about a recasting of the debate on liberty around the issue of human dignity.

This special issue of the *Journal* performs an important service to the scholarly community in reopening the question of the relationship between the US Civil War and the debate on liberal democracy in Britain, a subject which demands a fresh and systematic reappraisal. My sincere thanks to my co-editor, Graham Lippiatt, for helping to put together this issue; I hope readers enjoy it.

*Eugenio Biagini is Professor of Modern and Contemporary History at Cambridge and a fellow of Sidney Sussex College. He is the general editor of the Bloomsbury Cultural History of Democracy (6 volumes, 2021).*

*Concluded on page 67*

- 1 See Eugenio F. Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform: Popular liberalism in the age of Gladstone, 1860–1880* (Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Don H. Doyle, *The Cause of All Nations: An international history of the American Civil War* (Basic Books, 2015).
- 2 Doyle, *Cause of All Nations*.
- 3 Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform*; Doyle, *Cause of All Nations*.
- 4 See, Henry Pelling, *America and the British Left: From Bright to Bevan* (Adam and Charles Black, 1956); Royden Harrison, *Before the Socialists: Studies in Labour and Politics, 1861–1881* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965); Keith McClelland, “‘England’s greatness, the working man’”, in Catherine Hall, Keith McClelland and Jane Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, race, gender and the British Reform Act of 1867* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 71–118.
- 5 Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform*.
- 6 Derek Beales, ‘Garibaldi in England: The politics of Italian enthusiasm’, in John A. Davis and Paul Ginsborg (eds.), *Society and Politics in the Age of the Risorgimento: Essays in Honour of Denis Mack Smith* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 184–216; Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform*.
- 7 Beales, ‘Garibaldi in England’; Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform*; Lucy Riall, *Garibaldi: Invention of a hero* (Yale University Press, 2007).
- 8 Royden Harrison, *Before the Socialists*; Catherine Hall, ‘The nation within and without’, in Hall et al., *Defining the Victorian Nation*, pp. 179–233.
- 9 Pelling, *America and the British Left*; H. C. Allen, ‘Civil war, Reconstruction, and Great Britain’, in Harold Hyman (ed.), *Heard round the World: The impact abroad of the Civil War* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), pp. 3–96.
- 10 John W. Compton, ‘The Emancipation of the American Mind: J. S. Mill on the Civil War’, *The Review of Politics*, 70/2 (2008), pp. 221–44.
- 11 Quoted in Compton, ‘The Emancipation of the American Mind’, p. 242.
- 12 John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (1869), in J. S. Mill, *On Liberty and other writings*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 119–217, quotation from pp. 195–6.
- 13 Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, *An American Diary 1857–8*, ed. Joseph W. Reed (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 63, 66.
- 14 Emily Davies, *Collected Letters, 1861–1875*, ed. Ann B. Murphy, Jerome J. McGann, Deirdre Raftery and Herbert F. Tucker (University of Virginia Press, 2004), Davies to Barbara Bodichon, 3 Dec. 1862, p. 9.
- 15 Barbara Bodichon, ‘Of those who are the property of others, and of the great power that holds others as property’, *English Woman’s Journal*, 10 (1863), pp. 370–81.
- 16 Harriet Beecher Stowe, ‘A reply to the affectionate and Christian address of many thousands of women of Great Britain and Ireland to their sisters the women of the United States of America’, *Atlantic Monthly*, 11 (1863), pp. 123–5, 127–30.
- 17 Frances Power Cobbe, ‘Rejoinder to Mrs Stowe’s reply to the address of the women of England’, *Atlantic Monthly*, 11 (1863), pp. 525–8.
- 18 Ladies’ London Emancipation Society, *First Annual Report* (Emily Faithfull, 1864), pp. 8–9.
- 19 Clare Midgley, *Women against slavery: The British campaigns 1780–1870* (Routledge, 2016), p. 181.
- 20 Davies to Anna Richardson, 19 Apr. 1864, in *Collected Letters*, p. 112.
- 21 Ann Dingsdale “‘Generous and lofty sympathies’”: The Kensington Society, the 1866 women’s suffrage petition and the development of mid-Victorian feminism’ (Ph.D. thesis, University of Greenwich, 1995).
- 22 Davies to Henry Tomkinson, 14 Nov. 1865, in *Collected Letters*, p. 162.
- 23 Emily Davies, ‘Family chronicle’, Girton College Archive, p. 427.
- 24 Jane Rendall, ‘The citizenship of women and the Reform Act of 1867’, in Hall et al., *Defining the Victorian Nation*, pp. 119–78.
- 25 Davies, ‘Family chronicle’, pp. 486–7.
- 26 Andrew Rosen, ‘Emily Davies and the women’s movement, 1862–1867’, *Journal of British Studies*, 19/1 (1979), pp. 101–21; John Hendry, ‘Emily Davies: Fighter for female emancipation’ (unpublished typescript, 2021).
- 27 Pam Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, 1827–1891: Feminist, artist and rebel* (Chatto and Windus, 1998); Rendall, ‘Citizenship of women’; Hendry, *Emily Davies*.

## The Liberal Party and the American Civil War

Concluded from page 5

- 1 D. Raponi, *Religion and Politics in the Risorgimento: Britain and the New Italy, 1861–1875* (Basingstoke, 2014).
- 2 E. Bacchin, ‘Brothers of Liberty: Garibaldi’s British Legion’, *The Historical Journal*, 58/3 (2015), pp. 827–53. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24532049>.
- 3 E. Biagini, “‘The Principle of Humanity’”: Lincoln in Germany and Italy, 1859–1866’, in R. Carwardine and J. Sexton (eds.), *The Global Lincoln* (Oxford, 2011).
- 4 J. McCardell, *The Idea of a Southern Nation: Southern Nationalists and Southern Nationalism, 1830–1860* (New York, 1979); I. Binnington, ‘Confederate Visions: Nationalism, Symbolism, and the Imagined South in the Civil War’, *Journal of American History*, 101/4 (Mar. 2015), pp. 1275–6, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jav151>; P. D. Dillard, *Jefferson Davis’s Final Campaign: Confederate Nationalism and the Fight to Arm Slaves* (Macon, GEO, 2017); see also M. B. Cauthenn Jr, ‘Confederate and Afrikaner nationalism: myth, identity, and gender in comparative perspective’ (PhD thesis, University of London, 2000).
- 5 ‘The Rochdale Observer’, *The Rochdale Observer*, 7. Dec. 1861, p. 4, cit. in Westwood, ‘The Voice of Reason’, below.
- 6 John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, cit. in T. Larsen, ‘John Stuart Mill, Moral Outrage, and the American Civil War’, below.
- 7 Larsen, ‘John Stuart Mill’, below.
- 8 Jefferson Davis’ First Inaugural Address, *The Papers of Jefferson Davis*, Rice University, cit. in G. Lippiatt, ‘Commerce, Conscience and Constitutions’, below.