H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Duncan Andrew Campbell. *English Public Opinion and the American Civil War.* Woodbridge and Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2003. xii + 266 pp. $70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-86193-263-4.

Reviewed by Jay Sexton

Published on H-CivWar (January, 2005)

Britain remained a neutral party throughout the American Civil War, yet, when it comes to public opinion during the conflict, historians have generally divided British observers into either pro-Union or pro-Confederate camps. In his study of English public opinion during the conflict, Duncan Andrew Campbell seeks to demonstrate that this bifurcation has distorted the reality of an English populace that, on the whole, remained skeptical of both sides.

This argument is best presented in the first chapter, the strength of the book. Surveying the London press in the opening phase of the war, Campbell finds little affection for either side. In large part, this was an extension of pre-war diplomatic disputes and cultural tensions, which, Campbell rightly points out, have often been overlooked by historians who generally have concentrated exclusively on the war years. Differences arising from American expansionism, the right of search on the high seas, and monitoring of the illegal international slave trade, to name but a few, gave Englishmen ample reason to be distrustful of both sides.

Furthermore, the initial policies of both the North and the South did little to curry favor in England. The Morrill Tariff, vacillation on emancipation and the aggressive diplomatic tone of Northern statesmen alienated Englishmen from the Union's cause. Conversely, the South's diplomatic strategy of withholding cotton from Europe and, as Campbell particularly emphasizes, Confederate leaders' outspoken defense of slavery, overshadowed their foreign policy advantages of free-trade and self-determination. As one English observer put it in 1861, "We cannot be very zealous for the North; for we do not like her ambition; we are irritated by her insolence; we are aggrieved by her tariffs; but we still have much feeling of kinship and esteem. We cannot be at all zealous for the South; for though she is friendly and free-trading, she is fanatically slave, and Slavery is the object of our rooted detestation" (p. 48).

Historians, Campbell points out, have often confused opposition to one side with support for the other, leading to a flawed understanding of British sympathies. A useful set of appendices delineates how more Members of Parliament and

Lords publicly endorsed neutrality (or were skeptical of both sides) than consistently advocated the cause of either the North or the South. Similarly, Campbell draws attention to the methodological problems in gauging popular attitudes from the press and public meetings, which uncritical historians have often accepted as barometers of English public opinion.

These are all important points that should lead historians to reflect upon conventional wisdom. The book, however, is not without its faults. Campbell couches his argument in opposition to the "traditional" interpretation of British sympathies during the war--the already discredited view that class affiliation and political ideology rigidly determined British views on the conflict. The working class and political radicals, according to this interpretation, uniformly supported the Union, whilst the aristocracy and business interests, seeking to stifle democratisation in Britain, backed the Confederacy.

This view, articulated by contemporaries such as John Bright and reasserted by E. D. Adams in his 1925 classic ***Great Britain and the American Civil War*** has come under attack from historians in the last fifty years.[1] Those scholars who do pick up on some of the themes of the traditional view--namely R. J. M. Blackett--do so with such greater nuance and qualification that they cannot be classified as advocates of the "traditional" interpretation as espoused by Bright and Adams. It is unnecessary, in other words, for Campbell to devote so much of his time and space to dismantling an interpretation that, with the possible exception of Philip Foner's slim 1981 work, has not found much scholarly traction in the last half century.[2] Furthermore, the style and tone in which Campbell engages in historiographical discussions is one which this reviewer found unnecessarily and counterproductively aggressive, particularly as many such discussions regarded only minor points of emphasis.

Campbell's focus on demolishing an already-demolished interpretation is perhaps the product of not engaging with recent scholarship. Indeed, Charles Hubbard's 1998 synthesis on Confederate diplomacy, Alfred Grant's 2000 book on the British press and, most crucially, R. J. M. Blackett's 2001 ***Divided Hearts: Britain and the American Civil War***, are all absent from Campbell's historiographical discussions (as well as bibliography).[3] These works no doubt came out late in the day for a book published in 2003, but their absence detracts from the book--particularly given its historiographical focus.

This is not just a matter of bolstering footnotes. Campbell's discussion of the British partisans of the Union and Confederacy, in particular, suffers from the absence of engagement with recent scholarship--namely Blackett's ***Divided Hearts***. Campbell minimizes the extent of English public engagement in the war, relying largely on London newspaper accounts and dated secondary literature to make the point that pro-Confederate organizations such as the Southern Independence Association were "paltry" and "unimpressive," whilst supporters of the North abandoned their efforts in "no-go" areas such as Sheffield and Lancashire after mid-1863 (pp. 184, 218, 224).

The recent work of Blackett suggests otherwise. Drawing from over 125 local newspapers, Blackett has chronicled, in great detail, the activities of partisans of the North and South in Britain, providing rich detail to support his view that "no other agitation in the period ... engaged public interest so extensively as did the debate over the war in America" (p. 168). Furthermore, Blackett sociologically examines membership lists of pro-Union and pro-Confederate organizations and finds that certain trends are discernable. Dissenters, radicals and trade union leaders disproportionately supported the North, whilst the Confederacy found its strongest support amongst the aristocracy, ministers of the Church of England and the merchant community of Liverpool. Black-

ett is careful to note, however, that all classes of Britons were to some extent divided on the American issue and calls attention to the several exceptions to these trends, thus avoiding the pitfall of rigid class and ideological determinism that marks the traditional view. Nonetheless, this is, in short, a revised and nuanced variation of the traditional view--one that is based on extensive research and analysis. If Campbell seeks to challenge an interpretation, he needs to begin here.

That being said, Campbell's overall argument that public opinion remained largely suspicious of both sides and that historians need to be careful about how they categorize the partisans of the two sides is still of value. As his close reading of the London press suggests, longstanding controversies and the specific policies of the Union and the Confederacy gave ample reasons for English observers to be alienated from both sides.

It appears that this thesis might work best at the level of elite policy-makers. Rarely ones to be swayed by passions, Russell, Palmerston and other leading British statesmen viewed the Civil War in a detached and pragmatic manner. Though they recognized the virtues of the causes of both sides and the international opportunities presented by the conflict, they were more compelled to stay at arm's length from both the Union and Confederacy and to maintain a policy of neutrality. Russell's flirtings with intervention in the autumn of 1862 should be viewed as an attempt to mitigate the adverse consequences of the conflict in Britain, not as outright support for the Confederacy. Furthermore, Campbell's discussions of Parliament's overall skepticism of both sides--with the exception, of course, of a handful of Brights and Roebucks--further accounts for the free hand given to the Palmerston cabinet in the formation of British policy. The more popular the attitudes explored, in other words, the more important the attitudes of a few elites become to understanding British policy during the American Civil War.

Notes

[1]. E. D. Adams, ***Great Britain and the American Civil War*** (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1925); and John Bright, ***Speeches of John Bright, M.P., on the American Question*** (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1865).

[2]. Philip Foner, ***British Labor and the American Civil War*** (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1981).

[3]. Charles Hubbard, ***The Burden of Confederate Diplomacy*** (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998); Alfred Grant, ***The American Civil War and the British Press*** (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2000); and R. J. M. Blackett, ***Divided Hearts: Britain and the American Civil War*** (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001).

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

Citation: Jay Sexton. Review of Campbell, Duncan Andrew. *English Public Opinion and the American Civil War.* H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. January, 2005.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10157