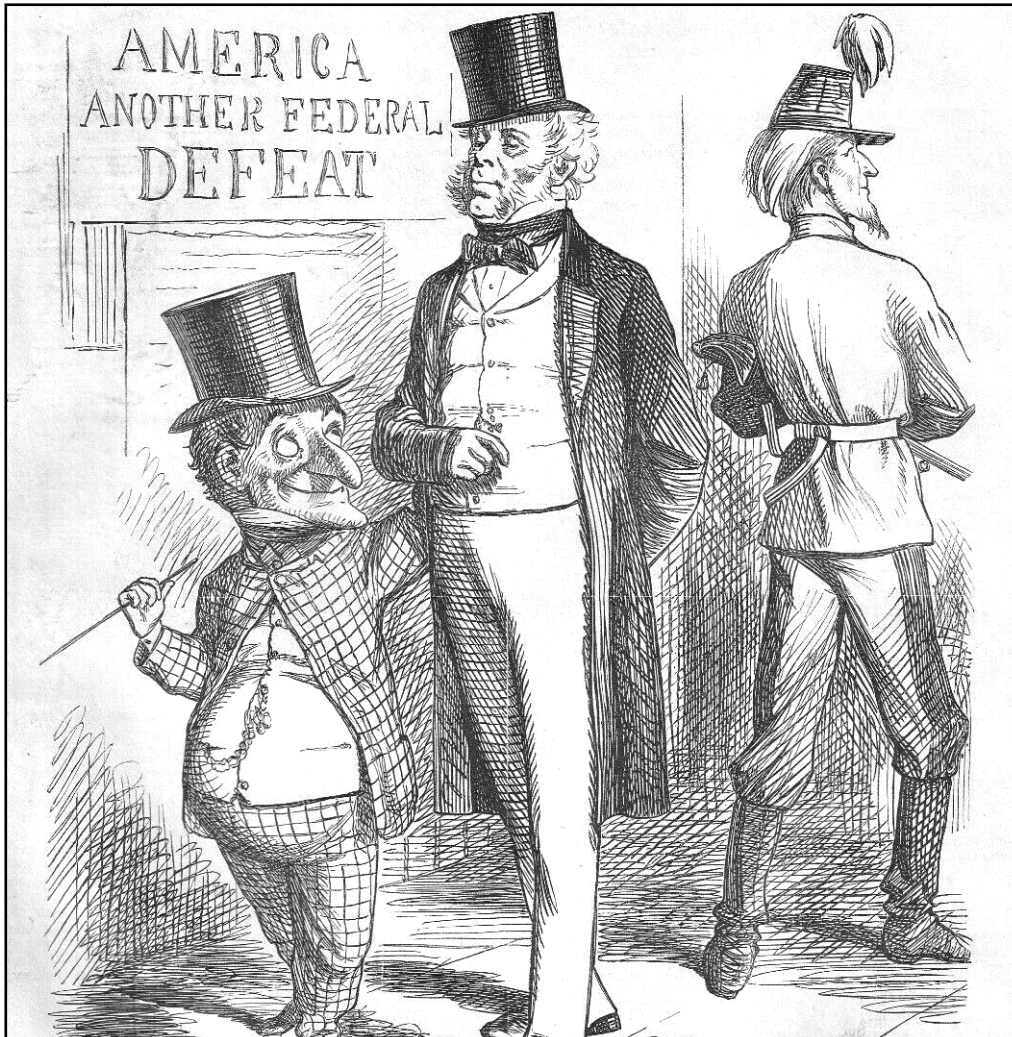


# Journal of Liberal

# HISTORY



## Liberals and the American civil war

Duncan Andrew Campbell

**The Palmerston Ministry and the American Civil War**

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Shannon Westwood

**The 'voice of reason' John Bright and his relationship with the Union**

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Timothy Larsen

**John Stuart Mill, moral outrage and the American Civil War**

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Tony Little

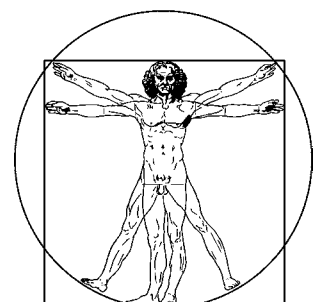
**Gladstone and the American Civil War**

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Alastair Reid

**The American Civil War and the British women's movement**

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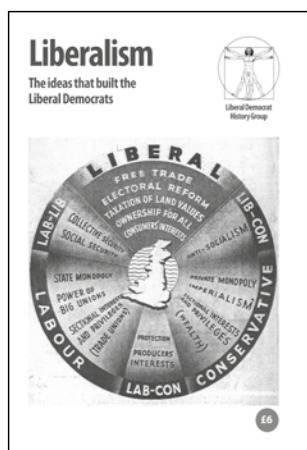
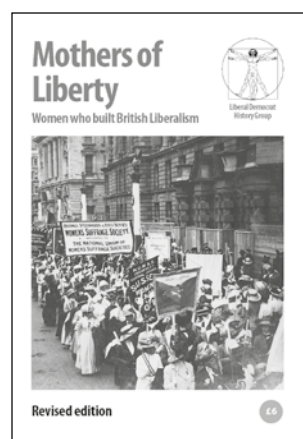
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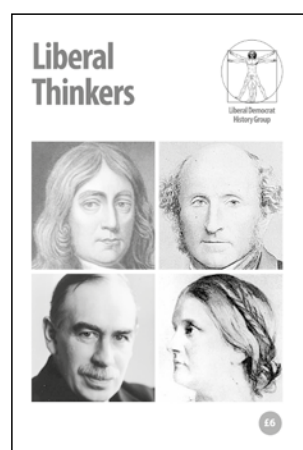
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## Journal of Liberal History

The *Journal of Liberal History* is published quarterly by the Liberal Democrat History Group.

ISSN 1479-9642

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An annual subscription to the *Journal of Liberal History* costs £25 (£15 unwaged) (print) and £45 (online). This includes membership of the History Group unless you inform us otherwise. Non-UK subscribers should add £10.00.

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Cover design concept: **Lynne Featherstone**

Published by the Liberal Democrat History Group, c/o 54 Midmoor Road, London SW12 0EN

Printed by **Kall-Kwik**, Unit 1, 37 Colville Road, London W3 8BL

May 2022

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### Very Probable

Lord Punch: 'That was Jeff Davis, Pam! Don't you recognise him?'

Lord Pam: 'Hm! Well, not exactly – may have to do so some of these days.'

(*Punch*, 27 August 1864)

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## 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*

## Liberal government

Duncan Andrew Campbell analyses the attitude of Palmerston's administration to the war in America.

# Letting someone else The Palmerston Ministry's foreign



**F**EW EVENTS IN the history of nineteenth-century Britain have been more distorted by myth and disinformation than the British response – at both the political and popular levels – to the American Civil War (the Civil War hereafter). Some of the reasons

why this is so, are sufficiently obvious. The Civil War was a pivotal event in American history, but an at best marginal one to the British. As such, the narrative has largely been created, almost from the first, by Americans, many of whom were less historians than nationalists.

# else have your way policy and the American Civil War

Thus, British history was, and to an extent still is, subordinated to a patriotic American narrative which ignores facts inconvenient to it. Other reasons, however, are perhaps less apparent. A tendency to ignore British–US relations before the secessionist crisis of 1860–1 is another problem. So, too, is the habit of looking at British–American relations in isolation without reference to other nations, ignoring their influences upon them. Yet another is the tendency to look back on the past through the lens of the later detente, and then increasingly close cooperation, between Britain and the United States following the Venezuela Crisis of 1895: the so-called great rapprochement following the First World War, their alliances against Nazi Germany and imperial Japan in the Second World War and then against the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in the Cold War. Seen from this perspective, British–American cooperation played a crucial role in advancing, or at least preserving, political liberties, and so this twentieth-century legacy is cast backwards onto the nineteenth. Taken as a whole, the above contributes to a sense of inevitable destiny, both with respect to British–American relations and the furtherance of political freedom.<sup>1</sup>

In terms of patriotic narratives, much Civil War scholarship remains in thrall to the myth of American exceptionalism which, among other things, claims that the modern liberal state begins with the War of Independence, effectively making the United States the pathfinder nation. As one historian notes, ‘we have made ourselves at home in the world, characteristically, by regarding it as America in the making.’<sup>2</sup> These exceptionalist beliefs often encourage the notion – one best termed as delusions of morality – that the United States

behaved (and behaves) more idealistically than other nations, operating on a higher moral plane. Thus, the Civil War rather than being recognised as one of the numerous struggles for national consolidation, independence and secession that occurred across the globe from 1848 to 1870, is instead portrayed as a necessary vindication of democracy, the survival of liberal institutions everywhere hanging in the balance of the conflict’s outcome.<sup>3</sup> Hence, a domestic event, while undeniably of consequence to the second-tier power in which it took place, has been elevated to an affair of overarching global significance: in some extreme perspectives, the most consequential event of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, we are told, by Civil War historians, rather than by specialists in British history, that despite being some 3,000 miles away with the world’s largest and most advanced economy, the preservation, not to say furtherance, of Britain’s own liberal institutions depended upon a Union victory. Consequently, British society’s sympathies were divided along lines of class and politics: that the working class, radicals, and liberals, as represented by John Bright and Richard Cobden, the ‘members for America’ supported the Union because they admired American democracy, while the aristocracy and conservatives championed the Confederacy because they feared the same. The Union’s victory, and Abraham Lincoln’s elevation to international icon of democracy consequent upon his assassination, vindicated the North’s supporters and directly or indirectly brought about the 1867 Reform Act. British democratisation, in turn, helped contribute to improved relations with the United States, paving the way for the later rapprochement.<sup>5</sup>

Palmerston  
(standing) in the  
House of Commons,  
1860 (by Thomas  
Oldham Barlow and  
John Phillip;  
© National Portrait  
Gallery, London)

## The Palmerston Ministry's foreign policy and the American Civil War

By refusing to recognise that the Southern cause was based entirely upon the preservation of slavery and thus denying the moral cause of the Union – through ‘wilful blindness,’ in the words of the contemporaneous American historian, James Ford Rhodes – the Palmerston ministry’s behaviour towards the United States was amoral at best and pro-Southern at worst – as the Confederate shipbuilding in Britain demonstrated.<sup>6</sup> A more extreme statement of events is that the prime minister was ‘as conscious as Bright and the Radicals that the Union armies were the most powerful force of militant democracy since the French Revolutionary armies of 1793. Besides this, it was one of Palmerston’s chief maxims of foreign policy to take advantage of the weakness of his opponents; and the United States was greatly weakened by being involved in a civil war.’<sup>7</sup> Even more recent and more balanced, though still America-centric, scholarship argues that the Union was nonetheless in peril, because the Palmerston ministry considered offering mediation in the war and that the possibility existed that it would intervene militarily.<sup>8</sup> That it did not is invariably credited to robust Union diplomacy, particularly on the part of the US secretary of state, William Henry Seward, and public demonstrations in favour of the Union decrying intervention that would aid and abet Southern secession.

Although recent and more rigorous scholarship in British history has thoroughly debunked this account, its influence lingers to an unjustified extent, especially amongst Americanists in general and Civil War historians in particular.<sup>9</sup> Addressing the problems these myths present upfront – particularly those growing out of American exceptionalism and a failure to understand British–American relations before the conflict – is necessary, therefore, to properly understand the Palmerston ministry’s actions with respect to the United States in its civil war.

The United States was not the only, or even the first, nation to proclaim that freedom was inherent to its identity. Even before the American War of Independence, the idea of Britain being the home of liberty due to its liberal institutions was a foundation stone of the developing national identity.<sup>10</sup> This belief continued despite the loss of the American colonies and throughout the nineteenth century, in part because of Britain’s leadership in abolishing slavery and the slave trade, but also because of the events surrounding the Napoleonic Wars, both of which would do much to determine British views of the United States, its institutions and its people.

**Addressing the problems these myths present upfront – particularly those growing out of American exceptionalism and a failure to understand British–American relations before the conflict – is necessary, therefore, to properly understand the Palmerston ministry’s actions with respect to the United States in its civil war.**

Although the War of 1812 is treated separately from the Napoleonic Wars in US historiography, it was very much the conflict’s North American theatre, as Americans at the time recognised, seeing theirs and France’s interests intertwined. For example, Andrew Jackson declared, ‘Should Bonaparte make a landing on the English shore, Tyranny will be Humbled, a throne crushed and a republic will spring from the wreck.’<sup>11</sup> The American version of the conflict is well known, a second war of independence against British encroachment – most notably their impressment policies, but also the blockade of the European continent via the Orders-in-Council.<sup>12</sup> The British one is less well known, but was nonetheless significant at the time. Not only were impressment in decline and the Orders-in-Council being repealed by the time the US declared war, but Britain was apparently losing the contest to Napoleon, fighting a desperate rearguard action in Spain. What prevented the American annexation of British North America (Canada hereafter) was Napoleon’s disastrous invasion of Russia – a course he embarked upon on the very day James Madison’s administration, under pressure from the so-called ‘War Hawks’, declared war upon Britain. Consequently, the self-styled Emperor of Europe’s downfall freed up both the Royal Navy and British Army to take the offensive against the United States, resulting in the sacking of Washington and the near bankruptcy of the republic. With the New England States, which had always opposed the war, threatening secession, the United States agreed to the peace treaty signed at Ghent.<sup>13</sup> Fortunately for Madison’s administration, news of the treaty’s ratification came too late to prevent Jackson’s victory at New Orleans which, being one of the last major engagements, was quickly seized upon by American commentators as evidence that the conflict was a US triumph that prevented the undoing of the War of Independence.

Predictably, this American version of events found little purchase in Britain. Instead, the widespread view was that the United States’ declaration of war was an opportunistic assault while Britain was fighting not only for her own liberty, but everyone else’s too. Novelist James Fenimore Cooper, on a visit to Britain twenty-five years later, noted, ‘There is a very general notion prevalent in England, that we seized a moment to declare war against them, when they were pressed upon hardest, by the rest of Europe ... I do not remember to have conversed on the subject with any Englishman who did not betray this feeling.’<sup>14</sup> As much as Cooper might protest there was ‘not a particle of truth’



in the British account, it was no less accurate – or self-serving – than his own nation's version of events. Further, there was undeniably an argument that the war against Napoleon was a struggle for liberty and that the American failure to grasp this was, in British eyes and to use Rhodes' expression above, 'wilful blindness'.<sup>15</sup>

While one must be cautious comparing the past to the present – especially when events are effectively two centuries apart – the Napoleonic Wars were, to an extent, to nineteenth-century Britons what the Second World War was to following generations: an important ingredient of the national identity, but also a convenient yardstick, political and moral, by which they measured themselves against other nations. One can hear this in the self-satisfied words of Sir James Fergusson who, comparing competing British and American claims to be the home of liberty, remarked that Great Britain had 'kept alive the liberties of Europe, that otherwise had been crushed out by the iron heel of military despotism.'<sup>16</sup> In the most important struggle for liberty in the nineteenth century, the United States had been on the wrong side. Further, while the Napoleonic Wars were the experience of an older generation by the time of the Civil War, Palmerston had served as the secretary at war from 1809 to 1828. While this was a relatively junior post, the future prime minister nonetheless served in the Liverpool ministry which oversaw the war against both Napoleon's France and Madison's United States.

The consequences of the Napoleonic Wars' North American theatre – and each side's interpretation of it – cast a long shadow over British–US relations. The spectre of this conflict was repeatedly resurrected as the United States and Great Britain locked horns over the demarcation of the US–Canadian frontier, a situation worsened by the refusal, of a significant portion of American politicians and the public, to accept the political legitimacy of Canada, instead believing its destiny lay with the United States.<sup>17</sup> Lincoln's secretary of state, Seward, being among this number. Indeed, this imperial rivalry and the international slave trade would be the chief bones of contention between Britain and the United States, having a profound impact upon the two countries' perceptions of the other. This discord also made British views of the United States quite different in key respects from those of their European neighbours, who were not, unlike Britain, perpetually involved in acrimonious diplomatic disputes with the Americans.

It is beyond the parameters of this paper to provide a detailed account of this imperial

### **The consequences of the Napoleonic Wars' North American theatre – and each side's interpretation of it – cast a long shadow over British–US relations.**

rivalry, which took place not merely in North America, but in Latin America, too. Despite the two nations' tendency towards negotiation when crises erupted, such as the ratification of the 1842 Webster–Ashburton Treaty in response to the so-called Aroostook War, tensions were constantly being brought to a boil. Of the crises, one of the more serious ones concerned the Oregon Territory during 1844–46, where Robert Peel's ministry had to inform James Polk's administration that if his Democratic Party's cry of 'Fifty-four Forty or Fight' (a demand that Britain cede all the Oregon territory up to 54° 40'N) was indeed official US policy, the British would choose the latter. Their bluff called, the Americans decided to negotiate, resulting in the 1846 Oregon Treaty.<sup>18</sup>

In Latin America, meanwhile, irrespective of the Monroe Doctrine, Britain had interests in the region that it intended to uphold. As with North America, space precludes a full discussion of British–US clashes in Latin America, but one issue that caused tension prior to the Civil War was filibustering: private military expeditions organised by American citizens directed at Cuba, Mexico, Nicaragua, and other places, which angered the British. Despite the ratification of the 1850 Clayton–Bulwer Treaty designed to settle the two nations' differences in the region, the filibuster William Walker established himself as the dictator of Nicaragua in July 1856, re-introduced slavery and annexed Greytown, a British protectorate. That the US government formally recognised Walker's Nicaraguan regime worsened the situation. Fortunately, the Latin American states resolved matters when troops from Costa Rica, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala expelled the American interloper. Walker would mount another expedition in 1860, this time to Honduras. Unfortunately for him, he was apprehended by the Royal Navy and turned over to the Hondurans, who executed him. The American public was outraged by this British act, but matters were swiftly overshadowed by the secessionist crisis.<sup>19</sup>

The habitual diplomatic incidents that took place in the Americas appear minor in retrospect but do so only because they were settled without recourse to war, thanks either to British and American politicians' willingness to compromise or because of sheer luck. Yet the longest and most emotive quarrel between Britain and the United States prior to the Civil War stemmed from the international slave trade and their dispute about the right of search to determine if a ship was transporting slaves. In this

## The Palmerston Ministry's foreign policy and the American Civil War

respect, slavery divided Britain and the United States as much as the institution would divide the latter itself. Or, in other words, monarchy and republicanism did not divide Britain and the United States; imperialism and slavery did. Again, the War of 1812 played a role. To the British – officialdom and the populace alike – that impressment caused that conflict was a fabrication created to cover an act of aggression and the American claim of unrestricted freedom of the seas was designed to protect the international slave trade. To the Americans – again, to officialdom and the populace alike – that impressment caused the war was a fact with respect to national self-defence, and the British demand of right of search was an assault on the sovereignty of the United States.<sup>20</sup>

Although Britain was able to sign treaties with virtually every major power guaranteeing mutual right of search – including with longstanding imperial rivals such as France and Russia – no such progress was made with the United States.<sup>21</sup> Further, despite participation in the slave trade carrying the death penalty under American law after 1820, the United States never seriously enforced its own legislation. The US Africa squadron was always too small to be effective and its commanders were notorious for their lack of cooperation with the Royal Navy. Finally, given the habitual failure of US courts to convict, far less pass an actual death sentence against the few American citizens the US Navy apprehended transporting slaves, the legal threat was a paper tiger, too.

Consequently, slave traders of all nations recognised that the US flag served as a means of escape should they encounter a Royal Navy vessel. Yet many slave traders were in fact US citizens, the American merchant marine being the largest importer of slaves by the 1840s. Between 1820 and 1866, 2.2 million slaves crossed the Atlantic Ocean, and while it is unclear precisely how many Americans participated in the 5,552 slaving voyages made after 1808, extant data and eyewitness accounts establish that US citizens played an oversized role in the business.<sup>22</sup> The overwhelming majority of these slaves, it must be noted, were destined for Brazil and Cuba rather than the United States; nonetheless the situation was such that, by the 1850s, the American flag remained the Atlantic slave trade's final defence.

It was a long-running dispute. In 1818, an Anglo-American Convention broke up in acrimony over the issue – the British accused the United States of acting in bad faith by raising impressment; the Americans denied that any of their ships were involved in the international

slave trade. Another failed attempt in 1824 featured in the contentious presidential election of that year where the US secretary of state, John Quincy Adams, contended against Andrew Jackson of New Orleans fame, with the latter accusing the former attempting to surrender to the British.<sup>23</sup> Eighteen years later, while the 1842 Webster–Ashburton Treaty resolved certain issues pertaining to the US–Canadian frontier, it proved less successful with respect to the right of search. Although a joint official statement declared that the two nations would cooperate in eradicating the slave trade and destroying the slave markets in Africa, American collaboration was not forthcoming. The minimum goal of fifteen ships for their Africa squadron was never met, nor was there any serious attempt to prosecute US citizens participating in the slave trade. Faced with this, the British offered a compromise: no right of search, only visit – that Royal Navy ships could verify whether a ship was, in fact, American. This compromise was rebuffed after American commentators and politicians accused Lord Palmerston, then foreign secretary, of insulting the US flag when he stated that slave traders should not be allowed to escape simply because they hoisted 'a piece of bunting.'<sup>24</sup> The rejection of this compromise led to an increase in the British stopping and searching of suspicious ships flying the US flag, resulting in a boarding crisis in 1858.

When, in May 1858, an American schooner was halted and searched by a British man o' war in the West Indies, the US public was outraged. The secretary of state and the Senate insisted that the British cease and desist all such activities, with the latter body passing a bill enabling the president to take military action if necessary. Although this prompted a counter-wave of anger in Britain, with demands that the anti-slavery campaigns be maintained even if it meant war with the Americans, Lord Derby's ministry apologised to the United States.<sup>25</sup> Derby's actions especially angered Palmerston and Lord John Russell, sitting in opposition, who recognised that this retreat undermined their longstanding and largely successful crusade against the slave trade.<sup>26</sup> Their campaign, however, faced domestic opposition from, among others, Cobden and Bright, who opposed British attempts to stamp out the international slave trade in general and the inevitable collisions it caused with the United States in particular.<sup>27</sup> Bright went so far as to dismiss the campaign against the slave trade as 'Palmerston's benevolent crochets.' Indeed, in appreciation of the Manchester School's efforts, one American

**Or, in other words, monarchy and republicanism did not divide Britain and the United States; imperialism and slavery did.**

**Looking on British–American relations during the Civil War as a point on a continuum, rather than as an event in isolation, demonstrates that far from having many reasons to view the United States as any kind of beacon of freedom, or for mistaking it for a particularly moral nation, the British instead saw an antagonistic and uncooperative imperial rival, willing to side with tyrants, whether Napoleon Bonaparte or the Russian tsar, as well as a defender of slavery and the international slave trade.**

slave trader named his ship the *Richard Cobden*.<sup>28</sup> If nothing else, Cobden's and Bright's sobriquet, 'the Members for America', was certainly well deserved.

British–American animosities were further revived by the Crimean conflict (1854–56). Although the United States was officially neutral, the British believed that the American public and their government sympathised with the Russians – US commentators freely predicted that France and Britain's forces would meet the same fate as Napoleon's *Grande Armée*. Even before the *Alabama*, American shipyards built a privateer for the tsar's government; only the Royal Navy's shadowing the vessel all the way to Russia, prevented it from achieving the Southern ship's notoriety. Similarly, a diplomatic crisis arose when American politicians discovered that the British were recruiting US citizens to fight in their conflict against the tsar. The acrimony arising out of the Crimean War has been almost entirely forgotten, despite the fact, as one historian noted, that, by the end of the conflict, the United States was the sole remaining power that openly acknowledged its friendship for Russia. Given the hostility of British liberals and radicals towards the Russian regime, that they would remember America's backing the wrong side in the struggle for liberty, just as they had in the Napoleonic Wars, was to be expected.<sup>29</sup>

Looking on British–American relations during the Civil War as a point on a continuum, rather than as an event in isolation, demonstrates that far from having many reasons to view the United States as any kind of beacon of freedom, or for mistaking it for a particularly moral nation, the British instead saw an antagonistic and uncooperative imperial rival, willing to side with tyrants, whether Napoleon Bonaparte or the Russian tsar, as well as a defender of slavery and the international slave trade. Nor were the Americans finished disappointing liberal Britain, rejecting outright the mantracum-gospel of free trade and instead embarking upon the retrograde course of imposing tariffs. Tariffs, it must be said, that were openly proclaimed to be aimed primarily at British commerce.<sup>30</sup> While those historians who point out that relations between the two nations were improving are fundamentally correct, they had started from a very low point.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the arrival of Irish immigrants following the Great Famine, 1845–49, and the need of certain politicians, such as Seward, to pander to them, gave American Anglophobia a new lease of life. While Congressional debates were no longer akin to those witnessed by Sir Basil Hall

in 1829, who observed 'this eternal vituperation of England and everything belonging to us', anti-British sentiment remained widespread and popular.<sup>32</sup>

Much of this was, predictably, reflected upon the other side of the Atlantic. Not all Britons were anti-American any more than all Americans were Anglophobes. Nonetheless, there was little in the way of either trust or concord between the two nations and their respective peoples. This could be true even of those groups theoretically in agreement, such as British and American abolitionists. For example, Harriet Beecher Stowe, of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) fame, complained in letters home that anti-slavery sentiment in Britain was often simply anti-American.<sup>33</sup> Nor did immigration necessarily contribute to a better understanding, as is sometimes claimed. Anywhere between one-third and one-half of all British migrants (the Irish were the exception) returned home, and those that did so were often unimpressed by their experiences. Frances Trollope's notorious *The Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832) was a screed by a failed immigrant.<sup>34</sup>

This is also why, mythology notwithstanding, British radicals' and liberals' views of the United States were at best ambiguous; Cobden's and Bright's pro-American zealotry was the exception rather than the rule. Such conservative animosity that existed meantime, was far more owed to the conflicts detailed above than out of any alleged threat to British society that America's republican institutions supposedly represented.<sup>35</sup> Far from being divided by the Civil War, meanwhile, most in Britain wished a plague on both houses. Even among the small minority who favoured one party or the other, Britons were less inclined to *support* a side in the Civil War than *oppose* one. Opponents of the Union tended to be such because they believed the South had the right of political self-determination, regularly comparing the Confederate cause to the Italian or Hungarian struggles. Opponents of the Confederacy, meanwhile, tended to be such because of slavery, regularly comparing Southern secession to Irish rebellion.<sup>36</sup>

While much has been made of the various meetings held on the Civil War by each sides' partisans, in an age where mass political meetings of 50,000 and above were common – such as that held by Palmerston in Glasgow in April 1863 – only six meetings on the Civil War managed to exceed 5,000 persons, with none reaching 10,000. The number of actual partisans in any case was small, as shown by the fact that the combined membership of the pro-North

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The United States and seceded states in 1861

and pro-South organisations amounted to some 2,500 individuals – out of a nation of over 29 million.<sup>37</sup> This was unimpressive even in comparison to other foreign events. Besides the fact that the Civil War was replaced as a topic of interest by the Polish rebellion and Prussian–Danish War from 1863 onwards, both the earlier Hungarian and Italian struggles had commanded far more British attention and support.<sup>38</sup> When Lajos ‘Louis’ Kossuth visited Britain in 1851, he attracted crowds of 75,000 in Birmingham and possibly as many as 100,000 in London.<sup>39</sup> In Giuseppe Garibaldi’s case, British homes were filled with items containing his image, from plates and cups to prints, paintings and busts. Pubs and taverns were named after him, as was a biscuit. There were no such popular memorabilia with respect to Lincoln – even after his assassination, the British public response to which, in any case, was more muted than later mythology would have it.<sup>40</sup>

Consequently, the ministry was never under any political pressure regarding the conflict – either outside or inside of parliament. When consulted by Palmerston and Russell regarding America, the leader of the Conservatives, Lord Derby, along with Benjamin Disraeli, let it be known that the Tories favoured a course of

‘bona fide neutrality.’<sup>41</sup> Meantime, few members of either the House of Commons or the House of Lords regarded the conflict as any of Britain’s business. Only one in six referred to it in their public addresses and, of these, a clear majority supported neutrality – irrespective of their political affiliation.<sup>42</sup>

Nonetheless, for all the antipathy towards the United States – and exacerbated rather than mitigated by the Union’s initial diplomacy – slavery and the spectre of the slave trade placed the South beyond the pale for most in Britain; something that became more pronounced following the 1862 Emancipation Proclamation. Little wonder, then, that in January 1863 Confederate agent Matthew Maury reported to his superiors from Britain that, ‘many of our friends have mistaken British admiration of Southern “pluck” and newspaper spite at Yankee insolence as Southern sympathy. No such thing. There is no love for the South here. In its American policy the British government supports the people.’<sup>43</sup> Maury might equally have said that the British people supported their government with respect to the conflict.

The immediate acrimony that arose between the Union and Britain from the war’s outbreak until the *Trent* Affair, demonstrates the distrust

inherent in the relationship. Secretary of State Seward, concerned about British intervention, blustered about annexing Canada, becoming even more truculent when Britain declared its neutrality. His behaviour was amplified by other Union politicians and a sizable portion of Northern opinion. Lincoln's public declarations that he would not interfere with slavery, meantime, plus the introduction of the protectionist Morrill tariff, reminded the British why the two nations had never been particularly close. By mid-1861, the Union was widely regarded as aggressive, irrational and rabidly Anglophobic. As the fiercely anti-Southern *Spectator* put it in June, 'The Americans are, for the moment, transported beyond the influence of common sense ... With all of England sympathising, more or less heartily, with the North, they persist on regarding her as an enemy, and seem positively anxious to change an ally, who happens to be quiescent, into an open and dangerous foe.'<sup>44</sup> The prime minister was in agreement, writing to the foreign secretary, Lord Russell, on 9 September 1861, that 'I almost doubt Lincoln and Seward being foolish enough to draw the sword against us, but they have shewn themselves so wild, that any impertinence may be expected from them,' and insisted that Canada be properly defended and the North American fleet be reinforced.<sup>45</sup> In this, Palmerston was upholding a long-standing British approach to the United States, characterised by one scholar as 'winning without fighting': avoid war by maintaining a demonstration of strength.<sup>46</sup>

The most significant challenge to the Palmerston ministry's determination to avoid entanglement in the Civil War came in the winter of 1861/2 when in November, a Union warship, the USS *San Jacinto* stopped the mail carrier, RMS *Trent* in international waters, and seized two Confederate commissioners, James Mason and John Slidell, plus their secretaries, who were travelling as passengers. Predictably, this touched off a storm of outrage in Britain and one that grew considerably when news arrived from America that the *San Jacinto's* captain, Charles Wilkes, was being lionised for, among other things, defying the British. What amounted to an ultimatum was sent to Washington, altered slightly by Prince Albert who inserted a clause declaring that Britain had no doubt Wilkes had acted without authority, thus providing the Union with a means of retreat. Similarly, the Palmerston ministry refused to meet with any Confederate agents who approached the government with an offer of a military alliance against the Union in exchange for diplomatic recognition. The Lincoln

cabinet, upon receipt of the ultimatum, after some debate, bowed to both justice and pragmatism, and released the Southern envoys.<sup>47</sup> That this prevented a probable third British–American war has long been acknowledged. What has been less noted is that the incident also opened the way to resolving the longstanding divide over the right of search.

That the *Trent* Affair – or *Trent* outrage as the British called it – took place three years after the 1858 boarding crisis is important. One historian, justifying the rapturous applause the American captain received in the Union, declares, 'they praised Wilkes for avenging ... all the British maritime encroachments with one blow.'<sup>48</sup> By 1861, however, these 'maritime encroachments' amounted entirely to the Royal Navy's searching American ships for slaves. Further, the return of the envoys was preceded by an intemperate response from the US secretary of state. In effect, Seward declared that although the seizure was illegal, the Union was returning the envoys because they were unimportant. Had they been important, the North would have refused to return them. Although often overlooked in recent scholarship, Seward's response effectively repudiated a half-century of American views of freedom of the seas.<sup>49</sup> Basically, it not only justified the British position regarding the right of search – it went far beyond. If mere 'importance' of the human cargo onboard a ship justified seizure and removal, the Royal Navy had just been given a remarkably free hand with respect to American shipping.<sup>50</sup> The British media's response to Seward's message demonstrates this was recognised. When *The Economist* noted that 'we will consider the act of Mr. Lincoln a free gift', it was not simply referring to the administration's return of Mason and Slidell to British custody.<sup>51</sup> The *Illustrated London News* also declared the United States was now in agreement with Britain with respect to right of search.<sup>52</sup>

This impacted the negotiations surrounding the 1862 Lyons–Seward Treaty resulting in a mutual right of search between Britain and the United States. True, the Lincoln administration was already making moves toward emancipation by 1862, but the treaty, negotiated by Seward and Lord Lyons, the British minister to Washington, was ratified a full four months before the Emancipation Proclamation. While the treaty was at least partially a concession to the British government, it was also clearly an attempt to undo some of Seward's inadvertently excessive generosity in his response to the Palmerston ministry during the *Trent* incident.

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The Emancipation Proclamation has overshadowed the significance of the Lyons–Seward Treaty in the scholarship of British–American relations during the Civil War, but it was nonetheless a diplomatic milestone considering the past fifty years of British–American animosity over the right of search.<sup>53</sup>

That the right of search remained important to Palmerston is demonstrated in his remarks to Russell, when informed in September 1861 by an American visitor that, contrary to appearances, the Civil War was in fact about slavery: the prime minister wrote, ‘Well, if the North are easily led to make all their present passions and sacrifices on account of their hatred of slavery, why should they not prove their abhorrence of slavery by joining us in our operations against the slave trade by giving us the facilities for putting it down when carried under the United States flag [?]’<sup>54</sup> That said, the Lyons–Seward Treaty did not mean accord was entirely complete. In 1863, the American slave trader, Captain Thomas Morgan, languishing in Newburyport Gaol, Massachusetts, wrote to Lincoln, demanding a presidential pardon. Lincoln, who on the reverse of the letter wrote that ‘the gentleman who brings me this letter says it is a “slave trade” conviction of a minor grade’, proved sympathetic.<sup>55</sup> On March 11, 1863, despite the existence of the US anti-slave-trade laws, despite being caught with 900 slaves on board a ship he commanded, Morgan received his presidential pardon. True, Lincoln did not earlier pardon Nathaniel Gordon in 1862, the only American ever executed for participation in the slave trade, but his willingness to free the notorious Morgan demonstrates that differences remained between the prime minister and the president.

Yet the 1862 Lyons–Seward Treaty, a success for the Palmerston ministry growing out of the *Trent* Affair, remained within the parameters of British–American relations for the past fifty years: crisis, followed by relatively peaceful resolution, followed by treaty. This approach also underpinned the issue of potential British mediation in the Civil War. That the Palmerston ministry wanted to avoid any military entanglement in the conflict is now the scholarly consensus.<sup>56</sup> The ministry also proved adept at undermining those few MPs, such as the radical John Arthur Roebuck – one of the three authors of the Peoples’ Charter – who put forth motions to enter the war on behalf of the Confederacy.<sup>57</sup> Even had the ministry been willing to abandon the approach of the past forty-five years with respect to the United States, Britain, having recently fought both the Crimean

War (1854–6) and the Indian Mutiny (1857) and engaged in the Maori Wars (1845–1872, escalating in 1860), was experiencing imperial overstretch, and wanted no more foreign adventures – as the disinclination to become militarily involved in the Polish Rebellion in 1863 and the Prussian–Danish War in 1864 demonstrate. Further, as the most recent examination of the Palmerston ministry’s mediation discussion points out, it took place at the same time as the cabinet crisis in France over French policies toward Italy and, more importantly, the overthrow of the Greek king. The revolution in Greece reopened the Eastern Question causing concerns for the Palmerston ministry’s foreign policy. Ultimately, the British government had to determine whether the situation in North America or the Eastern Question required more urgent attention. Given the priority European issues took over North American, the Palmerston ministry unsurprisingly determined that potential threats closer to home were more important.<sup>58</sup> To put it more bluntly: except for the *Trent* Affair, the Civil War was never a diplomatic priority for Palmerston’s ministry.

Offering mediation, in any case, was not the same as military intervention, but even here, the cabinet was divided. The two chief supporters of mediation, Russell and William Gladstone, the chancellor of the exchequer, not only faced opposition from the secretary of war, George Cornwall Lewis and most of the cabinet, but they could not bring Palmerston around in support of it either. Despite claims that the prime minister supported mediation, the only statement in favour of it in his correspondence came in September 1862. Yet even here, the most to which the prime minister would consent was that if Washington and Baltimore fell into the hands of the Confederates, mediation could then be considered.<sup>59</sup> This was a considerable qualifier. If the federal capital fell into enemy hands, it would have probably meant the end of the Union in any case. In October, after news of the North’s victory at the Battle of Antietam arrived, Palmerston argued that, instead of mediation, ‘I should be inclined to think that we might begin by a general recommendation to the two parties to enter into communication with each other in order to see whether some arrangement of their difficulties might not be made by which this afflicting and destructive war might be ended.’<sup>60</sup> In other words, before Britain even attempted to offer mediation, it should first be established whether the two parties would even talk to each other.

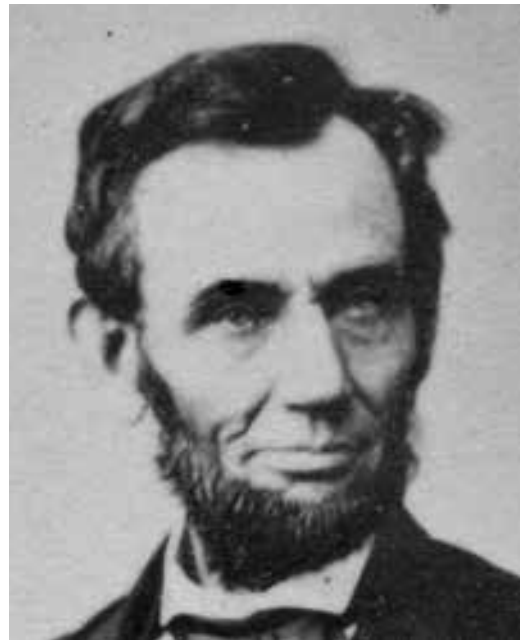
The situation was complicated by Gladstone’s the South ‘has made a nation’ speech

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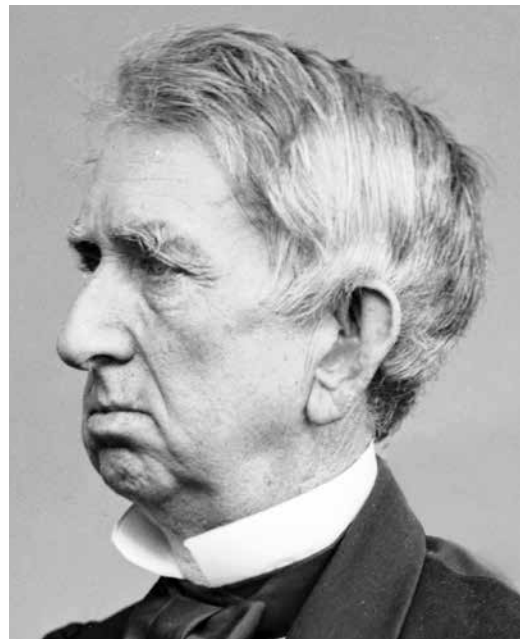
at Newcastle on 7 October 1862. As the cabinet was discussing mediation, Gladstone had caused something of a leak. Unfortunately for him, the public outcry was unfavourable, even from those hostile to the Union. For example, both *The Times* and the *Saturday Review*, two decidedly anti-Northern periodicals, condemned Gladstone's speech.<sup>61</sup> The majority of British public opinion, like the cabinet's, was against interference in the conflict. Following this public outcry, Palmerston scrutinised Russell's proposals even more closely and on 20 October, he pointed out to the foreign secretary: 'One difficulty as [to] mediation would be the function of slavery and the giving up of fugitive slaves. Could we without offence to many people here recommend to the North to sanction slavery and to undertake to return runaways and yet would not the South insist upon some such foundations [?]'<sup>62</sup> While Palmerston did finally agree to give Russell his cabinet meeting on mediation on 23 October, two days later, upon receipt of Lewis' arguments against it, Palmerston cancelled the meeting, writing to Russell that, 'I have read through your memorandum on American affairs & Lewis's observations. Your description of the state of things between the two parties is most comprehensive and just. I am however inclined to agree with Lewis that at present we would take no steps nor make any communication of a distinct proposition with any advantage.'<sup>63</sup> Given the late notice, an informal meeting was held by some of the cabinet, including Russell and Lewis, leading to an exchange between the two that became acrimonious to such an extent that Palmerston had to intervene to soothe tempers. Nonetheless, as the prime minister noted to Russell, on 26 October, '[Southern] independence can be converted into an established fact by the cause of events alone.'<sup>64</sup>

The last cabinet discussion regarding mediation took place in November 1862, when the foreign secretary presented a proposal from the French emperor, Napoleon III, of joint mediation to the cabinet. The emperor's plan included a six-month armistice and a suspension of the Northern blockade. Besides Gladstone and Baron Westbury, the lord chancellor, the rest of the cabinet rejected the proposal outright. Gladstone was incensed by Palmerston's failure to support himself and the foreign secretary, but the prime minister had warned Russell of his misgivings before the meeting: 'But is it likely that the Federals would consent to an armistice to be accompanied by a suspension of blockades, and which would give the Confederates a means of getting all the supplies

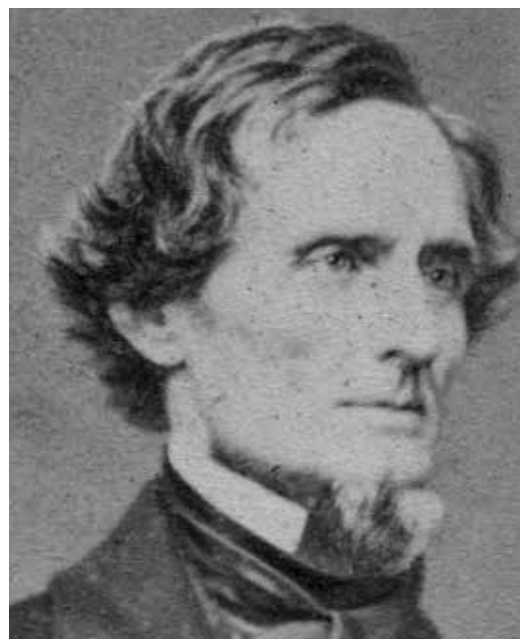
Abraham Lincoln (1809–65), 1863 (Elliott & Fry and Alexander Gardner; © National Portrait Gallery, London)



William Henry Seward (1801–72), ca. 1860–65 (by Mathew B. Brady)



Jefferson Davis (1808–89), 1860s (by Mathew B. Brady and Edward & Henry T. Anthony; © National Portrait Gallery, London)



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they may want?' That was merely one problem. There was another: 'Then comes the difficulty about slavery and the giving up of runaway slaves, about which we would hardly frame a proposal which the Southerners would accept, the Northerners to agree to, and the people of England would approve of.' There was a final problem: 'The French government are more free from the Shackles of Principle and of Right & Wrong as on all others than we are.'<sup>65</sup> There was no trust between Britain and France. The two nations were engaged in a naval rivalry, building ocean-going ironclads, and the volunteer movement had been established in 1859 to protect against a possible French invasion of Britain. Further, in 1861, Napoleon III had established a puppet regime in Mexico in defiance of the United States, making his interests in the war very different to Britain's. In short, Palmerston had no confidence in the emperor or his proposal. The prime minister's failure to support Russell and Gladstone simply reflected his clearly expressed dissatisfaction. This was the last time the Palmerston ministry discussed mediation. In January, Poland and then Lithuania rebelled against Russia, followed by the Schleswig-Holstein crisis, resulting in the 1864 Prussian–Danish War. In terms of foreign affairs, America became less important and less relevant, especially as effects of the cotton shortages eased in 1862. One more crisis would rear its head, however, and that was the question of Confederate shipbuilding in Britain.

James Bulloch, the Confederate agent residing in Liverpool directing these efforts, recognised the advantages created by the fact that the full burden of proof fell upon the Crown when it came to violations of the 1819 Foreign Enlistment Act.<sup>66</sup> Working in the leading shipbuilding nation in the world and cloaking his activities under mounds of misleading documentation, Bulloch commissioned vessels that left British ports as ostensibly innocent ships of neutral nations, only to be armed on the high seas and converted into raiders. Despite the myth that the British government colluded in allowing these privateers to be unleashed upon Northern shipping, historians have exonerated Palmerston's ministry of collaboration. Indeed, in the case of the most notorious of them, the *Alabama*, the most recent scholarship blames the Union's officials for the ship's escape because they failed to provide the necessary evidence they possessed to the ministry in a timely fashion.<sup>67</sup>

Washington, understandably outraged by Bulloch's activities, demanded that London halt them. Despite the acrimony over the *Alabama*'s

escape, the Palmerston ministry was broadly in agreement, recognising that these activities represented a dangerous precedent to the world's largest merchant marine. Having long sought American agreement that privateering was piracy, Bulloch's actions undermined British diplomatic objectives. A clampdown on his activities followed – despite some outstanding failures such as the release of the CSS *Alexandra* by the courts in June 1863 because the Crown failed to prove Southern ownership of the vessel. That same year, Bulloch audaciously tried to have two ironclad rams built for the Confederacy. Attempting to fool British officials, he covered his involvement, making it difficult to determine the vessels' purchaser. Unfortunately for him, the ministry was not deceived and in September, the ships were detained. Faced with Bulloch's ingenious paper maze that potentially prevented legal confiscation of the rams, Palmerston came up with the obvious solution – compulsory purchase of the ships for the Royal Navy.<sup>68</sup> Despite these setbacks, Bulloch's raiders caused havoc among American shipping. Thus, the merchant marine that had transported so many slaves across the Atlantic was savaged by a slave power. This would prove to be a major grievance of the United States during and after the war which accused Britain of deliberately releasing these privateers upon Northern shipping.

Ironically, however, Southern shipbuilding, like the *Trent* incident, compelled greater communication and cooperation between the Lincoln administration and the Palmerston ministry. Just as the *Trent* Affair, for all its sound and fury, ultimately released much of the tension that had been built up the previous year and demonstrated to all that neither Lincoln's administration nor Palmerston's ministry wanted a war, it also presaged the successful agreement with respect to right of search. So, too, did Bulloch's activities, for all the recriminations, improve communications and thus relations between Britain and the Union.

As the Civil War progressed, both Washington, involved in an increasingly protracted struggle against the Confederacy, and London, facing serious diplomatic problems in Europe, found themselves communicating on progressively more reasonable terms. Now that the United States agreed with Britain with respect to blockades, privateering, the right of search, and indeed, slavery itself, Palmerston's ministry pushed for increased cooperation at sea. In October 1863, Sir Alexander Milne, the commander of the North American and West Indies Squadron visited Washington, met Lincoln and

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Seward and had dinner with Gideon Welles, the US secretary of the navy, for precisely this purpose. Both sides regarded the negotiations a success. In January 1865, following a raid on St Albans, Vermont, by Confederate agents in Canada in October of the previous year, colonial officials passed legislation and instituted a clampdown on such activities. Seward, meantime, countermanded a Union general's orders to pursue rebels into Canada. When Congress decided to terminate the Canadian–American reciprocity treaty (1854) in retaliation for the raid, both the Lincoln administration and the Palmerston ministry tried to save it, each recognising the significance of their commercial dealings despite the Morrill tariff.<sup>69</sup>

This growing cooperation was not unnoticed in the Confederate capital Richmond. In fact, the South regarded Britain's neutrality as so one-sided in favour of the Union that the Confederacy withdrew their representatives from Britain in October 1863. In December of that year, President Jefferson Davis, addressing the fourth session of the first Confederate congress stated: 'Great Britain has accordingly entertained with that Government [the Union] the closest and most intimate relations while refusing, on its demands ordinary amicable intercourse with us, and has ... interposed a passive though effective bar to the knowledge of our rights by other powers.'<sup>70</sup> Davis' opposite number, Lincoln, meantime, was satisfied with Palmerston's ministry to the extent that he wanted it to remain in power on the grounds that if it fell, it would be 'replaced by other more unfavorable to us'.<sup>71</sup> Palmerston and Russell, meanwhile, preferred Lincoln in his 1864 re-election bid over his Democratic rival George McClellan. While in both cases this may well have been a case of sticking with the devil you know, even Seward acquired rather more respect for Britain by war's end than at the beginning. Indeed, in November 1865 he told an incredulous Sir Frederick Bruce, who had replaced Lord Lyons as minister to Washington in March of that year, that 'the interest of the two great branches of the Anglo-Saxon race on both sides of the Atlantic was to go together.'<sup>72</sup>

Phillip E. Myers is fundamentally correct that the Civil War, far from being a serious disruption to British–American relations, was instead a catalyst for improved diplomatic relations, making the later rapprochement possible. Certainly, the ameliorated relations proved important in the post-war years leading up to the Treaty of Washington (1871).<sup>73</sup> Although much has been made of the fact Britain agreed to arbitration for damages accrued to American

shipping by the *Alabama* and its sister ships, the United States similarly compensated Canada for the Fenian outrages following the war. Also of overlooked importance was that the United States effectively granted what amounted to virtual diplomatic recognition of the newly formed Dominion of Canada, thus formally allowing British North America a legitimacy that many in the United States had always denied.<sup>74</sup> Also significant was that the United States now agreed with Britain on key aspects of belligerent rights at sea, including the right of blockades, the illegality of privateering and the right of search – all of which had been disputed in the Napoleonic Wars and in the decades afterwards. Although no one could predict it, this would be of extreme importance forty-three years later in the First World War, when Britain blockaded the Triple Alliance.<sup>75</sup>

Civil War historians have been quick to praise the Lincoln administration's foreign policy, even if sometimes for the wrong reasons. That said, Lincoln and Seward achieved their goal of preventing foreign intervention in the war, which was certainly important, even if the claim that this applies to the Palmerston ministry is untrue. Less appreciated, however, is that by any measurement, the Palmerston ministry's response to the Civil War was both competent and intelligent, especially given the state of British–American relations before the conflict. None of the crises, from the *Trent* Affair to the Confederate shipbuilding, were allowed to escalate to the point of war. Nor were the British equivalents of the American 'War Hawks' of 1812 given succour. The long-running dispute over the right of search was settled. While meditation was considered, it was not pursued – just as the Lincoln cabinet debated, but decided against, defying Britain over the *Trent*. Similarly, Gladstone's speech at Newcastle may be paired with Seward's early diplomacy and his response to the Palmerston ministry during the *Trent* Affair. If the Confederate shipbuilding was a failure, it was a sin of omission not commission and the improved communications between the British and American governments because of it, militated against Southern activities in British North America and ultimately ensured that the United States would largely accept the British view of a belligerent's maritime rights in war and Canada's political sovereignty. The Italian diplomat and author, Daniele Varè, said that the art of diplomacy is letting someone else have your way. In many respects, this effectively sums up the Palmerston ministry's achievements in the American Civil War.

**As the Civil War progressed, both Washington, involved in an increasingly protracted struggle against the Confederacy, and London, facing serious diplomatic problems in Europe, found themselves communicating on progressively more reasonable terms.**

## The Palmerston Ministry's foreign policy and the American Civil War

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- 1 The origins of this tradition are discussed in my *Unlikely Allies: Britain, America and the Victorian Origins of the Special Relationship* (Continuum, 2007). A recent retelling of it is Walter Russell Mead, *God and Gold: Britain, America, and the Making of the Modern World* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2007). Similar works include: Kathleen Burk, *Old World, New World: Great Britain and America from the Beginning* (Little, Brown, 2007), and Kevin Phillips, *The Cousins' Wars: Religion, Politics and the Triumph of Anglo-America* (Basic Books, 1999). But see, also, James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of Anglo-World, 1783–1939* (Oxford University Press, 2009).
- 2 Benjamin Schwarz, 'The Diversity Myth: America's Leading Export', *The Atlantic Monthly* (May 1995), pp. 57–67, 57. Schwarz is warning against this view. For a critique of American exceptionalism generally, see, Ian Tyrrell, 'American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History', *American Historical Review*, 96/4 (Oct. 1991), pp. 1031–55.
- 3 See Carl Degler, 'One Among Many: The Civil War in Comparative Perspective', the Twenty-Ninth Annual Fortenbaugh Memorial Lecture at Gettysburg College, in 1990, which explores the conflict within the context of other contemporaneous events, noting similarities between Abraham Lincoln and Otto von Bismarck and comparing the Civil War to the 1848 Sonderbundskrieg in Switzerland. Further similarities are noted by Ian Tyrrell in his *Transnational Nation: United States History in Global Perspective Since 1789* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), pp. 87–91. The best comparative study to date, however, is Niels Eichhorn, *Liberty and Slavery: European Separatists, Southern Secession and the American Civil War* (Louisiana State University Press, 2019). The need for more work in this area has recently been acknowledged by Erinco Dal Lago, who has written a number of

- comparative studies between the Civil War and Italian unification, including *The Age of Lincoln and Cavour: Comparative Perspectives on 19th-Century American and Italian Nation-Building* (Palgrave, 2015), and in his 'Writing the US Civil War Era into Nineteenth-Century World History', *The Journal of the Civil War Era*, 11/2 (Jun. 2021), pp. 255–71.
- 4 While there is a surfeit of offerings from this school, such as Dean Mahin, *One War at a Time: The International Dimensions of the American Civil War* (Brassey's 1999), a recent and extreme example of Americanising world history is Don Doyle, *The Cause of all Nations: An International History of the Civil War* (Basic Books, 2015). With a handful of honourable exceptions, much the same is true of most of the essays found in David T. Gleeson and Simon Lewis (eds.), *The Civil War as Global Conflict: Transnational Meanings of the American Civil War* (University of South Carolina Press, 2014).
- 5 Often referred to as the traditional interpretation, one of the most recent recitations of it is Brent E. Kinser, *The American Civil War and the Shaping of British Democracy* (Ashgate, 2011); see, also, Robert Saunders' review of the same in the *American Historical Review*, 117/3 (Jun. 2012), pp. 930–1. Other recent versions include Alfred Grant, *The American Civil War and the British Press* (McFarland & Company, 2000) and R. J. M. Blackett, *Divided Hearts: Britain and the American Civil War* (Louisiana State University Press, 2001). Charles Campbell argues the democratisation of British politics led directly to better relations between Britain and the United States in his *From Revolution to Rapprochement, 1783–1900* (Wiley, 1974).
- 6 James Ford Rhodes, *The History of the Civil War* (Macmillan, 1917), p. 261. Rhodes was one of the early creators of the traditional myth, asserting that 'They [the pro-Northerners] had as their followers the working men whom hunger stared in the face but who realised, as did the upper class, that the cause of the Union was the cause of democracy in England' (p. 69). Ironically, Rhodes' family, as he himself admitted, were 'copperheads' – that is, Northerners who supported the South.
- 7 Jasper Ridley, *Lord Palmerston* (Constable, 1970), p. 549. A more balanced account is

David F. Krein, *The Last Palmerston Government: Foreign Policy, Domestic Policies and the Genesis of 'Splendid Isolation'* (Iowa State University Press, 1978). See, also, David Brown, *Palmerston: A Biography* (Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 450–55.

- 8 This is the thesis of Howard Jones in his *Union in Peril: The Crisis over British Intervention in the Civil War* (University Press of North Carolina, 1992), *Abraham Lincoln and a New Birth of Freedom: The Union and Slavery in the Diplomacy of the Civil War* (Nebraska University Press 1999), and *Blue & Gray Diplomacy: A History of Union and Confederate Foreign Relations* (University Press of North Carolina, 2010). My review of the last appears in the *Journal of the Civil War Era*, 1/2 (Jun. 2011), pp. 277–9. A more nuanced analysis which takes account of pre-war relations is Phillip E. Myers, *Caution and Cooperation: The American Civil War in British–American Relations* (Kent State University Press, 2008).
- 9 *My English Public Opinion and the American Civil War* (Boydell and Brewer, 2003) points to the errors, factual and interpretive, of this traditional account. See, also, Peter O'Connor, *American Sectionalism in the British Mind, 1832–1863* (Louisiana State University Press, 2017) and Michael J. Turner, *Stonewall Jackson, Beresford Hope, and the Meaning of the American Civil War in Britain* (Louisiana State University Press, 2020). Although Hugh Dubrulle has abandoned his earlier faith in the traditional interpretation, he still overstates the extent of US influence upon nineteenth-century Britain in his otherwise useful study: Dubrulle, *Ambivalent Nation: How Britain Imagined the American Civil War* (Louisiana State University Press, 2018). Robert Saunders' authoritative *Democracy and the Vote in British Politics, 1864–1867: The Making of the Second Reform Act* (Ashgate, 2011), meanwhile, demonstrates how little impact the Civil War had on the 1867 Reform Act.
- 10 See, for example, Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1770–1837* (Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 30–42, and Margot Finn, 'An Elect Nation? Nation, State, and Class in Modern British History', *Journal of British Studies*, 28/2 (Apr. 1989), pp. 181–91. See, also, Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Harvard University Press, 1992), and Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Roads to*

- Modernity: The British, French and American Enlightenments* (Random House, 2004).
- 11 Jackson, quoted in Donald R. Hickey, *Glorious Victory: Andrew Jackson and the Battle of New Orleans* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), p. 33.
  - 12 Donald Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (University of Illinois Press, 1989) remains the best American account of the conflict, although more recent ones include Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels and Indian Allies* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), and J. C. A. Stagg, *The War of 1812: Conflict for a Continent* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).
  - 13 See, for example, Jon Latimer, *1812: War with America* (Harvard University Press, 2007); Brian Arthur, *How Britain Won the War of 1812: The Royal Navy's Blockades of the United States, 1812–1815* (Boydell and Brewer, 2011); and Jeremy Black, *The War of 1812 in the Age of Napoleon* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2009). See, also, Duncan A. Campbell, 'The Bicentennial of the War of 1812: Reconsidering the "Forgotten Conflict"', *American Nineteenth Century History*, 16/1 (Mar. 2015), pp. 1–10.
  - 14 James Fenimore Cooper, *England with Sketches of Society in the Metropolis* (Baudry's European Library, 1837), p. 211.
  - 15 As Stuart Semmel reminds us, the British were divided over Napoleon at the time, in his *Napoleon and the British* (Yale University Press, 2004). By the same measure, the Americans were divided over the War of 1812. What is being referred to here are the subsequent national – and nationalist – narratives.
  - 16 James Fergusson, *The Personal Observations of a Man of Intelligence: Notes of a Tour in North America in 1861*, ed. Ben Wynne (The True Bill Press, 2009), p. 105.
  - 17 That many Americans believed the mere existence of British North America rendered the War of Independence incomplete has been forgotten, is one of the consequences of the later British–American accord. An introduction to the subject is Reginald C. Stuart, *United States' Expansionism and British North America, 1775–1871* (University of North Carolina Press, 1988); but see, also, Donald Warner, *The Idea of Continental Union: Agitation for the Annexation of Canada to the United States, 1849–1893* (University of Kentucky Press, 1960), and D. C. Masters, *Reciprocity, 1846–1911* (The Canadian Historical Society, 1961).
  - 18 An account of the British–American imperial rivalry appears in my *Unlikely Allies: Britain, America and the Victorian Origin of the Special Relationship* (Continuum, 2007), ch. 5. Other works on the diplomacy include: Charles Campbell, *From Revolution to Rapprochement, 1783–1900* (Wiley, 1974); Kenneth Bourne, *Britain and the Balance of Power in North America 1815–1908* (University of California Press, 1967); Francis M. Carroll, *A Good and Wise Measure: The Search for the Canadian–American Boundary, 1783–1842* (University of Toronto Press, 2001); D. M. Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Annexation: Texas, Oregon and the Mexican War* (University of Missouri Press, 1973); and Wilbur Devereux Jones, *The American Problem in British Diplomacy, 1841–1861* (University of Georgia Press, 1974).
  - 19 The Latin American rivalry is discussed in several of the works listed in the endnote above, but on filibustering see, Charles Brown, *Agents of Manifest Destiny: The Lives and Times of the Filibusters* (University of North Carolina Press, 1980), and Robert E. May, *Manifest Destiny's Dark Underworld: Filibustering in Antebellum America* (University Press of North Carolina, 2002). On the freebooter's fate, see, Regis A. Courtemanche, 'The Royal Navy and the end of William Walker', *The Historian*, 30/3 (May 1968), pp. 350–65.
  - 20 See Bernard Semmel, *Liberalism and Naval Strategy: Ideology, Interest and Sea Power during the Pax Britannica* (Allen & Unwin, Inc., 1986). A good recent study is Sarah A. Batterson's Ph.D. dissertation, "'An ill-judged piece of business': The failure of slave trade suppression in a slaveholding republic", (University of New Hampshire Durham, 2013). Another Ph.D. dissertation which should be consulted is Mark Clyde Hunter, 'The Political Economy of Anglo–American Naval Relations: Pirates, Slavers and the Equatorial Atlantic, 1819 to 1863' (University of Hull, 2003).
  - 21 For example, Anglo–French differences over the matter are discussed in Lawrence C. Jennings, 'The Interaction of French and British Antislavery, 1789–1848', *Proceedings of the Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society*, 15 (1992), pp. 81–91.
  - 22 Numbers derived from Batterson, "'An ill-judged piece of business'", p. 3. See, also, Anne Farrow, Joel Lang, Jennifer Frank, *Complicity: How the North Promoted, Prolonged and Profited from Slavery* (Ballantine Books, 2005), and John Harris, *The Last Slave Ships: New York and the End of the Middle Passage* (Yale University Press, 2020).
  - 23 The 1824 dispute is discussed in Bradford Perkins, *Castlereagh and Adams* (University of California Press, 1964), and Betty Fladeland, *Men and Brothers: Anglo–American Anti–Slavery Cooperation* (University of Illinois Press, 1972).
  - 24 Quoted in Muriel E. Chamberlain, *British Foreign Policy in the Age of Palmerston* (Longman, 1980), p. 45.
  - 25 On this crisis, see, Richard D. Fulton, 'The London Times and the Anglo–American boarding dispute of 1858', *Nineteenth Century Contexts*, 17/2 (1993), pp. 133–44.
  - 26 Roger Anstey credits Palmerston and Russell for being the main cause of the slave trade's decline. Roger Anstey, 'The Pattern of British abolitionism in the eighteenth and nineteenth century', in Christine Bolt and Seymour Drescher (eds.), *Anti–Slavery, Religion and Reform: Essays in Memory of Roger Anstey* (Archon Books, 1980), p. 33. See, also, John Oldfield, 'Palmerston and Anti–Slavery' in David Brown and Miles Taylor (eds.) *Palmerston Studies II* (Hartley Institute, 2007), pp. 24–38.
  - 27 Bright, along with Cobden, conspired to have the Royal Navy's Africa squadron disbanded, only to be thwarted by Russell and Palmerston's resolute opposition. Christopher Lloyd, *The Navy and the Slave Trade: The Suppression of the African Slave Trade in the Nineteenth Century* (Routledge, 2012), pp. x, 97, 107, 149. The Manchester School's free trade policies presented a moral problem for British abolitionists given that slave–grown products would also be freely exchanged. See, Simon Morgan, 'The Anti–Corn Law League and British Anti–Slavery in Transatlantic Perspective, 1838–1846', *The Historical Journal*, 52/1 (Mar. 2009), pp. 87–107.
  - 28 On the good ship *Richard Cobden*, see, Richard Bilger, 'The United States and Great Britain on the African slave trade, 1842–1862' (Ph.D. dissertation,

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- University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1968), p. 42.
- 29 On Anglo-American tensions during the Crimean War, see, Alan Dowty, *The Limits of American Isolation: The United States and the Crimean War* (New York University Press, 1971). See, also, Frank A. Golder, 'Russian-American relations during the Crimean War', *American Historical Review*, 31/3 (Apr. 1926), pp. 462–76. Golder is the scholar referred to in the paragraph.
- 30 Free trade, it should be recalled, was always presented as a moral policy, as the words of one of its great apostles, Richard Cobden demonstrate: 'I see in the Free-trade principle that which shall act on the moral world as a principle of gravitation in the universe – drawing men together, thrusting aside the antagonism of race, and creed, and language, and uniting us in the bonds of eternal peace.' Quoted in John Bright and James Thorold Rogers (eds.), *Speeches on Questions of Public Policy by Richard J. Cobden, M.P.*, ii (2 vols., London, 1870), pp. 362–3. On the divide between Great Britain and the United States over tariffs, see, Marc-William Palen, *The 'Conspiracy' of Free Trade: The Anglo-American Struggle over Empire and Economic Globalization, 1846–1896* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).
- 31 This is a point Myers makes in *Caution and Cooperation*.
- 32 Basil Hall, *Travels in North America in the Years 1827 and 1828*, iii (3 vols., Robert Cadell, 1829), p. 60. British travellers' accounts of widespread Anglophobia in the US throughout this period are discussed in my *Unlikely Allies: Britain, America and the Victorian Origins of the Special Relationship* (Continuum, 2007), pp. 103–10. See, also, Peter O'Connor, *American Sectionalism in the British Mind, 1832–1863* (Louisiana State University Press, 2017).
- 33 Noted by Benjamin Lease, *Anglo-American Encounters: England and the Rise of American Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 160. The other fundamental difference was that by the mid-nineteenth century, American abolitionists were outliers on the US political spectrum whereas British abolitionists were the mainstream. See, Fladland, *Men and Brothers*; and Clare Taylor (ed.), *British and American Abolitionists: An Episode in Anglo-American Understanding* (Edinburgh University Press, 1974).
- 34 On British migration to the United States before the Civil War, see, William E. Van Vugt, *Britain to America: Mid-nineteenth-century Immigrants to the United States* (University of Illinois Press, 1999).
- 35 See, D. P. Crook's authoritative *American Democracy in English Politics: 1815–1850* (Oxford University Press, 1965) which demolished the popular, but unrigorous, work of G. D. Lillibridge, *Beacon of Freedom: The Impact of American Democracy upon Great Britain 1830–1870* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1954). Other studies demonstrating that British views of the United States cannot be crudely divided between a positive radical/liberal view versus a negative conservative/reactionary one, include Jon Roper, *Democracy and its Critics: Anglo-American Democratic Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (Allen Unwin, 1989) and Michael J. Turner, *Liberty and Liberticide: The Role of America in Nineteenth-Century Radicalism* (Lexington Books, 2014). See, also, Ray Boston, *British Chartists in America, 1839–1900* (Manchester University Press, 1971), especially ch. 4, 'Political disillusionment'.
- 36 Further, Irish nationalists generally favoured the Confederacy, as Joseph Hernon, Jr. points out in *Celts, Catholics, and Copperheads: Ireland Views the American Civil War* (Ohio State University Press, 1968).
- 37 The membership numbers derive from R. J. M. Blackett, *Divided Hearts: Britain and the American Civil War* (Louisiana State University Press, 2001). Blackett's dividing the British population into pro-Confederate and pro-Union camps relies upon his concentrating almost entirely on each side's partisans, to the exclusion of the wider society. Besides ignoring the diplomatic sphere entirely, and despite the irrefutable evidence that this profoundly impacted upon British views of the United States, Blackett simply assumes pro-Southerners were conservative while the pro-Northerners were radical. This leads to his mislabelling individuals such as John Arthur Roebuck and William Schaw Lindsay as conservatives, which in American terms, is akin to identifying Radical Republicans Charles Sumner and Thaddeus Stevens as pro-slavery Democrats. Other historians have also noted Blackett's misidentifications, see, for example, Lawrence Goldman, 'A Total Misconception: Lincoln, the Civil War and the British, 1860–1865', in Richard Carwardine and Jay Sexton (eds.), *The Global Lincoln* (Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 122. Blackett's claim that dissenters favoured the Union, meanwhile, is based upon the views of selected Methodists while ignoring other groups, such as the Unitarians, whom scholars have demonstrated did not support the North. See, Douglas Charles Strange, *British Unitarians against American Slavery, 1833–1865* (University of Toronto Press, 1984). Although uncritically accepted by Americanists generally and Civil War historians specifically, the claims in this study do not stand scrutiny.
- 38 As Margot Finn demonstrates in her authoritative *After Chartism: Class and Nation in English Radical Politics 1848–1874* (Cambridge University Press, 1993) British radicals always paid more attention to Europe than the United States. See, especially, p. 204n. Consequently, the United States does not much feature in nineteenth-century British radical thought compared to Europe.
- 39 On Kossuth, see Zsuzsanna Lada, 'The Invention of a Hero: Lajos Kossuth in England (1851)', *European History Quarterly*, 43/1 (2013), pp. 5–26.
- 40 Thomas J. Keiser, 'The English Press and the American Civil War', (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Reading, 1971), demonstrates that not only were the obituaries for Lincoln far from overly laudatory, in many cases, they were often quite critical. The idea of Lincoln as a British hero is the creation of the so-called great rapprochement following the First World War, when Anglo-American elites erected statues of the sixteenth president in London and Manchester during the 1920s. This was also the era in which the narrative of the traditional interpretation was essentially finalised.
- 41 Quoted in David F. Krein, *The Last Palmerston Government*, p. 62.
- 42 For British politicians' opinions on the conflict, see, Duncan A. Campbell, *English Public Opinion and the American Civil War* (Boydell & Brewer, 2003), ch. 4.
- 43 M. F. Maury to B. Franklin Minor, 14 Jan. 1863, Maury Papers, vol. 17, quoted in Warren F. Spencer, *The Confederate Navy in Europe* (University of Alabama

- Press, 1983), p. 136.
- 44 *The Spectator*, 15 Jun. 1861.
- 45 Palmerston to Russell, 9 Sep. 1861, Russell Papers, National Archives, PRO30/22/21.
- 46 Andrew Lambert, 'Winning without fighting: British Grand Strategy and its Application to the United States, 1815–1865', in B. A. Lee and K. F. Walling (eds.), *Strategic Logic and Political Rationality: Essays in Honour of Michael I. Handel* (Frank Cass, 2003), pp. 164–93.
- 47 On the *Trent*, see Gordon H. Warren, *The Fountain of Discontent: The Trent Affair and Freedom of the Seas* (Northeastern University Press, 1981) and Norman Ferris, *The Trent Affair: A Diplomatic Crisis* (University of Tennessee Press, 1977).
- 48 Howard Jones, *Union in Peril: The Crisis over British Intervention in the Civil War* (University of North Carolina Press, 1992), p. 83.
- 49 Frank Lawrence Owsley made this point in his *King Cotton Diplomacy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. rev. Harriet Owsley (Chicago University Press, 1959 [1931]), pp. 77–83. D. P. Crook meanwhile notes, that 'In effect, he [Seward] had capitulated to a high British view of belligerent prerogatives, contrary to American tradition, on every issue at stake except that of adjudication.' *The North, the South and the Powers, 1861–1865* (Wiley, 1974), p. 160.
- 50 True, Seward tried to work impressment into the argument, stating that the British response to the *Trent* Affair meant they now agreed with the United States over that issue, but the comparison was dubious at best. Impressment had involved the Royal Navy seizing suspected British deserters from American ships. Mason and Slidell were neither seized on the grounds they were deserters nor compelled to serve in the US Navy. Warren H. Gordon correctly describes Seward's message as a 'monument to illogic' in *The Fountain of Discontent: The Trent Affair and Freedom of the Seas* (Northeastern University Press, 1981), p. 115.
- 51 *The Economist*, 11 Jan. 1862.
- 52 *The Illustrated London News*, 11 Jan. 1862.
- 53 Although all historians of Civil War diplomacy reference it, the last in-depth study of the treaty appears to be A. Taylor Milne, 'The Lyons–Seward Treaty of 1862', *The American Historical Review*, 38/3 (Apr. 1933), pp. 511–25. Even Myers' authoritative *Caution and Cooperation* only devotes two pages out of 332 to the treaty.
- 54 Palmerston to Russell, 24 Sep. 1861, Russell Papers, National Archives, PRO30/22/21. The American in question was John Lothrop Motley, yet another contributor to the traditional myth.
- 55 'Letter from Thomas Morgan at Newbury port goal', 1 Dec. 1861, to Abraham Lincoln, Record Group 204, Records of Pardon Attorney, Box 10, 358. National Archives. Quoted in Sarah A. Batterson, "An ill-judged piece of business", p. 188.
- 56 Despite believing the potential for conflict existed, Howard Jones nonetheless insists, 'there can be no question that the Palmerston ministry wanted to avert a war with the Union': *Union in Peril: the Crisis of British intervention in the Civil War* (University of North Carolina Press, 1992), p. 111. Earlier works such as Crook, *The North, the South and the Powers* and Krein, *The Last Palmerston Government* already held this view. This is also the position of Myers in *Caution and Cooperation* and Niels Eichhorn in 'The Intervention Crisis of 1862: A British Diplomatic Dilemma?', *American Nineteenth Century History*, 15/3 (Nov. 2014), pp. 287–310.
- 57 On the efforts of the pro-Confederates in parliament, see, Campbell, *English Public Opinion*, ch. 5 and 'Palmerston and the American Civil War', in Miles Taylor and David Brown (eds.), *Palmerston Studies II* (University of Southampton Press, 2007), pp. 144–65.
- 58 Eichhorn, 'Intervention Crisis'.
- 59 Palmerston to Russell, 14 Sep. 1862, Palmerston to Russell, 17 Sep. 1862 and Palmerston to Russell, 22 Sep. 1862, Russell Papers, National Archives, PRO30/22/14D.
- 60 Palmerston to Russell, 8 Oct. 1862, Russell Papers, National Archives, PRO30/22/14D.
- 61 For more details on the reaction to Gladstone's speech, see, Campbell, *English Public Opinion*, pp. 177–9.
- 62 Palmerston to Russell, 20 Oct. 1862, Russell Papers, National Archives, PRO30/22/14D.
- 63 Palmerston to Russell, 22 Oct. 1862, Russell Papers, National Archives, PRO30/22/14D.
- 64 Palmerston to Russell, 26 Oct. 1862, Russell Papers, National Archives, PRO30/22/14D.
- 65 Palmerston to Russell, 3 Nov. 1862, Russell Papers, National Archives, PRO30/22/14D.
- 66 Bulloch's memoirs make it clear that he had to conceal his activities from the British government. James D. Bulloch, *The Secret Service of the Confederate States in Europe; Or, How the Confederate Cruisers Were Equipped* (2 vols., Bentley and Son, 1883).
- 67 Frank J. Merli, *The Alabama, British Neutrality and the American Civil War*, ed. David M. Fahey (University of Indiana Press, 2004), chs. 2–6
- 68 The definitive account of the Alabama saga is Merli, *The Alabama*, chs. 2–6, as well as his *Great Britain and the Confederate Navy, 1861–1865* (Indiana University Press, 1970). See, also, Warren F. Spencer, *The Confederate Navy in Europe* (University of Alabama Press, 1983).
- 69 See, Myers, *Caution and Cooperation*, chs. 7–8.
- 70 Fourth Session of the First Congress, 7 Dec. 1863. *The Messages and Papers of Jefferson Davis and the Confederacy*, ed. James D. Richardson, i (2 vols., Chelsea House, 1966), p. 357.
- 71 Lincoln's comments recorded in Gideon Welles, *Diary of Gideon Welles: Secretary of the Navy Under Lincoln and Johnson*, ed. Edgar Thaddeus Welles, i (3 vols., Houghton Mifflin, 1909), pp. 451–2.
- 72 Bruce to Clarendon, 30 Nov. 1865, Clarendon Papers, quoted in Myers, *Caution and Cooperation*, p. 185.
- 73 This is the argument of Phillip E. Myers in *Dissolving Tensions: Rapprochement and Resolution in British–American–Canadian Relations in the Treaty of Washington Era, 1865–1914* (Kent University Press, 2015).
- 74 The argument that the Treaty of Washington represented 'virtual diplomatic recognition' of Canada by the United States was made to the author by Professor Francis M. Carroll of the University of Manitoba in an email.
- 75 On the US, Britain and Germany on neutral and belligerent rights at sea, see, Justin Quinn Olmstead, *The United States' Entry into the First World War: The Role of British and German Diplomacy* (The Boydell Press, 2018).

**John Bright**

Shannon Westwood traces the influence of John Bright on British attitudes to the American Civil War.

# 'The voice of reason'



# John Bright and his relationship with the Union during the American Civil War

THE AMERICAN CIVIL War was one of the most turbulent periods in world history. A nation founded on ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’ suddenly found itself divided according to different interpretations of what those principles actually meant. Individuals such as John Bright and Richard Cobden were unshaken in their belief that the Union, which epitomised their views, would undoubtedly be the victors. Historians tend to focus on Cobden and his influence in transatlantic relations during this period, but Bright should be given equal importance. Bright often lives in the shadow of Cobden when it comes to the American conflict, with few pieces of literature solely focusing on Bright’s involvement. As Louise Stevenson wrote, ‘to Americans of the present day, John Bright is an unknown figure of unknown historical significance.’<sup>1</sup> Yet, Bright’s prominent pro-Union voice was something that could not be ignored in the build-up to the conflict, and throughout its duration, since he regularly expressed his opinions on the events unfolding across the Atlantic. This was largely because the Union championed Bright’s own core beliefs: abolition, extending the franchise, liberty and equality for all. Bright was a firm believer in democracy, inspired by the American system and the constitution that the country was founded upon. His countless speeches and relentless letter writing were pivotal in maintaining cordial relations between Britain and America throughout the conflict, whilst also providing Unionists with an insight into public opinion at the time. It is for these reasons that Bright’s name should be ‘most honourably & indisputably connected with the history of the great civil war.’<sup>2</sup>

This article focuses on Bright’s involvement in the American Civil War by considering his pro-Union voice and attitudes, and the political activities that he was involved in that helped spread the Union’s cause. Such activities include a number of key speeches given by Bright on the subject of the Union, which will be considered alongside the regular correspondence with his American counterparts. The speeches used

are those that were conducted at public gatherings rather than behind closed doors, as these had the strongest impact and furthest reach. The letters sent between Bright and his American counterparts are an undervalued source of evidence and encompass proceedings from the pre-war period right through to the close of the conflict in 1865. These are found in the British Library and are a key resource when discussing Bright’s influence in the conflict. This is because they clearly demonstrate Bright’s integral role in maintaining lines of communication between Britain and America. Both of these political activities will be explored and dissected to highlight Bright’s support of the Union, and the efforts that he went to ensure that this support was heard.

Firstly, it is important to state that Bright was not just a domestic reformer; he was an advocate for reform in the United States too. His political voice and opinions on the Civil War reached a global audience, despite him not actively supporting the conflict itself. Bright is renowned for being an international pacifist, stemming from his Quaker roots, so it should come as no surprise that he did not support a war between the Union and the Confederacy. More precisely, it was his Quakerism that did not bring Britain into the war on the side of the Confederacy, coupled with his influence over leading parliamentarians such as Gladstone and Palmerston. This was demonstrated at a speech in Rochdale in 1861, at the outbreak of the conflict, in which he described how ‘no man is more in favour of peace than I am; no man has denounced war more than I have, probably, in this country’.<sup>3</sup> Bright’s singular aim when it came to the American Civil War was to preserve American democracy. He had long admired the freedom of American democracy and longed for a similar system to be adopted in Britain, which was slowly widening the scope of democracy through several extensions of the franchise. He was regularly accused of ‘wanting to Americanize their country’ by his British counterparts and hoped that Britain would follow in America’s footsteps to bring about a

John Bright (1811–89), 1864 (by Elliott & Fry; © National Portrait Gallery, London)

## 'The Voice of Reason': John Bright and his relationship with the Union during the American Civil War

more democratic society.<sup>4</sup> Bright's reasoning was that 'an instructed democracy is the surest foundation of government, and that education and freedom are the only sources of true greatness and true happiness among any people.'<sup>5</sup>

Bright's love for American democracy influenced his own campaigns for domestic reform, largely free trade and the extension of the franchise, as we know. President Lincoln and Bright shared these values in that respect; it was about the majority, not the elite few, with the ultimate goal being the preservation of democracy. In light of such beliefs, it is unsurprising that historians like James McPherson termed Bright as being 'the foremost British champion of the Union'.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, as well as being a powerful voice for the Union, Bright did not shy away from voicing his own opinion on slavery, despite never identifying as an abolitionist, and despite Quakerism being closely linked with the movement as a result of their early involvement in the destruction of slavery in Britain in the 1830s. He did not identify with the movement because abolitionists were often described as people who 'before the Civil War had agitated for the immediate, unconditional and total abolition of slavery in the United States', whereas Bright's interests lay with domestic reform.<sup>7</sup>

In his vocality surrounding slavery, Bright simply accepted and agreed that as an institution it was backward and outdated, and not in line with America's principles. In his speeches he regularly drew a comparison between slaves and the British working class, arguing that these people came from 'bonds' themselves, and how the lower classes could offer sympathy to those slaves who were still not free people.<sup>8</sup> This tactical move by Bright would have resonated with a good number of people at a time when many among the lower classes were regarded as social outcasts. The speeches provoked sympathy for the Union, culminating with the famous speech at the Manchester Free Trade Hall in 1862, demonstrating the power and influence of Bright's commentary of the conflict. There were two main ways in which Bright demonstrated his views: through his passion and oratory on the subject, showcased in his speeches; and in transatlantic correspondence to his pro-Union counterparts in the United States.

### Speeches

Bright's support of the Union was undoubtedly best expressed through his many speeches during the course of the conflict. Bright's oratory is

**Bright's love for American democracy influenced his own campaigns for domestic reform, largely free trade and the extension of the franchise.**

widely celebrated, with him often described as a 'talent in presenting with so much eloquence and force.'<sup>9</sup> Bright made speeches to a variety of audiences, from MPs in parliament, to the masses squeezed into the union and free trade halls across the country. Without a doubt, the speeches made in parliament are of the utmost importance; however, it was not the location that made his speeches significant, but, rather, the audiences. Whilst all his speeches are important, the speeches made to the masses – mainly the working classes – were the ones that had the most impact. The reasons for this are threefold. Firstly, the Union's rationale for the conflict reached a much wider audience than it normally would have – an audience that included many members of the public who were excluded from the political discussions of MPs. Secondly, the working classes were directly impacted by the Lancashire Cotton Famine of 1862, when their livelihoods were dramatically turned around due to the block on the import of Confederate cotton. Thirdly, and finally, by speaking to the masses, Bright was creating a grassroots movement that admired Lincoln and the Union and consequently fostered a patience for the situation that became crucial as the conflict continued.

Bright's idolised views of American democracy were a regular theme in his speeches. One particular example came in Rochdale in November 1863 and demonstrates Bright's ability to convince his audience of the benefits of American democracy. Attending alongside Richard Cobden, Bright used his voice to illustrate how his views on America were becoming popular among the many. In this, he made particular reference to the restoration of the Union and the abolition of slavery, and proposed that the rectification of these moral issues would lead Britain to 'learn that an instructed democracy is the surest foundation of government, and that education and freedom are the only sources of true greatness and true happiness among any people.'<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, he added that the conflict had gained much more recognition than the previous two years, when the people and politicians that defended the Confederacy were 'either profoundly dishonest or profoundly ignorant.'<sup>11</sup> At another speech at a dinner held in Rochdale in 1861, the *Rochdale Observer* had commented on Bright's speech and described him as being 'one man in England who did not forget he was allied with them in language and blood.'<sup>12</sup> Unsurprisingly, such rhetoric ensured that Bright received increasing numbers of letters praising his efforts. For example, in 1864, Edmund Bittinger wrote to



## 'The Voice of Reason': John Bright and his relationship with the Union during the American Civil War

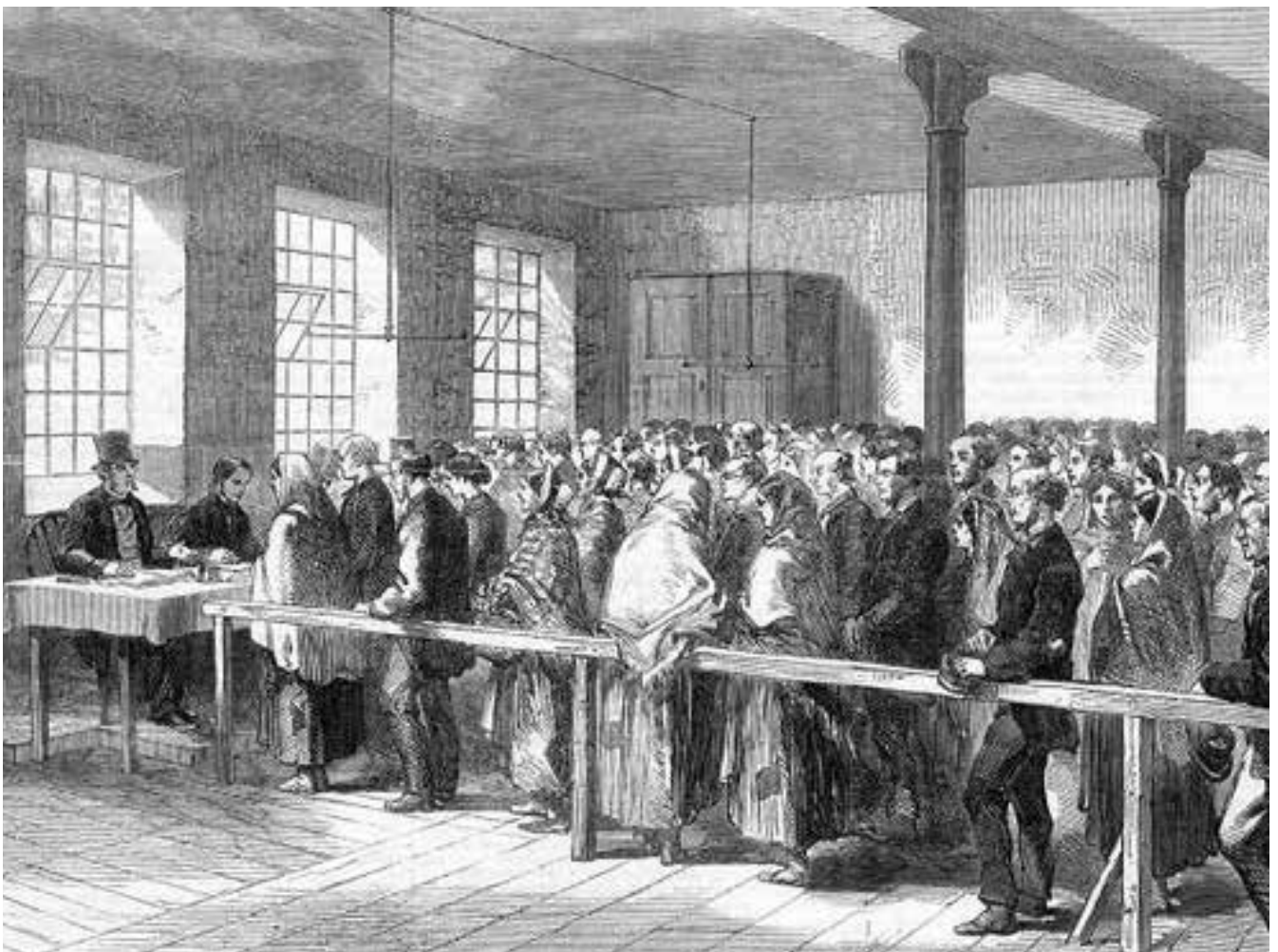
Bright in admiration, noting that his 'noble & exalted statesmanship, true philanthropy of love of liberty have given you a home in the American heart which has been awarded to the Englishmen of the present generation.'<sup>13</sup> The correspondence that Bright received will be discussed later in this article.

Additionally, at the meeting of the trade unions in London, in March 1863, Bright spoke to trade unionists about the war and emphasised that the sole purpose of their gathering was to express 'sympathy with the Northern States of America in the present struggle, and a belief that their success would lead to the speedy emancipation of the negro race.'<sup>14</sup> Bright spoke at great length about differing aspects of the conflict – including the economic impact it had had in Britain, owing to the blockades imposed on imported cotton – but made sure to underscore to those in attendance the importance of supporting the Union. As in his previous speeches, Bright emphasised the notion that both Unionists and the British workers were the same, regularly referring to them as brothers. This was further demonstrated at the closing of the speech, when Bright spoke of his hopes to 'see

Lancashire cotton famine: an 1862 newspaper illustration showing people queueing for food and coal tickets at a district Provident Society office.

the people of England and their brothers of America marching shoulder to shoulder determinedly forward, the pioneers of human progress, the champions of universal liberty.'<sup>15</sup> The language used by Bright was clearly influenced by the founding pillars of American democracy, the ones that he admired so much, and the very principles he wanted to disseminate and popularise among his biggest supporters.

When looking at Bright as a prominent voice in support of the Union, it is impossible to ignore the influence this had in Lancashire during the Cotton Famine. The Cotton Famine had huge repercussions for the county as a whole, as 310,000 out of 440,000 people living in Lancashire in 1860 were employed in cotton.<sup>16</sup> The cotton industry is enshrined in the history of the county of Lancashire and, for many years, it was by far the largest industry in the entire north-west of England. This extreme suffering gave Lancashire, as Mary Ellison argued, 'a basic involvement in the American Civil War.'<sup>17</sup> It is not hard to understand why the Union blockade on Confederate ports had such a negative impact on the economic health of the region. To further illustrate



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the importance of American cotton in Britain's industry, D. J. Oddy described how Britain 'bought nearly 71 per cent of the American crop in 1859–1860, which amounted to 80 per cent of the United Kingdom's total imports of raw cotton.'<sup>18</sup> As a mill owner however, Bright has been subject to accusations of double standards, for whilst he was expressive in discussing the suffering that working classes endured, he refused to contribute to the poor relief fund in Rochdale but instead offered his workers loans which they would eventually be unable to repay.

Of course, there was an alternate supply of Cotton from India, but Oddy's statistics show just how heavily reliant Britain was on its transatlantic supply. Bright vocally disagreed with changing suppliers largely due to his undying support for America. Bright, as a mill owner, was badly affected by the Cotton Famine, but, despite this, still disagreed with changing supplies to Indian cotton, thus demonstrating his support for the Union. His opinion was publicly showcased at a speech in Birmingham in 1862, in which he openly disagreed with economists like Edward Atkinson and clarified how, by continuing to trade with America, this did not correlate with supporting slavery or the Confederacy. Bright was thus responsible for educating the British people, and notably the working classes, who, without Bright, would not have had a full understanding of the conflict. James Skirving in 1864 would later go on to describe Bright as being 'vital to the interests of human freedom' and how the 'people of England have but a faint idea of it, and would have none whatever but for you.'<sup>19</sup> Bright was therefore considered almost crucial, by Unionists, for the education of the people of Britain about their cause and held that, without him, none of it would have been possible.

In summary, Lancashire and its inhabitants ultimately suffered so the Union could prevail in the conflict by crippling the Confederate economy. At a speech in Birmingham, Bright expressed the importance of this and, to further contextualise his arguments, explained the differing opinions concerning the Union among the aristocracy. This was a bold move for Bright, as he knew that this meeting, and the opinions voiced there, would eventually reach America, where they could be acknowledged by those close to President Lincoln. With this speech, Bright aimed to demonstrate how a complete severing of ties with American cotton would be disastrous for the longevity of the cotton industry. He amplified the views of the

working classes, and identified with them, as demonstrated in this extract:

But most of all, and before all, I believe – I am sure that is true in Lancashire, where the working men have seen themselves coming down from prosperity to ruin, from independence to a subsistence on charity, – I say that I believe that the unenfranchised but not hopeless millions of this country will never sympathize with a revolt which is intended to destroy the liberty of a continent, and to build on its ruins a mighty fabric of human bondage.<sup>20</sup>

In this, Bright brought attention to those suffering the greatest, and helped his listeners empathise and relate to those still held captive in slavery. He likened their struggle to that of the lower classes, who were collectively prisoners to the political and class system. Bright rightly stated that those that were unenfranchised but were free from suffering, say predominantly the middle classes, would not be able to relate to slavery in America because their struggle was not one and the same. It is partially true, as they had not suffered the greatest losses during the famine. This level of similarity and relatability between Unionists and the struggles of the working classes of Lancashire helped British workers understand the conflict on a deeper level and could now understand what their motives were for continuing the conflict. This was largely down to Bright's oratory and pro-Union voice being showcased at his speeches. Bright's insistence on standing by American cotton, and his desire to foment an element of relatability between those in the Union, those in slavery, and those among the British working classes, were greatly admired and appreciated by his American counterparts. People such as Theodore Tilton, an American newspaper editor, praised Bright for his and Lancashire's support in standing by this decision. Tilton hoped that 'God [will] help you, and all the rest of the nobility in England – by which I mean the noble souls of Lancashire, who know how to suffer ... I reach my hand to you over the sea!', and thereby acknowledged the suffering that British workers were experiencing in aid of continuing the Anglo-American cotton trade.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to his influence among workers during the Cotton Famine, Bright's pro-Union voice was significant in teaching the British people how to organise and conduct their own meetings. One of the most notable instances of this was at the Manchester Free Trade Hall

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in December 1862, which stands as the apex of Bright's voice and influence in British discussions about the American conflict. This was a meeting organised and attended by the working- and middle-class men of Manchester, which was something not uncommon in mid-Victorian Britain, and covered extensively by the popular *Manchester Guardian*. At this point in the conflict, a common understanding was being established between Unionists and the working people of Manchester and Lancashire, which was based on a shared struggle of mere survival. As stated earlier, for Unionists, the struggle was evidently the American Civil War and how it split the nation. For British working classes in Manchester and, more widely in Lancashire, it was the economic impact of the Cotton Famine and the blockade on Confederate ports. Transatlantic relations were strained prior to Lincoln's election, but now that abolition and slavery were widely understood factors in the conflict, Lancashire had sided once again with the Union and the majority pledged their support during the Civil War.

Many working- and middle-class men were educated on the issue of the conflict, slavery and Bright's desire to abolish it, and this led them to want to pass resolutions of their own. They had taken inspiration from Bright's earlier speeches in parliament, London and Rochdale, in which Bright had openly supported the Union. Bright's rhetoric and views on slavery were evident at this meeting, as the workers made particular reference to the choice of 'legal freedom' and stated that 'one thing alone has, in the past, lessened our sympathy with your country and our confidence in it, – we mean, the ascendancy of politicians who not merely maintained negro slavery, but desired to extend and root it more firmly.'<sup>22</sup> They went on to say that in such a short space of time, President Lincoln had made considerable steps to ensuring freedom would prevail, which 'fills us with hope that every stain on your freedom will shortly be removed, and that the erasure of that foul blot upon civilisation and Christianity – chattel-slavery – during your presidency, will cause the name of Abraham Lincoln to be honoured and revered by prosperity.'<sup>23</sup> When reading the speech in its entirety, it is unquestionable that Bright's experience and ideas were filtered throughout.

The *Manchester Guardian* reprinted the speech in its entirety and saw how the American Civil War was becoming an opportunity for the working classes to express their opinions on slavery and support the Union.<sup>24</sup> The newspaper, whilst directly not stating their own opinion on the content of the meeting, did

believe that it lacked influence due to the more respectable middle classes choosing to stay away from the hall.<sup>25</sup> Anonymous readers contributed their opinions however, which were published by the paper. In a follow-up piece entitled 'To the Editor of the Guardian', there was a response that produced an interesting debate. Whilst the author praised the organisation and publicity of the meeting, the contents of the event provoked a different reaction. The anonymous contributor wrote:

Why, sir, had not this rupture taken place, we should have gone on comfortably, taking slave-grown cotton (the real encouragement to slavery), and never had our consciences pricked about the question.<sup>26</sup>

It is not clear whether the 'rupture' mentioned referred to the meeting or the conflict itself, but it would seem the most logical for it to refer to the latter. Essentially it suggests that had the American Civil War not been brought into the public sphere, the British people would have gone about their livelihoods as normal. A thought would not have been spared for the origins of the cotton that they produced and sold. However, through individuals such as Bright and his public speeches, the middle and working classes acquired knowledge of the conflict and its origins, and therefore naturally raised questions with regards to the morality of slavery. Bright wanted to create this ongoing debate amongst the public; he wanted to provide awareness-raising information about the issues that were occurring. Bright's voice in the build-up to the meeting at the Trade Hall, simply put, paved the way for differing perspectives and arguments on the topic, and brought these debates that were being had about the Civil War, in private and parliamentary settings, into the public domain.

Therefore, Bright proved to be pivotal for the Union, not by strengthening transatlantic relations, but simply by maintaining them. What makes this even more impressive is the fact that the ever-present threat of domestic and economic turmoil in Britain did little to cool volatile Anglo-American relations. Whilst Bright was public in his support for the Union, he also continued his appraisal and admiration for America in his own, private letters with leading Unionists. Bright's letters are held in the National Archives in Washington DC, but, when considering Bright's influence, it is equally important to examine the letters that he received from notable figures at the heart of the American Civil War. Letters from

His support from Unionists was paramount and is clearly demonstrated by the sheer volume of letters that he received. Patrick Joyce, in *Democratic Subject: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England*, likened the fanatical response to Bright's speeches as representative of a kind of 'cult'.

his co-correspondents are held in the British Library and are an undervalued resource when examining Bright's pro-Union voice, as they give us a greater understanding of how deeply Bright was respected and adored on the American continent.

#### Letters

Although Bright's pro-Union voice manifested predominantly in the public speaking arena, he privately showcased his support for the Union through the art of letter writing – corresponding with leading Unionists. For the purpose of this article, it is the content within these letters that provides the more convincing argument as to how significant Bright's voice was. His support from Unionists was paramount and is clearly demonstrated by the sheer volume of letters that he received. Patrick Joyce, in *Democratic Subject: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England*, likened the fanatical response to Bright's speeches as representative of a kind of 'cult'.<sup>27</sup> This suggests an almost religious, spiritual association with Bright's values and methods. From here, this article will consider the letters that Bright received, and highlight the abundance of praise heaped upon him. He was routinely invited to take part in, or be an honorary guest at, functions and trips overseas, illustrating just how well thought of he was. The letters that he received were largely in response to his speeches, which propelled Bright to worldwide recognition for his oratory. However, this was not their only purpose, and many correspondents wanted to question Bright's opinions and thoughts further, on issues such as abolition, and the very real prospect of a divided United States.

During the conflict, Bright corresponded with prominent Unionists, most significantly politicians and confidants of President Abraham Lincoln, and did his utmost to pledge support for their cause. Bright closely spoke with Charles Sumner and William Seward, who relayed these letters to the likes of President Lincoln in cabinet meetings. For example, in relation to Britain's response to the Lancashire Cotton Famine, Bright wrote to Sumner reassuring him that the British 'working-class is with you and against the South', something that was later read aloud to the president himself.<sup>28</sup> Another example is a piece of correspondence with William Henry Aspinall, who redirected Bright's response to Salmon P. Chase, Lincoln's secretary of the treasury, who also read Bright's ideas to President Lincoln. Bright's letters were described as having 'influence', though this was

never explained or discussed.<sup>29</sup> Bright and Lincoln never met in person, owing to the former's reluctance to travel to the United States as his close friend Cobden had done. However, the two enjoyed a mutual admiration, a relationship exemplified by the presence of a newspaper clipping of a John Bright speech calling for Lincoln's re-election. This clipping was found in Lincoln's jacket pocket, following his assassination in April 1865.<sup>30</sup> It is a clear demonstration that Bright's voice was highly regarded by not only Unionists, but those closest to the president and in top government positions.

It was mentioned earlier that Bright received a large volume of letters throughout his transatlantic network, and it could be argued that this 'fan mail' gave him an almost celebrity-like status. To examine a definition by Simon Morgan, a person became a 'celebrity' in the Victorian period when 'a sufficiently large audience is interested in their actions, image and personality to create a viable market for commodities carrying their likeness and for information about their lives and views'.<sup>31</sup> So, to an extent, Bright's pro-Union voice propelled him to being at the forefront of international opinion on the conflict. His transatlantic correspondence began in the 1850s, discussing the American political and democratic system, as well as the prospect of the Civil War that loomed. What this shows is Bright's initial inquisitiveness into the nature of the American political system, and it traces his own growing desire for a British system that mirrored that of its transatlantic counterpart. In fact, Bright was often accused by his critics of trying to 'Americanize' Britain and move towards an idealist American system.<sup>32</sup> This is because the British elite were opposed to any form of American system as, at that time, the British aristocracy held the bulk of political power due to the lack of enfranchisement at that time. If Britain were to adopt a more American democracy-style system, the British elite would have to concede their own privilege, and almost monopolised access to the vote, to the public. For Bright, the American way of thinking incorporated the average working man and appeared to be more open than our system at that time.

The contents of these letters differ greatly in content. They include appraisals of Bright's most prominent and well-documented pro-Union speeches in Birmingham and Manchester, as well as invitations from committees across the country, and beyond, requesting his presence at their next conference. For the most part, John Bright was praised for both his activism in parliament, and his growing support

among the working people of Manchester and Lancashire. In a letter from the New York Chamber of Commerce, P. Perit wrote that 'to have found an able and fearless advocate under such circumstances; was a privilege, which we cannot too fully appreciate, or acknowledge with sufficient warmth.'<sup>33</sup> Unionists knew the risks that Bright was taking by being so outspoken about the Union and his support for it, and realised that there would be a backlash against him from the British government and its public. In an expression of deepest thankfulness, Perit emphasised how grateful America was for Bright's rallying cries to the masses in Britain in support of the Union. He summarised this best by stating that 'this nation will ever remember the gratitude, the noble advocacy of our cause, which you have had the firmness and courage to maintain, in face of public prejudice, and ministerial opposition.'<sup>34</sup> Likewise, at a council in Denver on 28 January 1864, resolutions were passed commending Bright and Cobden for their pro-Union support. From observing the correspondence, this appeared to be a normal procedure of this time. At this particular meeting, the first resolution passed was 'that we, the Union, freedom loving men of Denver, Colorado Territory, United States of America, recognize in John Bright and Richard Cobden, true representatives of the outspoken spirit of English liberty'.<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, individuals such as Anson Gleason, a US Presbyterian minister who also served as a missionary to the Chocotaw Indians, praised Bright for his speeches on the conflict and for bringing awareness to the American situation. In one particular letter, Gleason made reference to a speech that Bright made in Rochdale in 1861, and he asked Bright if he had any 'room in your noble philanthropic heart for a yankee stranger, who with his family has been recently very highly entertained and electrified by your late speech at the dinner in Rochdale'.<sup>36</sup> This meeting was used by Bright as an opportunity to initially explain the situation in America and the reasons for the country splitting into two. His speech would later be reprinted in the *Rochdale Observer*, which would bring greater awareness of the conflict to the public domain. With regards to the speech made at the Free Trade Hall in Manchester in 1862, Bright was recognised as having some involvement and received letters of thanks from his American counterparts. The scenes displayed at the hall attracted the attention of American author John Lothrop Motley, an individual who regularly corresponded with Bright. Motley praised Bright for his own

support of the Union and commented on the scenes that unfolded at the meeting, as well as the language used. Motley explained how this meeting illustrated to Americans how British perceptions of the American people and the conflict had changed, claiming that 'recent events have proved that the great heart of England is good.'<sup>37</sup> It was largely recognised therefore that whilst Bright did not attend the meeting, his American counterparts knew that he was somehow involved in influencing the organisation of the meeting. It was yet another avenue whereby Bright's pro-Union voice was demonstrated.

Bright's pro-Union voice also received recognition by those involved heavily in the abolition movement in the United States. As referenced at the beginning of this article, while Bright's stance on slavery was uncertain due to his lack of identification with the abolitionist movement, his principles and support of the Union clearly gained the attention of prominent figures who were supportive of the abolition of slavery. Bright, as we know, was more concerned with the freedom of everyone, not just specifically slaves. It could be argued that, in Bright's perspective, those without the franchise were equally as constrained within the British political system as slaves were in the United States. P. Wetmore, in one of his letters to Bright, described him as someone who articulated 'emancipated principles which lie at the root of international equity.'<sup>38</sup> Wetmore was also aware of Bright's attempts in parliament to defend the Union, which he had heard about through the correspondence that he had received from other individuals involved in the transatlantic network. Within this network they regularly exchanged newspaper transcripts of speeches, as well as reviews and coverage of international affairs. Moreover, influential figures in the abolitionist movement such as Harriet Beecher Stowe recognised Bright as part of the transatlantic network and praised his pro-Union stance in Britain. She commended Bright as 'the Liberal Member of Parliament John Bright whose constant support for the Union was a source of comfort for many in the North.'<sup>39</sup> Bright's constant support, as discussed here, had helped explain to workers how supporting abolition in the United States to some extent also signified support for President Lincoln and the Union.

Bright continued to receive this praise past the culmination of the conflict at Appomattox Courthouse and also received invitations to go on trips to the continent that he had long admired, as well as places in Europe. This is

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where the correspondence slows significantly, with the same figures, namely George Peabody, continually inviting Bright on trips and clearly stating that he did not receive his reply. Whilst this does not suggest that Bright's pro-Union voice was now dormant, the Union had become victorious and there was no longer a need for a rallying cry to support it. Although the lack of response and acknowledgement to Peabody's letters could be perceived to be as 'ignorant' on Bright's part, his attention was turned back to domestic reform once again and therefore his interest in the Civil War was no longer at the forefront of his agenda.

### Conclusion

Bright's influence is unquestionable in relation to maintaining Anglo-American relations during the Civil War, and it comes as no surprise that he gained the nickname as a 'member of the Union', alongside Cobden. This article purposely explored John Bright's role in Anglo-American relations and placed greater focus on the methods that he used in order to disseminate the Union's aims to the British people. Bright is not meant to stand in the shadow of Cobden when it comes to international relations. Having not long overcome such a turbulent time in the Anglo-American relationship, the American Civil War brought a whole set of new challenges that both sides would face, and in turn would strain their alliance. The majority of Europe and large sections of British society, including many MPs and business owners, were in favour of 'remaining neutral', yet still supplied the Confederacy with supplies and aid. This was done in order to keep business booming and the supply of money continuing. For example, William Gladstone's family fortune was built entirely on the slave trade in the West Indies prior to its abolishment in Britain, so he naturally was more supportive of the Confederacy. His feelings were reflected when he described the Confederacy as 'a nation rightly struggling to be free.'<sup>30</sup>

Lord Palmerston, British prime minister during the Civil War, was more focused on the brewing tensions in Europe between France and Germany and therefore issued the policy of neutrality to prevent the American Civil War from becoming a further distraction. It is hard, therefore, to imagine that, in the minds of those individuals of a similar stature, a thought was ever spared for their Unionist counterparts suffering from the internal turmoil that they were experiencing. Who knows what would have become of transatlantic

relations had it not been for Bright, and also Cobden, standing out from the hesitancy of radical and liberal opinion.

Through his eloquent speeches and extensive correspondence, Bright played a significant role in maintaining the line of communication and the spreading of information across both countries. As a result, Bright can be perceived as being a 'gossip' or 'nosy' when, in fact, it means quite the opposite: Bright's inherent interest and desire for American democracy in Britain, and wanting to protect that, is what influenced him to speak about these topics to the masses. Whilst his speeches in parliament were significant in the political sphere, it was his discussions at large public gatherings that propelled him into the Anglo-American discussion. His oratory and passion for the Union reached the masses, which eventually culminated in middle- and working-class men staging their own gathering, at the Free Trade Hall in Manchester. Bright likened their struggle during the Lancashire Cotton Famine to that against slavery and described how both workers and slaves were essentially trapped within the constraints of the political system that swore to protect their rights. The coverage of his speeches was wide-reaching, which prompted the influx of letters that Bright received from prominent Unionists. Bright's behaviour during the conflict can therefore be described as exceptional, as he was clearly politically active and outspoken about the conflict.

Furthermore, his correspondence helped to build the foundation of transatlantic correspondence that helped to spread the ideas of the Union, whilst also explaining the situation regarding Britain's stance. These letters were so widespread, that even Charles Sumner and Secretary of State William Seward took part in the correspondence, and as a result it culminated in Bright's letters being read aloud to President Lincoln. Bright's high status in America culminated in a marble bust being constructed in honour of Bright, which was placed in President Lincoln's office, but sadly the president never saw the finished piece due to his assassination. Additionally, the clipping of Bright's response supporting Lincoln's re-election in 1864 that was found on his person following his assassination, is a humble anecdote showing how much of an impact Bright's pro-Union voice had.

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**Bright's influence is unquestionable in relation to maintaining Anglo-American relations during the Civil War, and it comes as no surprise that he gained the nickname as a 'member of the Union', alongside Cobden.**

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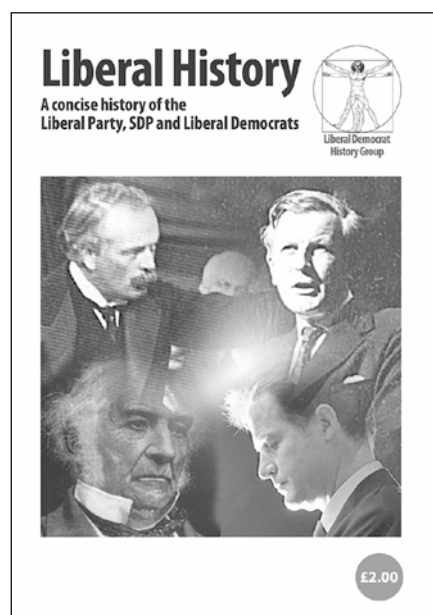
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## John Stuart Mill

Timothy Larsen traces Mill's contribution to developing Liberal support for the North in the American Civil War.

# John Stuart Mill, moral outrage

JOHN STUART MILL was the most eminent British intellectual to support the side of the North in the American Civil War empathetically, publicly, and already in the early part of the conflict.<sup>1</sup> As to the Liberal Party, although a minority, there were a sprinkling of other prominent figures who took an early pro-North stance, including even cabinet ministers W. E. Forster and the Duke of Argyll. The other obvious person of Mill's stature, in terms of being a voice to the people, to do the same was John Bright – one can see Bright as the greatest Liberal orator on the side of the Union in parliament and Mill as the most important voice in the press. Moreover, Mill is not just any Liberal, he is one of the most influential thinkers in the entire tradition, so much so that some have even suggested that he deserves the title of 'the father of modern liberalism.'<sup>2</sup>

Setting these two realities side by side is particularly intriguing because, in contrast to Mill, key Liberal leaders at the time of the conflict were, at the very least, prepared to move toward acquiescing in the secession of the Southern states and recognising the Confederacy as a sovereign, independent nation, including the prime minister, Lord Palmerston, the foreign secretary (and next prime minister), Lord Russell, and the chancellor of the exchequer (and the next Liberal prime minister after Russell), W. E. Gladstone. Mill himself fumed that, as he saw it, even Liberals were opposing the liberal side in the conflict:

Why is the general voice of our press, the general sentiment of our people, bitterly reproachful to the North, while for the South, the aggressors in the war, we have either mild apologies or direct and downright encouragement? and this not only from the Tory and anti-democratic camp, but from Liberals, or *soi-disant* such?<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of this article is to explore Mill's reaction to the American Civil War, both in its own right, and as a way of examining and pondering certain ways of being Liberal that

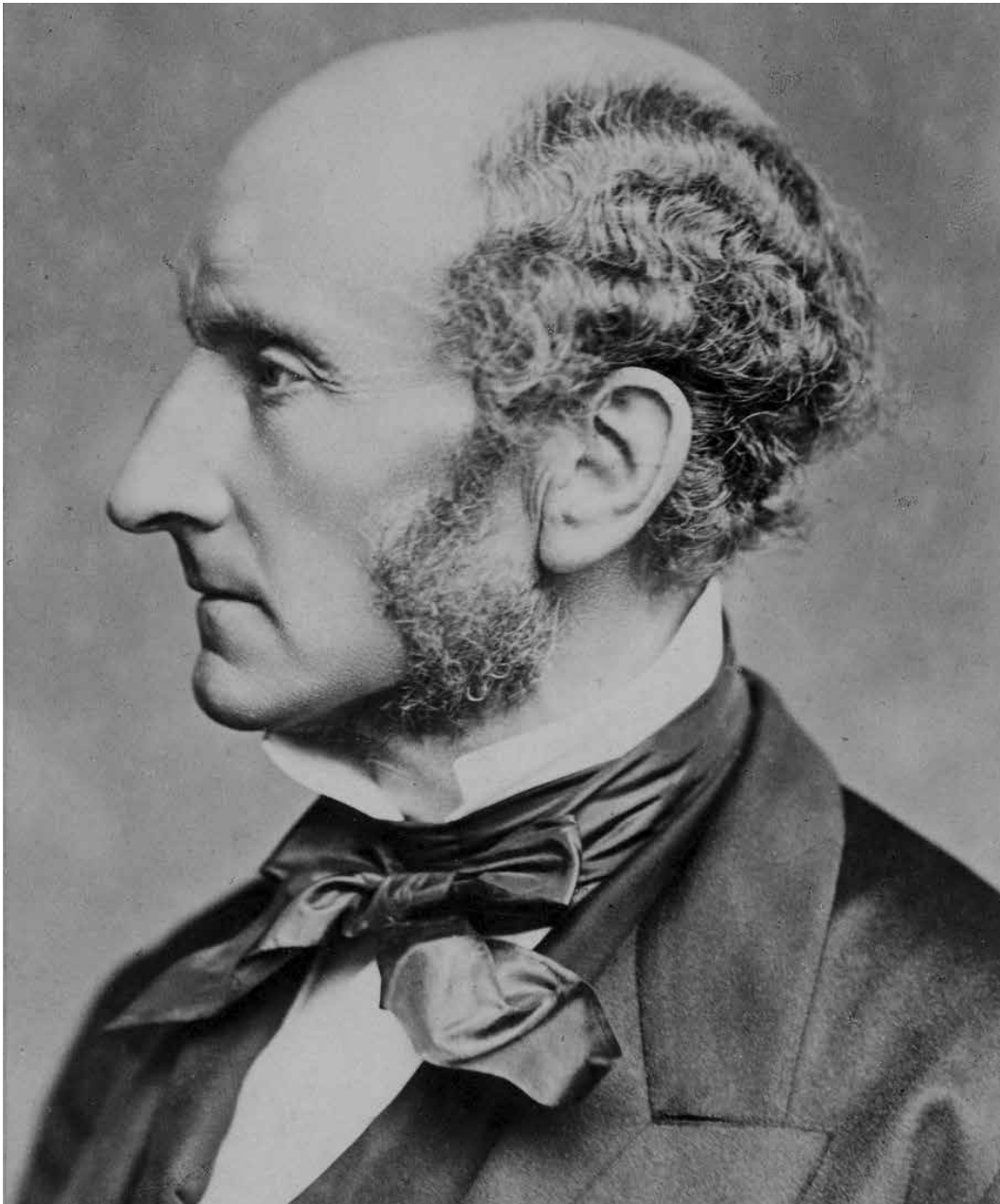
it represents. A whole range of issues were at stake in the war and in Britain's response to it, including the question of tariffs, national honour and pre-existing tensions in Anglo-American political relations, the spread of democracy, the goal of preserving the Union, and the issues of states' rights and limited government. At least in his own private thinking, Mill himself recognised the reality of these other issues to a certain extent. Nevertheless, this article will argue that Mill sought to define the conflict as one against slavery in order to advance the cause of the North from the high ground of morality – of right feeling – to which one could at least affect to maintain that mere matters of policy ought to bow. Mill thereby played an early and significant part in Liberalism's moral turn.

The one other issue, besides slavery, to which Mill also paid considerable attention was democracy: he was convinced that if the North failed in its struggle, then the cause of democracy throughout the world would be set back. In his *Autobiography*, Mill retrospectively reported that he opposed the Confederacy because he knew that, if it was victorious, it 'by destroying for a long time the prestige of the great democratic republic would give to all the privileged classes of Europe a false confidence.'<sup>4</sup> Brent E. Kinser, in an insightful, book-length exploration of this connection, *The American Civil War in the Shaping of British Democracy*, observes that much of what British intellectuals 'had to say about the American conflict was meant to be read in terms of the discussions surrounding reform in Britain.'<sup>5</sup> Hugh Dubrulle has likewise observed that the war was filtered through the question of 'Britain's destiny as an Americanised society.'<sup>6</sup> In September 1862, Mill asserted privately that, if the North should triumph, the Tories 'will be mortified that what they absurdly think an example of the failure of democracy should be exchanged for a splendid example of its success.'<sup>7</sup> More bluntly, Mill repeatedly referred to *The Times* and the Tories and others who sympathised with the Confederacy as 'those who hate democracy.'<sup>8</sup> To make

**In contrast to Mill, key Liberal leaders at the time of the conflict were, at the very least, prepared to move toward acquiescing in the secession of the Southern states and recognising the Confederacy as a sovereign, independent nation.**



# John Stuart Mill and the American Civil War



John Stuart Mill  
(1806–73), 1865 (John  
Watkins, London  
Stereoscopic &  
Photographic  
Company; © National  
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London)

the contrast even neater, Mill insisted that the Southern states were a region of America that, unlike the North, had been ‘founded on aristocratic principles.’<sup>9</sup>

It is also worth bearing in mind that the extension of the franchise in Britain was a prime political preoccupation of Mill’s throughout the stretch of years that included

the American Civil War, from his *Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform* (1859) to the Second Reform Act of 1867. Mill’s *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861) was published during the war, and he was actively scheming on this issue throughout the conflict. For instance, Mill wrote to William Rathbone, Jr., in November 1863:

## John Stuart Mill, moral outrage and the American Civil War

Nothing can be more true than your observations on the importance of having a definite plan of constitutional reform grounded on intelligible principles, to present to the nation at the time (perhaps not far distant) when the temporary indifference to the subject will have given place to a renewed and possibly an eager interest in it. The ruling classes are singularly short-sighted in not perceiving that they will certainly, in no long time, have to deal with a reaction of this nature. But they have been in a fool's paradise ever since they succeeded in stifling Lord Russell's reform bill ...<sup>10</sup>

During the last months of the war, Mill agreed to stand for parliament as a Liberal candidate for Westminster. In a telling indication of what he thought the agenda for the next parliament would be, he responded to the invitation by saying that he was willing to represent 'the Reform party'.<sup>11</sup>

One can even see the two causes overlapping. Thomas Bayley Potter, for example, had founded the Union and Emancipation Society, which, of course, Mill fully supported. In March 1865, however, when the Union victory was clear and the end of the war just a few weeks away, Mill counselled Potter to turn next towards giving leadership to the cause of reform in Britain.<sup>12</sup> In his published article, 'The Contest in America', Mill warned that far from being on the side of a wide franchise, the Confederacy stood for a theory of human relations that would deprive the British masses of even their existing rights: 'And the doctrine is loudly preached through the new Republic, that slavery, whether black or white, is good in itself, and is the proper condition of the working classes everywhere.'<sup>13</sup> Other Liberals were making such connections as well. John Bright, for instance, praised the workmen of Birmingham who had donated to help relieve the suffering in Lancashire due to the Cotton Famine caused by the war, before making this pointed dig: 'He was only sorry that every one of the men who thus nobly subscribed had not his name on the register of electors, and was not enabled to give his free vote at the polls.'<sup>14</sup> In a similar vein, Gladstone would argue after the war that the way that the Lancashire workers stood for principle over self-interest in such a costly way proved that they were worthy of being entrusted with the vote.<sup>15</sup> The causes of the Union in America and of franchise extension in Britain were deeply intertwined.

Stefan Collini has observed that Mill treated slavery as 'an extreme form of undemocracy',

**Mill had encouraged Cairnes to write it, and *The Slave Power* made a sustained argument, girded up by political economy, for the position that the war was about the institution of slavery.**

and that insight can serve as an apt transition to Mill's emphatic insistence that the conflict in America was about slavery.<sup>16</sup> Mill's influential, initial intervention to guide British opinion on the American war was an article in February 1862 in *Fraser's Magazine*: 'The Contest in America'. Its primary purpose was to answer the numerous voices in Britain, including many weighty ones, who denied that the war was about slavery. Mill was resolute in his insistence that Britons see the issue clearly for what it really was:

The world knows what the question between the North and South has been for many years, and still is. Slavery alone was thought of, alone talked of. Slavery was battled for and against, on the floor of Congress and in the plains of Kansas; on the Slavery question exclusively was the party constituted which now rules the United States: on slavery Fremont was rejected, on slavery Lincoln was elected; the South separated on slavery, and proclaimed slavery as the one cause of separation.<sup>17</sup>

Mill's other main public intervention in this debate appeared later that same year, in the October 1862 issue of the *Westminster Review*: 'The Slave Power'. This was in the form of a review of a book by the same name written by J. E. Cairnes. The book's subtitle ended: '*Being an Attempt to Explain the Real Issues in the American Contest*'. Mill had encouraged Cairnes to write it, and *The Slave Power* made a sustained argument, girded up by political economy, for the position that the war was about the institution of slavery.

The need to get this vital point drummed into obdurate heads sometimes tempted Mill not only to ignore, downplay, or set aside other relevant issues at stake in the war and in Britain's response to it, but even to elide some of the complexities of the conflict. For example, he would refer to the Union side as 'the Free States', and even did so in 'The Contest in America'.<sup>18</sup> Those were not synonyms, however, and therefore such terminology was inaccurate. Indeed, the very capital of the United States, Washington DC, was slave territory, as were four states in the Union: Kentucky, Missouri, Maryland, and Delaware. Likewise, Mill could refer to the Southern side as 'the Slaveholders' even though less than a third of white households in the Confederacy owned slaves.<sup>19</sup> Mill's motivation, of course, was to keep what he saw as the chief issue ever before people's eyes. In a letter to Henry Fawcett, Mill wrote

of: ‘the Slaveholders’ Confederacy. (One should never use any other designation for it than this, the one adopted by the Emancipation Society of Manchester).’<sup>20</sup>

And to Mill’s enduring credit, at least in terms of what has been discerned to be the fundamental meaning of history over time, he was right: he did see through to the momentous, central issue and meaning of the war – the abolition or persistence of slavery – when few other leaders of British opinion did. There are, of course, still people today that deny that the war was about slavery, but no one now imagines that the question of tariffs is a crucial one in determining the side with which one should sympathise, yet that was a not inconsiderable view in Britain at the time. Mill could be scathing in his denunciations of Southern sympathisers, yet even in his *Autobiography* – that is, once the unfolding of events had done so much to clarify the question – he was still handling that particular view with respect: ‘There were men of high principle and unquestionable liberality of opinion who thought it a dispute about tariffs.’<sup>21</sup> Mill was aware of the issue of gender-inclusive language, indeed, throughout the war he was trying to get the Reform movement to say ‘universal suffrage’ rather than ‘manhood suffrage’, but this is an occasion when he was not thinking along those lines. Even Harriet Martineau, who was heartily on the side of the North, gave weight to the tariffs issue.

The North was, indeed, irritatingly Protectionist; and the Liberal Party, after all, was the party of free trade. Mill would take the time to discount this view regarding what should be considered a decisive factor in picking a side for Britons, but his main target was those who imagined that the South was fighting a war of liberation, that it was a struggle for Southern freedom. Once again, Liberals had a history of siding with those who fought for their political independence. There were some who saw Jefferson Davis as a kind of Garibaldi figure – and Liberals in Britain, of course, had lauded Garibaldi to the heights. To begin, Mill would point out that each uprising had to be considered on its own merits. He gives as a thought experiment an island that only houses a prison, on which the inmates kill the guards, take over, and declare it to be a sovereign nation. Is there a duty in such a case for Britain to recognise its declaration of independence? As for a more likely scenario, he wondered if the British nation (or even the Liberal Party) was ready to let Ireland secede. Mill’s main point, however, took the argument back to slavery: Whose liberation? Whose freedom? Whose rights? Whose

independence? This war of secession, unlike others that many Liberals had supported, was not a matter of recognising the wishes of the people: ‘Have the slaves been consulted? Has *their* will been counted as any part in the estimate of collective volition?’<sup>22</sup> White Southerners were not fighting for human freedom, but only for the freedom to be oppressors.

To understand Mill and the American Civil War, one needs to understand Mill himself: his strange biography and bifurcated self. He was raised and educated by his father, James Mill, to be a cool, dispassionate, logical thinker. This training was so effective for a time that Mill later reflected that as a teenager he had become ‘a mere reasoning machine’. Specifically, he and his likeminded, Utilitarian friends were foes of ‘sentimentality’ and, indeed, all appeals to ‘feeling’. They were so determined on this point because they were frustrated by how often it was a weapon forged against them: ‘we found all the opinions to which we attached most importance, constantly attacked on the grounds of feeling.’<sup>23</sup> In debate, Mill would dismiss an appeal to feeling as irrelevant to the task of thinking through an issue: ‘the province of feeling commences where that of reason ends.’<sup>24</sup>

At the age of 20, however, Mill had a breakdown, and this resulted in his adopting a less doctrinaire position in which he learned how to balance logic with feeling, Bentham with Coleridge. He burned a manuscript of his which was an attack on sentiment. Nevertheless, although he now understood that there was more to life than logic, he also continued to believe that his own natural aptitude and calling lay in that direction. Hence his fame was first made with a massive, technical work, *A System of Logic* (1843). Throughout his mature years, individuals were continually stunned when they had pigeonholed Mill in their mind as a cool reasoner and then they suddenly discovered that he could also be a heated activist. Indeed, while this is no surprise to anyone who has studied Mill in depth – not least because of Richard Reeves portrait of him as a ‘Victorian firebrand’, a ‘passionate man of action’ – the assumption that Mill was clinically unfeeling still happens regularly to this day.<sup>25</sup>

The American Civil War is when Mill first gained widespread, public attention as a passionate polemicist. His erstwhile Benthamite ally, George Grote, described Mill disapprovingly as ‘violent against the South’.<sup>26</sup> Newspapers made the same observation: ‘According to the *Standard*, Mill’s arguments were not based on his usual rigorous logic but on his “passionate feeling.”’<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, the Duke of

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Argyll, who sympathised with the North, was pleasantly surprised to discover that ‘the cold-blooded philosopher comes out with much warmth.’<sup>28</sup> In his *Autobiography*, Mill reported that his ‘strongest feelings were engaged in this struggle’ and, especially given the views of his youth, it is striking how consistently he framed the debate in terms of feelings.<sup>29</sup> He complained that there was so much sympathy for the South because English ‘feeling’ had been subjected to ‘misdirection’.<sup>30</sup> And this was his appeal to Britain in ‘The Contest in America’: ‘now, if ever, is the time to review our position, and consider whether we have been feeling what ought to have been felt.’<sup>31</sup> Cairnes’s book was commended in Mill’s review for containing amply information ‘to give a new turn to English feeling on the subject.’<sup>32</sup> What Mill wanted – and was eventually delighted to see – was a reawakening of the ‘Anti Slavery feeling’ which Britain had had earlier in the century.<sup>33</sup> Mill praised the journalist Edward Dicey for writing about the war ‘with right feeling’.<sup>34</sup>

Mill’s feelings were so aroused because he saw Britain’s attitude toward the war as not a mere matter of policy: it was a moral issue. Moreover, he was determined to make Britons see that it was a moral issue. By their overwhelming sympathy with the South, Britons had been taking the wrong ‘moral attitude’: they had succumbed to the posture of an ‘inbred Toryism’ which ‘has no moral repugnance to the thought of human beings born to the penal servitude for life.’<sup>35</sup> Stefan Collini has convincingly presented Mill as the archetypal ‘public moralist’ of the Victorian age.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, Bruce L. Kinzer, Ann P. Robson, and John M. Robson have painted a detailed and vivid portrait of Mill as ‘a moralist in and out of Parliament’ who, by the mid-1860s, in his own estimation, was ‘one of the country’s leading political moralists.’<sup>37</sup> Eldon J. Eisenach’s edited volume, *Mill and the Moral Character of Liberalism*, also has as its theme the exploration of ‘Mill as moralist’.<sup>38</sup> Richard Reeves illuminatingly observed that Mill saw the American Civil War as a kind of ‘moral test’ for Britain.<sup>39</sup> Collini’s image is that Mill saw the war as ‘a thermometer with which to take the moral temperature of English society as a whole.’<sup>40</sup>

As with right feelings, this too became a way that Mill praised people during the war years. Perhaps somewhat awkwardly, he wrote a few words to ‘the editor of the *Spectator*’, praising whomever it was who held that office by saying he held him in very high ‘moral’ estimation.<sup>41</sup> As a scholar, Cairnes might have hoped that Mill would praise him as a formidable

thinker, but Mill’s mind was elsewhere, leading him to admire the political economist’s ‘excellent moral nature’.<sup>42</sup> Much of Mill’s allegedly ‘intemperate’ language about the war arose from his efforts to elicit a moral response from his readers: ‘The South are in rebellion not for simple slavery; they are in rebellion for the right of burning human creatures alive’; ‘It will be desirable to take thought beforehand what are to be our own future relations with a new Power professing the principles of Attila and Genghis Khan as the foundation of its Constitution’; and so on.<sup>43</sup>

The key point was that it was perfectly possible for Britons to think about the American Civil War through some other lens than morality. At one extreme, Mill’s erstwhile friend, Thomas Carlyle, in his bluff, strongman-worshipping, rabidly racist way, refused to acknowledge that even slavery itself was any kind of important or pressing moral issue.<sup>44</sup> If the war was not a moral issue, what kind of issue was it? To turn to fellow Liberals, James Fitzjames Stephen often thought about the conflict as a constitutional issue.<sup>45</sup> Or Britons could think about the war economically, or pragmatically, or in terms of policy, which are perhaps all various aspects of thinking of it in terms of personal or national self-interest. The Northern blockade – especially because of the loss of Southern cotton used in the Lancashire textile industry – was a major blow to the British economy and devastating to many individuals, so there was certainly a strong economic argument to be made that finding a way for the war to be over and to recognise the Confederate States of America was in British’s national interest. In some public remarks on 7 October 1862, W. E. Gladstone claimed that Jefferson Davis and those with him had ‘made a nation’.<sup>46</sup> This caused a sensation because it was widely interpreted as a signal that the government was about to recognise the Confederacy (and, indeed, key cabinet members were assuming at that time that it was more a matter of when than if that would happen). Putting an even heavier hand on the scale, Lord Russell tendentiously asserted in public that the North was fighting a war of domination while the South was fighting for its independence. Mill found that remark particularly exasperating: ‘The moral relations of the two parties are misplaced, are almost reversed, in Earl Russell’s dictum.’<sup>47</sup> At the very least, one can see Gladstone and Russell as taking a pragmatic approach to the question of Britain’s response to the war. Russell, in particular, rather than engaging in a moral discourse, was inclined

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to see matters through the lens of upholding Britain's national honour. Even in the case of the *Alabama*, which Russell knew was an incident in which Britain was at fault, he still was viewing matters through this frame – alarmed, for instance, that the government might allow the issue to be decided by international arbitration, an option which he was certain would be to forfeit Britain's national honour.<sup>48</sup> Again, the point is not to agree that none of these people were raising valid and important issues; the point is to see how Mill was using a strategy of foregrounding morality as a way of undercutting the relevance of other issues to Britons' decision regarding which side in the conflict to support.

While we are naming individuals, it is worth noticing the curious case of William Whewell. In his Manichaean frame of mind, Mill had pegged Whewell as an enemy. Whewell's *History of the Inductive Sciences* (1837) provided Mill with the foil he needed to rouse himself to write his *System of Logic*. It is more difficult to draw a straight line from someone's philosophical beliefs to the political ones that supposedly will inevitably flow from them than people often assume. Whewell was, in Mill's terms, an intuitionist, a believer in innate ideas. The philosophical dispute need not detain one here, but the thing to grasp for the purpose at hand is that Mill was so forcefully opposed to intuitionism because he believed that it served as an intellectual prop for aristocratic and other retrograde institutional forms that needed to be removed or reformed in the name of progress. Again, in short, it was, in Mill's view, a philosophical view that served to give aid and support to bad political positions. To Mill's great surprise and delight, however, Whewell was among that rare minority of eminent figures in British life who early on was an emphatic supporter of the Union side. Mill heard the report that Whewell would not even allow *The Times* into his house because of its pro-Southern slant. Here was real feeling! Here was the kind of passionate indignation that the situation should arouse in any right-thinking person.<sup>49</sup> From that moment onward Mill was happy to list Whewell as on the side of the angels.

To return to Gladstone and Russell, however, Mill the moralist was apt to see pure national self-interest as itself an inherently immoral standard. He had made that point already in the year before the war in his 'A Few Words on Non-Intervention'.<sup>50</sup> It was said that Palmerston opposed an international scheme to create a Suez Canal because it was not in Britain's interests; but if it was in humanity's

interests, Mill insisted, then opposing it out of merely national considerations was immoral. As Collini has observed of the Victorian public moralists: 'the partiality involved in privileging the claims of any more restricted group tended to be castigated as another form of selfishness.'<sup>51</sup> The point to keep in view is that Mill was insisting that the question of Britain's reaction to the American conflict needed to be framed in moral terms.

The perspective of social science research today can help us analyse what Mill was doing in his advocacy about the war. As we have already seen, and as researchers have confirmed, people can construe the same issue in moral or non-moral terms. Jay J. Van Bavel, Dominic J. Packer, Ingrid Johnsen Haas, and William A. Cunningham have demonstrated that 'people are able to shift back and forth between moral and non-moral evaluative modes in a highly flexible fashion.'<sup>52</sup> This also means that people can be prompted to reclassify an issue so that they are no longer just thinking about it pragmatically, but now see it as a moral issue. This has been called moral framing or reframing. As Matthew Feinberg and Robb Willer have shown, this technique is so powerful that it can effectively realign someone on an issue who had hitherto assumed that their political convictions necessitated them supporting the opposite position:

In the political arena, moral reframing involves arguing in favor of a political position that members of a political group would not normally support in terms of moral concerns that the members strongly ascribe to. Fitting a message to a particular audience in this way is persuasive because it makes the position relevant to and concordant with the audience's deeply held moral convictions. ... This suggests that moral reframing effects can be effective enough to be persuasive, even when seen as coming from a political outgroup.<sup>53</sup>

Moralising an issue also changes how people think and behave in other ways: once they have decided it is a moral issue, they hold to their view with greater tenacity and strength of conviction and in a more extreme form.<sup>54</sup> Finally, moral framing has been shown to result in 'resistance to compromise'.<sup>55</sup>

These are, of course, all outcomes that Mill was hoping for in his advocacy for the Union. The last one – a refusal to compromise – is particularly striking. In his 'Coleridge' essay in 1840, Mill had referred to England as 'the native

**Another striking feature of Mill's advocacy for the cause of the North was that the most powerful way he could find to communicate how momentous were the issues at stake was to reach for language that had a religious charge.**

land of compromise', but in the first half of the 1860s he was in no mood for compromise.<sup>56</sup> Mill's great fear throughout the war was that the North would be too soft on the South. He wanted slavery completely eradicated, and he was convinced that this would only happen if the Confederate states were utterly crushed. Yet more, he worried that if the Confederacy was crushed too easily then the situation might drift back into the *status quo ante bellum*. So, most jarring of all, Mill reasoned somewhat cold-bloodedly that Union losses and military setbacks would so harden the hearts of Northerners against the South that the end result would be the destruction of slavery. The more Northern blood that was spilt – without the North losing the will to continue the fight all the way to complete victory – the better. This is a running refrain in Mill's letters throughout the war years. After the Federals were defeated at the battle of Chickamauga in September 1863, for instance, Mill wrote to Henry Fawcett: 'The tidings from America may be considered good. It is a question if Rosecranz's [sic] check is to be regretted, since if the war ends too soon, it may end without the complete emancipation of the slaves.'<sup>57</sup> Even in his *Autobiography*, Mill reflected that he had had hopes of the good that would come out of the war if its 'termination did not come too soon and too easily.'<sup>58</sup>

The news of this bloody, bloody war – which Mill followed closely battle by battle – somehow would not elicit a response of horror or sympathy or compassion from him in regard to the staggeringly high numbers of killed and wounded. Mill was in an uncompromising frame of mind and any news that he thought meant that the North would fight on and not offer peace terms he regarded as good news. He does not tell us, in a Utilitarian calculus, how many deaths would be too many, but as the war was coming to an end he explicitly reaffirmed that he did not see the conflict as close to that limit: 'The present attitude of the Free States with respect to slavery was worth buying at even a greater price than has been paid for it.'<sup>59</sup> (On the Union side alone, that price was well over 360,000 soldiers killed.) The assassination of Abraham Lincoln did evoke human reactions from Mill, but even in the initial shock of that news he could not help but add that the cause 'may even benefit by it'.<sup>60</sup> In this view, every bloody, embittering attack on the North was just one more nail in the coffin of the Old South.

To return briefly to the research of social scientists, Linda J. Skitka, Anthony N. Washburn,

and Timothy S. Carse observe: 'There is also evidence that people are willing to accept violent solutions to conflict when doing so yields morally preferred ends.'<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, very few people are able or willing to keep forever looking exclusively through a moral lens. Mill himself supported Britain's official position of neutrality during the war. In other words, despite his heated rhetoric, he was not calling for Britain to become a co-belligerent with the North. This, of course, was the only practical position imaginable in British politics at the time – one might even have considered it quite a victory that the government was restrained from recognising the Confederacy. Still, as Kinser has astutely observed: 'On the point of neutrality Mill appeared to argue that political expediency supersedes moral necessity, even though such a view contradicts his unambiguous position that nothing in the American conflict is more important than the utter destruction of slavery.'<sup>62</sup> A purist moral position is often too narrow a path to stay upon. Mill often simplified the discussion of the conflict as part of a rhetorical strategy for motivating Britons to side with the North. It is also worth keeping in mind that Mill was not having to weigh specific actions and responses as a member of the government: he could declare what was right in bold, sweeping strokes without having the burden of needing to craft and implement the specifics of policies and to deal with their consequences.

Another striking feature of Mill's advocacy for the cause of the North was that the most powerful way he could find to communicate how momentous were the issues at stake was to reach for language that had a religious charge. Let's begin with his initial, great appeal to the British people, 'The Contest in America'. Before it became clear that the United States would back down, passions were inflamed in England against the Northern states because of the *Trent* affair, and there was a real possibility that Britain might go to war with the Union. Mill wrote after that crisis had passed, but he told his readers that, if the worst had happened, it would have meant that 'at the moment of conflict between the good and the evil spirit – at the dawn of a hope that the demon might now at last be chained and flung into the pit, England stepped in, and, for the sake of cotton, made Satan victorious.'<sup>63</sup> The evil spirit; the demon; Satan. Moreover, while people today often might not be aware of it, Mill's original readers would have heard a specific biblical allusion in this statement to Revelation 20:1–3 where Satan is chained and thrown into a pit.

Mill praised those true Christians who ‘consider a fight against slavery as a fight for God’. He declared that the proper way for the North to respond to their wrongdoing in the *Trent* affair was with ‘confession and atonement’. He argued that the Confederates were determined ‘to do the devil’s work’. He held out the hope that war would become, for Americans, the source of their ‘regeneration’ (a word overwhelmingly used in theological discourse). Finally, Mill insisted: ‘For these reasons I cannot join with those who cry Peace, peace.’<sup>64</sup> Once again, that is a very straightforward statement to understand on its surface without any special background knowledge and it is often quoted in discussions of Mill and the American Civil War, but what is not commented upon – but what his original readers would have well understood – is that Mill was aligning himself with the prophet Jeremiah.<sup>65</sup> It is Jeremiah who stands up as a true prophet to oppose the faithless priests and false prophets who have been deceiving the people about the reality of the situation by saying: ‘Peace, peace; when there is no peace.’ (Jeremiah 6:14; 8:11)

And, freethinker though he was, one should not imagine that Mill was just pandering to a religious audience.<sup>66</sup> Even in his private letters when writing to people who needed no convincing, Mill would reach for religious language as the only words that seemed strong enough to give vent to his feelings. For instance, he remarked to Cairnes in February 1863 that ‘the battle against the devil could not be fought on a more advantageous field than that of slavery.’<sup>67</sup> He insisted that, if the Confederacy was triumphant, then the next step must be ‘a general crusade of civilised nations for its suppression’.<sup>68</sup> (Victorians would have heard the word ‘crusade’ as a call for a holy war.) Mill’s feelings about Abraham Lincoln were almost always expressed in this way. He said the president of the United States reminded him of a saying of Solomon: ‘The righteousness of the righteous man guideth his steps’ (Proverbs 11:5; 13:6).<sup>69</sup> Upon the president’s death, Mill observed that Lincoln had received ‘the crown of martyrdom’ (Revelation 2:10).<sup>70</sup> In a letter to his old philosophical foe, William Whewell, Mill praised him for his support for the North by declaring that Whewell had been among those ‘who have been faithful when so many were faithless’.<sup>71</sup> There are numerous more such examples. Even in retrospect in his *Autobiography*, only religious language could bear the weight of how significant Mill considered what had been at stake in the war. Here, too, it is presented as a struggle with

‘the powers of evil’. Slavery is referred to as ‘the accursed thing’. Once again, Victorians would have understood that to be a biblical phrase referring to possessing what you have no right to possess and thereby bringing military defeat upon your own people (Joshua 6:17). In the very same sentence with that scriptural reference in it, Mill refers to the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison as the movement’s ‘apostle’ and John Brown as its ‘martyr’.<sup>72</sup> One might object that the notion of a political martyr is a pretty thoroughly secularised concept, but Mill also added in a footnote that Brown reminded him of Thomas More, thus aligning the abolitionist with a martyr and saint of the Church.<sup>73</sup>

Mill was remarkably and admirably right about so much in his response to the American Civil War. Georgios Varouxakis has argued that Gladstone had Mill in mind when he spoke dismissively of ‘negrophilists’ and has made the case that Mill was unusually enlightened on issues of race for his time and place.<sup>74</sup> Mark A. Noll has observed that, in all the debates in white America which hashed out whether or not there was contemporary warrant in biblical and classical examples of slavery, what was blindingly ignored by almost all these white commentators was that *race* slavery was certainly not justified by those examples – and this ‘peculiar institution’ created additional horrors and outrages and contradictions all its own that are heaped on top of the horrors and outrages and contradictions of all forms of slavery.<sup>75</sup> Yet to Mill’s enormous credit he was an extremely rare voice who grasped this point and tried his best to make the public see it:

The first distinction is the vital fact of the difference in colour between modern slaves and their masters. In the ancient world, slaves, once freed, became an integral part of free society; their descendants not only were not a class apart, but were the main source from which the members of the free community were recruited; and no obstacle, legal or moral, existed to their attainment of the highest social positions.<sup>76</sup>

Many commentators have observed that Mill was remarkably prescient on the course of the war. To those who said that even the government of the United States itself insisted that it was only a fight to preserve the Union, Mill countered that as the war went on it would *become* a fight to free the slaves. The Emancipation Proclamation proved Mill to be a prophet in the sense of prediction as well as moral pronouncement. As he wrote in a joyful letter: ‘it

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## John Stuart Mill, moral outrage and the American Civil War

has come sooner than I myself ventured to predict'.<sup>77</sup> And, at the time that he predicted it in print, most of those who thought of themselves as prescient in England were predicting that the British government would soon recognise the Confederacy and that there would be some kind of treaty that would put an end to the war and recognise the Southern states as an independent nation. Noll has written of how the religious debate was actually settled: 'it was left to those consummate theologians, the Reverend Doctors Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman, to decide what in fact the Bible actually meant.'<sup>78</sup> The same is no less true for the policy debate in Britain: backing the North because it was proving to be the winning side meant there need be no conflict between doing what was morally right as Mill was expounding it and pursuing national self-interest.

Nevertheless, Mill had made a real and substantial difference to the debate by swaying a considerable number of people to the side of the North when its final victory did not at all seem inevitable, perhaps not even likely. Mill's own assessment of the influence of his article, 'The Contest in America', is accurate and just:

Written and published when it was, the paper helped to encourage those Liberals who had felt overborne by the tide of illiberal opinion, and to form in favour of the good cause a nucleus of opinion which increased gradually, and after the success of the North began to seem probable, rapidly.<sup>79</sup>

Duncan Andrew Campbell has observed that even the radical *Westminster Review* was lost in the fog of war and did not know what line to take on the American conflict until Mill showed it the way, after which the journal stuck to it unwaveringly.<sup>80</sup> Just a couple months after the war ended, Mill was elected to parliament, and he saw his work there as a continuation of his calling to be a public moralist. He repeatedly observed that he viewed being admitted to parliament as his

gaining a higher 'pulpit' from which to 'preach'.<sup>81</sup> Gladstone testified that Mill's 'presence in the House of Commons has materially helped to raise and sustain its moral tone,' and observed that a parliamentary speech by Mill was like listening to 'a sermon'.<sup>82</sup> Gladstone has been seen as central to the 'moralising of Liberalism', but studying Liberals and the American Civil War serves as a reminder that John Stuart Mill was there before him and helped to lead the way.<sup>83</sup>

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- 1 The literature on the British response to the American Civil War is vast. See, for instance (to list them in reverse chronological order): Hugh Dubrulle, *Ambivalent Nation: How Britain Imagined the American Civil War* (Louisiana State University Press, 2018); Amanda Foreman, *A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War* (Random House, 2010); Duncan Andrew Campbell, *English Opinion and the American Civil War* (Boydell, 2003); R. J. M. Blackett, *Divided Hearts: Britain and the American Civil War* (Louisiana State University Press, 2001); Ephraim Douglass Adams, *Great Britain and the American Civil War*, 2 vols. (Peter Smith, 1957).
- 2 Eldon J. Eisenach (ed.), *Mill and the Moral Character of Liberalism* (Pennsylvania University Press, 1998), p. 3.
- 3 John Stuart Mill, 'The Slave Power', in John M. Robson (ed.), *Essays on Equality, Law, and Education* (vol. xxi of *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*) (Toronto University Press, 1984), pp. 143–64 (here 157). This article was originally published in the October 1862 issue of the *Westminster Review*. Hereafter *CW* and the volume number will be used as a short citation for the *Collected Works*.
- 4 John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography and Literary Essays* (*CW*, i), ed. J. M. Robson (Liberty Fund, 2006; reprint of University of Toronto Press, 1981), p. 266.
- 5 Brent E. Kinser, *The American Civil War in the Shaping of British Democracy* (Routledge, 2011), p. 7.

- 6 Dubrulle, *Ambivalent Nation*, p. 19.
- 7 J. S. Mill to John Lothrop Motley, 17 Sep. 1862: *CW*, xv, p. 801.
- 8 J. S. Mill to J. E. Cairnes, 5 Mar. 1865: *CW*, xvii, p. 1003.
- 9 J. S. Mill to John Lothrop Motley, 26 Jan. 1863: *CW*, xv, p. 828.
- 10 J. S. Mill to William Rathbone, Jr., 29 Nov. 1863: *CW*, xv, p. 904.
- 11 J. S. Mill to James Beal, 7 Mar. 1865: *CW*, xvi, p. 1005.
- 12 J. S. Mill to Thomas Payley Potter, 16 Mar. 1865: *CW*, xvi, p. 1012.
- 13 Mill, 'The Slave Power', p. 135.
- 14 George Barnett Smith, *The Life and Speeches of the Right Hon. John Bright, M.P.*, ii (2 vols., Hodder and Stoughton, 1881), p. 94.
- 15 Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850–1930* (Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 112.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 142.
- 17 John Stuart Mill, 'The Contest in America', in Robson (ed.), *Essays on Equality, Law, and Education* (*CW*, xxi), pp. 124–42 (here 132). (This article was originally published in the Feb. 1862 issue of *Fraser's Magazine*.)
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 142.
- 19 J. S. Mill to J. E. Cairnes, 8 Nov. 1864: *CW*, xv, p. 966.
- 20 J. S. Mill to Henry Fawcett, 17 May 1863: *CW*, xv, p. 860.
- 21 Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 267.
- 22 Mill, 'The Contest in America', p. 138.
- 23 Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 113.
- 24 John Stuart Mill, 'Population: Rely to Thirlwall' (1825), in John M. Robson (ed.), *Journals and Debating Speeches* (*CW*, xxvii) (University of Toronto Press, 1988), p. 307. (I realise that this statement is not formally incompatible with Mill's later views, but the point is that in the American Civil War he assumed that an appeal to feeling would work for rather than against the cause of the right.)
- 25 Richard Reeves, *John Stuart Mill: Victorian Firebrand* (Atlantic Books, 2007), p. 3; Alan Millar, 'Mill in a Liberal Landscape', in John Skorupski (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Mill* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 497–540 (here 513).
- 26 Harriet Grote, *The Personal Life of George Grote* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn., John Murray, 1873), p. 264.
- 27 Georgios Varouxakis, "'Negrophilist' Crusader: John Stuart Mill on the

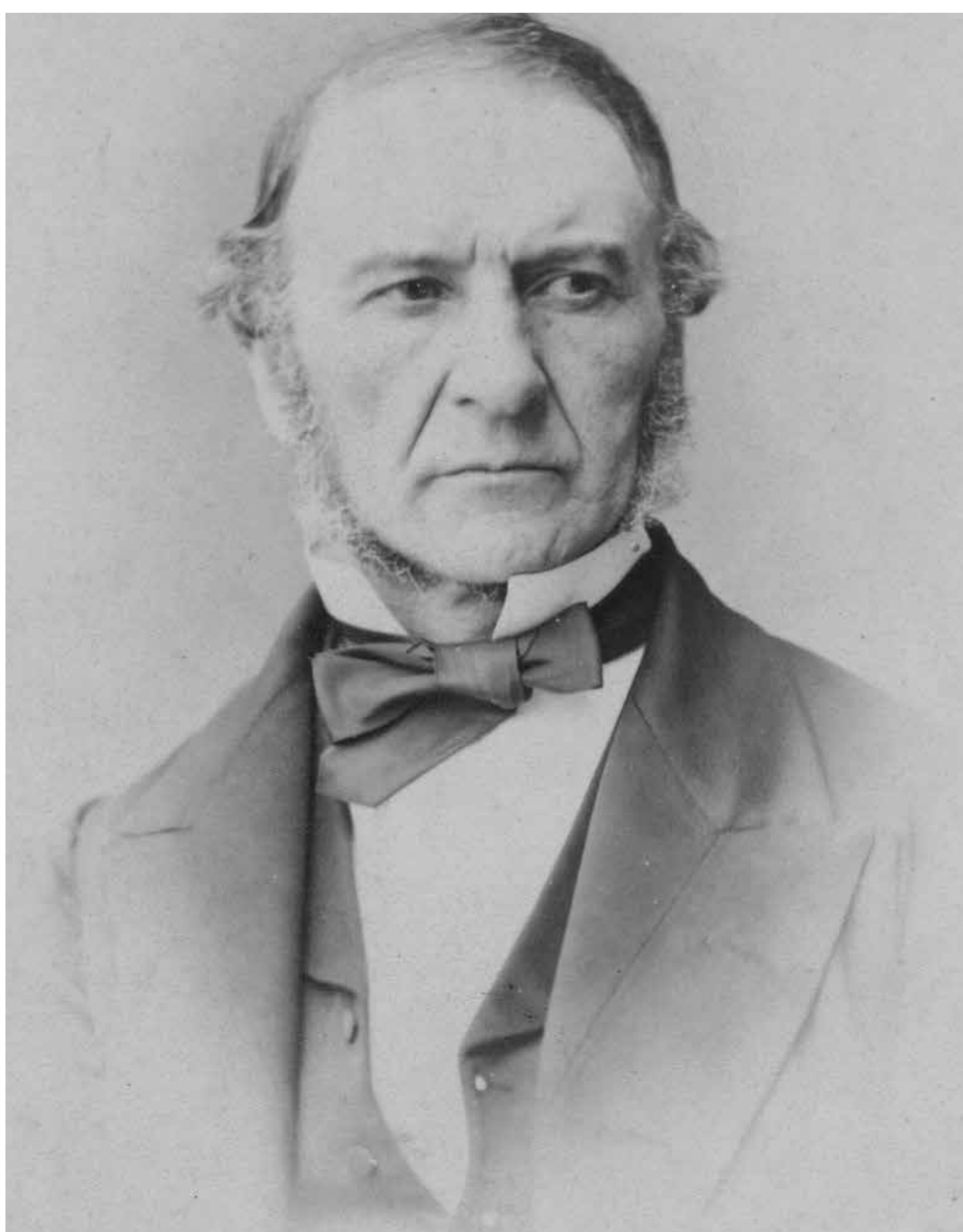


- American Civil War and Reconstruction', *History of European Ideas*, 39/5 (2013), pp. 729–54 (here 736). It is my pleasure to note here that I owe a general debt to this excellent article by Varouxakis.
- 28 Collini, *Public Moralists*, p. 142.
- 29 Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 266.
- 30 J. S. Mill to John Lothrop Motley, 17 Sep. 1862: *CW*, xv, p. 797.
- 31 Mill, 'The Contest in America', p. 129.
- 32 Mill, 'The Slave Power', p. 145.
- 33 J. S. Mill to John Lothrop Motley, 26 Jan. 1863: *CW*, xv, p. 828.
- 34 J. S. Mill to Theodor Gomperz, 17 Sep. 1862: *CW*, xv, p. 795.
- 35 Mill, 'The Contest in America', pp. 128–9.
- 36 Collini, *Public Moralists*.
- 37 Bruce L. Kinzer, Ann P. Robson and John M. Robson, *A Moralist In and Out of Parliament: John Stuart Mill at Westminster, 1865–1868* (University of Toronto Press, 1992), p. 5.
- 38 Eisenach (ed.), *Mill and the Moral Character of Liberalism*, p. 4.
- 39 Richard Reeves, *John Stuart Mill: Victorian Firebrand* (Atlantic Books, 2007), p. 334.
- 40 Collini, *Public Moralists*, p. 140.
- 41 J. S. Mill to the editor of *The Spectator*, 20 Feb. 1863: *CW*, xxxii, pp. 136–7. (*The Spectator* had joint editors at this time and the form of this letter seems to indicate that Mill did not know who the editor was.)
- 42 J. S. Mill to Henry Fawcett, 21 Jul. 1862: *CW*, xv, p. 795.
- 43 Mill, 'The Contest in America', pp. 136, 140.
- 44 T. Peter Park, 'John Stuart Mill, Thomas Carlyle, and the U.S. Civil War', *The Historian*, 54/1 (Autumn 1991), pp. 93–106 (especially p. 105).
- 45 Thomas E. Schneider, 'J. S. Mill and Fitzjames Stephen on the American Civil War', *History of Political Thought*, 28/2 (Summer 2007), pp. 290–304.
- 46 John Morley, *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone*, ii (3 vols., Macmillan and Co., 1903), p. 79.
- 47 Mill, 'The Slave Power', p. 159.
- 48 Spencer Walpole, *The Life of Lord John Russell*, ii (2 vols., Longmans, Green, and Co., 1889), pp. 338–67 (especially 359). The *Alabama* was a warship built in England and sold to the Confederacy in defiance of Britain's own stated policy and rules of neutrality. The *Alabama* made significant contributions to the Southern war effort.
- 49 J. S. Mill to John Lothrop Motley, 26 Jan. 1863: *CW*, xv, p. 828.
- 50 John Stuart Mill, 'A Few Words on Non-Intervention', in Robson (ed.), *Essays on Equality, Law, and Education*, pp. 112–24. (It was originally published in the Dec. 1859 issue of *Fraser's Magazine*.)
- 51 Collini, *Public Moralists*, p. 65.
- 52 Jay J. Van Bavel, Dominic J. Packer, Ingrid Johnsen Haas, and William A. Cunningham, 'The Importance of Moral Construal: Moral versus Non-Moral Construal Elicits Faster, More Extreme, Universal Evaluations of the Same Actions', *PLOS One*, 7/11 (Nov. 2012), pp. 1–14.
- 53 Matthew Feinberg and Robb Willer, 'Moral reframing: A technique for effective and persuasive communication across political divides', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 41/12 (2015), pp. 1665–81.
- 54 Andrew Luttrell, Richard E. Petty, Pablo Brinol, and Benjamin C. Wagner, 'Making it moral: Merely labelling an attitude as moral increases its strength', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 65 (2016), pp. 82–93; Van Bavel, et al., 'The Importance of Moral Construal'.
- 55 Linda J. Skitka, Anthony N. Washburn, and Timothy S. Carsel, 'The psychological foundations and consequences of moral conviction', *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 6 (2015), pp. 41–4; Kristin N. Garrett and Joshua M. Jansa, 'The Bernie Effect: Framing Economic Issues in Moral Terms', paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, 5–8 April 2018.
- 56 John Stuart Mill, 'Coleridge', in J. M. Robson (ed.), *Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society* (*CW*, x) (Liberty Fund, 2006; reprint of University of Toronto Press, 1969), p. 131.
- 57 J. S. Mill to Henry Fawcett, 14 Oct. 1863: *CW*, xv, pp. 889–90. (Mill was referring to Federal Major General, William S. Rosecrans.)
- 58 Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 266.
- 59 J. S. Mill to Joseph Henry Allen, 9 Feb. 1865, *CW*, xvi, p. 993.
- 60 J. S. Mill to Edwin Chadwick, 28 Apr. 1865: *CW*, xvi, p. 1039.
- 61 Skitka, et al., 'The psychological foundations and consequences of moral conviction', p. 42.
- 62 Kinzer, *The American Civil*, pp. 145–6.
- 63 Mill, 'The Contest in America', p. 128. The *Trent* was a British Royal Mail steamer which a Union naval ship forcibly stopped and then took into custody Confederate envoys who were on board.
- 64 Mill, 'The Contest in America', pp. 129–30, 139, 141–2.
- 65 George P. Landow's term for public moralists is 'elegant Jeremiahs' and it is particularly apt for Mill on this occasion: George P. Landow, *Elegant Jeremiahs: The Sage from Carlyle to Mailer* (Cornwell University Press, 1986).
- 66 For Mill's complicated but surprisingly engaged interaction with religious thought, see Timothy Larsen, *John Stuart Mill: A Secular Life* (Oxford University Press, 2018).
- 67 J. S. Mill to John Elliott Cairnes, 7 Feb. 1863: *CW*, xv, p. 801.
- 68 J. S. Mill to John Elliott Cairnes, 25 Nov. 1861: *CW*, xv, p. 752.
- 69 J. S. Mill to John Elliott Cairnes, 26 Dec. 1863: *CW*, xv, p. 912.
- 70 J. S. Mill to Parke Godwin, 15 May 1865: *CW*, xvi, p. 1051.
- 71 J. S. Mill to William Whewell, 24 May 1865: *CW*, xvi, p. 1056.
- 72 Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 266.
- 73 Thomas More was still a few decades away from formal canonisation but, of course, that act is a recognition that a person has already been widely considered saintly.
- 74 Varouxakis, "'Negrophilist' Crusader'.
- 75 Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (University of North Carolina Press, 2006).
- 76 Mill, 'The Slave Power', pp. 152.
- 77 J. S. Mill to Thomas Hare, 9 Oct. 1862: *CW*, xv, p. 800.
- 78 Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, p. 50.
- 79 Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 268.
- 80 Campbell, *English Opinion*, p. 213.
- 81 See, for instance, J. S. Mill to William George Ward [n.d., 1865]; J. S. Mill to George Grote, 25 Dec. 1866: *CW*, xvi, pp. 1165, 1234.
- 82 Collini, *Public Moralists*, p. 169; Kinzer, et al., *A Moralist In and Out of Parliament*, p. 7.
- 83 Schneider, 'J. S. Mill and Fitzjames Stephen on the American Civil War', p. 290.

## Gladstone

Tony Little examines William Ewart Gladstone's views of what he later came to consider as one of the worst mistakes of his political life.

# 'An undoubted error, the m Gladstone and the



William Ewart  
Gladstone (1809–98),  
circa 1863  
(by W. & D. Downey;  
© National Portrait  
Gallery, London)

# most singular and palpable' American Civil War

**T**OWARDS THE END of his life, William Ewart Gladstone wrote a series of autobiographical memoranda in three of which he confessed his worst errors. Twice, he berates himself over a speech made in Newcastle during the American Civil War, describing it in one place, as a 'palpable error which was of a very grave description' and in another as 'an undoubted error, the most singular and palpable', adding that it was 'the least excusable of them all ... because it was committed so late as in the year 1862 when I had over lived half a century.'<sup>1</sup> When a short careless electronic message can now end a political career, it is worth examining why a mistake described by Gladstone himself in such sombre terms had so little impact on his career and comparing the reasons he condemned himself with the criticisms, still repeated, made by his contemporaries.

At the time of President Lincoln's election, Gladstone was not the dominating force in the Liberal Party he later became, but a hesitant recruit. As a supporter of free trade, he had broken with the Conservative Party over the Corn Laws in 1846 and had served in Aberdeen's 1852 coalition, but had only reluctantly abandoned hope of Tory reunification. He was absent from the 1859 meeting in Willis's rooms which gathered the Whigs, Radicals and Peelites into the Liberal Party, and had, silently, voted against the motion which subsequently brought down Derby's Conservative government.<sup>2</sup>

He had, however, joined Lord Palmerston's Liberal government, as chancellor of the exchequer. Gladstone brought with him a strong reputation in finance and a programme of fiscal reforms, to promote free trade and prune government spending. This was not Palmerston's agenda and the two soon clashed. Palmerston sought increased expenditure to

strengthen coastal defences against perceived French threats. Although this dispute brought Gladstone near to resignation, he held back. By 1861, Gladstone had achieved his tax reforms and, through Cobden, a free trade agreement with France but had conceded Palmerston's increased military expenditure. The two had found a *modus vivendi* if not harmony.

Even before Lincoln assumed office in March 1861, southern states had begun to secede from the Union and Jefferson Davis had become president of the Confederacy. In April 1861, the American Civil War commenced.

Although trade between Britain and the United States had flourished, diplomatic relations were frosty. The two countries had been in dispute over Central America as recently as 1856. The USA coveted Canada and Lincoln's secretary of state, William Seward, described by a modern historian as a 'ferocious Anglophobe',<sup>3</sup> aspired to reconcile North and South to exclude Britain from the continent.<sup>4</sup> Events early in the Civil War further strained the relationship.

In April 1861, Lincoln announced a blockade of Confederate ports and by August had begun their closure. Britain imported four-fifths of her cotton from America and a quarter of her food supplies. The reduced supplies to British textile manufacturers brought a 'frightful level' of unemployment to Lancashire.<sup>5</sup> In a May 1861 proclamation concerning 'hostilities unhappily commenced between the United States of America and certain states styling themselves the Confederate States of America', the Queen announced her 'Royal determination to maintain a strict and impartial neutrality in the contest between the said contending parties.'<sup>6</sup> This pleased neither North nor South. Lincoln's government viewed the Southerners as rebels not

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## Gladstone and the American Civil War

belligerents, and Jefferson Davis had hoped for official British recognition. In November, a US frigate stopped the Royal Mail steamer *Trent*, and seized Confederate envoys travelling to Britain and France, causing a major diplomatic dispute. It has been described as 'the most dangerous single incident of the Civil War and perhaps in the whole course of Anglo-American relations since 1815.'<sup>7</sup>

### I think that principle detestable

The differences between Gladstone and Palmerston extended to America as, years later, Gladstone recalled:

I was not one of those who on the ground of British interests desired a division of the American Union. My view was distinctly opposite. I thought that while the Union continued it never could exercise any dangerous pressure upon Canada to estrange it from the Empire: our honour as I thought rather than our interest forbidding its surrender. But, were the Union split, the North no longer checked by the jealousies of slave power, would seek a partial compensation for its loss in annexing or trying to annex British North America. Lord Palmerston desired the severance as a diminution of a dangerous power but prudently held his tongue.<sup>8</sup>

Although the abolition of slavery was not among Lincoln's initial war aims, Gladstone recognised its significance. To the Duke of Argyll he confessed, 'It seems to me that the South has two objects in view: firstly the liberation of its trade and people from the law of tribute to the North; secondly and perhaps mainly, the maintenance of the slave system without fear or risk of Northern interference.'<sup>9</sup> His own view on slavery was expressed to the Duchess of Sutherland, in May 1861, 'the principle announced by the vice-president of the South ... which asserts the superiority of the white man, and therewith founds on it his right to hold the black in slavery, I think that principle detestable and I am wholly with the opponents of it.' But he doubted that slavery could be suppressed by war. 'No distinction can in my eyes be broader than the distinction between whether the Southern ideas of slavery are right and the question whether they can justifiably be put down by war from the North.'<sup>10</sup>

Despite the clarity of these private statements, Gladstone's reputation is still tarnished by association with slavery as a consequence of his carefully obscure public expressions on

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the subject, his propensity to draw fine distinctions and his family connections.<sup>11</sup> Gladstone's father had owned slave-worked plantations in the West Indies, receiving substantial compensation on the abolition of slavery. Early in his parliamentary career, Gladstone defended conditions on his father's plantations and defended the transitional compulsory apprenticeship system which replaced slavery but was little better. Many years later, he recorded that he had 'perused' his speech in the 1833 abolition debate 'with dissatisfaction' but added that he had not said 'a word, I think, unfavourable to the great change.'<sup>12</sup> Although denouncing the slave trade as 'by far the foulest crime that taints the history of mankind in any Christian or pagan country', in 1850 Gladstone unsuccessfully supported a resolution to stop the navy's anti-slave patrols because the non-cooperation of other countries made them ineffective. 'If you wish to suppress the slave trade', he argued you must 'repeal the Sugar Duties Bill; double your squadron; obtain the right of search from France and America; obtain the power to treat slave trade as piracy, and those engaged in it as pirates; and you must compel Spain and Brazil to fulfil their treaties.' 'The first two you might do,' he continued, 'you cannot the three last, it would belong to other nations to do that; and we know full well that they would not consent to it.'<sup>13</sup>

As the naval patrols debate illustrates, Gladstone approached politics as an efficient administrator. He was later to say: 'ideal perfection is not the true basis of English legislation. We look at the attainable; we look at the practicable; and we have too much of English sense to be drawn away by those sanguine delineations of what might possibly be attained in Utopia.'<sup>14</sup> One corollary of this was an antipathy to zealous idealists, in this instance 'his long-standing distaste for the fanatical abolitionists'. A revulsion expressed to Lord Stanley in 1864 when he 'spoke with astonishment of the eagerness of the 'negrophilists' ... to sacrifice three white lives in order to set free one black man, even after it was shown that there was no disposition among the negroes to rise to their own defence'. In addition, throughout the Civil War, Gladstone was constrained, in public, by collective cabinet responsibility to the *realpolitik* of 'strict and impartial neutrality'. As will be seen later, his Newcastle pronouncement was taken as indicative of changing government policy.<sup>15</sup>

### A gross outrage

Gladstone's involvement in the Civil War began with the *Trent* incident. Writing to the Queen,

Palmerston called the seizure of the envoys a 'gross outrage and violation of international law'.<sup>16</sup> The garrison in Canada was reinforced. Despite Gladstone's plea for moderation, the cabinet instructed Lord Lyons, the senior British diplomat in Washington, to demand an apology and reparations. Lyons was to return home if no favourable response was received. By coincidence, Gladstone was in attendance at Windsor and briefed Victoria and Albert before the cabinet discussion. Returning to dine with the royal family afterwards, he helped Prince Albert soften the draft, offering the Americans an opportunity to disown the seizure as unofficial and release the envoys. The threat to break diplomatic relations was withdrawn.<sup>17</sup>

The Americans were also lobbied by the French government while the Radical MPs Cobden and Bright wrote to Senator Sumner, an abolitionist leader, warning him of the risks of war with Britain. Over Christmas 1861, Lincoln's cabinet agreed to release the envoys despite the popularity of their seizure in the North. In the New Year, Gladstone undertook a series of engagements around Edinburgh. In Leith, he urged the acceptance of the 'concession' in 'a generous spirit' as having 'removed any apparent cause of deadly collision' with the Americans.

In summarising the views of 'all thinking men in this country' Gladstone revealed his anxiety that 'the party which was apparently the strongest had committed themselves to an enterprise which would probably prove to be completely beyond their powers'. Northern success he anticipated would 'only be the preface and introduction to political difficulties far greater than even the military difficulties of the war itself.' It was a 'war to be lamented and to be deprecated, and likely to result in great misery, great effusion of human blood, enormous waste of treasure, permanent estrangement and bitterness of feeling.'<sup>18</sup>

### The painful effects of the struggle upon ourselves

Gladstone made a number of speaking tours in 1862 highlighting the conflict. He wished to celebrate his tax reforms, to raise his profile within the Liberal Party and to find a new constituency. He had been MP for Oxford University since 1847, but anticipated difficulties in any future election from his increasing Liberalism, notably, his attitude to university reform and sympathy for Nonconformists. A visit to Manchester in April served all these purposes and in 1865 he successfully stood for South West Lancashire.

Speaking of America to the Manchester Chamber of Commerce, he flattered the audience's hostility to slavery: 'Why, no doubt, if we could see that this was a contest of slavery or freedom, there is not a man in this room – there is hardly, perhaps, a man in all England – who would for a moment hesitate as to the side he would take.' 'But', he continued, 'we have no faith in the propagation of free institutions at the point of the sword; it is not by such means that the ends of freedom are to be gained. Freedom must be freely accepted – freely embraced.'<sup>19</sup>

Gladstone also drew attention to the distress of the Lancashire textile workers and their selfless response, highlighting the 'painful effects of the struggle upon ourselves ... and not upon ourselves alone but upon the other countries of Europe ... [E]very country that has a cotton manufacture is suffering – grievously ...' The workers were commended 'in their patient endurance, in their mutual help, in their respect for order, in their sense of independence, in their desire to be a burden to no one, in the resignation with which they submit to positive privation.' The employers were equally praised: 'the steam engine is kept going, the factory, if not on all days, on some days is kept at work, not with a hope of profit to the master, but in the face of known and positive loss in order that ... they may not desert and abandon the noble hands they employ.'<sup>20</sup> More practically, that summer, Gladstone provided relief work in Hawarden for Lancashire operatives and Mrs Gladstone put her family energetically to work seeking donations, set up soup kitchens and undertook her own tour of Lancashire in the autumn.<sup>21</sup>

### Procuring a cessation of the deadly struggle in America

The early months of the Civil War were both bloody and inconclusive. In the spring and summer of 1862, a Northern victory was doubtful. In evaluating what he called the 'deplorable struggle' for his Mancunian audience, Gladstone reflected these doubts. He compared the Northern campaign to reunite the country with British efforts in the American War of Independence where, despite 'successes in the field', 'we found we were no nearer our objective than before.' He added, 'Some persons may say that the Northern States are a great deal stronger than the Southern, and therefore they must win. Now, England was in former times a great deal stronger than Scotland' but 'it was not the exercise of force, but a sense of policy and prudence on both sides, dictated in the main by

**Gladstone also drew attention to the distress of the Lancashire textile workers and their selfless response, highlighting the 'painful effects of the struggle upon ourselves ... and not upon ourselves alone but upon the other countries of Europe ... [E]very country that has a cotton manufacture is suffering – grievously.'**

natural circumstances which led to the union of the two kingdoms.’ For Gladstone, if the heart of the opposing ‘country is set upon separation’, ‘then it is almost impossible that the military object should be effected; and if it were, the civil and political difficulties remaining would render that military success a curse and a misery to those who achieved it.’ He ended with a prayer:

May the Almighty disposer of all hearts bring that struggle to an end! For the sake of ourselves – for the sake above all, of the Americans themselves, – may that struggle quickly reach its termination! May that take place, not which we wish or may prefer, but which is for the peace, the happiness, and the welfare of the inhabitants of that country, be they white or be they black.<sup>22</sup>

In the same month as Gladstone’s Manchester visit, the Liberal ship owner, William Schaw Lindsay, privately proposed to Palmerston and the foreign secretary, Earl Russell, that Britain and France mediate in the American war. With Russell’s approval, Lindsay had been discussing

the blockade of Southern ports with the French emperor. His endeavours, though encouraged by Napoleon III, were quickly and coldly rebuffed in London.<sup>23</sup> In July, Lindsay initiated a debate in the Commons where Palmerston, more diplomatically, again rejected the idea.

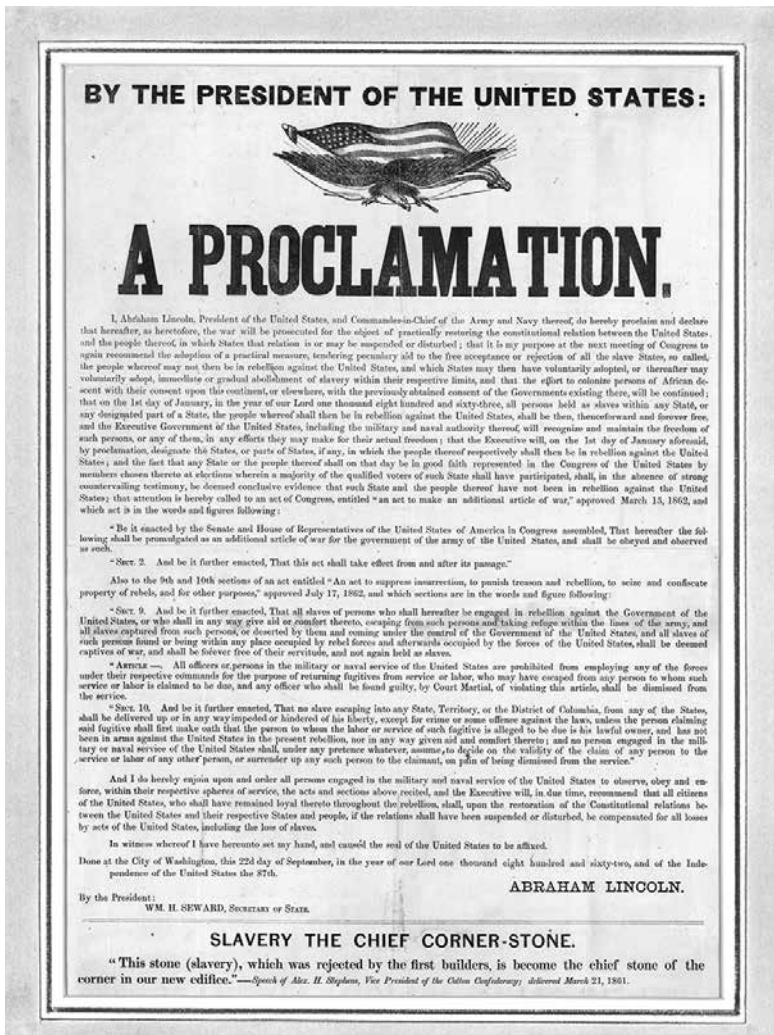
However, intervention had not been discarded. On 24<sup>th</sup> September, learning of Gladstone’s prospective trip to Tyneside, Palmerston wrote to warn the chancellor against being ‘too sympathising with the Tax Payer’ or agitating to bring ‘the House of Commons and the Government to more Economical ways & Habits’. He also notified him that, subject to the ‘Sanction of the Cabinet’ and the outcome of the battle, which ‘appeared by the last accounts to be coming on’<sup>24</sup>, ‘it seems to Russell and me that the Time is fast approaching when some joint offer of Mediation by England France, and Russia if She would be a Party to it, might be made with some Prospect of Success to the Combatants in North America.’ If, when Lyons returned to Washington in October, the proposal was accepted, he anticipated recommending ‘an Armistice and Cessation of Blockades with a View to Negotiation on the Basis of Separation.’<sup>25</sup>

While reassuring the premier that ‘I am not therefore going to the North upon an economical crusade’ but to celebrate the French trade treaty, the greater part of Gladstone’s reply responded to the prospect of ‘procuring a cessation of the deadly struggle in America.’ He was apprehensive that further Confederate successes would ‘authorise that Government with something like justice to ask of us prompt recognition’ and increase Southern territorial demands. ‘... [A] state of things may come about, if Europe does not speak at the right moment, in which she will find a new set of obstacles set up on the side of the South, and these obstacles again reacting unfavourably on the disposition of the North’. He feared that the ‘one great requisite’ for intervention, ‘moral authority’, could be undermined by the recent French invasion of Mexico, and potential unrest among the Lancashire unemployed. ‘[W]e might then seem to be interfering, with loss of dignity on the ground of our immediate interests, rather than as ‘representing the general interests of humanity and peace.’<sup>26</sup>

**They have made a nation**

Gladstone arrived in Newcastle on Monday 6 October, staying overnight with Gateshead MP, William Hutt. That morning’s newspapers published Lincoln’s preliminary emancipation proclamation, issued on 22 September and

Lincoln’s Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, 22 September 1862 (© US Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Alfred Whital Stern Collection of Lincolniana)



<i>Paper</i>	<i>Politics</i>	<i>Reaction</i>
<i>The Times</i>	Independent/ Conservative	'The North must conquer every square mile of the Southern States before it can make the proclamation more than waste paper.'
<i>Morning Post</i>	Palmerstonian, later Conservative	'... it is not easy to estimate how utterly powerless and contemptible a Government must have become who would sanction with its approval such insensate trash. It is evidently a bait thrown out to gain the support of the Abolitionist party. It will prove useless.'
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	Conservative	'The North is only Abolitionist by compulsion, and that this step is altogether inspired by Military and not moral considerations. Undoubtedly it has been taken with repugnance.'
<i>Daily News</i>	Radical	'... does not allude to the proclamation, but instead has a leader on the assertion of the Southerners that when their independence is achieved they will abolish slavery.'
<i>Morning Star</i>	Liberal	'... thinks it is indisputably the great fact of the war. The turning point in the history of the American Commonwealth, an act only second in courage and in probable results to the declaration of independence.'

Source: *Leeds Mercury*, 7 October 1862, p. 4  
 Newspaper political affiliations: C. Cook and B. Keith, *British Historical Facts 1830–1900* (St Martins Press, 1975), pp. 201–05

carried to Britain on the Royal Mail steamer *Australasian* together with news of the Union victory at Antietam. *The Times* portrayed early American reaction to emancipation as hostile: 'It is considered a blunder by all except extreme Abolitionists. It sent down the price of all securities ...'; 'Such a proclamation cannot possibly be enforced, and its only effect will be to strengthen the determination of the rebels to fight to the very last.'<sup>27</sup>

The proclamation received a mixed reception in the British press, as may be seen from the summary in the *Leeds Mercury* which illustrates the range rather than the balance of opinion – see Table 1 below.

In the evening, Gladstone socialised with Hutt's guests. He did not recast the speech planned for 7 October to reflect the proclamation. His topics remained the celebration of his economic policy, commendation of the Italian policy, which had helped enlist him in Palmerston's government, and preparing the way for mediation. He spoke after a banquet in Newcastle town hall where 500 men had dined and the galleries were filled with a 'large assemblage of ladies among whom were Mrs Gladstone, Mrs Hutt and the Lady Mayoress.'

Gladstone proclaimed his faith that 'in part the Government of the country is carried on, and the confidence of the people conciliated and attracted to the laws and institutions of the country' by 'free communication'. He analysed, in detail, the benefits of the French trade treaty and demonstrated that – despite 'a blight altogether unexampled in our history' smiting 'the greatest industry of the country', Irish

'distress', and his tax cuts – government revenue remained resilient. He commended 'the fortitude, resignation and self-command' of the Lancashire textile workers. He estimated that half the mill owners were keeping their factories open despite a fourfold increase in cotton costs and static sales prices and he urged a more sympathetic administration of poor law relief.

He concluded his speech by praising Palmerston and Russell for recognising the need for Italian unification. 'For generations back, almost for centuries, divided Italy has been a focus of troubles for Europe, has been a tempter to ambition .... Italy united ... will afford by a new example a new and signal proof that constitutional freedom ... is the best security that human wisdom can devise ...'<sup>28</sup>

It was the penultimate, American, section of the address which caused sensation, controversy and, later, repentance. The problem was a memorable phrase in a single sentence. Gladstone acknowledged that he favoured maintaining a United States, despite believing that slaves would be better off under their Southern masters rather than the 'whole power' of the federal authorities. He defended the policy of strict neutrality between the warring parties even though he 'will offend both, because the state of mind in which his conduct will be judged of by either'. He asked the audience to sympathise with the Northern fight against dismemberment. 'It is the more necessary to do this because I think we are of one mind as to what is to come. We know quite well that the people of the Northern States have not yet drunk of the cup – they are still trying to hold it far

from their lips – the cup which all the rest of the world see they nevertheless must drink.’ It was to his next sentence that G. J. Holyoake’s press agency report attached the word sensation:

We may have our own opinions about slavery; we may be for or against the South; but there is no doubt that Jefferson Davis and other leaders of the South have made an army; they are making, it appears a navy and they have made what is more than either – they have made a nation.<sup>29</sup>

The next day ‘the people of the Tyne gave him the reception of a king.’ ‘The bells rang, guns thundered, a great procession of steamers followed him to the mouth of the river’ and the banks were thronged with the workers from the local shipyards and local factories.<sup>30</sup> Thereafter Gladstone made his way, via speeches at Sunderland, Middlesbrough and York, to London where the cabinet would deliberate on mediation.

Holyoake later described ‘sensation’ as too strong and suggested ‘surprise’ might have been more appropriate.<sup>31</sup> The summaries of editorial

reaction circulated in the provincial press were more subdued – see Table 2 – but do highlight the areas where Gladstone was censured:

- his partiality to the South,
- ignoring the ‘curse of slavery’, and
- anticipating recognition of the Confederacy.

Gladstone responded firmly to the allegation of partiality for the South, ‘I have never to my knowledge expressed any sympathy with the Southern cause in any speech at Newcastle or elsewhere, nor have I passed any eulogium upon President Davis’, adding that ‘I have thought it out of my province to touch in any way the complicated question of praise and blame’ between North and South. These comments were amplified in a letter to the Duchess of Sutherland: ‘the South has not my sympathies except in the sense in which the North has them also. I wish them both cordially well, which I believe is more than most Englishmen can at present say with truth.’<sup>32</sup>

At Newcastle, Gladstone had shared his analysis that ‘We may anticipate with certainty the success of the Southern States so far as regards their separation from the North. I cannot but

**Table 2: Press Reaction to the Newcastle Speech**

<i>Paper</i>	<i>Politics</i>	<i>Reaction</i>
<i>Morning Herald</i> <sup>1</sup>	Conservative	‘It will now be understood throughout Europe and America Both, that the English Government are convinced the time has come to recognise the Independence of the South’
<i>The Times</i> <sup>1</sup>	Independent/ Conservative	‘... it can hardly be alleged that Mr. Gladstone has gone beyond the bounds of official reserve in the statement that Jefferson Davis has made a nation of the South. If any community ever did earn the name of a nation, the Southern Confederates have.’
<i>Daily News</i> <sup>1</sup>	Radical	‘Mr Gladstone has never concealed that he is favourable to Southern independence ... We do not find fault with him for recognising the progress which the South has made in establishing its independence. It is the proper business of a statesman to look before all things at the facts ... Could he not have said one word in favour of saving from the curse of slavery the vast countries which must fall to one or other of the combatants, but whose destiny is at present undecided.’
<i>The Globe</i> <sup>2</sup>	Radical	‘For the Birth of a nation the cosmopolitan certificate of birth, consisting of the recognition of other nations, follows ... The sincere repugnance in the general feeling of Europe, independent of state policy, to countenance or encourage by any premature act, the formation of an independent slave power, can alone account for the delay interposed in this instance ...’
<i>The Star</i> <sup>2</sup>	Liberal	‘The people of the northern States have undoubtedly no strict right to complain, because a leading English statesman chooses to proclaim to the world that they are certain to be defeated and humiliated in a great struggle in which their dearest hopes and interests are staked.’

Sources:

1 *Belfast News-Letter*, 11 October 1862, p. 4

2 *Newcastle Courant* 10 October 1862, p. 5

Newspaper political affiliations: C. Cook and B. Keith, *British Historical Facts 1830–1900* (St Martins Press, 1975) pp. 201–05



believe that that event is as certain as any event yet future and contingent can be.<sup>33</sup> His assessment accurately foretold the difficulties of Reconstruction but, as he later accepted, was ‘a false estimate of the facts’, about the potential for a Northern victory.<sup>34</sup> His adversaries, as Granville concluded a decade later, committed ‘the fallacy of confounding the expression of an opinion as to the probable course of events, with the desire that such should be their course.’<sup>35</sup> Analysis, faulty or otherwise, is not advocacy.

Contemporary critics concluded Southern sympathy implied support for slavery, suspicions still aired in today’s ‘culture wars’. Foremost among them was John Bright who, after Newcastle, wrote to Charles Sumner, ‘he is unstable as water in some things; he is for union and freedom in Italy, and for disunion and bondage in America ... he has no word of sympathy for the four million bondsmen of the South’.<sup>36</sup> To Cobden, Bright complained ‘He was born of a great slave holding family & I suppose the taint is ineradicable.’<sup>37</sup> But, again, his critics misunderstood his views. As Gladstone later wrote ‘It is one thing to anticipate an issue of the war favourable in the main to the Southern view; it is quite another to sympathise with men whose cause is, as I think, seriously tainted by its connection with slavery.’<sup>38</sup> In backing mediation, Gladstone would not ignore the ‘bondsmen’.

In his usual way, Gladstone had studied the background to the war. He had met representatives of both sides and would have been aware of Northern as well as Southern racial prejudice. For example, in November 1861, during a long weekend at Blenheim, he both discussed US affairs with Edward Schenley, a commissioner for repressing the slave trade, and read *American Union* by James Spence, a Liverpool merchant and Confederate agent.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, it is hard to understand how Gladstone believed that slaves would be better off under their southern masters than under the federal government, particularly given the view he had expressed to Argyll of the Confederate objectives. Together with the ambiguity of the phrase ‘our own opinions about slavery’ this hurt Gladstone’s reputation.

Bright was also mistaken in suggesting Gladstone applied different standards to Italy and the Confederacy. Defending Gladstone and ‘the little knot of men who thought with him’, his friend, the lawyer, Sir Robert Phillimore argued that they were ‘not moved by any tolerant feeling towards slavery, by any sympathy for the southern planter as a fellow aristocrat

or by any mean jealousy of the growing greatness of the United States ... Their position was perhaps a narrow one ... historic ... academic, but perfectly creditable ... As disciples of Burke they had admitted the justice of the claim of the States to self-government ... On the same ground they admitted the claim of the Southern States to secede from secession. It was in fact the doctrine of Home Rule<sup>40</sup> Gladstone based legitimacy on the consent of the population, the standard he later also applied to Alsace Lorraine after the Franco-Prussian War as well as to Ireland over home rule.<sup>41</sup> Gladstone’s fallacy was that the Southern slaves had no voice in their governance.

The senior Northern representative in London, Charles Francis Adams anticipated serious diplomatic damage from Gladstone’s Tyneside soundbite: ‘If he be any exponent at all of the views of the cabinet then is my term likely to be very short.’<sup>42</sup> Wisely, he delayed challenging the Foreign Secretary for a fortnight and then only asked obliquely if Lord Lyons would return to Washington for a long stay before adding ‘If I had entirely trusted to the construction given by the public to a late speech I should have begun to think of packing my carpet bag and trunks.’<sup>43</sup> Discreetly ignoring the potential mediation initiative, Russell assured him that government policy remained unchanged. Later, Russell gently reprimanded Gladstone, ‘I think you went beyond the latitude which all speakers must be allowed when you said that Jeff. Davis had made a nation. Recognition would seem to follow, and for that step I think the cabinet is not prepared.’<sup>44</sup>

The hint of recognition is the offence for which Gladstone most condemned himself, writing in one list of errors, ‘I did not perceive the gross impropriety of such an utterance from a Cabinet Minister of a power, allied in blood and language and bound to loyal neutrality<sup>45</sup> and in the other, ‘Not only was this a misjudgement of the case but even if it had been otherwise, I was not the person to make the declaration.’<sup>46</sup>

### Feeble and half-hearted support

Gladstone returned from his Tyneside triumph still supporting Russell’s mediation plan but soon discovered that cabinet heavyweights such as Argyll, Lewis, and Granville were opposed. Granville, later Gladstone’s closest ministerial colleague, wrote to Russell, ‘The North hate us now, the Southern leaders did hate us, and may for all we know do so now ... Public opinion in England is diametrically opposed to that of both

**Contemporary critics concluded Southern sympathy implied support for slavery, suspicions still aired in today’s ‘culture wars’.**

Northern and Southern statesmen on slavery. ... I doubt if any European Government really understands American politics ...' Granville feared the Americans using mediation to gain time for renewing 'military resources', making 'dupes' of the British. He was concerned that 'our offers would be refused by one or both belligerents, as such offers generally are when made before they are wanted.' A refusal by the North could lead to calls to 'recognize the South' inevitably leading to war with the North, freeing Napoleon III to make mischief in Europe.<sup>47</sup>

After an inconclusive cabinet,<sup>48</sup> Gladstone circulated a long memorandum to sway the debate. When 'the South has driven the North over the Potomac, and the North has driven back the South over that river in return', he suggested, the time was ripe for intervention. Delay risked increasing 'the terrible distress in Lancashire', compromising 'public peace'. He was concerned that 'people are being rapidly drawn into Southern sympathies'. He worried that the 'increasing exasperation and deepening horrors of the war' would make peace harder. On slavery he argued, 'I cannot suppose that we are to refuse to cure, or aim at curing, one enormous evil, because we cannot cure another along with it. But I feel it would be most desirable in a process of interference by which the South would be ostensibly, though perhaps not really, the greatest gainer, to use every moral influence with a view to the mitigation, or if possible, the removal of slavery.'<sup>49</sup> On 12 November, Gladstone wrote home, 'The United States affair has ended and not well. Lord Russell rather turned tail. He gave way without resolutely fighting out his battle ... Palmerston gave to Russell's proposal a feeble and half-hearted support.'<sup>50</sup>

**A final rebuke can fittingly be left to Gladstone himself: 'a man who speaks in public ought to know besides his own meaning, the meaning which others will attach to his words.'**

### **The only policy which answered the convictions of the country**

Gladstone's final public contribution to the Civil War policy debate came at the end of June 1863 when John Roebuck proposed recognition of the Confederacy. Opposing the motion on behalf of the government, Gladstone reiterated previous arguments of sympathy for 'heroic' Southern 'resistance' offset by 'a strong counter-current of feeling' towards slavery, and disagreement with those 'who thought it was a matter of high British interest that the old American Union should be torn in pieces'.

Throughout the war, Gladstone's horror of the casualties coloured his analysis: 'was there ever a war of a more destructive and more deplorable – I will venture to add, of a more hopeless – character'. Just days before the

decisive Union victory at Gettysburg, Gladstone still did not believe 'that the restoration of the American Union by force is attainable' or that 'the emancipation of the negro race is an object that can be legitimately pursued by means of coercion and bloodshed.' He defended the government's policy of 'faithful and strict neutrality' as 'the only policy which would have answered to the convictions and desires of the country' and urged its retention concluding, 'do not let us run the risk of making worse that which is already sufficiently horrible, and adding to the deadly feud which now exists other feuds and other quarrels which will carry still wider desolation over the face of the earth.'<sup>51</sup> Other Liberals dealt more harshly with Roebuck and, after some chivvy from Palmerston, he withdrew the motion. After Gettysburg, eventual Union victory was no longer in doubt.

### **Hostile animus**

In the summer of 1862, bumbling British bureaucracy allowed the newly launched sloop *Alabama* to escape from Merseyside and pursue a two-year career harassing Union shipping, further aggravating relationships with the United States. Ministerial responsibility for the escape lay with Russell but the odium attached was Gladstone's wartime legacy. America claimed for damages caused both directly by the *Alabama* and her sisters and indirectly for prolonging the strife, causing additional costs of war and higher marine insurance rates.<sup>52</sup>

Russell resisted the American demands and they remained unsettled by the 1866–67 Derby/Disraeli government. After 1868, Gladstone took responsibility for settling the claims by arbitration together with outstanding British grievances including raids on Canada by American based Fenian Civil War veterans and Canadian fishing disputes. He saw 'arbitration as exemplifying the means by which two civilised nations could settle differences without either having to admit being in the wrong.'<sup>53</sup>

To his embarrassment, his words at Newcastle 'were cited as part of the proof of hostile *animus*' by the British during the war.<sup>54</sup> The settlement cost Britain \$15m in 1872 and was taken publicly as a blow to British prestige, becoming a factor in Gladstone's general election defeat of 1874. The \$7.5m paid by the Americans to Canada and the lasting improvement in British–American diplomatic relations went unremarked.<sup>55</sup>

Gladstone's trips north in 1862 helped create a Liberal statesman, more appreciative of the contribution made to the national wealth and the exchequer by the industrial heartlands.

They fostered his respect for the civic capabilities of the working people and served as an apprenticeship for his style of campaigning leadership. His speeches on the Civil War demonstrated his both his sympathy for the Union and flawed analysis of the federal capacity to preserve it. They showed his humanitarian instincts to minimise suffering and casualties in both America and Lancashire but also his reluctance to express in public an empathy for the slaves that matched his loathing for the principle of slavery.

Gladstone had a lifelong urge to communicate, as the volume of his records amply testifies. But students of his life quickly learn Gladstone was a very careful ‘Colossus of Words’<sup>36</sup> whose lengthy sentences as often qualified as clarified his meaning. So it is ironic that, as a consequence of the apparent clarity of that one sentence at Newcastle, the Confederacy and slavery still taint his reputation despite his disdain for the one and detestation for the other. The *Alabama* negotiations were prejudiced by those words and the settlement politically costly. A final rebuke can fittingly be left to Gladstone himself: ‘a man who speaks in public ought to know besides his own meaning, the meaning which others will attach to his words.’<sup>37</sup>

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- 1 John Brook and Mary Sorensen (eds.), *The Prime Minister's Papers: W. E. Gladstone, vol. i, Autobiographica* (HMSO, 1971), pp. 132–4, pp. 249–50.
- 2 See H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone 1809–1874* (OUP, 1986), pp. 103–9.
- 3 Kathleen Burk, *Old World New World: The Story of Britain and America* (Abacus, 2009), p. 270.
- 4 Kenneth Bourne, *The Foreign Policy of Victorian England 1830–1902* (OUP, 1970), p. 92.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- 6 *The Times*, 15 May 1861, p. 5.
- 7 Kenneth Bourne, *Britain and The Balance of power in North America 1815–1908* (Longmans, 1967), p. 251.
- 8 Brook and Sorensen (eds.), *Gladstone Autobiographica*, pp. 132–4.
- 9 26 Aug. 1861, cited by John Morley, *The*

- Life of William Ewart Gladstone*, vol ii (Macmillan, 1903), p. 72.
- 10 Cited in Morley *Gladstone*, p. 71.
- 11 See Roland Quinault, ‘Gladstone and Slavery’, *The Historical Journal*, 52/2 (2009), pp. 363–83 for a full analysis over Gladstone’s lifetime. Dr Quinault is a harsher critic than I have been. For the business interests of Gladstone’s father see S. G. Checkland, *The Gladstones: A Family Biography 1764–1851* (CUP, 1971) especially ch. 19, 23 and appendix ii.
- 12 In 1894, Brook and Sorensen (eds.), *Gladstone Autobiographica*, p. 41.
- 13 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 109, cc. 1156–73 (19 Mar. 1850).
- 14 *Ibid.*, vol. 285, c. 123 (28 Feb. 1884).
- 15 This paragraph was developed from a conversation with Dr Quinault. Quotations from Quinault, ‘Gladstone and Slavery’.
- 16 Brian Connell, *Regina v. Palmerston: The Correspondence between Queen Victoria and her Foreign and Prime Minister 1837–1865* (Evans Brothers, 1962), p. 309.
- 17 Morley, *Gladstone*, pp. 73–4; Philip Guedalla, *The Queen and Mr Gladstone, vol. i, 1845–1879* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1933), p. 123; Kurt Jagow, *Letters of the Prince Consort 1831–1861* (John Murray, 1938), p. 372.
- 18 *The Times*, 13 Jan. 1862, p. 6.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 25 Apr. 1862, p. 7.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 Morley, *Gladstone*, p. 77, footnote; Joyce Marlow, *Mr & Mrs Gladstone An Intimate Biography* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1977), pp. 110–11.
- 22 *The Times*, 25 Apr. 1862, p. 7.
- 23 Duncan Andrew Campbell, ‘Palmerston and the American Civil War’, in David Brown and Miles Taylor (eds.), *Palmerston Studies II* (Hartley Institute, University of Southampton, 2007), p. 156.
- 24 The battle, Antietam, the bloodiest single day of the war, had already taken place, on 17 Sep.
- 25 Philip Guedalla (ed.), *Gladstone and Palmerston, Being the Correspondence of Lord Palmerston with Mr. Gladstone, 1851–1865* (Victor Gollancz, 1928), pp. 232–3.
- 26 *Ibid.*, pp. 233–6.
- 27 *The Times*, 6 Oct. 1862, p. 7.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 9 Oct. 1862, pp. 7–8.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 30 Morley, *Gladstone*, p. 77.
- 31 Cited in Richard Shannon, *Gladstone, God and Politics* (Hambledon Continuum,

- 2007), p. 150.
- 32 Morley, *Gladstone*, pp. 71–2.
- 33 *The Times*, 9 Oct. 1862, p. 8.
- 34 Brook and Sorensen (eds.), *Gladstone Autobiographica*, pp. 132–4.
- 35 Agatha Ramm (ed.), *The Political Correspondence of Mr Gladstone and Lord Granville 1868–1876*, vol ii (Royal Historical Society, 1952), p. 313.
- 36 Philip Magnus, *Gladstone A Biography* (John Murray, 1954), p. 154.
- 37 Cited in Shannon, *Gladstone*, p. 150.
- 38 Guedalla, *Gladstone and Palmerston*, p. 245.
- 39 H. C. G. Matthew, *The Gladstone Diaries, vol. vi, 1861–1868* (OUP, 1978), p. 75.
- 40 F. W. Hirst, ‘Mr Gladstone as Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1853, 1859–1865’, in Sir Wemyss Reid (ed.), *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone* (Cassell & Co. 1899).
- 41 I owe this point to a reviewer of an earlier draft.
- 42 Charles Francis Adams, Sr., diary, 8 Oct. 1862, in *Charles Francis Adams, Sr.: The Civil War Diaries* (unverified transcriptions, Massachusetts Historical Society, 2015): <http://www.masshist.org/publications/cfa-civil-war/view?id=DCA62d281>, accessed 12.6.2021.
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## Liberal supporters of the Confederacy

An examination of the motives of two contrasting Liberal MPs who chose to support the South during the American Civil War. By Graham Lippiatt.

# Commerce, conscien

**S**HORTLY AFTER 4.30 a.m. on the morning of 12 April 1861, the first Confederate shells began to fall on Fort Sumter, the Union-held military installation in the harbour of Charleston, South Carolina. To borrow a phrase from an earlier conflict on American soil, these were shots heard round the world. As the American diplomat and historian George Bancroft wrote in the year after the Civil War ended, 'For a time the war was thought to be confined to our own domestic affairs, but it was soon seen that it involved the destinies of mankind: its principles and causes shook the politics of Europe to the centre and from Lisbon to Peking divided the governments of the world.'<sup>1</sup> The American Civil War added a new fire to the arguments which were raging on the virtues or vicissitudes of Republicanism, democracy, nation-building; and, of course, on the question of slavery.

The impact of the American Civil War on British political and public opinion reflected this reaction. Keen debates followed on the causes and consequences of the war across the political spectrum; and these deepened and changed as the conflict progressed, particularly given the impact of the Cotton Famine in Lancashire and after the Emancipation Proclamation seemed to make it more explicit that the war was being fought to end slavery. As Turner has pointed out, however, it would be a mistake to assume that the whole of British society was aflame with opinion. There was indifference in many quarters and the strength of opinion changed and shifted with events. There was no clear division of view based on class, political or religious allegiance, or economic or social status.<sup>2</sup> Historians used to assume that working men, Radicals and reformers automatically supported the North, while Conservatives and Whigs sided with the South. As long ago as

1953, a study of Conservative and aristocratic attitudes to the Civil War concluded that the Conservative Party did not take a deep interest in the war and that the assumption that Conservatives collectively hoped for a Confederate victory was not a given.<sup>3</sup> In addition, previous studies of Liberal and Radical politicians have revealed significant sympathy and support for the Confederacy.<sup>4</sup>

Against this fluid background, it is clearly unsafe to assume that Liberals in the early years of the Civil War would instinctively line up with the Union against the Confederacy. Notwithstanding the passionate support for the North given by Liberal intellectuals such as John Stuart Mill, by anti-slavery campaigners like Harriet Martineau or by radical politicians like John Bright or Richard Cobden (both of whom earned the soubriquet Members for the United States, or Members for the Union), there were those among the Liberal ranks who wanted to see a victory for the Confederacy. More surprisingly, perhaps, there were those who supported the Southern cause even after Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. The purpose of this article is to consider the lives and motives of two such Liberal members of parliament during the Civil War: John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton (from 1869, Lord Acton) and William Schaw Lindsay.

These two men had different careers during the Civil War. Lindsay was active in politics and diplomacy. He used his time and position to argue in the House of Commons in favour of British intervention in the war. He joined pro-Confederate organisations such as the Manchester Southern Club, of which he was a vice-president, and was a founder member of the London branch of the Southern Independence Association, which aimed to mobilise support for recognition of the Confederacy.<sup>5</sup> He

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also visited Napoleon III of France to lobby for French intervention and was in regular contact with Confederate diplomats and commissioners.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, Acton was inactive as an MP. He spoke in the House of Commons just three times in the six years he sat there,<sup>7</sup> and none of these interventions were to do with the American Civil War.<sup>8</sup> Acton's position on the Civil War was expressed through his writings. It was not specifically designed to stimulate support for the Confederacy but was, rather, a part of his scholarship around the history of liberty, democracy, unrestricted majority rule and the protection of minorities.

## **William Schaw Lindsay (1815–1877)<sup>9</sup>**

W. S. Lindsay was born at Ayr in December 1815. He was orphaned young and brought up by an uncle, William Schaw, a Free Church minister. At age 15, he left Ayr and went to Glasgow and soon embarked on a seafaring life. He led a dangerous and exciting existence at sea. He was once washed overboard, suffering serious injury to his legs. On another occasion he received a sabre wound in a fight with pirates and shot one of his attackers dead. This may have been enough adventure for him, for about a year later he retired from the sea and became a port agent, specialising in coal and later in pig iron, at Hartlepool. He became a financial success and married into a ship-owning family, eventually moving to London to become a shipbroker. He later opened an agency in Sunderland, during which time he expanded to own a large number of ships. Lindsay built up contacts with other ship-owners and shipbuilders. His commercial interests made him a fierce proponent of free trade, unrestricted access to markets and freedom of the seas. As a prominent man of international commerce, Lindsay



would have been more than aware of the policies of United States' governments from the Embargo Act of 1807, the introduction of protectionist measures in 1816, and further tariffs imposed during the presidency of Andrew Jackson in 1828. These measures had impacted

William Schaw Lindsay (1815–77), 1855 (unknown artist)

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on Southern products and trade much more than on the Northern economy<sup>10</sup> and were a factor in Lindsay's sympathy for the efforts of the South to argue states' rights to try and nullify these policies. As Lindsay said of himself, he was 'a plain man whose business was his politics and with a leaning towards Free Trade principles.' These were important motivations when it came to Lindsay's attitudes and opinions on the American Civil War, both as the conflict approached and during its course.<sup>11</sup>

As Lindsay's business life flourished, he began to harbour political ambitions. In April 1852 he unsuccessfully contested Monmouth for the Liberals at by-election and then stood, again without success, in the general election of that year in the naval seat of Dartmouth. In 1854 he was narrowly elected MP for Tyne-mouth and North Shields. He was returned unopposed there in 1857, and in 1859 he transferred to Sunderland, being one of the two Liberals returned in that constituency. He held the seat throughout the duration of the parliament and the American Civil War.<sup>12</sup>

Lindsay's interests took him to the United States in 1860. By this time, US overseas trade was growing fast, and Lindsay had developed strong business connections with many American ship-owners. It is clear that this visit had British government approval and was sanctioned by the United States. While Lindsay acknowledged that his mission was not in an official capacity, he was supplied with copies of government correspondence concerning maritime issues by the foreign secretary, Lord John Russell.<sup>13</sup> Back home, Lindsay began to speak publicly about the dangers of the approaching conflict between the States, voicing his concerns on commercial, maritime, legal and moral grounds. Lindsay was among the many in Britain who felt the interests and culture of the Northern and Southern states made it increasingly impossible for them to remain together as one nation. This was the age of nationalisms. Nationalist movements in Italy and Hungary, exemplified by the figures of Garibaldi and Kossuth, had attracted Liberal support. There was no natural reverence for existing Unions, and this extended to America. In 1860, for example, Lord Russell seemed in tune with wider opinion when he reflected that peaceful disunion in the United States would benefit both North and South and, by extension, the international community.<sup>14</sup> Many democrats would struggle over the issue of secession, but many would nod in consent when hearing the words of Jefferson Davis giving his inaugural presidential address to the Congress of the Confederate States:

Our present condition ... illustrates the American idea that governments rest upon the consent of the governed, and that it is the right of the people to alter or abolish governments whenever they become destructive of the ends for which they were established.<sup>15</sup>

In addition, many also believed that that the Confederacy could not be conquered militarily, or only, if at all, at great and senseless loss of life and destruction. The seceding states formed a huge geographical area, providing a vast hinterland into which forces could retreat, perhaps recalling the failure of British arms to secure the dauntingly large area of the colonies during the American Revolution. In 1861, Lindsay wrote to New York banker and member of the February Peace Conference in Washington DC, Alexander Duncan, setting out his views on the likely conflict:

I look at history and consider the vast extent of your country and I find the interests of the South are opposed to the policy of the North. When I see that the two sections of your people differ in almost everything except language, and when I hear that they are resolved by the vote of several of their State legislatures to arm themselves and raise a vast army, not to coerce other States or attack the North but to defend themselves, I could not but feel that there must be a separation and that no force which the North could bring to bear will ever re-unite the Southern with the Northern States.<sup>16</sup>

Lindsay took a businessman's view that separation would be better for the American economy and its international trade, since a long, costly and deadly war, whatever the outcome, could bring on a decline from which it might take America decades to recover. Lindsay's predictions on the human cost of the war were shared by many in Britain, adding to the pressure on the government to offer mediation as the conflict progressed. And when the South was victorious in the first major battle of the war, at Bull Run (First Manassas) in July 1861, it seemed to underline the belief that war would not only be prolonged and bloody, but that separation had become a fait accompli.

During the course of the war, Lindsay took up other themes resonating with public opinion in Britain. A widespread fear existed that opposition to slavery, and the way the war was explicitly being seen a war for emancipation,

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would result in a slave insurrection. A long history of slave revolt in America going back to the earliest settlements<sup>17</sup> had been followed by serious incidents in the British West Indian colonies and by the slave rebellion in Haiti. Memories of these events and of the Indian Mutiny of 1857 were fresh in people's minds. Pro-Southern voices tried to exploit these concerns with predictions of the murder and rape of white women and children by slaves encouraged by a desperate and vindictive Union government,<sup>18</sup> but there was genuine fear which needed little stirring up. Lindsay took up this call following the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863.<sup>19</sup> Writing in the *Sunderland Times* in October 1863, he claimed that the Proclamation was a call to slaves to massacre 'your masters, massacre your mistresses, and massacre their children, so that you may obtain your freedom.'<sup>20</sup>

Yet Lindsay was not favourable to the continuation of slavery in America. When, because of his knowledge of commerce and international shipping, he agreed in 1861 to meet with Williams Lowndes Yancey, the Confederate diplomat, he professed a wish to aid the South in gaining independence but only on the understanding that slavery would eventually be abolished.<sup>21</sup>

Another issue Lindsay stressed was the impact of the war and the blockade of Southern ports on the Lancashire cotton trade, which caused much hardship and unemployment as the war dragged on. In the House of Commons, in July 1862, he referred to the damage caused to the cotton industry and claimed that Lancashire cotton workers had told him that the South deserved their independence. In general, however, the sympathy of the cotton workers was towards the Union, despite the hardships they were themselves suffering from, mainly because of their animosity towards slavery. However not all working men were pro-North. Many important voices from the Chartist era took an unsympathetic view of American capitalism and exploitation of the working man, which they saw as the dominant force in US industrial development, and for this reason they supported Southern independence.<sup>22</sup>

During the course of the Civil War, Lindsay continued his political and diplomatic efforts to bring about British and French intervention, in the hope of progressing, through offering mediation, to recognition of the Confederacy. Lindsay worked closely with John Arthur Roebuck, the nominal Liberal MP for Sheffield. Roebuck was a former radical, but he was fluid in his political loyalties, was often out of step with Sheffield Liberals and was determinedly

independent of party and government ties in the House of Commons. He ended up being made a Privy Counsellor by the Conservatives.<sup>23</sup> Roebuck had attempted and failed to get debates in the House on the war, so Lindsay took up the mantle, allied with the Liberal-Conservative MP for County Galway, William Gregory. As early as February 1862, Lindsay and Gregory were looking to get a debate in the House to discuss the Northern blockade, hoping to get the government to intervene.<sup>24</sup> The following month, Lindsay undertook another meeting with Napoleon in France (with whom he met a number of times and for whom he prepared briefing papers throughout the conflict) to press for French recognition of the Confederacy. Lindsay next tried to take advantage of the outrage provoked by the notorious 'Woman Order' issued by Major-General Butler in occupied New Orleans of May 1862, under which Southern women showing disrespect to Union soldiers were to be treated 'as a woman of the town plying her avocation', in other words as a common prostitute. Despite Lindsay's expressing the opinion that nine-tenths of members were at that time sympathetic to intervention, he was unable to find enough support for a debate. Although he could not get the issue before parliament at this stage, Lindsay was right that opinion was shifting away from the US and from the British policy of neutrality. The Lancashire unemployment figures were dire, and Lindsay started making preparations for a speech on a debate he wanted to initiate in July 1862.<sup>25</sup>

The debate which Lindsay brought before the House of Commons on 18 July was his principal attempt to persuade MPs to force the government into intervention. It took place against the background of a false report of a Union defeat in the Seven Days Battles (25 June – 1 July 1862). The Union forces had retreated but their army was still intact. William Forster, the Liberal MP for Bradford, took an American newspaper to the House to show the report wasn't true. A large crowd had turned up for the debate and there was much jostling for seats in the public gallery between supporters of both sides. It was believed that news of the Union defeat would push the government towards recognition of the Confederacy. Lindsay told the House that the break between North and South was irreparable, with justice on the Confederate side. He tried to focus on the issue of mediation rather than immediate recognition of the South, but he was not a good speaker and failed to get the House on his side. He raised the issue of the cotton shortage and its impact

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on Lancashire. Perhaps out of frustration he abandoned his arguments around trade. He said slavery was not the cause of the war and that the North was fighting out of a desire for greed and power. He declared that he 'desired the disruption of the American Union, as every honest Englishman did, because it was too great a power and England should not let such a power exist on the American continent.'<sup>26</sup> Although his points were not seriously challenged, when it came time for the debate to be wound up it was Palmerston, the prime minister, who dealt the death blow to Lindsay's pleas for intervention. Palmerston said that recognition or mediation were not to be considered lightly and that it was for the government alone to decide.<sup>27</sup> In July 1864, Lindsay proposed yet another parliamentary resolution in favour of recognition and mediation, against the background of the increasing loss of life and the sufferings on both sides, but it again came to nothing.<sup>28</sup>

Despite all Lindsay's political and diplomatic efforts, the British government never wavered from its policy of neutrality and France never resorted to acting alone. While sympathy for the South remained widespread and was boosted by events such as the death of Stonewall Jackson, it was more than countered by the odium of most British opinion against slavery. Lindsay published an open letter against the institution of slavery, asking the South to devise a way of abolishing it, and undertook to broaden the base of popular support for Confederate causes in Britain.<sup>29</sup> In August 1864, Lindsay suffered a stroke which diminished his powers and weakened his influence. As a consequence, he did not stand for re-election in Sunderland at the 1865 general election. He maintained his pro-Southern views in retirement. His continuing interest in American maritime affairs and the Civil War is reflected in his post-war letters with former leading Confederates, expressing regret that 'the Southern people who fought so nobly and so well' were not able to achieve their independence.<sup>30</sup> He died, having suffered another stroke, on 28 August 1877.

### John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton (1834–1902)

Acton was one of the great historical thinkers of the Victorian age. Through his personality, journalism and scholarship, he established himself as an important figure in liberal Catholic thought. From his study of religious and secular history, Acton came to understand that '... power tends to corrupt and absolute power

corrupts absolutely.'<sup>31</sup> The key conclusions of Acton's thinking around the state, liberty and democracy were that liberty was the foundation of the good society; that the role of the state must be limited but must ensure the liberty of the individual; that reason took precedence over will, that might was not right; that power was corrupting in any system, and that the test of liberty and democracy is the amount of protection afforded to minorities.<sup>32</sup> Against that background, it might seem incongruous that Acton chose to side with the slave-owning South in the American Civil War.

Acton was born in 1834 in Naples. His family were Shropshire baronets with German connections but also related to French and Italian nobility. His father died young, and his mother then married Earl Granville. Acton followed his Whig stepfather in political affiliation, but his mother insisted on a Roman Catholic upbringing, and Acton studied in France and then under the future Cardinal Wiseman at Oscott College before going to Munich in 1850 to study with the church historian Dr Ignaz von Döllinger. Under Döllinger, Acton became a perceptive student of history, particularly of the church and its tendency to absolutism. Through Döllinger, he became immersed in the liberal Catholic movement. Later he travelled widely, including to the United States, Russia and Mexico, and in 1857, on a visit to Italy with Döllinger, he met Pope Pius IX, although he remained unimpressed by Roman institutions.<sup>33</sup>

Acton's main contributions to religious thinking were later to be developed through his editorship of and writings for the Catholic monthly publication *The Rambler*, in which he argued against papal infallibility and for which he narrowly escaped excommunication. Later still, he followed an academic career with his appointment to the Regius Chair of Modern History at Cambridge. But, from the late 1850s, Acton chose – and his chief biographer believes somewhat reluctantly – a political path.<sup>34</sup> A more recent investigation of Acton's search for a political career in Ireland, however, where his Catholic faith would not be the bar to success it would be in Great Britain, has shown that he was considerably more motivated to find a seat than previously thought. Through his stepfather and through his own efforts to make the most of the patronage of important Catholic contacts, a seat was found for him in Ireland at Carlow.<sup>35</sup> At the general election of 1859, he took the seat from the sitting Conservative John Alexander, a Protestant, by 117 votes to 103.<sup>36</sup> It was in the early 1850s that Acton first came to know W. E. Gladstone, through his

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connections to Döllinger and his interest in religious and intellectual affairs. Acton called on Gladstone in London before setting out for Ireland and the election to quiz him on political matters. Thereafter they became more closely acquainted, exchanging views and papers, with Acton becoming Gladstone's confidant and adviser and eventually his friend.<sup>37</sup> As noted above, Acton was not drawn to speak much in parliament, but at the 1865 election he stood again, this time switching to the Shropshire constituency of Bridgnorth, near his home at Aldenham. He won by a single vote but was unseated after scrutiny and, when he stood there again in 1868, he failed to get elected.<sup>38</sup> It was Gladstone who raised Acton to the peerage in 1869, although he spoke in the Lords as rarely as he had done in the Commons.<sup>39</sup>

In 1866 Acton wrote to General Robert E. Lee, the commander of the Confederate States Army during the Civil War, saying, 'You were fighting the battles of our liberty, our progress and our civilization ...',<sup>40</sup> and it is in Acton's study of liberty that we will find the answer to how, despite his views on the immorality of slavery, he came to support the Southern cause.

First, however, it is right to point out that Acton came from a family of Whig landowners, and traditionally this group has been seen as typical of British supporters of the Confederacy, identifying with the dominant, plantation-owning aristocratic Southern class, who looked back to their English heritage. It is not clear how much of this sentiment Acton inherited, but he did spring from this background and did mix in Whig and aristocratic circles. In one important regard, however, he differed from the characteristics of this group, traditionally identified as typical of their distaste for the United States (and consequently the Union in the Civil War). This was his esteem for American political arrangements following the Revolutionary War and, in particular, his approval for the principles and mechanisms of American democracy.

Acton had great admiration for the Founding Fathers of the United States. He thought particularly highly of the members of the political elites who participated in the Constitutional Convention. He approved of the way they drew on the political histories of ancient Greece and Rome as well as the English tradition, building into the constitution strong limitations and checks on the power of the state but also of direct democracy. The Founding Fathers were right, in Acton's view, to distrust state power, which had to be defended against abuse. They instituted the separation of powers and



John Emerich  
Edward Dalberg-  
Acton, Lord Acton  
(1834–1902)

followed the federal principle, and Acton saw in this that it caused no danger to liberty and that the new nation was founded on rights.<sup>41</sup>

But Acton looked to the criticisms of the constitution voiced by the Founding Fathers themselves to help explain why things could go wrong in the future. As Colley has recently noted, the Civil War was bound from the outset with debates over written constitutions.<sup>42</sup> In his lecture 'The Civil War in America: Its Place in History', delivered in 1866, Acton said that George Washington had warned against a possible rule in the 1787 Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia that might have given a greater blocking power to a minority of states. Acton believed Washington foresaw the danger of putting too much into democratic hands. Alexander Hamilton thought that dissolution of the Union was the most likely eventual result. Later in his life, Hamilton called the constitution a frail and worthless fabric, and a temporary bond, although he always thought of himself as a strong defender of the constitution for all its failings. The second president, John Adams, said 'he saw no possibility of

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continuing the Union of the States; that their dissolution must necessarily take place.'

So, while Acton admired the American constitutional system, he thought that it clearly had defects if it led to civil war; defects which had been anticipated by the Founding Fathers. The checks and balances had failed. The experiment of an advanced polity with a large territory, which the United States seemed to have created, had broken down and was no longer an example of a successful democracy combining freedom, equality and strong authority. He had to look again at his ideas on liberty and democracy in the light of events. Acton believed that individual freedom is dependent on the right of self-government, ending ultimately with the state. But he distrusted central authority, and the federal government had come to represent this. Democracy, like any form of government, can degenerate, and clearly this had happened in America. The federal state had become over-mighty. It justified its actions by appealing that it represented the majority, but, with J. S. Mill, Acton understood that majority rule can become the tyranny of numbers. For Acton, as Himmelfarb has pointed out, the South was in the position of a young state for whom tyranny seemed to be an appropriate means of augmenting its power.<sup>43</sup> The South felt it was particularly discriminated against by federal actions over tariffs and trade embargoes and in the area of political patronage. Northern manufacturers, unable to compete with European competitors, wanted protection of the home market; but the US market accounted for only around a quarter of Southern cotton production, and the Southern economy was based primarily on cotton. Agricultural producers in the South were for free trade, moderate taxation, and limited government spending.<sup>44</sup> These differences helped bolster Southern support for states' rights, nullification, and limited government along the lines propounded by John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, the seventh vice-president of the United States. Calhoun characterised the relationship between the states as the North playing 'an overweening Sparta to the South's more democratic Athens'.<sup>45</sup> To Acton, it was Calhoun who was the true defender of the Union. He thought Calhoun's theory of nullification 'the very perfection of political truth.'

Acton would surely have approved of the constitution of the Confederate States which specifically strengthened states' rights. The preamble to the constitution read, 'We the people of the Confederate States, each state acting in its sovereign and independent character ...'.<sup>46</sup> On Abraham Lincoln's pronouncement that it was

the creation of the Union that converted the colonies to states, setting limits to their independence and liberty, Acton wrote, 'This is the extreme logical result of the democratic theory, according to which the whole is the author of the parts, and absolute master of them. In the face of such a doctrine it is obvious that state rights are the only security for freedom'.<sup>47</sup> Thus, could Acton also write in his letter to Robert E. Lee, 'I saw in States Rights the only availing check upon the absolutism of the sovereign will, and secession filled me with hope, not as the destruction but as the redemption of Democracy'.<sup>48</sup>

It seems hard to reconcile Acton's view that the wrong side won the American Civil War with his statement that slavery was an evil to be deplored and that, as it existed in America, the country had become essentially immoral.<sup>49</sup> Acton did not view slavery in absolute terms of right and wrong, however. As Lazarski describes it, 'In his hierarchy of values civilization and political liberty take precedence over the abolition of slavery. ... The progress of civilization requires a passage through a phase of slavery and all societies must experience it'.<sup>50</sup> As a Christian, Acton was steeped in the knowledge that historically Christianity had never opposed slavery and that there were many passages of the bible in which it was favourably mentioned.<sup>51</sup> Acton's conscience allowed him to believe that the South should and would come to abolish slavery, as had happened in most Union states and elsewhere, as attitudes and working conditions changed. But, in judging the actions of the Union government during the war and the effects of the Emancipation Proclamation, Acton believed emancipation had been 'an act of war, not of statesmanship, or humanity. They have treated the slave owner as the enemy, and have used the slave as an instrument for his destruction. They have not protected the white man from the vengeance of barbarians, nor the black man from the pitiless cruelty of a selfish civilisation'.<sup>52</sup> In Himmelfarb's words, for Acton the 'collapse of the Union came about when the North added to the iniquities of democracy the fanatical intolerance of an idea, the idea of abolitionism'.<sup>53</sup>

This verdict, delivered as it was in 1866, has been viewed by some biographers of Acton to have lacked sufficient distance and perspective from the events of the Civil War. They see a mellowing of opinion across a range of Acton's thinking on America, liberty and democracy, but he remained a critic of pure democracy and the tyranny of the majority throughout his life. Some of Acton's worst fears for American

democracy were not realised but he stuck to his ideas on state authority and personal liberty. For Acton, as Clausen has pointed out, absolute power corrupts democracy as surely as any other sort of government.<sup>54</sup>

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The motivations of these two contrasting Liberals in supporting the Confederate cause sprang from their different careers and political interests. Lindsay, the man of international commerce, typified the dogmatic commitment to the principle of free trade of the nineteenth-century Liberal Party and the business community's pragmatic response to the war. Lindsay would have been aware, from his commercial activities and his own visit to the Southern states, that the area was centre of capitalist growth, with a vast internal infrastructure of railroads, warehousing, ports, and shipping concerns based on cotton production which he felt was threatened by Northern actions on tariffs. From his statements in parliament, we know that he felt the Union was unreasonably aggressive and that he feared the damage to trade and prosperity which would and did come from war. Acton represented a more philosophical Whig concern with the concepts of liberty (often more enthusiastically applied overseas than in the United Kingdom). Acton's sympathies for the Southern planocracy may have reflected his own privileged, landed, and aristocratic heritage; and his willingness to put aside his own rejection of slavery was clearly influenced by his knowledge of Biblical references and his studies of liberty. As he wrote in 1881 to Mary Gladstone, 'The law of liberty tends to abolish the reign of race over race, faith over faith, class over class.' Acton took an intellectual view of the struggles over states' rights and the wording and meaning of constitutions. The positions Lindsay and Acton took were not taken up by the majority of other Liberal MPs, who increasingly came to regard the Civil War as a crusade against slavery.

Lindsay's interventions in parliament made little impact. Acton did not really make his views known widely until after the war ended. While Liberal colleagues may have shared an element of pragmatic support for British intervention on economic or humanitarian grounds in the first years of the war, the Emancipation Proclamation and the gradual turning of the tide of war in favour of the Union helped solidify support for an ending of the war in a victory for the North and the abolition of slavery. However, even at the end, Liberal opinion remained divided. The *Manchester Guardian* editorial of 27 April 1865, in the immediate aftermath of the assassination of President Lincoln, contained the words: 'of [Lincoln's] rule we can never speak except as a series of acts abhorrent to every true notion of constitutional right and human liberty.'<sup>55</sup> It is hard to imagine Lindsay and Acton dissenting from such an assessment.

*Graham Lippiatt is a contributing editor to the Journal of Liberal History.*

- 1 Quoted in the introduction to Don Doyle, *The Cause of All Nations: An International History of the American Civil War* (Basic Books, 2017).
- 2 Michael J. Turner, *Liberty and Liberticide: The Role of America in Nineteenth-Century British Radicalism* (Lexington Books, 2014) pp. 127–9.
- 3 Wilbur Devereux Jones, 'The British Conservatives and the American Civil War', *The American Historical Review*, 58/3 (Apr. 1953), pp. 527–43.
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- 5 Blackett, *Divided Hearts*, p. 67.
- 6 Amanda Foreman, *A World on Fire: An Epic History of Two Nations Divided* (Allen Lane, 2010), pp. 222 and 670.
- 7 Christopher Lazarski, *Power Tends to Corrupt: Lord Acton's Study of Liberty* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2012), p. 19.
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## Women

Alastair Reid examines how British women anti-slavery campaigners reacted to the American Civil War.

# The American Civil War and th

**A**T A TIME when the upsurge of interest around Black Lives Matter has drawn attention to the widespread and important benefits that British society derived from enslavement and the trades associated with it, it is also worth remembering the importance of anti-slavery ideas and actions for liberal and radical politics throughout the early-nineteenth century. This was nowhere more significant than in the early campaigns to improve the position of women, which emerged from the same Unitarian and Quaker circles that did so much to produce the movement to abolish slavery.

One of the leading figures in taking these proto-feminist campaigns onto the national political stage in the 1860s was Emily Davies (1830–1921), famous as the main organiser of the first residential ‘College for Women’ in 1869, which became Girton College, Cambridge; perhaps less often remembered as the main organiser of the first campaign for women’s suffrage in 1866–67. Davies was admittedly an Anglican and a Conservative, but she was the exception among her close colleagues: Barbara Bodichon (née Leigh Smith) (1827–1891) was more typical, as a Unitarian whose father and grandfather were both abolitionists as well as Radical MPs for Norwich, and one of whose aunts played a key role in the organisation of women’s petitions against slavery in the 1830s. So, Bodichon and many of the other members of the circle around Davies had seen female political activism close at hand as they were growing up, with abolitionist activity as one of its central elements. It might be thought that the very successes of the abolitionists in eliminating the British slave trade in 1807 and slave ownership in the British colonies in 1833 would have made the movement less necessary and also less influential. However, the moral crusade against enslavement was suddenly revitalised by enthusiasm for the Northern side in the

American Civil War which broke out in 1861 and which drew in even such previously uninvolved women as Emily Davies. It is therefore worth exploring this wider national and indeed international context to throw light on what we can see as some of the main ‘external’ influences on the emergence of the early women’s movement in Britain, which has usually been studied from a more ‘internal’ perspective. To make this manageable in the space available, this paper will focus on the circle of women around Emily Davies, based mainly in London.

### The Civil War in America and its impact on British politics

In an initial attempt to contain the dispute, the Northern case for maintaining the Union was conciliatory about the abolition of slavery and focused instead on arguments about majority rule in a democracy; but this led to considerable confusion among overseas observers, as the Southern secessionists countered it by emphasising their ambition for self-determination. There were, however, many who understood from the start that the whole point of this self-determination was the preservation of slavery, and who saw the dispute as the latest episode in a long struggle between aspirations for liberty and popular government on the one hand and the resistance of hereditary privilege on the other, which had begun with the American and French Revolutions. From this point of view, the conflict was not an internal dispute over sovereignty but a key test of the ‘republican experiment’ with implications for the rest of the Atlantic world, throughout which reactionary forces had been dominant since defeat of the revolutions of 1848.<sup>1</sup>

Once the Northern leaders had a better grasp of the extent of the unpopularity of slavery overseas, they began to shift their case towards a more explicit championing of liberty and

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# The British women's movement

equality against slavery and aristocracy, which seems to have been just in time to prevent intervention by the British and French governments in support of Southern independence. The turning point was Giuseppe Garibaldi's maverick march on Rome in the summer of 1862, with the aim of making it the capital of a fully united Italy. This turned out to be something of a farce, but the popular demonstrations in support of the wounded Garibaldi which subsequently swept from Italy across the continent, combined with his very prominent statements of support for the North in the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, made European governments think again about intervening on the side of notorious American enslavers.<sup>2</sup> This new international situation favouring the North was then crystallised by two further public events during 1863. First, President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation became law at the beginning of January and unambiguously focused the war on the question of slavery. And second, Lincoln's short but powerful Gettysburg Address universalised the conflict in November 1863, by declaring the Union's aims to be not only 'that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom' but also 'that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth'. Whether consciously or not, this echoed some well-known phrases of the Italian republican nationalist Giuseppe Mazzini, and it turned Lincoln into one of the major icons of liberal and democratic aspiration throughout Europe for many decades after his shocking assassination in 1865, just as the North was securing victory.<sup>3</sup>

The four-year-long American Civil War therefore had a powerful transatlantic resonance and transmitted a major impetus to progressive movements in Britain. For, the fight to end Southern slavery led to a revival of abolitionist feeling which enabled the construction

of new political alliances: between parliamentary Liberals and Radicals, and between both those groups and extra-parliamentary popular radicalism, including a resurgent trade union movement.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, a stronger unity was also created within extra-parliamentary radicalism itself.<sup>5</sup> As a result, over the next five years this broad progressive movement was able to achieve not only a major expansion of the British electorate in 1867 but also a triumphant success for popular Liberalism with the election of William Gladstone's first reforming government in 1868.

Once again, a key link in the chain of events was provided by Garibaldi, whose long career as a leader of military adventures in pursuit of national independence in Europe and South America led him to be seen not only as the 'Hero of the Two Worlds' but also, with reference to a more ancient form of enslavement, as a modern Moses. His visit to Britain in 1864 was initially intended as a rather low-key propaganda exercise in support of liberal Italy, but unexpectedly caught the mood of the moment and turned into an extraordinary expression of spontaneous public passion for a man who had become a sort of secular saint, renowned for his moral virtue and physical charm. When Garibaldi arrived in London, the crowds which came to see him were estimated at 500,000 and, since so many people wanted to speak to him and shake his hand, it took him five hours to travel the three miles from the railway station to the place where he was going to stay.<sup>6</sup> But Garibaldi's tour of Britain was suddenly cut short, allegedly because of pressure from the government not to visit Manchester, Newcastle and Glasgow as originally planned, in case it stirred up too much popular agitation. If there was any truth in that, the cancellation had rather the opposite effect, with the ensuing deep disappointment leading directly to the formation of the

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## The American Civil War and the British women's movement

National Reform League the following year: a body which would play the leading role in mounting pressure for electoral reform from outside parliament, with Garibaldi in a prominent role as its honorary president.<sup>7</sup>

That year, 1865, also saw the election to the House of Commons of a number of Radicals who supported the North in the American Civil War, most notably John Stuart Mill and Henry Fawcett. Then, after just two more years of intensive extra-parliamentary pressure, a Conservative prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli, conceded the first measure of electoral reform in a generation in a bid to calm down the agitation at a time of unsettling disputes over British rule in Jamaica and Ireland as well as in domestic industrial relations.<sup>8</sup> While still falling short of manhood suffrage, the Second Reform Act of 1867 extended the vote to all male householders, almost doubling the electorate and including many ordinary manual workers within the political system for the first time. Throughout the campaign for electoral reform, comparisons with the United States were prominent among both progressives and conservatives. The conservative side usually had the upper hand in parliament by pointing to many examples of mediocrity and corruption under America's more democratic political arrangements. But the progressives were able to ride an ongoing wave of enthusiasm in the country, fuelled by passionate agitation appealing to anti-aristocratic and anti-slavery attitudes.<sup>9</sup>

For the leading Radical intellectual John Stuart Mill, the American Civil War was a major catalyst not only in reviving his optimism about the United States but also in encouraging him to extend the discussion of parliamentary reform to include votes for women. Of course, Mill had long approved of the principles of liberty and equality on which the United States had been founded but, partly under the influence of Alexis de Tocqueville's critical account of *Democracy in America* (1835 and 1840), had begun to fear that it would decline into an increasingly mindless worship of its own republican superiority and a neglect of the need to put the grand principles of the constitution fully into practice. So, Mill welcomed what he saw as the salutary shock of a lengthy conflict, followed by the eventual victory of the North and the elimination of chattel slavery, as the beginnings of a regeneration of the American people which would lead them to address the other major issue of continuing inequality: the subordinate position of women.<sup>10</sup> In a letter to the feminist

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abolitionist Elizabeth Cady Stanton in 1869, he was still absorbing and reflecting on the impact of the Civil War: '[The nation's] late glorious struggle has shaken old prejudices and brought men to the feeling that the principles of your democratic institutions are not mere phrases, but are meant to be believed and acted upon toward all persons.'<sup>11</sup> Then, when Mill finally published his classic work on *The Subjection of Women* that year, though it had mostly been written as early as 1861, he called for the reform of property laws affecting women and equal access to the vote. And one of the central themes of his argument was a comparison of the position of married women with that of enslaved people, considering the latter to be in some respects better off as they usually had some time away from their duties to their masters. In any case, slavery having just been abolished in the Southern states, the position of women was the one remaining major anomaly in the liberal democracies which needed to be addressed:

The law of servitude in marriage is a monstrous contradiction to all the principles of the modern world, and to all the experience through which those principles have been slowly and painfully worked out. It is the whole case, now that negro slavery has been abolished, in which a human being in the plenitude of every faculty is delivered up to the tender mercies of another human being, in the hope forsooth that this other will use the power solely for the good of the person subjected to it. Marriage is the only actual bondage known to our law. There remain no legal slaves, except the mistress of every house.<sup>12</sup>

### **Anti-slavery and the emergence of the women's movement in Britain**

In these ways, the victory of the North in the American Civil War, followed immediately by the emancipation of the enslaved people in the Southern states and, soon after that, by their inclusion within the political system, gave a huge boost to the ambition and assertiveness of campaigners for democracy and women's rights on the European side of the Atlantic. As the American situation unfolded, the new generation in Britain born around 1830 found that what had initially been largely a tradition of abolitionism inherited from their older female relatives was coming to life again as a major issue of their own day. Barbara Bodichon, for example, went on a seven-month tour

of the United States with her husband in 1857–58 as a sort of honeymoon, and they spent two months of the winter in New Orleans, where every conversation seemed to be about race and slavery. Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) was mentioned by Southerners from the start of their visit and roundly condemned as the product of an appalling mindset which combined anti-slavery and women's rights. Bodichon agreed about that combination but gave it the opposite evaluation. Thus, she frequently compared the position of enslaved people and women, speculating that the belief that women should be subordinated to men was a foundation of the belief that Blacks should be subordinated to Whites:

[A free mulatto] told me there was no career for free negroes, no rights, no public position. All he said might have been said by any woman anywhere.

Slavery is a greater injustice, but it is allied to the injustice to women so closely that I cannot see one without thinking of the other and feeling how soon slavery would be destroyed if right opinions were entertained upon the other question.<sup>13</sup>

On her return to Britain, Bodichon began providing readers of the *English Woman's Journal* with material on the realities of slavery and she was encouraged by Emily Davies, who was the *Journal's* editor at the time and who, once the Civil War had broken out, had no hesitation in publishing pieces critical of the South: 'If we exist for anything, surely it is to fight against slavery, of Negro as well as other, women'.<sup>14</sup> However, the issue did not become fully focused until two years into the conflict when President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation became law in January 1863. Bodichon was quick to propose a new campaign: in the February 1863 edition of the *Journal* she published a long and lucid piece underlining the centrality of slavery to the dispute between North and South. Indeed, she seemed to be hoping to shock her readers into active support of the North by providing evidence that the South was aiming not only to maintain its existing plantations but also to populate the new territories in the American West by reopening the Atlantic slave trade.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, there had already been an initial stimulus for the revival of active abolitionist campaigning by women in Britain from an open letter published in the January 1863 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, calling for the women

Women  
campaigners:  
Emily Davies, 1880  
(1830–1921)  
Barbara Bodichon,  
1861 (1827–91)  
Clementia Taylor,  
1898 (1810–1908)



## The American Civil War and the British women's movement

of Britain to support the North in the Civil War as a Christian fight for 'the inalienable rights of immortal souls' and expressing some regret that there had been a 'decline of the noble anti-slavery fire in England'.<sup>16</sup> A rejoinder of passionate support by Frances Power Cobbe (1822–1904) was produced as a pamphlet in London and then picked up and reproduced in a later edition of the *Atlantic Monthly*. In the course of her argument, Cobbe made it clear that she, like Bodichon, saw the disempowerment of enslaved Blacks and female Whites as direct equivalents:

... the right to freedom is founded simply and solely on the moral nature wherewith God has endowed every man and woman of the human race, enabling them, by its use, to attain to that virtue which is the end of their creation.<sup>17</sup>

The main practical outcome of these interventions was the establishment of the Ladies' London Emancipation Society on 20 March 1863 by Clementia ('Mentia') Taylor (1810–1908) at her home, Aubrey House, in the Holland Park district of west London. This is generally considered the first national anti-slavery society for women anywhere in the world, though there had been provincial ones before, both in Britain and in North America. It soon had over 200 members and, while its executive committee included some prominent veterans such as Harriet Martineau, it was notable for drawing in a significant number of women who had not previously been involved in abolitionist activity, usually because they were from a younger generation. Thus, the executive committee also included Emily Davies alongside her close friend from the older generation Charlotte Manning (1803–71). Like its male equivalent, the main activity of the Ladies' Society was to disseminate detailed information about the realities of Southern slavery to support the new case of the North about its war aims: that they were about ending the immorality of slavery rather than just trying to interfere with states' rights. The society distributed a large range of tracts and published twelve of its own in 1863–64 with an estimated circulation of over 12,000 copies. The society's first annual report made a point of ending its detailed account of its own publications by quoting from its fifth tract, a reprint of a pamphlet by the Boston abolitionist Loring Moody, indicating how at least some of its leading members saw the significance of the American Civil War:

The design of this work is to show, from the testimony of the prime movers and leaders in this Rebellion, and those in sympathy with them, that this is an open and undisguised conflict between the opposing principles of Freedom and Despotism; that the leaders of the Rebellion are fighting to break down and destroy the government of Freedom, which our fathers founded, and to establish a despotic, slaveholding aristocracy on its ruins.<sup>18</sup>

Given this wider political perspective, it is interesting to note that the one male subscriber to the Ladies' London Emancipation Society listed was 'Signor Mazzini', a close friend of Mentia Taylor's and frequent visitor to her home in Holland Park; and it seems that 'General Garibaldi' was recruited as an honorary member.<sup>19</sup> Certainly, a delegation from the Ladies' Society presented the latter with an address a year later during his tumultuous reception in London in April 1864. And, when Emily Davies wrote an amusing letter about her part in that meeting to her friend Anna Richardson (1832–1872), even she was clearly excited and not completely immune to Garibaldi's famous charisma:

I have been engaged in fine sports to-day, helping to present an address to Garry Baldy, as the Londoners call him. It was as being on the Committee of the Ladies' Emancipation Society that I had the honour & happiness of going. I felt rather unworthy of it. The face is very fine in its calm composure, not at all foreign in the common sense of the word. We were a disreputable set of people (except myself & one other lady.) & our address was a most inflammatory production. I felt as if I had got among conspirators, & was relieved when I discovered two clergymen in the company.<sup>20</sup>

In the following years this network of women activists which had begun to form around anti-slavery issues then began to turn its attention to other campaigns. In May 1865 Emily Davies and Charlotte Manning played the leading role in setting up a group for the focused discussion of carefully prepared papers, which became known as the 'Kensington Society' because it met in Manning's house in that part of west London, with Davies acting as its secretary. However, it was more of a national society than previous gatherings of female activists as it consciously aimed to bring together women from different social circles who did not already

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know one another.<sup>21</sup> It eventually had almost seventy members and gathered quarterly for presentations and discussions for three years, becoming increasingly focused on the issue of women's parliamentary suffrage, partly because it also drew in a significantly more Radical current under the influence of Mentia Taylor. Davies certainly supported the idea of increased political participation on the part of women but was uneasy about moving too fast: she still feared that such an advanced demand might provoke a reactionary backlash and upset her own more careful, almost technical, step-by-step work in the education field. When she expressed this explicitly to others, it came quite naturally to her to compare it with the by then conventional parallel of slavery:

I don't think I agree with you that rights ought to be seized by force. Take the extreme case of Slavery. It would surely be better that the right of freedom should be restored by the people who have stolen it, than that it should be extorted by an insurrection of the slaves. As to the suffrage, my view is that, the object of representation being, not to confer privileges but to get the best possible government, women should be politely invited to contribute their share of intelligence in the selection of the legislative body. As to their 'asserting their rights successfully & irresistibly', the idea is, if I may say so, rather revolting to my mind.<sup>22</sup>

Bodichon, however, was enthusiastic about fighting energetically for the extension of the franchise to women and led the way. Somewhat against her own judgment, Davies allowed herself to be carried along and it seems, from the way she remembered it later, that it was a lot of fun. First, they campaigned in support of John Stuart Mill's candidacy as a Liberal MP for Westminster in the spring of 1865 on a manifesto of explicit commitment to female suffrage. He was successful, but Davies was rather ironic about how much her circle really contributed:

I remember that Mrs Bodichon hired a carriage, occupied by herself, Isa Craig, Bessie Parkes & myself, with Mr Herman Bicknell on the box, with placards upon it, to drive about Westminster. We called it giving Mr Mill our moral support, but there was some suspicion that we might rather be doing him harm, as one of our friends told us he had heard him described as 'the man who wants to have girls in Parliament.'<sup>23</sup>

Then, in the spring of 1866, they organised a petition in support of extending the householder suffrage to women, which achieved almost 1,500 signatures.<sup>24</sup> Ironically, as Bodichon was increasingly unwell and frequently abroad, it was Davies who began to take over as the key, if characteristically low-profile, figure in this first extra-parliamentary campaign for the vote for women. This involved her in several meetings with Helen Taylor (1831–1907) and visits to her father, John Stuart Mill, at his home in Blackheath, which Davies much enjoyed. Then, it was she, along with Elizabeth Garrett Anderson (1836–1917), who took the petition over to Mill in Westminster for presentation to the House of Commons on 7 April 1866. This was perhaps the high point of Davies's involvement in national political life and, scrupulous memoirist as she was, she still remembered it vividly years later:

... we walked up & down the Hall, E. Garrett carrying the Petition, amid a crowd of people. The large roll was somewhat conspicuous, & not easy to conceal, so we asked an old applewoman to put it behind her stall. Almost immediately after, Mr Mill appeared, finding us empty-handed. It was an embarrassing moment. E. Garrett, almost choking with suppressed laughter, said in broken accents, 'we've put it down.' It was of course at once recovered, & Mr Mill, taking it up and waving it in the air, said 'I can brandish this with effect.'<sup>25</sup>

Subsequently, it was Davies who coordinated a publicity campaign to keep up the pressure over the second half of the year and who became the real administrative force behind the first Suffrage Committee to be set up in Britain.<sup>26</sup> But, of course, she had also been correct at the outset in having thought this was all somewhat premature. Mill's attempt to move an amendment to extend the householder franchise across the gender divide by replacing the word 'men' with 'persons' in the debate over the Reform Bill on 20 May 1867 was roundly defeated without the majority of MPs even turning up to listen or to vote. Davies was grateful to Mill for having made his intervention and satisfied that there had been a serious discussion of the issue in parliament for the first time but, seeing that the opening which had been offered briefly by the debates on the passing of the Second Reform Bill would be closed for the foreseeable future, she dropped out of the Suffrage Committee and left the work of keeping up the long-term pressure on votes for women to the

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Girton College,  
Cambridge, ca  
1890/1900

Radicals.<sup>27</sup> For, that gave her the time to focus on her more immediate educational projects and, as the pinnacle of their efforts of the 1860s, Emily Davies and Barbara Bodichon proved to be a truly remarkable partnership in their successful establishment of a residential college of higher education for women: Davies providing the administrative persistence and intellectual ambition, Bodichon most of the initial money and a winning personal charisma.

Of course, Girton College is still there today, considerably larger and looking so much like a venerable Victorian establishment in its own now picturesque grounds that it is probably not immediately obvious to most visitors what a visionary and courageous effort it took to get it going in the 1860s, before women could even take part fully in the professions let alone cast their votes in parliamentary elections. Its main mover, Emily Davies, was an Anglican and Conservative but she was surrounded by women who were Nonconformists and Liberals or Radicals, and who mostly came from families long immersed in campaigning for the abolition of slavery. Davies may have been alternately frustrated and amused by the Radicals and wary of being seen as too closely associated with them and their methods, but she had been right at the centre of all the progressive events of the early 1860s during

which the women's movement became a significant presence on the British political stage for the first time: the first women's national anti-slavery organisation in 1863, the overwhelming response to Garibaldi's visit to London in 1864, the establishment of a national intellectual forum for the discussion of women's issues, the election of John Stuart Mill to parliament in 1865, the presentation to Mill of the first petition for women's suffrage and the formation of the first committee in pursuit of that cause in 1866. So, if the successful establishment of the first College for Women three years later is to be understood in terms broader than the power of individual personalities and the successive steps they took to achieve their specific educational aims, it can be seen as part of a wider wave of enthusiasm for extending democracy and participation initially sparked off by support for the anti-slavery aims of the North in the American Civil War. It might seem a long way from Gettysburg to Girton, but the links in the chain were direct and continuous.

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## 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).
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- 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.

# The fall of the Lloyd George coalition

2022 marks the centenary of the departure from office of the last Liberal to hold the post of Prime Minister; on 19 October 1922 David Lloyd George resigned after six years as premier. His fall followed the decision of Conservative MPs, meeting in the Carlton Club earlier that day, to end the post-war coalition; the Conservative parliamentary party's 1922 Committee is named after that meeting.

Discuss why the Lloyd George coalition fell with **Lord Lexden** (official historian of the Conservative Party) and **Dr Matthew Johnson** (Associate Professor of Modern British History, University of Durham) (to be confirmed).

6.30pm, Monday 11 July

Lady Violet Room, National Liberal Club, 1 Whitehall Place, London SW1A 2HE

(We are aiming for this to be a hybrid meeting, with an in-person audience and access via Zoom. Further details will be posted nearer the time on our website at <https://liberalhistory.org.uk/events/>)

- 9 T. Little, "An Undoubted Error, the Most Singular and Palpable": Gladstone and the American Civil War', below.
- 10 Eugenio F. Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860–1880* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 67–84.
- 11 Josh Gibson, 'The Chartists and the Constitution: Revisiting British Popular Constitutionalism', *Journal of British Studies*, 56/1 (2017), pp. 70–90. doi:10.1017/jbr.2016.121. The most systematic discussion is in Id. 'The political thought of the Chartist movement' (Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge University, 2016), especially chapter 7, <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.24324>. For the significance of emigration see James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The settler revolution and the rise of the Anglo-world, 1783–1939* (Oxford, 2009).
- 12 C. W. Dilke, *Greater Britain: A record of travel in English-speaking countries in 1866–7* (London, 1868). For its influence see D. Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860–1900* (Princeton, 2007).
- 13 Eugenio F. Biagini, *British Democracy and Irish Nationalism, 1876–1906* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 245–7.
- 33 Josef L. Altholtz, 'Acton' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 Sep. 2004.
- 34 Roland Hill, *Lord Acton* (Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 81–5.
- 35 Colin Barr, 'Lord Acton's Irish Elections', *The Historical Journal*, 51/1 (March 2008).
- 36 J. Vincent and M. Stenton, *McAlmont's Parliamentary Poll Book* (Harvester Press, 1971), p. 49.
- 37 Hill, *Acton*, pp. 86–7.
- 38 Craig, *Election Results*, pp. 59–60.
- 39 Altholtz, ONDB.
- 40 Hill, *Acton*, p. 387.
- 41 Lazarski, *Power*, p. 144.
- 42 Linda Colley, *The Gun the Ship and the Pen: Warfare, Constitutions and the Making of the Modern World* (Profile Books, 2021), p. 329.
- 43 Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Lord Acton: A Study in Conscience and Politics* (Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1993), p. 78.
- 44 Hill, *Acton*, p. 88.
- 45 James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (OUP, 2005), pp. 42–3.
- 46 However, it should be noted that this independence did not extend to the abolition or liberalisation of slavery which was expressly denied in the constitution. See Colley, *Gun*, p. 333.
- 47 Acton, *Political Causes of the American Revolution* (1861).
- 48 Jerry Salver, 'Lord Acton and the American Civil War', *The Imaginative Conservative*, <https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2019/02/lord-acton-american-civil-war-jerry-salver>, 7 Feb. 2019.
- 49 Hill, *Acton*, p. 88.
- 50 Lazarski, *Power*, p. 161.
- 51 A. C. Grayling, *Towards the Light: The Story of the Struggles for Liberty and Rights That Made the Modern West* (Bloomsbury, 2007), p. 164.
- 52 Acton, *The Civil War in America* (1866).
- 53 Himmelfarb, *Acton*, p. 78.
- 54 Christopher Clausen, 'Lord Acton and the Lost Cause', *American Scholar*, 69/1 (Winter 2000), pp. 49–58.
- 55 Quoted in Alfred Grant, *The American Civil War and the British Press* (McFarland & Co. 2000), p. 182.

## Commerce, conscience and constitutions Concluded from page 59