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CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH PERSPECTIVES ON THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR: Rare Documents

Sylvia Larson

In May of 1861, Abraham Lincoln's Secretary of State William H. Seward wrote to the United States Minister to the Court of St. James that "war may ensue between the United States and one, two, or even more European nations....But if it comes, it will be fully seen that it results from the actions of Great Britain, not our own."

Seward was expressing one of President Lincoln's most troublesome problems, that of preventing Great Britain from intervening in the American Civil War. Minister Charles Francis Adams had the task of conveying the President's concern to British Foreign Secretary Lord John Russell, in tones less blunt than those of Secretary Seward. Adams, son and grandson of American presidents, was well equipped for diplomacy, as he handled the complexities of this fascinating aspect of our Civil War: the inter-relationship of England (with its European alliances), the Union (the Northern states), and the Confederacy (the rebellious Southern states). President Lincoln's troublesome problem can also be viewed as the "old" world dealing with a republic of the "new" world. And, because Great Britain's Canadian colony bordered the republic, Mr. Lin-

coln also worried about our neighbor to the north. Canada, then consisting of four separate provinces (Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Canada West and Canada East), was facing its own domestic difficulties and coming to grips with the necessity of some kind of union. Canadians viewed the American scene without compassion and with trepidation. Americans looked north and saw a vivid manifestation of English outrage over the notorious *Trent* affair—more than 10,000 red-coated troops were rushing into Canada. England correctly considered the forced removal of two Confederate commissioners from the British ship *Trent* by Captain Charles Wilks of the United States Navy as a provocative breach of neutral rights. It was not the friendliest of times along the border.

Recently, the University of North Carolina Press published a study by Howard Jones of this international dimension of the American Civil War. The author's bibliography includes such American and British sources as the diaries of Charles Francis Adams and the papers of Lord John Russell, William Gladstone, and Prime Minister Henry John Palmerston.

Coincidentally, and most fortunately, the Lincoln Collection at Bridgewater State College recently received a collection of seventeen Civil War documents, many published during the war years and dealing directly with the focus of Professor Jones' book *Union in Peril: The Crisis over British Intervention in the Civil War*.

Walter Morrison of Lawrencetown, Nova Scotia, Bridgewater class of 1950, gave the collection to the college as part of his contribution to the class fund. Mr. Morrison was born in Massachusetts. In 1961, he moved to Canada where he had family. He taught cartography at the Nova Scotia Land Survey Institute, now the College of Geographic Survey and part of the Technical University of Nova Scotia,

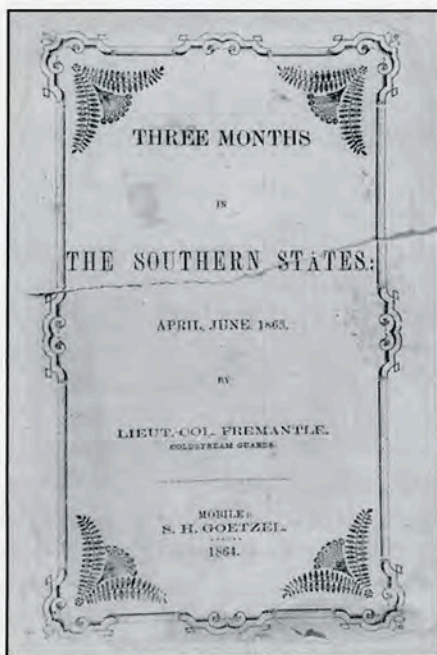


PHOTO: MARIE DENNEHY

and he retired in 1986. At Bridgewater, Walter Morrison had been a math-science major and an active photographer. His interest in antiquarian maps led him to collecting documents like those in his gift to the college. Some of his documents were extras or discards from the Dennis Collection of the History of Nova Scotia; some were given to him by friends; others he purchased at antique shops and book sales.

Mr. Morrison contacted Dr. Jean Prendergast, also of the class of 1950 and a member of the class finance committee, about giving his collection of documents. Dr. Prendergast, of the Department of Mathematics and Computer Science, contacted Mrs. S. Mabell Bates, Special Collections Librarian, who accepted the Civil War documents for the Maxwell Library — an exceptional gift “which will add much prestige to our Lincoln Collection.”

This essay considers selections from Mr. Morrison’s gift, as they reflect specific contemporary insights into President Lincoln’s foreign policy problem.

THREE MONTHS IN THE SOUTHERN STATES

If you saw the movie *Gettysburg*, perhaps your curiosity was piqued by the fascinating character of Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Freemantle, the Englishman who felt so at home among the Southerners — they were, to him, not Americans but transplanted Englishmen. *They are English*, he mused; *and the great experiment — democracy and the equality of the rabble — in just over a generation they have come back to class; they are all the same — one religion basically, one way of life*. These were profound thoughts to take back to England!

Why was he at Gettysburg, riding beside General Longstreet in the early hours of the second day of the battle?

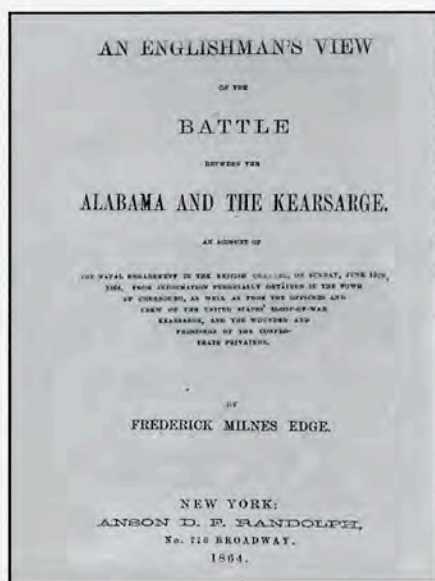


PHOTO: MARIE DENNEN

Professor Tom Turner selected a pamphlet written by Freemantle as a particularly interesting document in the collection, and explains: “Freemantle was a member of the Coldstream Guards and was on leave of absence when he spent three months with the Confederate Army. He was on intimate terms with both Lee and Longstreet, and the diary which he produced has been quoted by many historians....He donned his bright red uniform during Pickett’s charge. This must have made him stand out prominently, as well as having been extremely uncomfortable during the very hot weather of early July 1863.”

Freemantle’s 158-page diary was written during the months when England began to realize that the North would eventually win the war, and the Union would be the Union. News of the North’s victory at Gettysburg reached Adams in London at a critical time. It reinforced his assertion that intervention on the Confederacy’s behalf was a policy not to be further entertained.

But as Freemantle sailed back to England just after Gettysburg, he remained infatuated with Southerners. In the preface of his diary, he admits to originally feeling a slight inclination toward the North, due to the slavery

question. But he soon began to admire the gallant determination of the Southerners and feel “complete revulsion” for the bullying of Northerners.

He had come to America to witness “the wonderful struggle.” Once here, he was impressed by the unanimity of the Southern people and the heroism of the Confederacy, and closed his diary by saying he could not believe that, in the nineteenth century, the civilized world would be a witness to the “destruction of such a gallant race.” Michael Shaara, in his novel *The Killer Angels*, on which *Gettysburg* was based, has Freemantle express his feelings this way: “And perhaps they will rejoin the Queen and it will be as it was, as it always should have been.”

AN ENGLISHMAN’S VIEW OF THE BATTLE BETWEEN THE ALABAMA AND THE KEARSARGE

A major irritant in British-American relations began in English shipyards and spread to the high seas. Shipbuilders constructed “commerce-raiders” for the Confederacy which, according to British law, were not technically “warships.” The *Alabama* was a particularly notorious “commerce-raider.” When it left the Liverpool shipyard, it was the *Enrica* on a trial run. At an appointed rendezvous in the Azores, this English-built vessel took on English sailors and English-supplied arms, coal and provisions. As the *Alabama*, it then proceeded to disrupt Union commerce and destroy over sixty vessels. Finally, challenged by the Union cruiser *Kearsarge* off the French coast near Cherbourg, it was destroyed in 1864. A picture of the naval battle circulated throughout the North with this caption: “Built of English oak in an English yard, armed with English guns, manned by an English crew, and sunk in the English Channel.”

The author of this pamphlet went to Cherbourg right after the battle. He

wished to set straight misrepresentations of the truth, spread by individuals as well as the French and English press. Captain John Winslow of the *Kearsage* welcomed Frederick Edge to his ship, anchored since the battle just outside Cherbourg harbor. The captain showed his visitor the ship's logbook. Mr. Edge spent six days detailing the ship's measurements, construction and armaments, the damages it had received in battle, and the names and nationalities of the crew and officers. He compared these statistics with those of the destroyed *Alabama*; and he described the military engagement, noting it was the first decisive battle between ships propelled by steam, and the first test of modern naval artillery. He praised the advanced armaments of the *Kearsage* and the number of ironclads in the Union navy, seventy-three out of over six hundred. Mr. Edge concluded his report by noting, gratefully, that this large United States fleet would be used to defend the "democratic principle." Edge donated the proceeds of his publication to the United States Sanitary Commission.

THE SOUTHERN BAZAAR HELD IN ST. GEORGE'S HALL, LIVERPOOL, OCTOBER 1864

Sympathy for the Confederacy was not limited to the shipbuilders in Liverpool, but was widespread among the upper classes, who organized a great bazaar to raise money for Southern soldiers in Northern prisons and hospitals. Letters telling of terrible suffering, in such places as Boston's Fort Warren, compelled the organizers of this bazaar to match their concern with substantive help. (Unhappily, mistreatment of prisoners occurred on both sides. This collection also includes a *Narrative of Privations and Sufferings of the United States Officers and Soldiers While Prisoners of War in the Hands of Rebel Authorities*, printed for the United States Sanitary Commission.)

Preparation for the bazaar began by compiling a list of Lady Patronesses who had the "appropriate" credentials. Not all qualified ladies agreed to help because stepping forward publicly could cause some embarrassment. Some ladies, on the other hand, were relieved to have an outlet for their sympathy, to be able to *do something*, especially since the government seemed paralyzed with inaction. The list of lady patronesses included a princess, three marchionesses, three countesses, and several ladies. A committee arranged a stall for each of the Confederate states. Stalls were attended by Southern representatives of the states or English ladies, if a given state had no representative in England. "This contributed greatly to the originality and character of the bazaar."

The report describes St. George's Hall — red, white and blue decorations over each stall and above everything — the Confederate flag. There are details on the stalls and the people attending them, items for sale, and musical entertainment. A beautiful Shetland pony was raffled off for 320 pounds; the pony was named Varina Davis, after the First Lady of the Confederacy. The Great Bazaar brought in over 22,000 pounds, an amount which the organizers felt worthy of the heroic South.

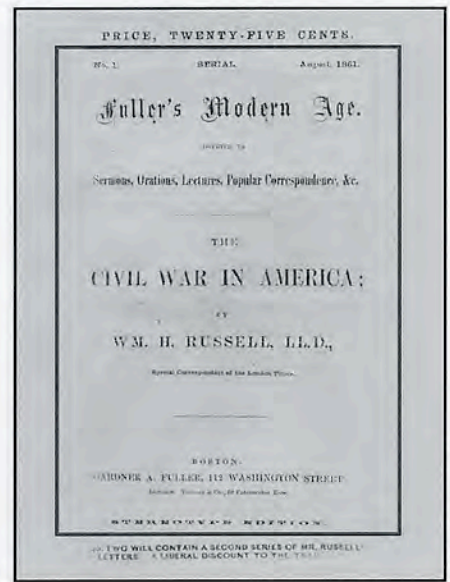
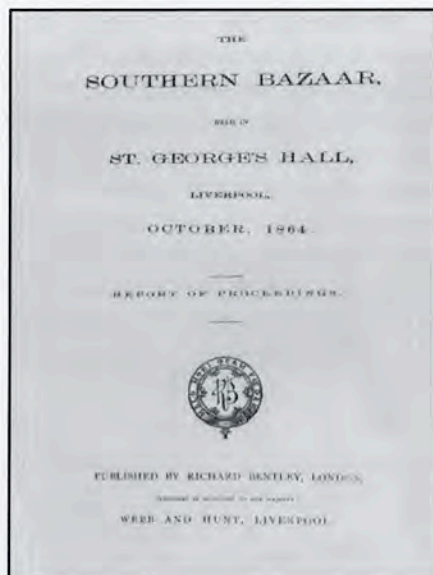


PHOTO: MARIE DENNEHY

Professor Jean Stonehouse of the Department of History spent several hours in Special Collections, looking over the valuable new Civil War documents. She commented on the generosity of the donor, and later she wrote, "I left musing over the Southern women who presided over booths at a public fair in England to raise money for the Confederate cause. I hadn't known about them. How did they come to be there? Did the experience change them?" Professor Stonehouse returned to use two other items in the collection for an article she is writing on the St. Albans Raid.

THE CIVIL WAR IN AMERICA

As Professor John Myers succinctly puts it, "the British waffled about their role with the South." Should they recognize the Confederacy, declare neutrality, remain aloof? Or should they initiate a European-style mediation, an idea particularly insulting to the Lincoln administration.

William H. Russell was a special correspondent for the *London Times*, internationally respected for his coverage of the Crimean War. Between March and June of 1861, he traveled throughout the South. The information he sent back to readers of the

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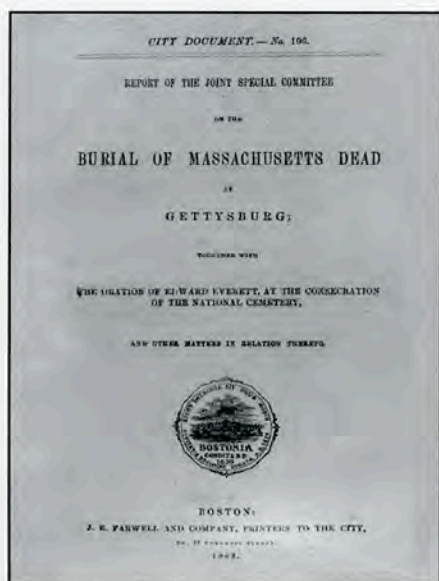


PHOTO: MARIE DENNEHY

Times and to the British government was generally considered accurate and unbiased. His letters covered the issues of the day: slavery, the blockade of Southern ports, the question of England's recognition of the Confederacy, military strength, communications lines, agriculture and crop potential — especially, of course, cotton. And he described the Southern countryside.

The correspondent spoke with important people in Charleston, Montgomery, Mobile, New Orleans, Natchez, and Cairo. Also, Mr. Russell met with Secretary Seward, who allowed Russell to read one of his angry dispatches (on the belief that England really would prefer a divided United States) to Charles Francis Adams in London. During a July 4th conversation, the Secretary told the correspondent that the United States would not shrink from a war provoked by a European power, but “a contest between Great Britain and the United States would wrap the world in fire.” The correspondent was impressed with the Secretary.

Russell witnessed the Union army's humiliating retreat after the first battle at Bull Run and was one of the few who predicted the North would recover. He

and Jefferson Davis discussed England's relationship with the Confederacy, and they touched on the tricky question of whether England's need for cotton might be stronger than its distaste for slavery. In Charleston, he listened to arrogant assumptions of English recognition and military assistance — “as if England were a sort of appanage to their cotton kingdom.”

In Boston, in 1861, Gardner A. Fuller began publishing a series of pamphlets. Number 1 in the series, *Fuller's Modern Age*, was a 189 page document containing William H. Russell's letters to the *London Times*. Fuller chose this for Number 1 because Russell was the most “interesting” correspondent with the most “influential” newspaper, and Fuller felt the subject of utmost importance, deserving of wide circulation.

BURIAL OF MASSACHUSETTS DEAD AT GETTYSBURG

For Abraham Lincoln, the dedication of the Gettysburg Cemetery presented an opportunity to transcend the terrible battle and vindicate the loss of life, to elevate the Civil War to an ideological and moral plane, thus giving the Union renewed purpose and rekindled faith. He accomplished this with the 272 words of the Gettysburg Address.

For each of the states, the importance of the Gettysburg ceremony was to honor its own among the 50,000 casualties. The states accomplished this with remarkable speed. An interstate commission assessed each state, according to its representation in Congress, for funds to clean up the bloody battlefield. William Saunders was hired as the architect to lay out the cemetery. Only four months after the battle, the dedication took place.

However frequently we ponder the event of November 19, 1863, it is impossible to imagine the enormity of the logistics in clearing the huge battlefield, placing the bodies, and preparing a fit-

ting cemetery. Gary Wills in *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Re-made America* (1992), leads us toward an understanding of the overall picture; Boston City Document, Number 106 provides a “case study” in detail of how one city and state carefully performed the task of taking-up and reburying its dead soldiers.

This document includes a list of the Massachusetts dead, complete according to information at that time. Edward Everett's lengthy oration is included, as is the President's brief address. The comment accompanying Lincoln's talk contrasts with general contemporary press reactions: “Perhaps nothing in the whole proceedings made so deep an impression on the vast assemblage, or has conveyed to the country in so concise a form, the lesson of the hour, as the remarks of the President.”

Lincoln's worries about English-American relations could not have been far from his mind as he composed the address. Great Britain could take note of the lesson of the hour: the *nation* being *tested* was the whole nation, North and South; the locale in democracy must not *perish from the earth*.

The author thanks Professors Myers, Stonehouse, and Turner for looking at the documents and sharing their thoughts; Mrs. S. Mabell Bates, for help in so many ways; Dr. Jean Prendergast for making all this happen; and Melissa Turner who, as part of a high school English project, researched the authors of some of the documents.



Sylvia Larson is a Visiting Lecturer in the Library Media program and also works with the Lincoln Collection at the Maxwell Library, Special Collections Department.