H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James J. Barnes, Patience P. Barnes, eds. *The American Civil War through British Eyes: Dispatches from British Diplomats, Volume 1: November 1860-April 1862.* Kent: Kent State University Press, 2005. viii + 338 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87338-787-3.

William C. Davis, ed. *Secret History of Confederate Diplomacy Abroad.* DeLeon. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005. xxxi + 224 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1411-0.

Reviewed by Charles R. Bowery (U.S. Army)
Published on H-CivWar (March, 2007)

The Diplomatic Dimension of the Civil War

While the American Civil War was first and foremost an armed conflict, the focus of historians and readers on battles and campaigns tends to obscure the parallel formation, development, and functions of the government of the Confederate States of America. The views of the Federal government aside, for the short period of its life, the Confederacy saw itself as an independent nation and strove to conduct itself as such. A key condition of true independence was the recognition of foreign powers, and the Confederate government devoted a sizable diplomatic corps to that end. Other nations dispatched diplomats to the Lincoln and Davis governments in an effort to ensure that their interests were represented in North America. Two recently reprinted collections highlight the Civil War's diplomatic aspects.

The American Civil War through British Eyes is the first of three volumes of collected dispatches from British diplomats to London. The bulk of the correspondence is from Richard Bickerton Pemell Lyons, Second Baron, who served as British "Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary" in Washington, to Earl Russell, the British Foreign Secretary. It is interesting to note that as late as 1860, Great Britain did not maintain a formal embassy to the United States; Lyons was therefore the ranking British diplomat in America. Additionally, the British maintained consulates in various cities, some in the Confederacy. The editors have included a small selection of their dispatches that illuminate various aspects of British policy toward the United States.

It will come as no surprise that Lyons viewed the coming of the American Civil War through the lens of British interests, and most of his dispatches concerned threats to those interests. Lyons was particularly sensitive to the plight of British citizens caught up in the war on both sides, and commented frequently on issues of commercial interest to the British Empire. The period of these dispatches saw two major events from the British perspective: the Union defeat at the First Battle of Bull Run in July 1861, and the affair of the mail steamer *Trent.* Lyons's perceptive reaction to First Bull Run is fascinating and quite accurate. A perceptive observer of public opinion, he judged, quite correctly, that while there was no real danger to Washington, D.C., "the hope that the war could be terminated in a few months by vigorous effort has vanished." The Federal government and U.S. Army, he continued in the dispatch of July 30, would come to the realization that "if the war is to be carried on at all, it must be carried on by troops organized, trained and disciplined as a regular army" (pp.147, 149). The installation of Gen. George B. McClellan as Union General-in-Chief, and the subsequent reforms of the army, bore out Lyons's observations.

On November 8, 1861, the captain of the U.S. Navy warship *San Jacinto* stopped the British mail steamer RMS *Trent* while underway in the Bahamas and removed two Confederate diplomats, James Mason and John Slidell, who were bound for service as ministers to the British and French governments. The resulting diplomatic crisis led to talk of a third Anglo-American war, to a strident ultimatum from London, and to massive preparations in Great Britain and Canada to carry out that war. U.S. Secretary of State William H. Seward ended the crisis on December 27 with an ironically crafted note that both offered to return the prisoners and salvaged American pride by referring to the American victory in the War of 1812. Lyons reported Northern reaction to the incident in great detail and, as the senior Crown representative in the United States, carried out negotiations with the Lin-

coln Administration. His dispatch of December 31 gives some credit for a peaceful resolution of the crisis to "a promptness on the part of the [U.S.] Government, and a calm acquiescence on the part of the people," but the lion's share of the praise to his government's prompt and overwhelming military response. The "preparations for war," Lyons continued, "which have been made so rapidly and on so great a scale by Her Majesty's Government, have produced a result which would, in all probability, not have been obtained in any other way" (p. 260). Lyons was an active chronicler of Northern public opinion and of the Federal war effort, as demonstrated by this sizable collection of dispatches.

With his edited release of the *Secret History of Confederate Diplomacy Abroad*, William C. Davis, director of the Virginia Center for Civil War Studies at Virginia Tech, adds to his status as a chronicler of the history of the Confederate States of America. Edwin DeLeon, son of Spanish Jews who settled in Columbia, South Carolina, was one of three sons, all of whom attained some notoriety for literary and professional pursuits in the Old South. Edwin was a newspaper editor and diplomat before the outbreak of war, and was traveling in Europe at the time of the secession crisis. Unable to reach the Confederate States once the war began, he shuttled between London and Paris while carrying on an information campaign to sway European opinion away from the Union.

After finally reaching home in mid-1862 and securing from Jefferson Davis permission to continue his efforts in spreading Confederate propaganda, DeLeon returned to Europe in a formal capacity. He remained abroad until February 1864, visiting both the Court of St. James and that of Napoleon III and encouraging pro-Confederate publications in both countries, when Confederate Secretary of State Judah P. Benjamin recalled him. Several of DeLeon's dispatches to Benjamin, highly critical of both England and France, made their way into Northern newspapers after being captured at sea. From that point until his death in 1891, he traveled the world and wrote for a number of publications. From 1867 to 1875, he published the twenty-one extant chapters of the *Secret History* in serial form in the New York *Citizen*. William C. Davis has brought this entertaining and informative firsthand account to book form for the first time, in combination with three other of DeLeon's short wartime writings.

DeLeon's writings offer a unique view of two of the major centers of European politics, the Government of Lord Palmerston in London and the court of Napoleon III. DeLeon left a June 1862 interview with Palmerston convinced that British recognition of the Confederacy was a forlorn hope. Although he was "most favorably impressed by his manliness and candor," DeLeon was "hopeless of any immediate aid from him or from the British Government," and, he left immediately for France (p.121). He traveled widely there, meeting with Napoleon III at his summer home in Vichy and using his sizable allowance to fund pro-Confederate periodicals. His dislike of John Slidell (who had received the post of minister to France that DeLeon thought was rightly his) prevented any close cooperation between the two, and again this Confederate diplomatic overture went for naught.

Neither of these edited collections offers new or groundbreaking insights into Civil War diplomacy. Rather, they reinforce the scholarly consensus that recognition of the Confederacy by Great Britain and France was never a serious possibility. Both nations acted in their own self-interest, and saw no real benefit, economic or otherwise, to allying with the Confederacy. That does not diminish the value of these publications, however. James Barnes and Patience Barnes have created a valuable primary source for understanding Civil War events from the perspective of an interested bystander. William C. Davis adds to his reputation for excellence in research and writing. Edwin DeLeon's story is a fascinating account of a singular man and his travels that adds greatly to our understanding of the diplomatic maneuverings behind events on the battlefield. Both books would be useful additions to library collections on the Civil War, and for undergraduate and graduate courses focusing on the political and diplomatic history of the Civil War era.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Charles R. Bowery. Review of Barnes, James J.; Barnes, Patience P., eds., *The American Civil War through British Eyes: Dispatches from British Diplomats, Volume 1: November 1860-April 1862* and Davis, William C., ed., *Secret History of Confederate Diplomacy Abroad.* H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. March, 2007.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12938

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for

nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.