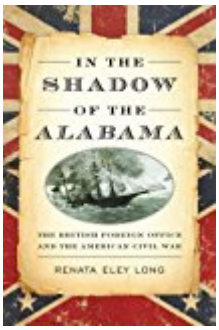
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Renata Eley Long. *In the Shadow of the Alabama: The British Foreign Office and the American Civil War.* New Perspectives on Maritime History and Nautical Archaeology Series. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2015. xiii + 254 pp. $37.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-61251-836-7.

Reviewed by Bradley Cesario

Published on H-War (April, 2016)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Since the British-built Confederate commerce raider CSS *Alabama* sailed from Liverpool in late July of 1862, historians have debated how exactly the ship managed to leave port ahead of the clutches of the British Foreign Office. Many theories have been propounded, most dealing with a Confederate sympathizer or mole within the Foreign Office (often presumed to be customs agent S. P. Edwards) who slipped word of the ship's impending seizure to the Confederate foreign agent James Bulloch. This is the explanation put forth by such contemporary authors as Amanda Foreman in *A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the America Civil War* (2010) and Coy Cross in *Lincoln's Man in Liverpool* (2007). A competing account by Frank Merli in his posthumously published *The* Alabama*, British Neutrality, and the American Civil War* (2004) disdains any idea of British collusion, crediting Bulloch for being savvy enough to sneak the *Alabama* to sea in the nick of time. Renata Eley Long worked with Merli and with his papers after the his death, but *In the Shadow of the* Alabama*: The British Foreign Office and the American Civil War* follows an older historiographical tradition: there was indeed a Foreign Office mole, and it was a clerk by the name of Victor Buckley. In taking this approach, Long returns to a hypothesis first raised by the historian Brooks Adams in 1911 with a new examination of the historical evidence.

Long's work hinges on the contention that Buckley was the Foreign Office mole. If he indeed was, the evidence rests on a copied memorandum brought to the secretary of the American legation in London by the disillusioned Confederate sympathizer Henry Hudson in December of 1865. Hudson claimed to have seen a message sent by Buckley to a Confederate agent in Liverpool, warning the latter that the Foreign Office would soon be seizing the *Alabama*. It must be noted here that this evidence is circumstantial; only Hudson saw the original memorandum, but he was unreliable and was eventually dismissed for failing to present any further confirmation of the relationship between Buckley and the Confederacy. Long admits that even if Buckley had been an

informant, any communique he sent would likely have had to pass through a second sympathetic party (she suggests arms manufacturers who sold weapons to the Confederacy) to the ***Alabama***'s constructors at the Laird Brothers shipyard to be of any eventual use to Bulloch. As to why Buckley's involvement was lost for over a century, Long posits two explanations. When Adams first published his evidence in 1911, he accidentally misidentified the memorandum's recipient, and the error was repeated by later historians, taking further scholarly attention away from Buckley and onto the Liverpool Confederates. Long also believes that Buckley's role could easily have been hidden by the British government. Buckley was Queen Victoria's godson and his father had been an equerry to the queen, and "behind the desire for good Anglo-American relations ... lay a personal wish that the potential scandal involving the son of her former equerry should not gain credence" (pp. 184-185).

This new examination of Buckley's role as a possible Foreign Office mole is Long's greatest contribution to the literature on British supporters of the Confederacy. However, the monograph as a whole covers a great deal of additional ground. The book consists of twenty short chapters, of which only four deal with the ***Alabama*** and only two with Buckley's role in the ship's escape. The remainder provide a broadly chronological history of everything from the family histories of British arms manufacturers to an 1892 Sherlock Holmes tale dealing with naval treaties. Some of these chapters provide an excellent background for the narrower focus on the ***Alabama***'s construction and launch, but some add little to Long's overall argument. A few of these could perhaps have been replaced with a historiographical chapter and a conclusion, as the work has neither. In terms of archival research, the most notable collections consulted are the diaries of Queen Victoria and US minister to the UK Charles Francis Adams—neither of which, it must be said, deal directly with the ***Alabama***. More germane is the impressive variety of rare and in some cases heretofore unused personal accounts and memoirs Long has uncovered, including privately printed internal histories of the British arms companies that supplied the Confederacy and the memoir of British Confederate sympathizer M. J. Butcher.

Proof of Buckley's complicity in the ***Alabama*** 's escape, as compiled in this work, will likely convince only those readers open to convincing. Those inclined to believe Buckley was the mysterious Foreign Office mole will find a great deal of circumstantial evidence that the young clerk operated in the same circles as the major arms manufacturers who were dependent on Confederate revenues and thus on the successful cruise of the ***Alabama***. Those who support Cross's idea that the mole was Edwards, or Merli's contention that Bulloch received no insider assistance, will not find their views demonstrably disproven. Readers looking for an in-depth examination of Confederate shipbuilding are advised to turn to the works of Merli and Foreman. What the book under review provides is an important reminder of the need to periodically reexamine historical truisms. The search for a smoking gun in the case of the ***Alabama***'s departure will continue; if focused authors such as Long continue to unearth previously unknown or forgotten historical evidence, someday soon the story of the Liverpool Confederates will again be rewritten.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-war

Citation: Bradley Cesario. Review of Long, Renata Eley. *In the Shadow of the Alabama: The British Foreign Office and the American Civil War.* H-War, H-Net Reviews. April, 2016.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=45322