Interests and Ideals:
Sources of British Worker Opinion on the American Civil War

Kevin Baird
Senior Seminar: History Honors
Faculty Mentor: Professor Manning
May 7, 2012
I hereby authorize the publication of this thesis.
Introduction

As civil war sundered the United States between 1861 and 1865, British workers looked on with great interest. The ideas which pervaded discussion of the war, principles such as equality and self-government, reflected their own concerns as members of British society. Intermingled with high ideals, economic self-interest necessitated close observation of the “American question.” The war interrupted the flow of cotton from the Southern states to Britain, a serious disturbance when an estimated 20-25% of the island nation’s population depended on cotton for its livelihood. With such a mix of high principle and simple economics, it is no surprise that the American Civil War became a matter of discussion, debate, and activism among British workers.

For several generations, historians believed with near unanimity that this interest came attached to a pro-Union bias. As scholars categorized British opinion of the war through class, they placed the working class firmly on the side of the abolitionist, egalitarian North, while the upper class sympathized with the aristocratic, romantic South. This supposed stance was elevated by its apparent conflict with the economic interests of workers. Many operatives suffered unemployment and impoverishment as cotton became scarce, yet they stood firm against intervention on the side of the Confederacy due to its association with slavery. The idea of this “magnificent moral spectacle,” as William Gladstone called it, proved alluring, and indeed enduring.2

---

In the middle of the twentieth century, historians began to reevaluate this traditional interpretation. Studies began to question the unity of the working class behind the Union. Divergences were seen in how trade unionists of different generations responded to the war, how press organs connected to workers viewed the war, and how regions affected in different ways by the cotton famine responded in their own manner. The very authenticity of recorded pro-Union activity by British workers was questioned. These studies introduced complexity into the discussion on the sympathies of British workers in the Civil War. Where historians once saw a picture of an entire class united on a basis of moral principle, their successors added nuance to the characterization, or even sought to reverse it entirely.\(^3\)

Ultimately, a more complex narrative of British workers and the war across the sea must emerge, simply because of the complexity of the war and of the workers themselves. Some thought the Union to be fighting for the great moral principle of freedom from slavery, and thus worthy of support. Others believed the Confederacy advocated its own great principle, that of self-government. Still others viewed the war from a practical standpoint, believing that the Confederacy, whatever its founding principles, was a *de facto* independent nation, or hoping that British intervention of some sort would reopen the flow of cotton. Newspaper accounts, petitions, and pamphlets abound with varying reasons for supporting one side or the other. To ascribe one opinion to the entire class of British workers is to greatly oversimplify the truth.

Another limitation on the subject’s existing literature: a fair amount of attention has been given over the years to *what* British workers thought about the American Civil War, but the question of *why* remains comparatively unexplored. There are impressive efforts of scholarship

---

devoted to determining the true state of worker opinion on the war. This thesis builds on those past works by looking deeper at the currents of opinion among workers. Whereas some of the legends that have grown up around the war attribute pro-Union sympathy to an innate, abiding anti-slavery sentiment, and revisionist interpretations tend to elevate a desire for cotton as the ultimate reason for workers to follow the war’s events, this thesis considers worker opinions as malleable and multi-faceted. Different phases of the conflict saw different issues come to the fore; even where cotton, for example, dominated debate, workers differed on what that interest meant in terms of sympathizing with one side or the other. In short, the Civil War offered a chance for workers to figure out for themselves their most important interests and ideals.

More than a concern for events across the Atlantic, workers followed the war because it held considerable import for their place in Britain. Economic interests, most obviously cotton, raised the question in the minds of unemployed operatives in the mills of whether their nation would let them starve, and whether that possibility nullified moral concerns about slavery. When the war’s meaning was perceived as centering on freedom, either for white Southerners or for the slaves, workers considered how their obligations as members of the working class and as Britons should dictate their choices.

The chapters that follow examine more closely the influences that motivated workers to care in the first place and then shaped how they saw the war. Chapter One presents background on British workers before the war, focusing on earlier political activity, organization and ideology. The second chapter focuses on the larger state of British public opinion and the war’s beginning, highlighting the issues that were expected to shape perceptions of the war. Chapter Three looks at the events of the year 1861, particularly the cotton situation and the Trent affair, which provoked worker attention. Subsequently, the chapters shift their focus to specific themes.
that resonated among workers. Economic interests took precedence in the early stages of the war, but were far from alone. Perceptions of national identity and class also assumed prominence as influences worth considering in relation to the war. One may sense a glaring oversight: the topic of slavery does not receive its own chapter. The issue’s very pervasiveness rendered it difficult to separate into its own chapter; it simply cannot be separated from anything. Most often, slavery was considered in connection with the other themes: as a counter-argument to assertions of economic interest, or as the issue through which national identity and class concerns were manifested.

Because surveys of worker opinion have already been done, this work focuses on specific instances that express important currents of opinion instead of providing an exhaustive overview of opinion. The examples contained herein were chosen because they ably represent the overall ways in which economic interests, national identity, and class were used to shape worker opinions. As an added benefit, close analysis of these examples allows the reader to sense the atmosphere in which they occurred, the intensity of feeling and the sense of importance. Many elements go into this story: labor history, diplomatic history, a history of ideas and their use in political discussion, the history of one country split in two and another country across an ocean, looking on uneasily, contemplating its own role. Perhaps above all, it is a story of why individuals feel compelled to take action, politically and socially. Although workers in Britain felt the touch of war, they felt it distantly, in the news they received and the cotton they did not. No battles raged in the fields of their homeland; few familiar names appeared on the casualty lists of the distant struggle. Yet British workers followed these events anyway, formed opinions about them, and took the time to express them. In understanding why individuals such as they
became active in events so seemingly distant, one can better understand why people engage in political and social causes at all.

This thesis will argue that the interests and ideals of British workers motivated them to observe the events of the American Civil War, take sides, and organize to promote their views. Because their interests and ideals frequently clashed, workers and sympathetic outsiders engaged in debates to assert their preferred viewpoint. The process was complex. Workers shifted their focuses based on the events of the war and their own foremost concerns. Economic interests predominated when the cotton supply dwindled; moral concerns sometimes countered claims based on economic interest and sometimes bolstered them. As the war went on and the urgency of the cotton crisis subsided, views of the war became associated with questions of national and class identity. The beliefs of national identity compelled some workers to view the war primarily through the lens of their British identity, and consider its meaning for their opinions; beliefs stemming from class compelled workers to consider the war’s ramifications for their status as a class. By the war’s conclusion, the sympathizers of the Union, using antislavery beliefs filtered through national identity or class to sway audiences, were winning the arguments. In the end, the working class emerged from the years 1861-1865 with a firmer sense of its own identity and a renewed commitment to asserting its place within British society, not against it.
Chapter One: British Workers Before the Outbreak of the War

A decade that threatened civil war in the United States appeared promising for the prospects of British workers. Labor in Britain evolved over several decades, moving from a loosely-defined, often lawless collection of various tradesmen to a coherent, more organized working class with a unique culture and ethos. By 1860, this evolution seemed ready to take another major step with the formation of national working class leadership. Accompanying the structure of the working class was its ideology. A politically-conscious worker drew on a blend of traditional notions and new concepts. Both structure and ideology would be tested by news coming from across the Atlantic.

The most noticeable change in the characteristics of the working class was the shift from the mob to a more organized, disciplined form. At the end of the eighteenth century, the lower classes fit into a tradition of lawlessness that earned Britain notoriety throughout Europe. Riots could start spontaneously, most famously in response to high bread prices. In these instances, the rioters assumed the power of ensuring justice, trying to make their targets stand by the “moral economy” which kept the price of necessities affordable. Mobs arose more deliberately as well, responding to appeals (and manipulations) from political elites, exemplified in riots against Catholic toleration in 1780. The era of popular agitation reached its peak in the 1790s, as France endured the throes of its revolution. Inspired both by the example across the English Channel and by native grievances, such as rising food prices and disapproval of Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger, the British lower classes organized reform societies and held demonstrations that sometimes threatened violence. The government responded aggressively, arresting leadership of the societies on charges of high treason and passing the Two Acts, which labeled incendiary speech and writing against the King and Government as treasonous and severely restricted.

---

meetings of over fifty people. These actions in turn inspired more unrest, but no revolution resulted. What did come about was the foundation for a working class consciousness and recognition of a need for organizations formed and led by workingmen.⁵

In the subsequent decades, a trend clearly emerged towards greater organization and discipline among the working class. Trade unions began to take root despite the Combination Act, which banned them. These organizations were supplemented by a web of other associations. “Friendly societies” allowed for the pooling of resources to care for members while providing another venue for workers to exercise responsibility in organizing themselves. Even workers in informal organizations exercised notable discipline. In the messy midst of Luddism, a movement which destroyed machines that threatened to replace workers, assailants eliminated the machinery of their opponents while leaving the property of friendly or neutral parties untouched. E.P. Thompson notes, “The facility with which English working men formed societies in the early 19th century is formidable. The influence of Methodism and of Dissenting chapels; the lengthening experience of the friendly societies and trade unions; the forms of parliamentary constitutionalism, as observed on the hustings or as mediated by middle class and self-educated reformers to the working class movement – all these influences had diffused a general addiction to the forms and proprieties of organizational constitutionalism.”⁶

In 1824, the Combination Act was repealed, allowing the underground trade unions to come into public view. Efforts by workers to attain suffrage were frustrated by the 1832 Reform Act, which extended the franchise but not nearly enough to include workers. The movement did inspire them to assert other rights. In 1834, a conference of workers in London established the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union, with a mission to streamline subsidiary unions, aid

⁵ Thompson, 132-185.
⁶ Thompson, 672-673.
strikers, and coordinate pressure for higher wages. However, the Grand National failed, largely because it could not offer the promised support for striking members. Its collapse heralded a general decline in unionism, especially attempts to form national unions. This reversal of fortunes presaged twenty years of emphasis on growing unionism at the level of locality and trade.\(^7\) Unionism benefited by the expansion of industry, which necessitated worker combinations to safeguard their interests.\(^8\) Thus, by 1860, workers were quite familiar with organization, especially through trade unions, which were gradually seeking a return to the national level.

A history of organization was matched by a tradition of ideology. A strong tradition of the workingman’s rights as an Englishman, which protected him from arbitrary authority, predated the nineteenth century. At the end of the eighteenth century, these notions were supplemented by political radicalism encouraged by French Jacobinism and native influences like Thomas Paine. Paine’s *The Rights of Man*, a tract that denounced the power of the aristocracy and promoted political equality, became a foundational text for working class ideology.\(^9\) The next great era of reform movements, following the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, centered on workers intent on attaining specific rights: the right to vote, freedom of the press, freedom to hold public meetings and to organize.\(^10\) The decades following Waterloo saw some progress in these areas, but by 1860, the right to unionize was still not firmly entrenched, and the right to vote still lay out of reach despite renewed efforts to gain the franchise. The struggle for fuller enjoyment of political rights continued.

\(^8\) Pelling, 47.
\(^9\) Thompson, 107-113.
\(^10\) Thompson, 603-710.
It is with this background that British workers observed and opined on the American Civil War. They entered the period of the war with a growing tradition of organizing to promote their interests, a tradition that would be evident in the organized efforts to offer opinions on the war. At the same time, the tradition of lawlessness, even if lessened by the mid-nineteenth century, remained fresh in the minds of many Britons. Government officials worried that a class that had often rioted for bread might do so again, a serious concern when the cotton famine struck. Historically, workers were also deeply attuned to ideological arguments. The idea of the “free-born Englishman” continued to resonate, and activism in the time of the French Revolution showed that workers followed ideological clashes in places beyond Britain, taking into consideration the ramifications for their own country. Ideas of freedom and equality were rendered more relevant by the fact that tangible rights such as the franchise remained out of reach. When civil war began in America, workers were prepared ideologically and organizationally to voice their opinions on the conflict.
Chapter Two: The Shape of British Public Opinion at the War’s Opening

Understanding the opinions of British workers about the American Civil War requires a consideration of the overall relationships between Britain, the Union and the Confederacy. The warring parties each desired the favor of the island nation, but their hopes for the manifestation of that favor diverged considerably. Confederates and their sympathizers sought relatively active participation from Britain, believing that it could be enticed to provide diplomatic recognition, financial support and even assistance in breaking the blockade. In contrast, those on the side of the Union wanted not overt and active participation in the conflict but strict neutrality, which would cut off potential support to the fledgling Confederacy. In pursuit of these agendas, the belligerents appealed to the British government and people with a variety of arguments, some emphasizing economic reasons and others grounded in the realm of ideas.

The secession of South Carolina in 1860, soon followed by other states, was the culmination of long-standing sectional differences between the North and the South in the United States. The previous decades began with confrontations over the admission of territories gained in the Mexican War as free or slave states. Although the Compromise of 1850 calmed the dispute, subsequent events pushed the country to the brink. Violence broke out in the Kansas Territory over its status as slave or free. The 1857 Dred Scott case, in which the Supreme Court ruled federal restrictions on slavery in the territories unconstitutional, enraged opponents of slavery, and John Brown’s bloody attempt to start a slave insurrection at Harper’s Ferry in 1859 alarmed Southern states. The election of Republican Abraham Lincoln to the presidency on November 6, 1860 signified the breaking point for many in the South. The president-elect, elected over three other candidates without carrying a single southern state, ran on a platform of restricting the spread of slavery. Sensing a threat to the survival of their “peculiar institution,”
South Carolina declared its secession from the Union on December 20. Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia and Louisiana followed suit in January 1861, and Texas joined the departing states in the next month.

The task fell to the seceded states to form their own government. In February 1861, delegates from the seceded states met at Montgomery, Alabama, to compose a provisional Congress and develop a constitution. They also chose ex-Secretary of War Jefferson Davis as provisional president of the Confederate States of America, inaugurating him on February 16. Meanwhile, last-ditch attempts at compromise and reconciliation were made. James Buchanan, the outgoing president of the United States, denounced secession but claimed no right to coerce states to remain in the Union. After Lincoln’s inauguration on March 4, the new president faced a crisis. Fort Sumter, remaining in federal hands, was running out of provisions in Charleston harbor. Rather than allow the fort’s resupply, Confederate forces opened fire on Sumter on April 12, pummeling it into submission. Lincoln’s subsequent call for 75,000 militiamen to subdue the insurrection propelled four states of the upper South – Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina and Tennessee – out of the Union. War had begun.11

Even before Fort Sumter, Southerners considered how to solicit recognition and aid from foreign countries. Above all, Southerners staked their hope of winning favor upon their great cash crop: cotton. Three years before the war began, James Henry Hammond, Senator from South Carolina, promulgated the doctrine of cotton’s supremacy in foreign relations:

But if there were no other reason why we should never have war, would any sane nation make war on cotton? Without firing a gun, without drawing a sword, should they make war on us we can bring the whole world to our feet. The South is perfectly competent to go on, one, two, or three years without planting a seed of cotton. I believe that if she was to plant but half her cotton for three years to come, it would be an immense advantage to her . . . what would happen if no

cotton was furnished for three years? I will not stop to depict what every one can imagine, but this is certain: England would topple headlong and carry the whole civilized world with her, save the South. No, you dare not make war on cotton. No power on earth dares to make war upon it. Cotton is king.12

In the eyes of Hammond and others, cotton would guarantee recognition of a Southern nation as a great power in the world. Hammond’s explicit mention of England clearly demonstrates the direction of his thought. Southerners counted upon the commercial importance of cotton in Britain and other nations to guarantee their interests. The theory supposed that these nations were so dependent upon cotton that they would take any and all necessary steps to keep the supply open. American cotton certainly held a prominent place in the economies of several European nations: by the late 1850s, the United States provided 77 percent of cotton consumed in Britain, 90 percent for France’s consumption, and up to 92 percent for Russia’s needs.13

Precedent lent weight to the belief in cotton’s supremacy. A sectional crisis at the end of the 1840s set the United States on edge. While the North and the South argued bitterly over the status of territories won in the Mexican War, and whether they would enter the Union as slave or free, Southerners noted British and French concerns over a potential interruption of supply.14 The Compromise of 1850 tempered these immediate concerns about dissolution of the Union for a time, but it stirred further consideration of the power of cotton.15 Seven years later, in the autumn of 1857, an economic panic swept the nation, with bank failures and suspensions of specie payments leading to business closures and unemployment. While the viability of the North’s commercial and financial foundations were shaken, cotton prices quickly rebounded by the

---

12 Congressional Globe, 35th Congress, 1st Session 70 (1858).
15 Owsley, 15-18.
following spring, giving Southerners further confidence in their economic power.\(^\text{16}\) By 1859, the Richmond *Daily Dispatch* was able to take pride in the ever-improving size and quality of each year’s cotton crop and declared its centrality to the economic well-being of the country and the world: “The North produces nothing which the rest of mankind require; all the productions that give this country a commerce, cotton naval stores, etc., are exclusively found in the Southern States, whose two hundred millions of exports make the United States a Power upon the earth, and a Power which no manufacturing and commercial nation dare lay its hands upon.”\(^\text{17}\) Such pronouncements, buoyed by the clear economic strength of the crop and its continued importance in Europe, strengthened the hold of King Cotton on the southern mind.

As war loomed, Southerners confidently anticipated the utility of cotton as a tool to secure independence. While visiting the Carolinas before the outbreak of the war, London *Times* correspondent William Howard Russell asked a farmer in military uniform whom he expected to fight. “That’s more than I can tell,” the farmer replied, “the Yankees ain’t such cussed fools as to think they can come here and whip us, let alone the British.” When a perplexed Russell asked how the British were involved, the farmer replied, “They are bound to take our part: if they don’t we’ll just give them a hint about cotton, and that will set matters right.”\(^\text{18}\)

Lincoln’s declaration of a blockade of Southern ports in April 1861 encouraged further discussions about the use of cotton to secure British and French recognition. Prominent newspapers such as the *Richmond Enquirer*, the *Charleston Mercury* and the *New Orleans Crescent* urged Southerners to embargo their cotton crops. Proponents of this measure argued that instead of waiting for the blockade to slowly starve Europe of cotton, an embargo would


\(^{17}\) “King Cotton,” *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, December 17, 1859.

lead more directly to a shortage and thus precipitate intervention. While the Confederate Congress never formally enacted such a drastic measure, it did take steps to restrict the flow of cotton out of the Southern states. In the theory of King Cotton and discussions about an embargo, the newly-minted Confederacy chose to stake its future to a high degree on foreign public opinion, hoping that a shortage of cotton would lead to such an outcry abroad, especially in Britain, that foreign governments would feel compelled to act. Because of their country’s reliance on Southern cotton, British workers were bound to pay considerable attention to the American Civil War.

While the Confederate government, supported by opinion leaders in the media, counted above all on the importance of cotton to win favor from Britain, it empowered its diplomats to make the case for the Confederacy on ideas. The first dispatch from Secretary of State Robert Toombs to its diplomatic commissioners in Europe – William Yancey, Pierre Rost, and A. Dudley Mann – encapsulated many of the arguments made by Confederate diplomats and their sympathizers. Above all, it was essential to impress upon the British the reality of a new nation:

You will inform him [Lord John Russell, British Foreign Secretary] that the several Commonwealths comprising the Confederate States of America have, by act of their people in convention assembled, severed their connection with the United States; have reassumed the power which they delegated to the Federal Government... under the compact known as the Constitution of the United States of America; and have formed an independent Government, perfect in all its branches, and endowed with every attribute of sovereignty and power necessary to entitle them to assume a place among the nations of the world.

By using arguments of self-determination, Toombs placed the Confederacy in the context of revolutions on both sides of the Atlantic. In the same dispatch, Toombs made the connection explicit:

---

19 Owsley, 24-33.
The recent course which the British Government pursued in relation to the recognition of the right of the Italian people to change their form of government and choose their own rulers encourages this Government to hope that they will pursue a similar policy in regard to the Confederate States. Reasons no less grave and valid than those which actuated the people of Sicily and Naples to cast off a government not of their choice and detrimental to their interests have impelled the people of the Confederate States to dissolve the compact with the United States, which, diverted from the just and beneficent purposes of its founders, had become dangerous to their peace, prosperity, and interest.\(^{21}\)

Making comparisons to Italy and other revolutionary nations was an acknowledgement of a salient issue in mid-nineteenth century Europe: nationalism. The wave of revolutions that swept the continent in 1848 captured the world’s imagination, as peoples sought to form new independent states. Although these revolutions failed, they shaped the European political environment for the next several decades. Questions about the basis for national distinctions and the legitimacy of nation-states proved important to many events in the rest of the century.

Although an ocean away, Americans also became swept up in the questions of nationalism, especially as their nation appeared headed for a split. Southerners dealt with the question in evolving ways, first as part of the United States and then as aspiring to form their own country. National history was celebrated, with a focus on the heroes of the Revolution like George Washington (conveniently from Virginia). Romantic ideas of nationality also seeped into the southern consciousness. Ethnicity was one such idea, but even discounting blacks, as the South was wont to do, ethnicity served as a poor basis for nationalism. Culture served as another national distinction, although distinguishing North and South in this regard proved difficult. Ultimately, slavery and the culture surrounding it provided the unifying power for the nation. As

\(^{21}\) Richardson, 5.
southerners increasingly perceived the institution of slavery as besieged, they rallied around a unique identity which placed the institution of slavery in its center.\(^\text{22}\)

Unfortunately for the Confederate cause, a nation based on slavery offered a poor argument for winning British favor. This obstacle, while considerable, was not insurmountable. After successfully instituting abolition throughout the British Empire in 1833, antislavery ardor cooled in the late 1840s. Noted American abolitionist Frederick Douglass perceived the lack of interest in the antislavery cause during a visit to Britain in 1859. He sensed exhaustion in the struggle, with former activists unconcerned about the persistence of slavery in a land outside of the Empire.\(^\text{23}\) Nevertheless, abolition activism continued, and antislavery sentiment remained an important element of public opinion. The Confederate commissioners recognized the power of British anti-slavery opinion and tried to avoid the issue, marking the beginning of a halting and ultimately unsuccessful quest to shape the slavery issue to the Confederacy’s advantage.

The unpalatability of a nation based on slavery forced the Confederate commissioners and their sympathizers to draw upon other elements of nationalist sentiment. The precedent of British reaction to revolutions on the continent was frequently invoked. In the Toombs dispatch, British support for Italy assumed an important role. Italy’s quest for unification and liberation from Austria drew sympathy from the British public. Prime Minister Henry John Temple, Viscount Palmerston, sensing that public opinion about his policy towards Italy would determine the fate of his ministry, asserted, “The people of Italy . . . should be left free to determine their own condition of political existence,” and demanded non-interference from Austria and France.\(^\text{24}\) The Confederacy saw its chance to make the same impression and began to characterize its cause


along similar lines.\textsuperscript{25} Yancey, Rost and Mann explained that the Confederacy was simply reasserting rights, namely that of controlling its domestic institutions, that had been trampled by the government in Washington. The withdrawal of the Southern states from the Union restored to the people their ability to govern themselves.

The diplomats also hoped to engender the perception that the Confederacy’s independence was an accomplished fact. They sought to impress upon the government and public opinion that its people were united in language, religion, economic priorities and (although not emphasized in Britain) support for slavery. The indispensability of this argument in part explained the haste with which the Confederate provisional government was established, and also provided the impetus for a deluge of popular poetry and songs in 1861 celebrating the new nation.\textsuperscript{26} When Toombs sent his dispatch on March 16, 1861, he portrayed the Union cause as a tyrannical desire infringing upon a separate nation’s existence, positing that any steps Washington might take to assert its authority could only be due to “lust of dominion, numerical superiority, or the fancied possession of a right to compel our allegiance to them.”\textsuperscript{27} Naturally, Toombs expressed confidence that such an attempt would fail. Thus, in the Toombs dispatch setting out the arguments for diplomats, the new Confederacy shone as an example of an aggrieved people standing up for themselves against tyranny, along the lines of other revolutionary movements in Europe in the previous decades.

Toombs’s dispatch indicated an awareness of British public opinion in its presentation of economic interests as well. The Secretary of State directed the Confederate commissioners: “You can point with force to the efforts which have been persistently made by the manufacturing

\textsuperscript{25} Andre Michel Fleche, “The Revolution of 1861: The Legacy of the European Revolutions of 1848 and the American Civil War,” (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2006), 139-140.
\textsuperscript{26} Quigley, 131-136.
\textsuperscript{27} Richardson, 6.
States of the North to compel the agricultural interests of the South, out of the proceeds of their industry, to pay bounties to Northern manufacturers in the shape of high protective duties on foreign imports.”

In Britain, free trade became something close to the Confederacy’s *raison d’être*, a shrewd if not infallible gambit. Culminating in the 1846 repeal of the Corn Laws, which removed duties on imported corn, the doctrine of free trade retained an important place in British public policy.

Longstanding sectional differences of tariff policy, combined with a level of obliviousness in Washington to its diplomatic consequences, combined to make free trade a potentially decisive factor in British opinion. Toombs portrayed the Confederacy as united behind free trade, coinciding with the preferences of Britain and highlighting affinities between the island empire and the aspiring nation. The Secretary of State also made sure to note that Southern success in seceding offered Britain a chance to acquire a new free trade partner.

Meanwhile, the United States aided the secessionist appeal on free trade with its February 1861 passage of the Morrill Tariff, which raised duties and targeted the manufactured goods that Britain exported. The British press, led by *The Economist*, condemned the new tariff as a deliberate slight to their country.

Even New York Representative Daniel Sickles lambasted the House Ways and Means Committee for “offering the strongest provocation to England to precipitate recognition of the southern confederacy.” The Confederacy appeared to be in a strong position to gain favor on the trade issue as the war began.

At the beginning of the Civil War, the Union faced a different challenge in Britain. Rather than seek recognition and intervention, the diplomats from the government in Washington

---

28 Richardson, 4.
wanted to maintain the status quo ante. On the diplomatic front, Britain and the United States had come a long way from the War of 1812, the last time the two countries had engaged in military struggle. Britain tacitly accepted American hegemony in the western hemisphere and sought a détente that would leave Canada secure. In the 1850s, the countries generally moved towards greater cooperation, especially in Central America. Meanwhile, the American system of government, providing guarantees of liberty and suffrage, excited the admiration of a great portion of the British public. The United States was not without British critics in the decade preceding the war, especially as its political institutions proved insufficient to head off the secession crisis. Still, the Union had reason to hope it could win the battle for British public opinion and ensure the island nation’s neutrality.

The task of guarding the Union’s interests in Britain fell to Charles Francis Adams, arriving in the country on May 13, 1861 as the newly-appointed Minister to the Court of St. James’s. The son and grandson of earlier ministers (and presidents), and like them a staunch abolitionist, Adams came to London with instructions from Secretary of State William Seward on how to present the secession crisis. According to his directions, Adams was to portray the government in Washington as expecting peaceful reconciliation with the Southern states, thus rendering any offers of mediation and plans for recognition of the Confederacy unacceptable. Most of Adams’s interactions with the British government took place through Lord John Russell, the Foreign Secretary whose reserved, straightforward character matched that of the new American Minister. Adams developed a rapport with the Foreign Secretary, although their relationship would often be tried. He also sensed widespread sympathy for the Union cause within government circles. However, Prime Minister Lord Palmerston harbored a longstanding dislike of the United States, due to its potential hostility to British interests in the Western

---

31 Crook, 6-7.
hemisphere. He even relished the convulsions in America as a method of discrediting republican government.\textsuperscript{32} Furthermore, Palmerston’s Cabinet balanced several competing elements of the new Liberal Party, requiring him to carefully monitor public opinion while conducting policy. Adams recognized that the public at large could prove decisive to Britain’s relations with the United States.

Anti-slavery sentiment, in Adams’s opinion, produced a generally favorable view of the Union cause among the public at the outset of the war. Adams’s son Henry, who served as the minister’s private secretary, later wrote of these sentiments: “He [Henry] thought on May 12 that he was going to a friendly Government and people, true to the anti-slavery principles which had been their steadfast profession . . . he could not conceive the idea of a hostile England. He supposed himself, as one of the members of a famous anti-slavery family, to be welcome everywhere in the British Islands.”\textsuperscript{33} However, this sentiment had several major complications. Opposition to slavery did not translate automatically to support for war. If the South departed from the Union, the United States would be rid of the scourge of slavery, while the extent of slavery would be constrained to the ability of the new Confederacy to expand.\textsuperscript{34}

More detrimental to the Union cause among the British public was the emphasis placed by the Lincoln administration and other Northern politicians on preserving the Union rather than ending slavery. Statements such as Lincoln’s declaration in his inaugural, “I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in states where it exists,” disillusioned many abolition advocates in Britain. Such statements built upon an already-significant skepticism about the sincerity of American abolitionism. Before the war, the United States had resisted efforts by the Royal Navy to crack down on the slave trade. Furthermore,

\textsuperscript{32} Brown, 450-451.
stories of American racial prejudice were widely circulated in Britain as the war opened.\textsuperscript{35} With opinions so entangled and fluid even on issues seemingly favorable to the Union cause, Adams knew that British neutrality was not guaranteed. He rented his house in London by the month, pressing the Union case with Russell while recognizing that the best argument for the Union in Britain would be made on the battlefields of North America.\textsuperscript{36}

As Union and Confederacy prepared to fight in North America, they were already clashing across the Atlantic in the realm of public opinion and diplomacy. The seceded states framed their struggle in the context of nationalism, which still resonated across Europe. Confederates also targeted material interests that favored their cause, while avoiding the issue of slavery. They hoped that these arguments would be enough to secure, at the least, diplomatic recognition from Britain’s government. Opposing them, the Union wished for Britain to maintain its neutrality as the federal government put down the rebellion. Hoping that enough repugnance towards slavery remained in Britain to hinder the Confederacy, Union diplomats and their sympathizers found themselves in a difficult position as long as the war focused on other topics. British public opinion would be influential in determining the government’s policy towards the Civil War, and workers found themselves caught up in the issue as well.

\textsuperscript{35} Campbell, 20-24.
\textsuperscript{36} Duberman, 267.
*Chapter Three: Worker Responses to the Cotton Crisis and the Trent Affair*

The firing on Fort Sumter disabused many, in both Britain and in the dissolving United States, of the notion that the secession crisis would be resolved peacefully; the Union defeat at the first Battle of Bull Run on July 21, 1861 repudiated the notion that the conflict would end quickly. In Britain, the public largely viewed the battle’s results as proof that subjugating the South would be extremely difficult, if not impossible. Foreign Secretary Lord John Russell reaffirmed his country’s neutrality despite an overture for a treaty from Confederate Commissioners Yancey, Mann, and Rost. Still, U.S. Minister Charles Francis Adams believed that recognition for the seceded states was not far off.37

While the government and public at large considered American developments and contemplated possible involvement, British workers focused on the topic most evidently relevant to them: cotton. Soon after secession and President Lincoln’s announcement of the blockade, the ramifications for the cotton industry became apparent. Rather than blaming Lincoln’s declaration, Britons with a stake in the cotton industry began seeking alternative sources. Workers remained relatively quiet on the topic, holding few notable meetings. Rather than cotton, the diplomatic crisis over the *Trent* affair aroused greater worker concern about the war. This surge of activity demonstrated that economic interests alone would not dictate worker opinions, and that workers would not instinctively fall in line with the rest of the country.

A large surplus of cotton contributed to an initially-subdued attitude about limitations on its imports, at least among manufacturers. Extraordinarily large crops from the Southern states in the years immediately preceding the war allowed Britain to import and stockpile enormous quantities of cotton. A Board of Trade estimate in June 1861 reported that Britain possessed over

450,000 more bales of cotton than it had two years previously. This surplus dwindled through 1861 but still remained in December, despite the lack of new Southern imports. With such numbers, manufacturers had little apparent reason for urgency. One considerable drawback for workers: this same surplus led to a huge stock of manufactured goods, lowering their prices and encouraging mill owners to reduce hours for their operatives. Thus, the strain put on workers when the cotton famine did severely strike them in 1862 was actually a continuation of their misfortunes due to an abundance of cotton. Nevertheless, in the initial months of the war, the shortage of cotton was a problem for future concern, not one of immediate impact.

To prevent the speculative shortage from becoming a reality, discussion in the early phase of the war largely considered opening new sources as the solution instead of intervening in the American conflict. On January 29, 1861, Charles Buxton, MP, delivered an address on the cotton supply to a crowd at the Working Men’s Institute, in his constituency of Maidstone, a town in Kent. He expressed hope that some cotton would continue to flow to Britain from the South, but even if the drop in supply were precipitous, Buxton expected other territories, such as India, Egypt, and Brazil, to make up enough of the difference to lessen the impact. Overall, the termination of the Southern supply would constitute “a serious evil, but the calamity would not be a crushing one. The general prosperity of the country would remain untouched, and after a year or two enormous resources would be opened in different parts of the world [cheers].” Furthermore, increased reliance on alternative sources would increase the proportion of free labor worldwide. Meetings and newspaper editorials across Britain struck the similar themes. Often, dismay at the misfortune about to befall the cotton industry was accompanied by regret that Britain had grown so dependent on one source, which used slave labor at that. These

---

38 Owsley, 134-140.
negative perspectives on the situation were generally tempered by optimism, and even gratitude, that these failings could now be made right, if only out of economic necessity.  

Unfortunately for the textile industry, both manufacturers and operatives, the number of bales imported shrunk significantly due to the war and the unreadiness of other sources, producing the cotton famine that would greatly distress the operatives in 1862-63. However, a diplomatic crisis in the autumn of 1861 monopolized British discussion of the American war. On November 8, 1861, the USS San Jacinto stopped the British mail packet Trent in the Old Bahama Channel. San Jacinto’s commander, Captain Charles Wilkes, had learned of the presence on board the Trent of James Mason and John Slidell, the newly-dispatched Confederate envoys to Britain and France respectively. Without orders, Wilkes pursued their vessel. After stopping the Trent, a Union boarding party seized the two Confederate diplomats and their secretaries. Eventually, Mason and Slidell found themselves imprisoned in Boston’s Fort Warren.

Upon learning of the trespass upon one of its ships, an outraged British government demanded the release of the commissioners and an apology on threat of war. Lord Palmerston, always quick to defend his country’s honor and unfavorably disposed to the Yankees anyway, alerted Queen Victoria and the Cabinet to the possibility of conflict with the United States. Military preparations were underway as Lord Russell sent the Lincoln administration an ultimatum, moderated by the dying Prince Albert, that recalled British minister to the United

---

41 Jones, Blue and Gray Diplomacy, 88-89.
States Richard Bickerton Pemell, Lord Lyons, if a week passed without the Lincoln administration’s acquiescence.  

Popular reaction largely echoed Palmerston’s angry response. The British public already perceived the Union government, Secretary of State William Seward in particular, as hostile to Britain. Before Wilkes, Seward was a singular target of British ire. Admittedly, he encouraged much of this reaction himself, most notably in arguing that a war with Britain would provide an impetus for reunion. The generally anti-British slant of Northern newspapers such as the New York Herald also encouraged a perception of hostility from the Union. Stopping the Trent and seizing the commissioners only seemed like a natural step on the part of the Union to further provoke Britain. Most egregiously, Wilkes was treated as a hero upon his return to the United States, both by the thousands who cheered his arrival and by many public officials who offered their congratulations. This outpouring of mass enthusiasm impressed upon the Palmerston government and the press the sentiment that war was inevitable.

While many voices called for war preparations, the voices of workers indicated contrary desires. Some newspapers associated with labor, particularly Reynolds’s Newspaper and the Bee-Hive, did join the voices urging war over “the Trent outrage,” chiefly as a pretext for breaking the Union blockade of Southern ports and thus acquiring cotton. In these cases, the Trent affair merely provided a casus belli for military action desired out of economic reasons. Others in the working class treated the crisis with greater caution. On December 19, 1861, the Daily News of London ran a letter from Richard Cobden, a Liberal MP who would be deeply involved in raising

---

42 Jones, Blue and Gray Diplomacy, 94-99.
43 Campbell, 28-31, 35-41.
44 Campbell, 71-74.
45 Reynolds’s Newspaper, December 1, 1861; December 8, 1861; December 15, 1861. Jones, Blue and Gray Diplomacy, 99. Both of these newspapers, inclined to sympathize with the Confederacy, will be discussed in subsequent chapters.
support for the Union cause. His letter responded to one from Henry Catt, who was organizing a workers’ meeting in Brighton to condemn a war with the United States. Although Cobden could not attend, he praised the efforts of Brighton’s workers to advocate mediation by a third party. He acknowledged the illegality of Mason and Slidell’s seizure, but found it inconceivable that the government in Washington would seek to engage Britain in the midst of its internal strife. Cobden viewed arbitration as the best way to ensure peace, and praised the workers of Brighton for their agreement.

Cobden, a manufacturer, free trader, and pacifist campaigner, rarely found common ground with Karl Marx, the coauthor of *The Communist Manifesto* living in London at the time. However, Marx also noted the activities of the Brighton workers, providing a detailed report of their meeting in the Vienna *Presse*. A motion introduced by one of the attending workers attributed the imbroglio to a misinterpretation of international law instead of deliberate hostility on the part of the Union. Such a misinterpretation would be best resolved through arbitration; otherwise, “under the existing circumstances a war with America is not justifiable, but rather merits the condemnation of the English people.” William Coningham, MP for Brighton, also addressed the crowd, declaring that emancipation sentiment was growing in the Union and asking the workers: “Will you, freeborn Englishmen, allow yourselves to be embroiled in an anti-republican war?” The meeting adopted the resolution calling for arbitration.46

Ultimately, arbitration over the seizure of Mason and Slidell proved unnecessary. The Lincoln administration released the commissioners. While Seward’s explanation to Lyons, instead of a direct apology, tried to save face by justifying the release through the longstanding American tradition of neutral rights, the fact of the release itself satisfied Palmerston, averting

---

Yet for a period, war had seemed likely, and during this period, workers garnered attention for their opposition. The Brighton meeting did not represent the opinions of all workers, but it was important enough to attract the attention of members of Parliament and observers with differing political perspectives. Brighton’s workers refused to buy into arguments made in the press, even in newspapers produced by or sympathetic to workers, that war would not only satisfy the country’s honor but would achieve the vital interest of restoring the cotton supply. The fact that they felt strongly enough about the matter to organize a meeting provided an early indication that workers would not defer to the upper classes in British society in thinking about the war. Furthermore, in taking a stand apparently out of line with their direct economic interests, they displayed a broader awareness of issues that confounded the hopes of Confederates, and the fears of the Palmerston ministry, that economic interest would be the decisive factor in their activities on the war. The economic situation of workers in the cotton industry would indeed worsen; demonstrations and debates would come, highlighting an array of stands taken by workers on the issues of the war. Their reaction to the Trent affair showed the stirrings of opinion, and demonstrated its unpredictability.

---

47 Jones, Blue and Gray Diplomacy, 105-107.
Chapter Four: Economic Interests

Of all the reasons for British workers to take an interest in the American Civil War, economic interests seemed the most likely to inspire action. The Confederates actively brandished the issue through their King Cotton policy, while officials in the British government, including Chancellor of the Exchequer William Gladstone and Minister to the United States Lord Lyons, anticipated unrest in the manufacturing districts that could force the government’s hand on the American question. While the cotton surplus largely muted the issue at the war’s outset, by October 1861 cotton mills were running on short time, a situation made worse by the coming of winter. The distress provoked by the growing cotton shortage steadily increased throughout 1862. In an April 25, 1862 dispatch to Confederate Secretary of State Judah P. Benjamin, the Confederate propagandist Henry Hotze barely restrained his glee: “If I had $100 at my disposal at this moment, I feel confident that I could incite an agitation, without compromising your Department, which should be scarcely less in extent and effect than the Corn Law agitation . . . . But without resorting to such questionable means, I am confident that the Government will soon be forced to act.” By December 1862, when the cotton famine reached its peak, the resultant number of impoverished Britons may have been as high as 2,000,000. These numbers included far more than the operatives, taking into account their dependents and workers in auxiliary industries.

As expected, the pervasiveness of economic pain inspired a new period of increased activism on the American question, but the activism did not follow the course of violent

---

49 Henry Hotze to Department of State, April 25, 1862, Box 7, Records of the Confederate States of America, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
50 Owsley, 145.
upheaval predicted by many. By his September 26 dispatch, Hotze had significantly tempered his optimism for the prospects of unrest created by workers:

There is only one class which as a class continues actively inimical to us, the Lancashire operatives . . . . They look upon us, and by a strange confusion of ideas, upon slavery, as the author and source of their present miseries, and I am convinced that the astounding fortitude and patience with which they endure these miseries is mainly due to a consciousness that by any other course they would promote our interests.\(^{51}\)

As hoped for by the Confederates, workers expressed despair at their difficult economic difficulties. However, these voices were hardly unanimous. While some called for British intervention on behalf of the Confederacy to gain cotton, others blamed the Confederates for their dire straits or balked at the economic consequences of enmity with the Union. Still others subordinated economic interests to moral values, such as opposition to slavery. Instead of reflexive rioting, as Gladstone feared, the impact of the cotton famine was to touch off a process of introspection within the working class, forcing its constituents to consider their very survival, their most important beliefs, and their role in British society.\(^{52}\) The abstention from violence and the divisions of opinion among workers took pressure for decisive action on the American question off of the government. As new sources of cotton developed, poor relief alleviated much of the suffering, and events in America encouraged belief in the war as an antislavery crusade, economic interests faded as the issue pervading worker discussion.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the glut of cotton that existed at the war’s opening, as well as the sheer volume with which Southerners proclaimed their belief in King Cotton, gave cotton mill owners time to evaluate their options before a crisis actually hit. The first reaction was to search for alternative sources of the material, a search combined with elements of self-

---

\(^{51}\) Hotze to Department of State, September 26, 1862, Box 7, Records of the Confederate States of America.

\(^{52}\) Blackett notes that a few violent episodes occurred where the suffering was greatest, most notably at Stalybridge in March 1863. These incidents were generally reactions against the relief system. Blackett, 205.
flagellation for not doing so earlier. As the autumn of 1861 approached, however, the seriousness of the situation grew more evident. *The Aberdeen Journal*, writing on September 25, sensed a growing unease among workers about the lack of imported cotton, noting that many mills were going on half-time, but expressed relief that the only grumbling from the workers was about the reduction in wages proportionate to fewer hours. A fellow Scottish newspaper, *The Caledonian Mercury*, lauded the endurance of the cotton workers:

> ... the operatives of Lancashire are looking at the subject like sensible men. The resolutions the latter have recently adopted, speak well for their good sense and sagacity. We must face the impending trial as long as we can. It is a serious matter, but not quite so bad as we feared. We have two resources, one in economy of consumption, the other in the discovery of new supplies. Both, we trust, will stand us in good stead, while we feel our way to such a position as will exempt us from any future return of the liability.

In this telling, the workers refrained from blaming one side or the other for their misfortune, let alone sought the intervention of the government. Instead, they simply rued the consequences.

Near the same time, another narrative emerged. Instead of passivity, this narrative called for action because of the stakes involved. On September 29, 1861, within the week of *The Caledonian Mercury*’s editorial, *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, edited by an ex-Chartist and circulated throughout manufacturing districts, ran an editorial that called on the British government to break the blockade. While the *Mercury*’s editorial valued the stoicism and caution of workers, *Reynolds* set forth a different value system. Declaring that a government’s first task is to protect its people, the editorial demanded active British involvement in ending the blockade and restoring the supply of cotton. Strikingly, the editorial compared the weavers and spinners of Lancashire with the slaves once trafficked to the territory now under blockade:

> What is the object of our African slave squadron? . . . Why, but for the protection of human life, the abolition of barbarous and diabolical customs, and the

---

propagation of the principles and practices of true civilization? The blockading of the coasts of a country, thereby inflicting indescribable miseries upon millions of innocent human beings, is both a barbarous and fiendish custom. It is a relic of the systematized ferocity of a bygone age. It is alien and hostile to the noblest spirit of the times in which we live.  

Systematically raising objections to such a drastic step and then bombastically refuting them, the editorial framed the act of breaking the blockade as in the economic, moral, and national interest of Britain. Far from stoicism, the rhetoric in Reynolds encouraged anger about the cotton famine, and could easily have inflamed its readers.  

The dueling narratives of stoicism and anger progressed into the next year, as the cotton situation only worsened. On January 25, 1862, William Massey, a member of Parliament for the greater Manchester constituency of Salford, addressed his constituents. Massey unhesitatingly attributed the Lancashire distress to the American war, emphasizing British forbearance in respecting the blockade despite grievous consequences for the economy: “But how much longer was that to last? Was this inefficient and paper blockade to be eternally respected? (No, no.) Were we to submit to be starved? (No.)” Considering the hardships inflicted upon Britain by the American war too great to meet with passivity, Massey vowed to push for mediation and “friendly interposition” in the Civil War, invoking the principle of freedom of commerce and framing such actions as benevolent to the war-torn Americans. However, an April 1862 article in The Economist expressed relief that the workers were “perfectly aware that neither the law, nor the Government, nor their employers, are in any degree to blame for the misfortunate that has overtaken them.” Although itself not a working class journal, The Economist expressed great sympathy for the struggles of workers in the cotton industry, believing that their trials had been

55 “England Must Break the Blockade, or Her Millions Will Starve,” Reynolds’s Newspaper, September 29, 1861.
56 This rhetoric from Reynolds was not an isolated instance, either. A week later, an editorial appeared in the paper simply titled “More Reasons Why the Blockade Must Be Broken.”
neglected by the rest of the country. Furthermore, their “unexampled and exemplary patience” further dampened discussion of the issue. Its estimates noted that, at best, Southern cotton would only reach Britain in September, assuming optimistically that the war would end before July. The journal described its view of the character of the spinners and weavers, describing them as thrifty and benefiting from mutual aid societies. These resources were rapidly becoming exhausted, though, so *The Economist* called for special government expenditures to alleviate the suffering.58

The views expressed by the *Caledonian Mercury* and *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, William Massey and *The Economist* appear not only to stem from different opinions but from different perceptions of reality. The *Mercury* and *The Economist*, based in Edinburgh and London respectively, appealed to more middle- and upper-class readership, so their coverage and their target audience was conceivably more removed from the realities of Lancashire. In contrast, voices like Massey and *Reynolds’s Newspaper* were more familiar with Lancashire generally, and at least in *Reynolds’s* case, with its workers specifically. Thus, their more overt interest in the American question appears more reflective of the sentiments of Lancashire workers. The most important confirmation of their viability as voices of workers came most notably in the summer of 1862, when public meetings on the Civil War began in earnest, seeking to judge questions of blame and suggest courses of action.

Public meetings on the war, especially in their relatively early stages, needed to sort through multiple stages of the issue. First of all, what constituted the primary reason or reasons for British workers to take an interest in the topic? If a determination was reached, which party in the conflict, the Union or the Confederacy, best aligned with those interests? Finally, what actions would prove most beneficial both to the workers and the side with which they sympathized? Of course, the agendas of the meetings were rarely so methodical. Instead, the

public meetings convened on the war were often raucous, freewheeling affairs. Often, the agenda proposed by the meeting’s organizers was subverted by the participants. The public meetings examined in this chapter agreed (partially, at least) on the first question: they met because of concern about economic interests, particularly cotton. However, such a judgment hardly determined the answers to the next two questions. Even if the extreme importance of economic interest was acknowledged, not all agreed that such interest was the most important matter at stake. The different perceptions of interests and values led to a cacophony of voices from Lancashire and wherever else workers met to discuss the war, expressing their own opinions about events across the Atlantic.

A belief in the supremacy of the cotton supply as the main interest of workers, as well as the sheer desperation wrought by the cotton famine, characterized a meeting held in Stockport, part of Greater Manchester, on June 27, 1862. Alerted by placards which invited opinions on the American question and the best means of attaining cotton, an overflow crowd, mostly of unemployed operatives, gathered at the Oddfellows’ Hall. The report in the next day’s *Manchester Times* told of great tumult and confusion. A working man named Charles Cittie was elected chair and proceeded to describe the desperate straits in which Lancashire workers found themselves. The chair expressed his appreciation for those who had contributed to relief funds and thanked the mill owners for running their enterprises despite economic costs as a way to keep the workers together. As the newspaper account recorded, “He felt proud of the spirit that had been displayed by the masters, – a spirit that he should never have given them credit for had he not lived to witness it during the last year.” Cittie’s account, while calibrated to support his view of the American question, embraced a sense of solidarity with all Britain, not just its working class. By thanking people of all classes for their contributions and even admitting that

---

59 Blackett, 202-205.
his typical suspicion of mill owners was misplaced in this instance, the chairman felt that his
countrymen had tried their best to aid the suffering workers.

The fault lay not with the British, but with the Americans, particularly in the Northern
prostration of the commerce of this country, and the wide-spread destitution arising therefrom,
this meeting is of opinion that the time has arrived for the government of England to use its
influence to put an end to the prosecution of the war in America, which is the cause of both.” It
recommended recognition of the Confederacy as the best path forward. The wording made no
pretense that horror incurred by war and a love of peace motivated the resolution, only a desire to
alleviate the economic hardship in Britain. Wood’s supporting speech avowed that cotton would
only come with recognition of the South, for no other source promised such a ready supply.
Rejecting the notion that slavery was a central issue of the war, Wood explained that since the
war so affected Europe, Europe had the right to intervene. He ended his speech by declaring, “If
the operatives could get our government to interfere to stay that war, it would be the greatest
blessing they had ever obtained for themselves or their families. [Loud cheers].”

A later speaker, James Williams, offered an explanation for the apparent silence of
workers for so long: they had been patient because of “deceptive promises” that cotton would
become available soon, promises made many months before. This comment further weakened
the narrative of stoic workers pushed to their limit. Instead of emphasizing patience as a sign of
worker endurance, Williams suggested that if the truth of their situation had been known earlier,
noisy demonstrations like the meeting he was attending would have already occurred. By
dispelling the myth of worker patience, Williams believed that one of the great arguments for
neutrality was no longer in effect. The desperate needs of the cotton operatives demanded not
merely recognition or aid to the Confederacy, but active intervention. Williams’ argument stripped away any sort of considerations besides cotton. By advocating intervention, he put aside reservations about the fitness of the Confederacy for support or concerns about the dangers of war between Britain and the United States. In actively critiquing the idea of worker patience, he also undermined this idea, one that burnished the reputation of the working class throughout Britain and would later be invoked to demonstrate its fitness for political participation. In Williams’ address, the desire for cotton for economic survivability took its purest form.

At the Stockport meeting, another economic grievance against the Union entered into the equation: the tariff issue. Having already expressed skepticism about the sincerity of the Union’s anti-slavery commitment, Luke Wood revealed the true cause of secession: “The secession had been caused by the restrictive tariffs imposed since 1808 by the North, of which almost the entire burden had fallen on the South.” While the Confederates in reality saw the tariff issue as secondary rather than primary cause of disunion, their diplomats in Britain exploited that country’s affinity for free trade. Framing the war as a fight against unreasonable tariffs appealed to fundamental British interests and shaped views of the war. The editors of the Preston Pilot, a Lancashire newspaper, scoffed at the idea that the Union fought to free the slaves, writing, “They fight for what is much more dear to them, namely, their protective system, which thousands of English people now learn for the first time is the most narrow, bigoted, and restricted in the world.” Even “the members for America,” John Bright and Richard Cobden, considered the Morrill Tariff passed in Washington as deeply harmful to its cause in Britain, Cobden in particular being swayed by it before joining his friend Bright in wholehearted support for the Union. Ultimately, the tariff issue took a much less significant part in discussions over the war.

60 Quoted in Ellison, 36.
61 Blackett, 21.
in Britain than the Confederacy had hoped; that the tariff issue rarely benefited the Union cause is difficult to dispute.

The Stockbridge meeting agreed to the resolution urging intervention in the Civil War “by a great majority,” yet it also highlighted divisions as to the true best interests of workers. Before the resolution was passed, a competing amendment was offered, declaring unsolicited intervention by the British government “both unjust and impolitic – (hear, hear); and that such an act would be looked upon by the whole civilized world as an unprovoked outrage committed on the citizens of the American Union, and a flagrant violation of international law.” Several speakers offered their support, but one of them attributed the operatives’ distress to improvident living, dooming the amendment’s chances in a crowd of operatives. Nevertheless, the motion suggested that worker’s interests extended beyond the material concerns which dominated the meeting. In labeling intervention “unjust and impolitic,” committed not just on an abstract foreign power but on “the citizens of the American Union,” the amendment’s sponsors, albeit unsuccessfully, forced a consideration that true worker interest required the guidance of morality. Agitating for an immoral war, even for the purpose of securing material goods to sustain themselves, ultimately clashed with the best interests of workers.

Although averting a war could be seen as a higher motivator than gaining cotton, the moral issue with the most potential for influence was slavery. In the early stages of the war, though, its effectiveness was muted, chiefly because of the Lincoln administration’s handling of the issue. Britons heard statements from Lincoln declaiming his intention to interfere with slavery where it already existed and doubted the moral worth of his efforts. Their negative views on Northern anti-slavery sincerity were enhanced by perceptions of American racism and

---

62 “Intervention in America,” Manchester Times, June 28, 1862.
uncooperativeness in ending the slave trade.\textsuperscript{63} Even after the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862, doubts persisted about the seriousness of abolition.\textsuperscript{64} These doubts dominated views of the war when the cotton famine was at its peak, dampening its power as a counterweight to economic arguments considerably.

Even if economics interests were determined to be most significant to workers, support for the Confederacy did not necessarily follow. Confederate sympathizers suffered an embarrassing loss at the September 30, 1862 public meeting in Stalybridge, a textile center near Manchester. The town had been famed for the speed of its spindles, but the cotton famine hit it hard.\textsuperscript{65} Some citizens of the town, hoping to secure a change in the government’s attitude on the American question, petitioned the mayor for a public meeting that would endorse recognition of the Confederacy. In contrast to the Stockport meeting, the gathering at Stalybridge’s town hall, although over capacity, maintained good order, and a Mr. John Bamford put forward the first resolution:

\begin{quote}
That, in the opinion of this meeting, the lamentable distress and pauperism so prevalent in the cotton districts of Cheshire and Lancashire are consequent upon the deplorable conflict now raging in North America, and that our government would be justified in taking any steps in accordance with the principles of international law, to arrest, if possible, the indigence and pauperism now closing upon us.
\end{quote}

The London \textit{Daily News} wrote that Bamford’s speech and that of John Bradbury, who seconded him, were “listened to with attention.” Following Bamford and Bradbury, however, J. Billcliffe presented his deep opposition to intervention to loud cheers and the support of a vast majority of attendees. Ultimately, Mr. T. Hodson offered an amendment: “That, in the opinion of this meeting, the distress prevailing in the manufacturing districts is mainly owing to the rebellion of

\textsuperscript{63} Campbell, 18-20.
\textsuperscript{64} Campbell, 130-133.
\textsuperscript{65} Ellison, 18.
the Southern states against the American constitution.” It was seconded, “and, after being put, was declared carried by an immense majority – something like a hundred to one – amid loud cheers.” The meeting voted thanks to the chairman and dispersed.66

The crowd at Stalybridge did not take issue with the facts of the cotton famine or its origination in the American conflict, yet it chose to blame the Confederacy, which possessed the cotton, instead of the Union, which blockaded the ports through which cotton once flowed. Stalybridge’s reaction to the war countered the expectations of Confederate sympathizers who essentially expected one reaction to a cotton shortage: rage against the Union, leading to active aid to the Confederacy. The historical record leaves little to indicate why Stalybridge acted as it did in this instance, but other clues illuminate the town’s example. First of all, a genuine aversion to the presumptuousness of King Cotton was evident in Britain at the time. Many Britons knew that the Confederacy sought to manipulate them through the withholding of cotton, and resented it.67 Furthermore, realism existed about the practicality of reopening the cotton supply from the Southern states. Richard Cobden, addressing his Rochdale constituency on October 30, 1862, warned that simply recognizing the South would not result in a sudden inrush of cotton. He noted that the Union would bristle at such an act, leading to a war whose cost would far outweigh the benefits of access to Southern cotton.68 Perceived slights and practical considerations mitigated the effectiveness of King Cotton, even where the doctrine’s essential logic was admitted.

The appeals of those, like Cobden, who feared war despite any possible increase in the cotton supply failed to deter calls for British action. Pro-Confederate responses urged on the government were recognition of the Confederacy as an independent nation, mediation, action

66 “Meeting at Stalybridge on Intervention in America,” Daily News (London), October 2, 1862.
67 Campbell, 49-54.
68 On the same day as Cobden’s comments were reported in The Leeds Mercury, they were echoed by former Chartist Henry Vincent, who pointed out not only the military costs of a war but the probable loss of important goods, particularly wheat, that were obtained through trade with the North. The Leeds Mercury, October 30, 1862.
limited to breaking the blockade, and more general military intervention. It is hard to imagine a manner in which the British government could break the blockade without starting a war, but that very prospect was considered in Manchester. The blockade also offered the chance for private citizens to take matters into their own hands through building and financing blockade runners, an activity especially frequent in Liverpool. However, this solution resulted in minimal replenishment of the cotton supplies. Workers who endorsed government activity on behalf of the Confederacy continued meeting and petitioning throughout the war. Even in November 1864, a Rochdale meeting expressed dismay at the distress in the manufacturing districts and urged mediation. An amendment decrying the Southerners as “slavemongers” was also put forward, and both sides claimed victory.

By November of 1864, however, pro-intervention meetings were quite rare. Meetings focused on economic distress were eclipsed by ones which focused on other issues. At first, distress overwhelmed the government’s poor laws and early efforts at private relief, but charities gradually met the challenge of caring for those unemployed or underemployed by the cotton famine. Employers made arrangements that offered some support to their impoverished employees, such as paying partial wages. Lancashire charities initially bore the burden, but as conditions became known, donations poured in from across the country. Local and national private charity donations increased substantially in 1862 and early 1863, a period which included December 1862, the height of the cotton famine. Gradually, national charity overtook local relief as the primary source of support for stricken operatives. Ultimately, these efforts paid off, with

---

69 Ellison, 160-161.
70 “Meeting on the American Question at Rochdale,” Manchester Times, November 19, 1864.
no increase in mortality in the stricken districts. Prosperity may not have been offered, but subsistence was provided.71

Coupled with the significance of the relief effort, the economic situation improved, partially due to an inflow of cotton, partially due to increased activity in other industries. While the blockade tightened around the Confederacy, British cotton interests, assisted by the government, worked to expand India’s cotton exports to Britain. Through diverting cotton from domestic use and competing markets while expanding production by 50 percent, India supplied 75 percent of Britain’s raw cotton in 1862, a share which continued to grow. The replication of these measures in other places, such as Egypt and Brazil, provided a reliable and growing supply of cotton that lessened the impact of the loss of Confederate imports.72 Furthermore, the war stimulated British industries related to military materials and promoted the country’s merchant fleet due to the danger posed to Union vessels by Confederate commerce raiders.73 These factors considerably lessened the urgency of material concerns to workers.

The opinions British workers developed about the American Civil War based on their economic preferences were characterized by disorder and uncertainty. At the core, they faced something of an existential crisis: literally, in that many feared for their survival with the supply of cotton cut off; figuratively, in that workers had to choose what mattered most to them in reacting to events. By February 1864, the ex-Chartist Ernest Jones was able to argue:

The cry is, ‘stop the war, and get the cotton;’ but those who say so fail to point out how the war is to be stopped, or the cotton to be had. All [Jones] wished was, that England should keep aloof from the quarrel; but as far as our sympathy goes, it should be with the North – not merely on account of our material interests in the matter, but because of the moral aspect of the question.74


72 Beckert, 1413-1414

73 McPherson, 386.

74 “Mr. Ernest Jones on the American Question,” The Hull Packet and East Riding Times, February 19, 1864.
In February 1864, with the worst of the cotton famine over, and the moral issue of slavery clarified to the satisfaction of much of Britain, Jones could make the claim that moral and material interests coincided. For much of the earlier phase of the war, he could not, or at least not with the acquiescence of many workers. Essentially, workers faced the choice of following their material interest or moral concerns, the foremost of the latter being slavery. Workers who perceived the Union as uninterested in abolishing slavery felt no qualms in overlooking moral concerns to gain cotton. These workers were the ones proposing and voting for resolutions at public meetings blaming the American conflict for the distress in the manufacturing districts, and could call for government action on behalf of the Confederacy with a clean conscience. Those who held a more nuanced view – that economic interests did not make a straightforward case for supporting the Confederacy, or that moral issues balanced or outweighed economic concerns – tended to support the Union. As the war went on, moral issues such as slavery were expounded upon and the urgency of the economic issues faded. The next two chapters, on national identity and class influences in the formation of opinions, focus on those moral issues. Those discussions generally attracted more attention later in the war, and consensus grew around them more than on economics. One should not be surprised: in the early phase of the war, especially in 1862, when economic concerns predominated, workers faced very real questions about their survival. Such urgent questions produced divisions and differing ideas about the best interests of workers, the relations of those interests to moral principles, and how workers should act upon their choices.
Chapter Five: National Identity

“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.” So pronounced Chancellor of the Exchequer William Ewart Gladstone to a cheering crowd in Newcastle on October 7, 1862. In his comments, which ignited a firestorm, the chancellor touched upon an issue essential to British discussions of the Civil War – the issue of nationhood. Gladstone’s words, which he later regretted, suggested a matter-of-fact observation, rather than a moral judgment; his view was that the perceived achievement of nationhood by the Confederacy stood as a milestone, an accomplishment that deserved respect regardless of sympathies for or against its cause. In contrast, when supporters of the Union rejected Confederate nationhood, they did so on the basis of British national identity, pointing out how its longstanding association with liberty clashed with Confederate insistence on the preservation of slavery. While arguments based on national identity contained many nuances, they essentially took two forms: value-free arguments that refrained from making judgments on the worth of the Union or Confederate causes, only taking into account their viability; and value-priority arguments, which examined the causes based on their moralities, and judged them in light of values considered integral to British national identity.

The lines of thought expressed in Gladstone’s Newcastle speech were reflected in worker opinions about the war and, at a higher level, general political discussions in the mid-nineteenth century. The American Civil War took place in an atmosphere rife with discussions of nationalism. The European revolutions of 1848 focused attention on the formation of nations. Both North and South articulated arguments that placed their causes in the context of

75 “Mr. Gladstone In The North,” The Times, October 9, 1862.
nationhood. As seen in Confederate Secretary of State Robert Toombs’s first dispatch to the Southern commissioners in Europe, the Confederates believed their aspiring nation should be recognized as distinct from the Union but cohesive in itself. In contrast, the North considered the South an integral part of the United States. Lincoln’s appeal to the “mystic chords of memory” in his first inaugural address suggested a nation formed by a common heritage and history. To win the battle of ideas, the Union and the Confederacy each considered a convincing vision of its own nationhood indispensable.

Although nationalism was a dominant political theme in the Western world of the mid-nineteenth century, it hardly possessed a single, uniform definition. In the great revolutions that swept across Europe in 1848 and still reverberated, nationalism became associated with the idea that “nations” – peoples united by common culture – should align with political states. The Confederacy placed great import in being seen as a nation, but the cultural identity that set it apart as its own nation centered above all on the preservation of slavery. Such a national identity looked different from the identities of other aspiring nation-states formed around unity of language or religion. While recognition of a nation in the latter instances would seem rather straightforward – does the entity in question share a common language? – the Confederacy opened itself up to denial of its nationhood because of sentiment against its cornerstone, slavery. Political debates that focused on the Confederacy’s other unifying factors, such as a homogenous culture and a functioning central government, put the Confederacy on firmer ground.

Few arguments aided the Confederacy more than those that considered its independence a fait accompli. As exemplified in Gladstone’s speech, accepting the Confederacy as an established nation allowed the justice of its cause to be set aside. The argument gained further

potency when made to, and heard from, cotton workers suffering from a dearth of the staple crop. Its implications were potentially damaging to the Palmerston ministry: how could the government allow ongoing suffering among British men and women due to a conflict whose outcome had been decided?

Thursday, August 7th, 1862 witnessed an outcry from Blackburn, a mill town in Lancashire. A crowd, dominated by working men, gathered at the town hall to debate a petition to the government requesting diplomatic recognition of the Confederacy. The first resolution, carried unanimously, declared: “That this meeting deeply deplores the unnatural war now raging in the States of North America; the awful destruction of life and property now resulting therefrom . . . and feels convinced that the continuance of the unhappy strife will be alike ruinous to the hostile parties and to the vast population of this district depending upon the cotton trade.” By labeling the war “unnatural,” the resolution cast doubt on the legitimacy of the war. Furthermore, the resolution suggested that the “unnatural war” imposed as much needless suffering on the Lancashire district as it did on the combatants. A second resolution, submitted by a man identified as Mr. R.R. Jackson, clarified the responsibility of the war’s illegitimacy, and thus the blame for Lancashire’s pain: “That a petition to the Queen be adopted by this meeting, and signed by the Mayor, praying Her Majesty to take immediate measures, in concert with France and such other powers as may be willing to give their cooperation, to recognize the independence of the Confederate States of North America.” A path to peace lay in making the Union understand the futility of its cause.

Jackson’s speech in support of his resolution, supported by the workers at the Blackburn meeting, displayed his belief in the inevitability of a Confederate triumph. While Jackson paid

---

77 While the Manchester Times is unclear, this man is presumably R. Rayford Jackson, identified by R.J.M. Blackett as a noted pro-Confederate organizer in the area. Blackett, 66.
tribute to the North’s courage, he asserted the impossibility of its victory over the South. Asking why workers should starve over a question of Northern pride, Jackson urged action. As reported in the *Manchester Times*, “His proposal was that Europe should recognize, as a matter of simple justice, the independence of the Southern Confederacy, which the South had a perfect right to claim.” Jackson envisioned not simply diplomatic recognition, however, but military intervention through a blockade of Northern ports, the lifting of the Southern blockade and efforts to detach the border and western states. In his address, Jackson admitted that the Union could easily keep fighting. Now that he saw two separate powers whose struggle would only harm fellow Englishmen, Jackson demanded intervention as both a moral and practical necessity. A resolution later adopted urged arbitration, but clearly the crowd in the meeting wanted the war to end by any means necessary.78

The Blackburn meeting illustrated the power of the belief in Confederate nationhood, particularly when combined with internal British interests. In the eyes of Jackson and the supportive crowd, the Confederacy had earned a right to independence, and in practice the Union could not undo this fact. Alone, a Confederate nation might not deserve much active aid from Britain, but the relationship of workers to the conflict lent to the Confederate cause a sense of urgency and even righteousness. Interests aligned across the Atlantic in ending the war as soon as possible, which in August of 1862 meant recognizing the Confederacy as an independent nation. It should be noted that the *Liverpool Mercury* criticized the meeting in an August 11 editorial, pointing out that “the mere recognition of the South as an independent Power would not have the remotest tendency either to terminate the war or to raise the blockade of the cotton ports.” Many issues, such as slavery, also clouded the prospects of arbitration, the method of

---

78 “Meeting at Blackburn on the American War,” *Manchester Times*, August 9, 1862.
ending the war favored later in the meeting. The Mercury’s skepticism in a column days after the meeting, however, only highlighted the emotional power of the nationhood issue. Whatever the logical flaws in the proposals of R.R. Jackson, he won a crowd of workingmen over to the idea that the Confederacy was by rights a nation, and the crowd’s interest in recognizing this fact potentially extended to support for armed intervention.

The argument that the Confederacy deserved recognition because it was a true nation was a pragmatic approach. By applying the threshold of “nationhood,” which admittedly differed for a great many audiences, one could declare that the Confederacy, whatever its national values, earned recognition simply by meeting this threshold. Taking a value-neutral position essentially left recognition in the hands of the combatants – it was up to Jefferson Davis, his government and his army to prove their viability as a state, and then Britain would join in recognizing an accomplished fact.

The Union also benefited from a value-neutral outlook on the war. By the time of the South Carolinian declaration of secession in December 1860, the United States had been independent of Britain for 84 years. Emerging victorious (or at least still standing) from several military conflicts and rapidly expanding westward, the United States gained recognition in British eyes as a legitimate nation. Therefore, attempts to prove the Confederacy’s position as a realized nation ran up against the fact that the United States had long been such a nation. On February 22, 1862, the Reverend Newman Hall addressed a crowd of 2,000 to 3,000 workers in Surrey. In questioning why sympathy for the South persisted, he compared the logic of the Union cause to a potential British response in a similar situation:

We may think that conquest is hopeless, and that the compromise which must close the war might as well have come to pass without bloodshed and mutual impoverishment. But England is the last nation that ought to blame them if they

79 “Intervention in America,” Liverpool Mercury, August 11, 1862.
choose to fight. They take up the sword in defense of law; to preserve the integrity of their empire; and to prevent the many inconveniences, which, under the special circumstances of America, would result from the existence of two separate Governments so contiguous. In a similar case, would not English statesmen be unanimous in drawing the sword? (Hear.)

Other speakers went further in applying the principles of the Union cause to Britain’s own political activities. Henry Vincent, a veteran of the workers’ movement going back to the days of Chartism, invoked an example close to home in demonstrating the justice of the Union cause. An account of his lecture in Huddersfield on the war described his tack: “After tracing the progress of the war, he said that many people regarded it as a foolish thing on the part of the North to fight for the Union; but in order to show that national susceptibilities ought to be respected, he drew a graphic illustration of the probable steps which would be taken by England in case of an Irish revolt, and the manner in which proposals for interference would be treated.”

The Liberal MP and noted Union advocate Richard Cobden, linked support for the Union with support for the very idea of national identity:

What is it that at present appears to be the paramount instinct among races of men? Certainly not a desire to separate, but to agglomerate and bring together in greater concentration the different races speaking the same language and professing the same religion. Three-fourths of the white population in America are now contending against disunion; they are following the instinct which is impelling the Italians, the Germans, and other populations of Europe; and I have no doubt that one great and dominant motive in their hearts is this, that they are afraid that if they become disunited, they would be treated as Italy has been treated when disunited. Well, then, without pretending to offer an opinion myself, these are powerful motives, and if they are operating as they appear to operate, they may lead to a much more protracted contest than has been predicted by some of our statesmen.

By portraying the struggle to restore the Union as a matter of a nation’s rights, Northern sympathizers also appealed to neutral moral judgments on the war (although both Hall and Jones

---

often spoke extensively about the evils of slavery). Secretary of State Seward’s instructions to Charles Francis Adams at the start of his posting in London emphasized the same point, that the United States had a right as a nation to deal with its internal affairs without interference. This argument lacked the emotional power of the Confederate case for recognition based on nationhood, chiefly because expectations for opening the cotton supply accompanied proposed recognition of Confederate nationhood. Whatever the rights of the government in Washington to assert its authority, British workers were still in distress due to the lack of cotton. Advocates of the Union heightened the stakes by emphasizing the possibility of war over British diplomatic recognition of the Confederacy or any more provocative actions. They pointed out the difficulties of substantially aiding a Confederate nation while invoking the consequences of war on Britain’s own political situation. The workers of Lancashire might not gain cotton, but at least they would not have to fight.

While many debates focused on the nationhood of the warring sections – whether the Confederacy was really a nation, and whether the Union’s accepted nationhood gave it the right to quell the rebellion - other debates focused on the war’s meaning for Britain’s, or specifically England’s, own national identity. Notably, little substantial discussion occurred in Wales, Scotland or Ireland about the war’s relation to any sort of “British” national identity, and when the English spoke about it, they invariably used the term “English” rather than “British.” Therefore, this terminology shall be adopted through the rest of this chapter, and the location of its events will safely be confined to the territorial realm of England.

As a stable, cohesive political unit with a long history, England did not have to prove its nationhood to anyone. Geographically it was united, and culturally it was relatively homogenous. In addition to these elements, England had developed over hundreds of years a political tradition
which prized certain principles. In this formulation, liberty and representative institutions (however unrepresentative in practice) comprised a key part of the British national identity. Particularly in the wars against France of the eighteenth century, the idea pervaded British society that its country was an oasis of liberty, favored by God. This idea grew as a way to assert superiority over the French enemy: while at the time France possessed greater military might and a more sophisticated culture, the British considered themselves better off because of the extraordinary power of the king and the Catholic hierarchy over the French people. These ideas took root even in the lower classes, which, although economically disadvantaged and politically marginalized, recognized what freedoms they did possess. In the subsequent decades, this belief in the unique British characteristic of liberty remained deeply engrained at all levels of society, providing a long-cherished cultural touchstone by which political questions were judged. Therefore, in the British view Union and Confederate partisans needed to portray their causes as essentially compatible with British national identity if they were to be taken seriously.

For the Union cause to come across as an effort to promote liberty, and therefore place it in accord with British identity, it needed to own the slavery issue. As previously discussed, Union sympathizers were unable to effectively capitalize on British antislavery sentiment in large part because of the Lincoln administration’s reluctance to frame the war in terms of abolition. The Emancipation Proclamation itself, which went into effect on January 1, 1863, swayed some to accept the Union as genuinely antislavery, but others perceived it as purely a military action, or as an incentive for slaves to revolt. Rather than directly persuade Britons, the Emancipation Proclamation’s great benefit to the Union cause in Britain was to unleash the efforts of Union and antislavery activists. Lincoln’s reframing of the debate in terms of slavery

84 Campbell, 130-133
and freedom allowed Union sympathizers in Britain, those who already supported the cause, to join the fight without reservations, brandishing the Emancipation Proclamation as a weapon. In short, the Emancipation Proclamation in itself was not particularly persuasive, but its use by effective partisans magnified the document’s effect. Boosting the antislavery credibility of the Union cause proved essential to aligning it with British national identity.

Before examining the substance of appeals to English national identity, it should be noted that these appeals seldom came from workers themselves. The examples seen here are lectures and speeches delivered by non-working class figures to the workers, and they fairly represent the manner in which the discussion about English national identity was conducted. Rare was the occasion when an average worker at a public meeting would avow his support for the Union or the Confederacy based on its compatibility with English principles such as liberty and representative government. Nevertheless, the discussions about English identity deserve attention in looking at the sources of British worker opinion. First of all, while perhaps not keen on discussing these relatively abstract principles, workers were interested in the more concrete issue of slavery, and advocates of North and South tried to fit the issue into their discussions of liberty. Secondly, advocates frequently invoked “the heart of England” in their addresses to workers, indicating their belief in its efficacy as a tool for persuasion. Certain speakers repeated their assertions time after time before working class audiences, suggesting a positive response underlined by common insertions of “(loud cheers)” or similar comments in accounts of these addresses. Finally, the idea of English identity as pertaining to workers, even if not articulated by them, had a long tradition, going back at least to the eighteenth-century notion of the rights of the “free-born Englishman.” It continued through the uproar of the 1790s and Thomas Paine’s The

---

85 Campbell, 222-223.
86 Thompson, 77-101.
Rights of Man, and of course intertwined closely with movements to gain the franchise and form unions. Workers were quite aware of their identity as Englishmen, whoever was articulating that identity.

One of the most forceful and eloquent advocates of English identity relating to the American question was Newman Hall, a Nonconformist minister and member of the Union and Emancipation Society. Hall, a frequent Union surrogate at public meetings, addressed working men in London on October 20, 1862. His speech, later printed and distributed as a pamphlet by the Union and Emancipation Society, examined the history of the United States to determine the legality of secession and the importance of slavery. Following this exposition, he urged the speech’s listeners, and the pamphlet’s readers, to support the Union cause. Hall admitted that the Confederacy could yet become an independent nation, “but if the South become a separate nation, they do so avowedly to perpetuate and indefinitely extend all the horrors of slavery.” Such a nation deserved no sympathy from the across the Atlantic: “The heart of England beats true to liberty. It is impossible she should sympathize with slavery. It is impossible, therefore, when the question is clearly understood, that she can sympathize with this Southern conspiracy against humanity.” In Hall’s argument, the bases of Confederate and English nationality were mutually exclusive. He went beyond mere judgments against slavery, but bound the American question to the essence of Englishness.

Hall continued by asking why England should sympathize with the Confederacy. He targeted the argument that southerners represented traits Englishmen should find admirable. Bringing up high-mindedness, courtesy, ancestry, generosity, bravery, chivalry, and desire for freedom, characteristics the Confederacy supposedly possessed, Hall noted the contrast between

87 Blackett, 107.  
the ideal of these traits and the reality of slavery. Ultimately, any society based on slavery could be no friend to Britain:

While we continue to be Britons, and therefore neither slaves, nor, what is worse, slavemasters, is it possible that they can ever love us? For political ends they may at present court our favor. They want to have the blockade broken, to sell their cotton, to be recognized as a Confederacy. But do they not know that England detests and abhors the system which they regard as essential to their existence, the “Corner Stone” of their social fabric? Let them come here and publicly proclaim their principles! Let them come with their iron chains, and bull-hide scourges, and well-trained bloodhounds, and with these illustrations of their system advocate their hellish doctrines on our soil sacred to Freedom!89

Support for the Confederacy, in Hall’s argument, would constitute a betrayal of all that the idea of England represented.

While Hall declaimed against the Confederacy, he recognized opposing arguments that targeted workers. One particular argument brought out his anger:

We are told that the condition of many working men in England is worse than that of the slaves, and that it is a harder lot to toil in a dark coal mine than in a sunny cotton field. Insulting to British workmen is such sophistry! Would not every one of you rather, as a free man, spend all your days in darkness, dirt and danger, than with a palace as your prison, and pampered with luxury, live a slave, body and mind enthralled, and subject to every caprice of the fellow-man who claims you as he does his horse or his dog?

In this statement, Hall answered materialistic arguments by invoking ideas. A good greater than any material comfort was possessed by British workers – freedom, an inherent condition of being English. Hall gambled in making this argument. Instead of denying the validity of the claim that slaves were economically better-off than workers, he appealed to a more noble sentiment and counted on its resonance. Even if his assumption were correct, that workers would respond more positively to a higher calling than economic self-interest, he faced risks. Hall does not hesitate to include workers in the heart of England, yet the franchise still eluded them, as did significant

89 Hall, 26.
progress in forming trade unions. Was Hall simply portraying an England that the workers
themselves did not recognize?

A notable voice from the working class that agreed with Hall’s portrayal of the issue was
that of Henry Vincent, the old Chartist lecturing around the country. In his speeches, Vincent
portrayed not just an England devoted to liberty, but an Anglo-Saxon race sharing the same
principles. Speaking in Birmingham on February 16, 1863, Vincent offered a recounting of the
tradition of English liberty, going back to the thirteenth century. The hundreds of years of
struggle for liberty in England were simply continued on the other side of the Atlantic by the
descendants of Englishmen. In his peroration, Vincent appealed to an identity that superseded
class, one also echoed in Hall’s speech:

Arise Englishmen, and in your faith and prayer stand by the right and oppose the
wrong, that your proud country, growing in moral energy and more complete in
faith, may stand true to her ancient principles and her ancient glory, and that the
voice of her thunder may be heard in the universe in no complicity with slavery –
no acknowledgement of any Slave State. Long live the free people, long live
freedom, long live liberty, long live justice, long live the life-giving vitalizing
divine powers which, by God’s mercy, have been planted in this country, and long
live the great race from which America has sprung – the great race that bears on
the earth an open Bible, that carries on the earth an incorrupt press, that builds on
the earth an unfettered pulpit – long live this people to bear down before them
superstition, sin, and slavery, and to plant upon their thrones justice and liberty.90

By casting the act of sympathizing with the Union in such noble terms, Vincent and Hall
provided a way for workers to participate in their national identity. They may not have possessed
the vote, but workers could understand the ideal of England, and they needed no franchise to
embrace it. Hall referred to past worker support for the revolutions in Hungary and Italy,
indicating that this method of expressing political views followed a great tradition. Conceiving
the nation of England as one based on values, and then judging the American question in light of

those values, offered a way for workers to transcend the restrictions on their political voice and participate in the political life of the country.

Considering the importance of the concepts of national identity and nationalism to Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, it seems natural that these concepts played a role in forming British opinions about the war. Although Britain did not undergo the revolutionary upheaval that swept across the Continent, some of the ideas that motivated the “springtime of peoples” seeped into British political discourse. Union and Confederate sympathizers sought to turn these concepts to their advantage, and when appealing to workers, they needed to make them relevant. Both interests and ideals could accomplish this feat. Neither side possessed a monopoly on one or the other, but clear distinctions emerged. Arguments on behalf of the Confederacy tended to emphasize the practicality of recognizing a Southern national identity, specifically in relation to cotton. They added particular relevance to discussions, but also staked the argument on the success of Southern arms. Significant setbacks would decrease the practical gains of recognizing Confederate independence and render the idea of Confederate nationhood questionable. By comparison, supporters of the North harkened not just to a national identity for the United States but to Britain. By linking the two identities through an emphasis on common values, proponents of the Union appealed to the heart. As the war dragged on, economics needs lessened, and the slavery issue clarified, workers grew more receptive to such appeals.
Chapter Six: Class

On February 2, 1862, the Vienna, Austria Die Presse ran an article from a regular contributor in London that chronicled a workers’ meeting. The article noted the importance of “pressure from without” in the British parliamentary system, which gave public opinion a crucial role in governmental decision-making even if, in the case of workers, the demonstrators lacked the franchise. Now joining the list of great events shaped by public opinion, such as Catholic emancipation, the 1832 Reform Bill, and the abolition of the Corn Laws, was the issue of involvement in the American Civil War. Recognizing the deep distress of workers dependent on cotton only highlighted to the correspondent the dignified tone with which the workers conducted their meeting. A Mr. Steadman served as chair for the gathering, brought together to discuss the proper reception of Confederate commissioners James Mason and John Slidell. While not personally insulting the commissioners, a speaker offered a resolution condemning them as “absolutely unworthy of the moral sympathies of the working class of this country, since they are slaveholders as well as the confessed agents of the tyrannical faction that is at once in rebellion against the American republic and the sworn enemy of the social and political rights of the working class in all countries.” Despite eloquent opposition (from a speaker apparently under direction from current commissioners Yancey and Mann), the motion passed, as did a second one which disavowed the anti-Union opinions of The Times and other newspapers. “This is a new, brilliant proof of the indestructible excellence of the English popular masses, of that excellence which is the secret of England’s greatness,” exclaimed the Die Presse contributor, Karl Marx.\(^1\)

Marx’s delight in the stand of the workers’ meeting exemplified the important way in which the American Civil War contributed to perceptions of the working class. Both workers themselves and observers from outside their ranks closely followed the debates as an indicator of

\(^1\) Marx, 139-143.
working class unity and moral strength. For members of the working class, the war raised questions about their very future. Before proceeding further, it is helpful to distinguish between the concepts of “class awareness” and “class consciousness.” Class awareness recognizes a similarity in beliefs and lifestyle among its members, but does not build that class solidarity into hostility towards other classes. Class consciousness accepts a class’s unique characteristics but takes them further, emphasizing distinctions with other classes to the point of hostility.⁹²

Both versions of class sensibility were present in reactions to the Civil War. Activism representative of class awareness tended to use the war to emphasize working class fitness for fuller and more equal political participation. Notably, this vision was often shaped by figures outside the working class, such as the middle-class Radical John Bright and the noted intellectual John Stuart Mill. In contrast, activism representative of class consciousness used the war to highlight the virtues of the working class at the expense of other classes and competing visions of society. Perceptions of the American economy, particularly the association of the Northern States with modern capitalism, revived in some the motivational sentiments of the Chartist and Owenist movements, which focused their hostility on the very legitimacy of the modern capitalist economy. As links between national working classes spread, advocates of international workers’ movements looked for signs in Britain of a larger consciousness that considered the advancement of labor all over the world as its chief interest. With all of these class-related ideologies seeking traction, workers’ opinions became objects of scrutiny, criticism, and persuasion.

Within the labor movement, generational fault lines influenced views of the war. In Royden Harrison’s examination of the labor movement, specifically the labor press, he observed

a tendency on the part of the older generation of labor leaders “who still thought of the industrial capitalist as the main enemy” to support the Confederacy. These labor leaders perceived industrial capitalists as exploiting the workers to pad their own pockets. In earlier decades, this perception drove some workers into movements, such as Chartism, that decried industrial capitalism. During the Civil War, the Northern states were associated with the industrial capitalists of Britain. Discussions of the Union cause as one of freedom thus aroused the ire of anti-capitalist labor leaders, both because of skepticism about the depth of anti-slavery commitment and because of these beliefs about industrial capitalism. In contrast, younger leaders had not undergone the formative experiences of the early nineteenth-century radical movements and sought to work within the system rather than upturn it. Having grown up within the system of industrial capitalism, they accepted it and desired its reform, leading to an alliance with middle-class radicals dedicated to the same issues. Therefore, they were more open to entreaties on behalf of the Union.93

It is important to recognize that discussions about Northern industrial capitalism relied on perceptions of the United States more often than facts. Hostility to the Union resulting from opposition to industrial capitalism led to sympathy for an aspiring Southern nation that had quadrupled its railroad mileage and increased capital investment in manufacturing by seventy-seven percent in the 1850s, hardly a perfect antithesis.94 Such dependence on general perceptions about America indicated that the true battle over industrial capitalism concerned what kind of society Britain should be.

The labor press provided the outlet for the generational divide. In fact, Harrison observed sympathy for the Confederacy within the press as over-representative of support in the general

93 Harrison, “British Labour and American Slavery,” 55-59. Harrison’s work is utilized as a reliable guide to the opinions of working class newspapers, most of which are not currently accessible.
94 McPherson, 94.
working population. His work focused on the *Bee-Hive*, a workers’ newspaper established in 1861 by trade unionist George Potter and chosen as the official journal of the London Trades Council. Through 1862, it actively opposed the Union cause, and although its attitude shifted thereafter, the *Bee-Hive*’s pages still expressed some sympathy for the Confederacy. In 1863, several articles appeared in the paper, written by former Chartist and “father of London Trades Unionism” T.J. Dunning. One article decried the Yankee character as greedy and cowardly, grounding these beliefs in the varied ethnicities found in the North. As for its war aims, Dunning refused to buy into abolition as a goal for the Union, believing that the North only highlighted it to assist the war effort and because slaves no longer contributed to the national economy. Dunning’s skepticism about antislavery sincerity, and his loathing of capitalists, characterized the views of other old labor leaders such as G.W.M. Reynolds and Peter Mackenzie, who also matched backgrounds in Chartism or militant reform with powerful press voices at the time of the war.95

Later historians have criticized Harrison’s work as oversimplifying generational divisions within the labor movement.96 This thesis has already discussed some ex-Chartists, such as Henry Vincent and Ernest Jones, who staunchly backed the Union. Nevertheless, Harrison’s suggested distinction suggests how worker concern for their place in British society often superseded the actual events in America. A veteran of labor like T.J. Dunning used the war to expound upon his Chartist beliefs long after the movement itself had faded. By associating the Union cause with those manufacturers and mill-owners he had long railed against, Dunning opened a new front in his long struggle.

95 Harrison, 42-45.
96 Ellison, 11; Campbell, 202.
By looking to the past and despairing of the present, T.J. Dunning differed from many other figures who viewed the war as a proving ground for workers. For the most part, labor leaders and sympathizers thought the war offered a chance for workers to show their strength and fitness as a component of British society. One of the most important and lasting questions of the day centered on suffrage. The 1832 Reform Act lowered the property threshold required to vote, but this measure still had almost no impact on the working class. Attempts to further extend the franchise continued without success for several succeeding decades.

Among the leading champions of parliamentary reform was John Bright, MP for Birmingham. Bright had a complicated relationship with labor. He rose to prominence due to his activities in the Anti-Corn Law League, and saw his efforts to repeal trade barriers on food as an aid to hungry workers. 97 He generally opposed factory legislation, however, believing that questions of the work-day and working conditions were best left to employers and employees, not state intervention. 98 While often targeting the aristocracy and political elites, he also deplored radical movements, like Chartism. Before the American Civil War consumed his attention, he had made a strong but failed push for parliamentary reform that tried to appease both the middle class and the working class. Yet critics from the labor movement believed his proposals did not offer enough for workers. With this complicated history, Bright was known among workers before the war as a figure of distrust, especially in unionist circles.

At the center of Bright’s political views was his belief in a peaceful, united, prosperous Britain. He opposed unions and strikes because he believed they exacerbated tensions between employer and employee. Further inflaming these tensions, in his view, was the lack of suffrage. Feeling frustrated at their lack of political influence, workers vented their dissatisfaction on their

98 Robbins, 50.
employers. Bright saw disenfranchisement as stunting the development of the working class: “Its members are limited to the consideration of their own individual, and local, and class interests; and their mental activity is devoted to something like a servile war, because everything that is broader and greater is excluded from their view.” Workers obsessed only on the narrow question of wages and spurned other avenues of self-improvement. In contrast to this state of separation and alienation, Bright expressed his desire “to unite all, to have no separate interests; to blend all in a common sense of common rights, and thus to give peace and strength where now discord and weakness too much prevail.”

Bright’s ideas coincided with the rise in the United States of Free Labor, an ideology associated with the Republican Party. Advocates of Free Labor articulated the “harmony of interests,” in which the possibility of social mobility for the worker meant that labor and capital ultimately held the same interests. Bright’s strong attachment to the United States, heightened by a philosophical compatibility with the ascendant Republicans, compelled him to actively follow the war’s events.

Bright saw the United States as the embodiment of his aspirations for Britain, and aiding the divided nation in its hour of need soon occupied most of his time and talents. In rallying support for the Union cause, he saw an opportunity both to support the country he admired and share his vision for his native land. The war provided a chance for him to share that vision specifically with workers, an audience that would otherwise suspect his loyalty to their causes. Bright’s eloquence and outspoken support for the Union made him a sought-after speaker, and working class meetings invited the MP to offer his appeal on behalf of the Northern cause. In these addresses, Bright not only weighed in for the Union and against the Confederacy, but also presented a vision of what the British working class could become.

---

At Rochdale, a Lancashire district where Bright made his home, a meeting gathered on February 3, 1863, to express gratitude for the arrival of an American ship carrying provisions for the unemployed operatives. A resolution of thanks to the Northerners who provided the supplies was offered, and Bright spoke in support. In his oration, lasting over an hour, Bright depicted the antebellum United States as a thriving, peaceful land with an educated populace and a form of government “not very dissimilar from that which our Constitution professes in this kingdom. The difference is this, that our Constitution has never yet been fully enjoyed by the people.” In that once-united country, in contrast to his native land, workers enjoyed full participation as citizens. As characterized in Bright’s speech, the United States was the great hope of the working man, a hope confirmed by the vast numbers of lower-class British migrants who made it their home.

Now, that great hope was threatened by the Southern states, who sought to oppress not only black slaves but white persons as well. Bright cited excerpts from the *Richmond Examiner* which decried “free society.” In the face of these tyrannical principles, British aristocrats still supported the Confederacy.

But the working men of England, and I will say it too for the great body of the middle class of England, have not been wrong upon this great question. As for you, — men laboring from morn till night that you may honorably and honestly maintain your families, and the independence of your households, — you are too slowly emerging from a condition of things far from independent — far from free — for you to have sympathy with this fearful crime which I have been describing. You come, as it were, from bonds yourselves, and you can sympathize with them who are still in bondage.

Bright then detailed workers’ meetings from around the country in support of the Union cause and closed with an appeal to the “friends of freedom, personal and political.”

In Bright’s address to the St. James’s Hall meeting in London, organized and convened by the trades unions in March 1863, he made the class distinctions sharper and the link with

---

parliamentary reform clearer. Asking rhetorically whether workers should take any interest in the cataclysm across the Atlantic, Bright told the crowd, “Privilege thinks it has a great interest in it, and every morning, with blatant voice, it comes into your streets and curses the American Republic.” In contrast to the British aristocracy, which hated the democratic and free United States, workers had no reason to hate a country “where labor has met with the highest honor, and where it has reaped its greatest reward.” However, even when united, the two now-warring sections were not equally deserving of esteem from workers: “In the one, labor is honored more than elsewhere in the world; there, more than in any other country, men rise to competence and independence; a career is open; the pursuit of happiness is not hopelessly thwarted by the law. In the other section of that country, labor is not only not honored, but it is degraded. The laborer is made a chattel.”\textsuperscript{102} After reiterating Southern hostility to working men, Bright made his appeal, which tied in suffrage: “I should hope that this question is now so plain that most Englishmen must understand it; and least of all do I expect that the six millions of men in the United Kingdom who are not enfranchised can have any doubt upon it.”\textsuperscript{103} In his peroration, Bright cast the choice of workers in stark terms, meant to open their eyes to the consequences for their own status: “You wish the freedom of your country. You wish it for yourselves. You strive for it in many ways. Do not then give the hand of fellowship to the worst foes of freedom that the world has ever seen, and do not, I beseech you, bring down a curse upon your cause which no after penitence can ever lift from it.”\textsuperscript{104}

In his numerous speeches to working class audiences, Bright offered his idea of what the working class, and in truth all of Britain, could become. This idea looked suspiciously like the United States. Bright’s ideal society abandoned class privileges and instead opened up the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{102} Bright, \textit{Speeches}, 248-249.
\item \textsuperscript{103} Bright, \textit{Speeches}, 252.
\item \textsuperscript{104} Bright, \textit{Speeches}, 253.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
opportunities of citizenship to all. Class warfare was thus rendered unnecessary, and so were trades unions (not that he said this in his speeches). Because such a society already existed, embodied by the Union, workers would indicate their proclivity for this specific future by offering their support. Bright viewed the Civil War as a test to prove the compatibility of Britain’s workers to his ideal. Their apparent enthusiasm for it impelled him to fight once again for the next step upwards: enfranchisement. After the war, which occupied much of Bright’s time, he again took up the cause of parliamentary reform and finally succeeded. Parliament passed the Second Reform Act in 1867.

A parallel to the efforts of John Bright can be seen in the activities of John Stuart Mill. Unlike Bright, Mill primarily approached politics as an observer and theoretician. His *Considerations on Representative Government* offered a system of government chosen by the people. This system emphasized education – the votes of intellectually-qualified electors received more weight than their intellectual inferiors, and the representatives of Parliament, themselves among the country’s best and brightest, would then assign decisions to yet another intellectual elite. To implement his vision, Mill devoted himself to improving the whole populace. He considered the working class of his time morally unfit to influence government, and sought to reform their moral status so that they could earn a voice.  

Mill’s increased political activity, devoted to the moral and intellectual improvement of British society, coincided with the Civil War. The United States exemplified the manifestation of many of Mill’s ideas, and so its success provided an opportunity to vindicate his own thought, or see it collapse. Furthermore, Mill saw slavery as the key to the whole struggle, offering a great moral test for the British populace. Like Bright, Mill devoted his efforts to garnering favor for the Union. Articles he authored on the topic actually enjoyed more favorability in America than

---

105 Reeves, 223-224.
in Britain. Nevertheless, the philosopher continued to engage in what he considered a great moral crusade, waged not only for the military and political success of the United States but for the heart of Britons as well.

Because he placed so much weight on the war as a moral test, Mill evinced great interest in the opinions of workers as a way to gauge their improvement. In late 1862, he received a letter from Max Kyllman, a German merchant invested in a cooperative cotton mill. Kyllman participated in planning the mass meeting that took place on December 31, 1862 in the Manchester Free Trade Hall, which at that time was the largest popular gathering on the topic of the war. Organized and conducted largely by workers, the meeting resulted in resolutions condemning slavery and praising the Union. It produced an address to Lincoln as well. Kyllman wrote his letter to inform Mill of the planning. In a reply dated December 24, Mill wrote:

Hardly anything could do more good at present than such a demonstration from the suffering operatives of Lancashire; while there is in the fact itself, and in the state of mind which prompts it, a moral greatness which is at once a just rebuke to the mean feeling of so great a portion of the public on this monstrous subject, and a source of unqualified happiness to those whose hopes and fears are, as mine are, inseparably bound up in the intellectual and moral prospects of the working classes.

On December 31, the secretary of the Manchester meeting read this extract of Mill’s letter to the audience. The letter displayed Mill’s assurance in the right judgment of the working class. He frequently derided what he viewed as the ignorance of the general public on the true issue of the war, slavery. By showing their appreciation for the true meaning of the war, despite hardships,

106 Reeves, 334.
107 Blackett, 81-83.
110 Mill, Volume One, 278; Volume Two, 31.
the working class not only demonstrated its moral fitness but established in fact a level of moral superiority over much of the population. In 1865, Mill ran for and won a seat in Parliament. In 1867, he voted for the Reform Act, evidently assuaged that workers had proven their moral fitness for the vote.

Bright and Mill, although not members of the working class, tied their efforts on behalf of the Union to the advancement of workers within British society. As another outsider figure to the British working class, Karl Marx concerned himself not with its acquisition of a proper role in society but with laying the groundwork for working class domination. Living in London during the war, Marx firmly rooted his view of the conflict through his theory of historical materialism and hope for a workers’ revolution. His conception of world history placed conflict at the center, with men constantly striving to realize their full potentialities. In his era, the conflict would take the shape of class warfare, with the proletariat dominated by the capitalist system. To achieve freedom, workers by necessity needed to rise up and throw off the yoke of their exploiters.\(^{111}\) In his writings on the Civil War, Marx placed the conflict into the structure of his ideology: “The present struggle between the South and the North is, therefore, nothing but a struggle between two social systems, between the system of slavery and the system of free labor. . . . It can only be ended by the victory of one system or the other.”\(^{112}\) He counted on the liberation of slaves as a first step in a movement by the workers to liberate themselves. As long as the slave economy existed, a vast section of North America would largely shun the manufacturing and industrial economy that would produce a politically influential working class. This restriction on size would stunt the growth of any labor movements, obstructing a workers’ revolution in the United States and diminishing its likelihood all over the world. Aware of these


\(^{112}\) Marx, 81.
consequences, Marx cheered for the triumph of the Union and embraced similar sympathies among British workers as a sign of their emerging worldwide consciousness.\textsuperscript{113}

In a contribution to the \textit{New York Daily Tribune}, Marx first portrayed a clear class distinction in opinions on the American question. Writing in the aftermath of the \textit{Trent} affair, the writer told his American readers, “It ought never to be forgotten in the United States that at least the \textit{working classes} of England, from the commencement to the termination of the difficulty, have never forsaken them.” Through Marx’s perspective, organs of elite opinion, such as \textit{The Times}, sought to embroil Britain in a war with the United States. After demonstrations of popular opinion against this course, the government felt compelled to find a peaceful resolution. Marx confidently predicted that with the \textit{Trent} crisis safely passed, no other occasion could lead to a war in which Britain sided with the Confederacy. He heaped praise upon the workers for taking a stand against their evident economic interest:

> When a great portion of the British working classes directly and severely suffers under the consequences of the Southern blockade; when another part is indirectly smitten by the curtailment of the American commerce, owing, as they are told, to the selfish ‘protective policy’ of the Republicans; when the only remaining democratic weekly, Reynolds’ paper . . . exhausts its horse-powers of foul language in appeals to the working classes to urge the government, for their own interests, to war with the Union – under such circumstances, simple justice requires to pay a tribute to the sound attitude of the British working classes, the more so when contrasted with the hypocritical, bullying, cowardly, and stupid conduct of the official and well-to-do John Bull.

Worker reaction to the \textit{Trent} affair signified for Marx an occasion when workers recognized an interest greater than their individual livelihoods. In his portrayal, class differences were everything. He did not make allowances for certain segments of the working population to favor the Confederacy, nor did he credit any members of the upper classes for joining in attempts to halt a rush to war. In other articles, he noted the commercial interests that motivated Britain’s

\textsuperscript{113} Marx, xii-xiii.
capitalists to side with the Confederacy. He found in the *Trent* affair a maturity and deliberation among workers, which would serve them well as they advanced towards political power.

Simply sympathizing with the Union was not sufficient for Marx. Having promulgated a doctrine of class conflict, Marx hoped that the debate in Britain on the American question would highlight the mutual exclusivity of working class and ruling-class interest. Recognizing the impossibility of compromise, the proletariat would be forced to fight for its emancipation.

Thus, it deeply disappointed Marx when workers chose to remain silent instead of making their voices heard. A November 17, 1862 letter to his collaborator, Friedrich Engels, contained a discussion of the Union’s chances for success in the war. In viewing silence on the part of British workers as actively harmful to the cause, Marx made no attempt to conceal his contempt:

> What might be much more injurious in my view is the sheep’s attitude of the workers in Lancashire. Such a thing has never been heard of in the world. All the more is this the case as the manufacturing rabble do not even pretend “to make sacrifices” themselves, but leave to the rest of England the honor of keeping their army going for them; that is, impose on the rest of England the costs of maintenance of their variable capital. During this recent period England has disgraced herself more than any other country, the workers by their christian slave nature, the bourgeois and aristocrats by their enthusiasm for slavery in its most direct form. But the two manifestations supplement one another.

By suffering in silence, workers were only enabling their exploitation. Marx found no nobility in that step, even if it meant no pressure from the workers for intervention on the side of the Confederacy to secure cotton. Considering what he saw as the blatant indifference of the upper classes to the pain of the workers, Marx despaired at the apparent stoicism of Lancashire. His workers’ revolution must have seemed a long way off.

---

114 Marx, 163.
115 Marx, 47-54.
116 Berlin, 112.
117 Marx 262-263.
Marx, however, continued to seek his workers’ revolution, and towards the end of the war, he received an opportunity to link the stance of British workers on the war with the broader international workers’ movement. In late 1864, a meeting of labor leaders and radicals convened in St. Martin’s Hall in London. It declared its opposition to the current capitalist social order and sought to replace it with an order controlled by the workers. This meeting led to the formation of the International Working Men’s Association, or the First International. Marx initially came as a representative of German artisans in London but soon took a leading role in the proceedings.\footnote{Berlin, 162-163}

One item on the agenda: a message of congratulations to Abraham Lincoln for his reelection as president in November 1864. The drafting of the address fell to Marx, who shared his meticulous concerns about the composition in a letter to Engels.\footnote{Marx, 273.} The address began by congratulating the American people on Lincoln’s reelection and praising its significance as a death-knell for slavery. Subsequently, it detailed the import of the war to workers everywhere:

> When an oligarchy of 300,000 slaveholders dared to inscribe, for the first time in the annals of the world, “slavery” on the banner of armed revolt . . . then the working classes of Europe understood at once, even before the fanatic partisanship of the upper classes for the Confederate gentry had given its dismal warning, that the slaveholders’ rebellion was to sound the tocsin for a general holy crusade of property against labor, and that for the men of labor, with their hopes for the future, even their past conquests were at stake in that tremendous conflict on the other side of the Atlantic. Everywhere they bore themselves patiently the hardships imposed upon them by the cotton crisis, opposed enthusiastically the pro-slavery intervention, importunities of their “betters,” and from most parts of Europe contributed their quota of blood to the good cause.

In its conclusion, the address expressed the hope of the First International that the Civil War would mark a new era of promise for the working man and expressed satisfaction that a man
such as Lincoln, “the single-minded son of the working class,” had proved such an important force.\textsuperscript{120}

Examinations of class-based perspectives on workers and the war bring to the forefront the issue of labor’s role in British society. When it came to making and accepting distinctions, some of the figures covered in this chapter were willing to go farther than others. Bright and Mill praised workers for their pro-Union stance to the detriment of others, especially the aristocracy, but they fundamentally wanted workers incorporated into British society. They did not aim to inflame the working class against other classes, but rather by lauding workers for their support of the Union, Bright, Mill and their counterparts encouraged them in their stance. Ultimately, they hoped that principled pro-Union support would redound to the benefit of workers by demonstrating their capabilities to act deliberately and based on values rather than the passions of a mob. In fact, the tentative links made between middle-class Radicals, represented by Bright, and the labor movement led to the Reform League, a hybrid middle/working class organization pushing for manhood suffrage. In 1867, of course, this goal was attained.\textsuperscript{121}

Marx, in contrast, did not make class distinctions simply to show the moral fitness of workers. He used the war as a tool to convince workers of the utterly corrupt nature of the upper classes, who actively supported the cause of slaveholders. By promulgating these conceptions of society’s elites and firming workers in their support for the Union, Marx hoped to build a foundation for the eventual workers’ revolution. Instead of acceptance \textit{for} workers, Marx sought rejection \textit{by} workers – their rejection of the capitalist system that enslaved them. In this quest, Marx was joined by T.J. Dunning and other labor leaders from an earlier age of radical politics. Ultimately, the hope of these leaders for the overthrow of the capitalist system was never

\textsuperscript{120} Marx, 279-281.
\textsuperscript{121} Foner, \textit{British Labor and the American Civil War}, 91-92.
realized. The reasons for failure can be glimpsed in worker reaction to the American Civil War. As seen in this chapter and previous ones, many factors shaped worker opinions in different ways. For Marx or others sharing his vision, to make that vision attractive would have required the subjugation of a host of other worker loyalties, such as those owed to the British nation or to economic self-interest. Even then, if able to make a case based on class awareness, an extra push would have been needed to convince workers that their class interest depended on warring upon other classes instead of pushing for change within the system. Change had been slow in coming, but authority figures such as Bright assured workers that change was coming, and promised that the performance of workers during the war (or at least the perception of their performance) aided their cause. The fact that British intervention in the American war never occurred at least created the perception that worker activity had made the difference. Taking into consideration this political factor, and realizing that the nation had in other ways, such as poor relief, acknowledged their worth, workers gained confidence that they had a place in British society, and that that place would soon improve.
Conclusion

St. Martin’s Hall was packed on May 4, 1865, as London’s workers gathered to compose an address expressing sympathy for the people of the reunited United States on the assassination of their president, Abraham Lincoln. The occasion provoked reflection not only on the life of Lincoln but on the meaning of the interest workers took in the four-year-long war. The chair, Thomas Bayley Potter, an MP from Rochdale, noted that in the same hall two years before, John Bright had rallied a similar crowd to the cause of the Union, tying it to the cause of the working-man. On this day, they met to offer condolences:

But they must remember that this was not altogether a time for mourning – it was a time for action. (Applause.) They must not forget the program which Abraham Lincoln laid down – “Union and emancipation.” (Cheers.) “Union,” which in America was the symbol of the success of popular government, and “Emancipation,” which meant not merely to break the fetters of the slave, but to give him the rights of citizenship. (Cheers.) We in this country also needed union, to secure for every man equal rights and justice, and emancipation from those remnants of feudalism, the privileges of which still trammel labor in this country. They sympathized with the cause of labor in America, and at that meeting they would extend the right hand of fellowship to their friends on the other side of the Atlantic. (Cheers.) They wished that meeting to be the seal of friendship between the two peoples. (Great cheering.) They did not forget their common origin, their common language, and they looked forward to a common destiny to advance the principles of liberty wherever the common tongue was spoken.

Resolutions were passed offering condolences to the people of the United States for the death of their president and congratulations on the success of the Union armies. The meeting also voted to send copies of the resolutions to Lincoln’s wife, Mary Todd, and his successor as president, Andrew Johnson.122

The St. Martin’s Hall meeting in May 1865 signified what the American Civil War had become to many British workers. They had found a cause with which to express solidarity. The bonds between the United States and Britain gave hope that the success of the Union cause,

interpreted as a promise of freedom and equality to the downtrodden, would enhance the political power of similar causes at home. As the war continued and the issues at stake were clarified, figures such as Bright, Marx, and Potter (president of the Union and Emancipation Society) quite deliberately invested in its outcome meaning for Britain’s workers. Success for the Union would mean advancement of the working-man, so one had better join the cause now. In fact, histories of Britain during the period frequently consider the activism of the war as a turning point, a “testing ground for those committed to political reform,” as R.J.M. Blackett writes.\(^\text{123}\)

This linkage was far from inevitable. First of all, the divisions within the working class on which side to support, and on what basis to extend that support, indicate that the meaning of the war to British workers was deeply contested. By the end of the war, assuredly, Union supporters dominated the discussion, but the decline in economic pressure neutralized one of the most potent arguments on behalf of the Confederacy.\(^\text{124}\) Furthermore, Union supporters had to wait on developments in America before they could make their cause seem deeply relevant in Britain. A war fought solely to save the Union could never gain the traction abroad that a war to end slavery could. While the Emancipation Proclamation did not instantly persuade Britons of the sincerity of the Union’s antislavery sentiments, it signaled a definitive shift in emphasis that provided a rally point for advocates of the Union.\(^\text{125}\)

For the Union cause to succeed among British workers, proponents needed to link it to broader themes that carried meaning for the target audience. Before new sources of cotton and effective poor relief largely suppressed economic interests as a major issue, these broader themes served as counter-arguments. As the war progressed, they became the main issues. These themes touched on the very identities of workers. Invoking the characteristics of British national

\(^\text{123}\) Blackett, 243.

\(^\text{124}\) Blackett, 211-212.

\(^\text{125}\) Campbell, 223.
identity, namely a desire for liberty, essentially called on workers to verify their very Britishness. Similarly, associating the freedom of slaves in America with reforms in Britain required workers to seriously consider their responsibilities as a class. The success of the Union cause depended on workers valuing these memberships in larger communities – in the working class or in Britain as a whole – over a more self-interested focus on material goods. Union advocates were able to effectively link the obligations imposed by membership in these broader communities with support for the Union.

The success of Union sympathizers in exploiting these community identities raises the question of whether Confederate sympathizers could have exploited them as effectively. As we have seen, the particular relevance of these identities to the war was contested; arguments were made on the basis of national identity and class that supported the Southern cause. However, while pro-Union supporters were simply better organized, the content of the ideas they espoused truly made the difference. Deep antipathy to slavery was dormant in Britain in the beginning of the war, and the Union cause did not quickly become associated with a genuine pursuit of abolition. Once Union victory and the end of American slavery were united in the minds of British workers, Union advocates had an innate advantage. The use of British identity and class awareness entailed frequent invocation of liberty as the supreme value, and the Confederacy’s embrace of the institution of slavery proved too abhorrent to the idea of liberty for Southern advocates to overcome it.

Ultimately, British workers had to determine how they truly defined themselves before they could assess the American Civil War. It was a process that aroused great emotions and generated discussion of great ideas. This awakening of political and social consciousness served as a basis for the success of the working class in the ensuing years. Having conducted a process
of introspection during the war, workers emerged with a heightened sense of class awareness, an identity not inherently inimical to other classes. Marx’s critique tried to stir class resentment by linking the slaveholders of the Southern states with the capitalists of Britain, but it was the language of liberty, which united its speakers in an ideal Britain, that truly carried the day. Instead of overthrowing the political order, workers sought delivery of its full promise, to finally and fully acquire the rights and duties of the “free-born Englishman.” Thus, a push for the franchise followed the American Civil War, not a workers’ revolution. As they watched liberty’s promise extend, at least in name, to the emancipated slaves of the United States, workers felt compelled to realize that promise in their own country, not change its terms.

The process of introspection itself also fostered greater inclusion in political life. Workers at the very least attended, and often organized, enormous meetings that made the news. Their conduct, while frequently spirited and argumentative, demonstrated maturity and a capacity for deliberation; belief in their fitness for greater political participation grew as a result. While the conclusions they reached depended on the events of the American Civil War, the manner in which workers reached those conclusions commended them to other Britons and affirmed their place in British society.
Bibliography

Primary Sources:


Birmingham Daily Post. February 18, 1863.


The Caledonian Mercury. September 20, 1861.

Congressional Globe. 35th Congress, 1st Session 70 (1858).


The Economist. April 12, 1862.


The Hull Packet and East Riding Times. February 19, 1864.


Manchester Times. August 9, 1862-November 19, 1864.


*Reynolds’s Newspaper*. September 29, 1861-May 14, 1865.


*Richmond Daily Dispatch*. December 17, 1859.

*The Times*. October 9, 1862.

**Secondary Works:**


