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Politics of the Lancashire Working Class during the American Civil War

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If the had British intervened on the side of the Confederacy the American Civil War would almost certainly have gone differently than it did. No one doubted at the time that the British elites were in favor of supporting the Confederacy, but what about the disenfranchised British working population? Their loyalties in the conflict across the ocean were debated even during their own time, and it continues in interest historians today.

The traditional view is that the lower classes supported the Union almost unanimously. By the 1960s this was under debate by writings such as Joseph Herson Jr. and Mary Ellison. They reversed the trend and stated that the workers approved of the Confederacy as much as the upper classes did. Most recently this trend has reversed again and returned to the traditional view.¹

The truth of British labor's opinion during the war is a bit more complicated. The Confederates were counting on the suffering caused by the Union blockade. It was thought that the prevention of cotton shipments would swing British loyalty in their favor. Yet, a slight majority of the working class supported the Union. In some cases this support was vocal and included harsh criticism of the Confederates.

William Gladstone, Lord Palmerston, the Elites and the War

Context is important to understanding the motivations of British labor and their perceptions of the American conflict. The position of the British elites must also be understood. When William Gladstone said in Newcastle on October 7, 1862, that the

¹ Donald Bellows, "A Study of British Conservative Reaction to the American Civil War," *Journal of Southern History* 51 (November 1985). Philip S. Foner, *British Labor and the American Civil War* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1982), 1-10. R. J. M. Blackett, *Divided Hearts: Britain and the American Civil*

Confederacy had made a nation, he was echoing the sentiments of most of the British elite. Few in the aristocracy or political leadership of the United Kingdom felt any kinship towards the Union or democracy in general.²

Lord Palmerston, serving as Prime Minister, was outspoken in his dislike of American-style democracy. However, he was also among the more moderate of the British elites. His only political goal was the advancement and protection of British power. Distracted by affairs on the continent, he was content to wait out the war, certain that Britain would benefit in any outcome.³ Palmerston was essential in moderating the more outspoken members of the British government, such as Chancellor of the Exchequer William E. Gladstone.

Gladstone was one of the most influential British politicians to speak on behalf of Confederacy. He was among the few in Prime Minister Palmerston's cabinet to push for joint mediation in the American conflict along with the French, and his Newcastle speech was hardly the only one he made in support of a divided union. He had made a speech in Manchester supporting the Confederacy the year the war began. In the summer of 1863 Gladstone was still preaching that the Union would not be reunified by force. Officially, the Chancellor stated that he was neutral in the conflict, but Gladstone's words on the war were so partisan that the Palmerston ministry was forced to distance itself from him. Palmerston himself chastised Gladstone for his haphazard acknowledgement of the

War, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001).

² Howard Jones, *Union in Peril: The Crisis over British Intervention in the Civil War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992). Bellows, 505-526.

³ Joseph M. Hernon Jr., "British Sympathies in the American Civil War: A Reconsideration," *Journal of Southern History* 33 (August 1967): 359.

Confederacy.⁴

The majority of the Confederate sentiment among the elites in Britain came from the Conservatives.⁵ Thus Gladstone stands out not only because of his verbosity but also because of his political record. The position of supporting the Confederacy with so much vigor was out of character for both the man and the Liberal party of which he was a member. Fellow Liberals Richard Cobden and John Bright were vocal supporters of the North and often spoke with the working class of Britain directly.⁶ They were quick to criticize Gladstone's positions on the war.⁷ While a distrust of mass democracy was a common reason for the aristocracy to support the Confederates, much of Gladstone's career was spent working towards expanding the franchise in Britain. One of his nicknames was "The People's William."⁸

During his speeches for the recognition of the Confederacy Gladstone stated that the people were unanimously in agreement that the Union could not be restored by force.⁹ Yet later when arguing for the expansion of the franchise to include them, Gladstone would praise the actions of the cotton workers in England. They were being ruined by the war, and yet they still selflessly supported the Union, according to his new opinion. His about-face was so complete that years later he would be blamed by

⁴ Hennon, 364-365. Jones, 184.

⁵ Bellows.

⁶ Mary Ellison, *Support for Secession: Lancashire and the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972). Foner.

⁷ Jones, 183.

⁸ Clayton Roberts, David Roberts and Douglas R. Bisson, *A History of England*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2002), 2: 608-615.

revisionist historians for creating the “myth” of Lancashire workers’ support for the Union.¹⁰

It would appear that Gladstone was caught completely off guard by the political motions of the working class, a rare case for him. However, while popular opinion was certainly unified behind the Union cause after the war was already won, the reality was more nuanced during the war itself.

Depression in Lancashire and the Press

Between 1861 and 1865 the British cotton industry was in crisis. The blockade of Confederate ports led to rampant speculation on the future of the cotton supply. Although there had been a surplus of cotton coming in to Britain since 1858, the specter of a coming shortage rapidly raised the price of cotton held in storage. The result was not that the manufacture of cotton products became impossible due to lack of cotton, but rather that it was unprofitable due to the artificially inflated price. Smaller operators could not pay the high price of cotton and closed their factories. The larger factories remained open but laid-off workers to maintain profitability.¹¹ Attempts by men like Richard Cobden, who held what the *Times* called the first practical meeting on the problems in Lancashire in November of 1862, to relieve the pressure by bringing in cotton from India were successful in increasing supply but not the perceptions of scarcity.¹²

⁹ Hernon, 364.

¹⁰ Ellison, 6. Foner, 19, 22-23. Hernon, 366.

¹¹ Foner, 4-5. Jones.

¹² *The Times*, November 6, 1862, 6.

Hundreds of thousands of British workers were left either unemployed or underemployed. In 1861 533,950 workers were employed by the cotton industry out of a population of 2,429,440; by May of 1865 the number of people employed by the cotton industry in Lancashire had dropped to 99,545. For those still employed the working day was longer and the hourly pay dropped. For the unemployed there was a very real risk of starvation. Homes were emptied of furniture, books, and anything else of value to pay for food.¹³ Relief societies were set up and there was much debate among the elites as to how much welfare should be provided for the people of Lancashire. The number of relief societies was so great that an entire section was devoted to them in the *London Times* during most of this period, taking up the majority of the second page of the paper.¹⁴ An example of the amount of aid that was felt to be needed can be seen in a meeting in Manchester in December of 1862 called by Lord Derby. The representatives of the government and the upper classes pledged £540,000 in relief for the operatives of Lancashire, and the depression was not yet as bad as it would get.¹⁵

It is against this background of suffering that the political leanings of the working class must be examined. From the beginning the labor union papers took a stand against the Union. They saw the Union's actions in the war as spurious at best and hypocritical at worst. However, the most important issue in driving their opinion in the Confederates' direction was the issue of cotton. Breaking the blockade, by force and foreign aid if necessary, was seen by the press as the quickest way to insure the continued flow of

¹³ Ellison, 11-13. Foner, 5-6.

¹⁴ *The Times*, 1861-1865. Jones.

¹⁵ *The Times*, December 4, 1862, 6.

cotton.¹⁶ It was not thought that the Union would be truly willing to go to war with Britain. Even if it came to that extreme, it was considered “better to fight the Yankees than starve our own operatives.”¹⁷ Even tentative support for the United States in the labor press was uncommon. A few smaller papers, such as the *National Co-Operative Leader* and *Bricklayer’s Trade Circular* made their voices known for the Union, but couched their arguments with calls for the Union to make the war about emancipation.

President Abraham Lincoln’s decision to countermand General John C. Fremont’s orders about freeing the slaves in Missouri soon soured much of the limited support for the Union. Although *The Working Man* and others had previously supported the United States based on their perception of the war as turning against slavery, Lincoln’s order caused that optimism to dry up. Ending the war quickly on the basis of separation seemed to be the quickest way to both free the slaves and feed the starving men of Lancashire.¹⁸

The *Bee-Hive* was one of the most influential labor papers being published in the 1860s, and it was also one of the most outspokenly pro-Confederate. The editor of the *Bee-Hive* from 1861 to 1863 was George Troup, who was rabidly anti-Northern. The official voice of London Trades Council, the paper claimed to speak for all workers. Some of George Troup’s early editorials in October 1861 declared that the war was not for the abolition of slavery, but rather the continuation of Northern financial exploitation of the South. Later in the same month and on into November the *Bee-Hive* made repeated calls for the aggression against the South to end, and for the Confederacy to be allowed to

¹⁶ Melvyn Dubofsky, “Myth and History,” *Reviews in American History* 1 (September, 1973): 397.

¹⁷ “England Must Break the Blockade or Her Millions Will Starve,” *Reynolds’ Newspaper*, September 29, 1861, quoted in Foner, 26.

exist separately.

By the end of 1861 the voice of the *Bee-Hive* had gotten even angrier, denouncing President Lincoln as mindless and his cabinet as consisting of evil men who reveled in the war and used it to enrich themselves. Troup championed the familiar cause of intervening in conjunction with Napoleon III. The preliminary Emancipation Proclamation at the end of 1862 did not calm the *Bee-Hive*; it shook up George Troup even more. The idea of Lincoln freeing the slaves he had no control over while keeping in bondage those that he did was repeatedly lambasted in the paper.¹⁹

But the eventual fate of the *Bee-Hive* shows that the mind of the working man of Britain could not necessarily be determined by reading the editorials in the labor newspapers. In November 1862 the London Trades Council held a meeting to discuss the problems of unemployment and depression in Lancashire. Instead of blaming the Union and the blockade for the problems in the mills, the government of Britain was blamed in one speech for allowing the cotton famine to happen rather than providing a contingency for a situation they should have seen coming. This was greeted by loud applause. Speakers even attacked the British government for not supporting the North, since that would quickly end the cotton famine and free the slaves.

The cheers for the pro-Northern speeches at the meeting of the Trades Council did not go unnoticed by the manager of the *Bee-Hive*, George Potter. Himself a supporter of the South, could clearly see the way the wind was blowing among the readers of his paper. Changes to the *Bee-Hive*'s policy were demanded, and George Troup was

¹⁸ Ellison, 173-178. Foner, 25-28.

¹⁹ Foner, 28-29.

removed as editor. The board of directors was replaced with pro-Unionists.²⁰

The editorial direction of the *Bee-Hive* was changed only briefly. Edward Beesly's content replaced that of George Troup and initially brought the paper back in line with the views of the Trades Council, but by the summer of 1863 articles critical to the North and supportive of the Confederacy had returned to the paper in the form of a series of three essays by T.J. Dunning. Directly commenting on the meeting that had led to the change in the paper's policy, he stated that the only reason the North now wished to destroy slavery was because it found itself cut off from its profits.²¹

The board of directors was replaced again in November 1863 and the new board gave George Potter greater control over the *Bee-Hive*'s content. The result of this decision was that in February of 1864 articles written by George Troup returned to the paper, completing the reversion to a Confederate outlook for the paper. In his new articles Troup accused the Union of drafting or signing up new immigrants and sending them into battle immediately, noting the famous Irish Brigade as an example. He likened this to using them as a human shield. Troup also compared Lincoln to Xerxes because of the huge number of men the President had drafted to conquer a relatively small Confederate population. In the next edition the editor of the paper, Robert Hartwell, took out space to criticize Troup's arguments. Beesly also contributed and joked that the unsuspecting reader of the *Bee-Hive* might have thought they had accidentally picked up a back issue due to the return of pro-Confederate rhetoric. T.J. Dunning responded to their comments by backing up Troup and began an editorial war that lasted for several months, until

²⁰ Ibid., 30-32.

²¹ Ibid., 67-68.

finally Beesly was so fed up with the policies of the *Bee-Hive* that he threatened to stop contributing at all.²²

What followed was the second reversal of policy by the board of directors of the *Bee-Hive* during the Civil War. In April of 1864 Hartwell prohibited any further publication of responses to Troup's articles or the debate they had caused. The board of directors followed suit by issuing a unanimous decision that the comments of Troup and Dunning were counter to those of the working classes that formed the paper's readership. No more articles in that vein would be published in the *Bee-Hive* for the rest of the war.²³

The *Bee-Hive* was not the only major publication to have its editorial policies directly questioned. A meeting on December 31, 1862 was used by working men in Manchester to complain about the pro-Confederate bias of the *Manchester Guardian*, citing the editorials as one of the main reasons that the meeting was called. One of the organizers, Edward Hooson, said that he wanted the world to know the true views of the workingmen of the district. Unlike the *Bee-Hive*, the *Guardian* did not give in to the pressure of its readers and maintained its lenient stance towards the Confederacy.²⁴

Rabble Rousing in England

The meeting in Manchester, while the most famous by virtue of its appropriation by Karl Marx and relationship to Abraham Lincoln, was not the first gathering of working men in Lancashire to express their opinions. If the pro-Confederate bias of the

²² Ibid., 67-69.

²³ Ibid., 69, 110.

²⁴ Ellison 83-84, 182-183. Foner, 40-41.

labor press cannot be denied, its ability to speak for the working class can easily be drawn into question when these meetings are examined.

The first series of meetings of the working class in Lancashire was called in the city of Blackburn. On July 3 the Blackburn Relief Committee released a report describing the state of the town. The committee was only one of the societies distributing aid to the era, but nonetheless they reported that in June they handed out 57,620 pounds of oatmeal and 58,529 pounds of bread to the community. By their estimates the workers of Blackburn were now losing £10,500 a week in wages due to lack of employment.²⁵

Pro-Confederate forces in Blackburn called a meeting a few days after the report was published. They were attempting to drum up public support for a motion in Parliament that would bring the Civil War to an end through mediation. The area was reported by the *Blackburn Standard* as having universal support for recognition for the South, making the town seem like a natural place for such a meeting. Four to five thousand people were present. The planned speakers of the meeting were several hours late, causing it to be chaired instead by local manufacturers. One of them, Mortimer Grimshaw, put forth a resolution to mediate peace between the Union and the Confederacy, but was shouted down. He attempted to shore up his argument by stating that his only concern was for the welfare of the people of Lancashire, and asking the crowd if it made any sense for them to starve so that a lesser number of slaves might possibly gain their freedom. This was greeted by hisses. At that point the secretary of the Blackburn Weavers' Association took control of the meeting and put to the vote an amendment to the original motion. Instead of intervention, the amendment asked the

²⁵ *The Times*, July 3, 1862, 8.

British government to do nothing that did not uphold the policy of President Lincoln. The motion was quickly seconded and put the vote, passing nearly unanimously. Attempts to revive the original resolution failed, and the meeting adjourned with only the pro-Union motion passing.²⁶

There was pushback against this result. On July 29th a meeting was held in the Blackburn Town Hall with a more modest resolution: recognizing the Confederacy. This resolution passed easily.²⁷ In the beginning of August another meeting was held in Blackburn, also in the Town Hall, with the mayor R.H. Hutchinson presiding. Speakers were pulled from the leading citizens of Blackburn, but none from the working class. The hall was completely packed when the meeting began. The platform for this meeting was identical to that of the first. Colonel James Jackson, one of the speakers, had no qualms in admitting that the purpose of the meeting was to counter the resolution passed by the previous. Jackson trotted the familiar arguments out again. Nothing but cotton could save Blackburn from the hardships it was currently enduring. Any intervention could possibly lead to war with the North, but was that outcome worse than unemployment and being forced to rely on welfare? The supply of cheap corn to Britain from the Union would be cut off, but Jackson argued that cheap corn was of no use if you had no money to buy it with.²⁸

The second Blackburn meeting on mediation was interrupted exactly as the first, with the introduction of an amendment to the original motion, this time requiring that any

²⁶ Ellison, 112. Foner, 34-36.

²⁷ Ellison, 114.

²⁸ Foner, 36-38.

motion for recognition and mediation on behalf of the Confederacy include the requirement of the abolition of slavery. The amendment was upheld by the crowd, and the working class in Blackburn had essentially defeated their local pro-Confederate movement. None of the resolutions was ever forwarded on to the government.²⁹

In October of 1862 there was a meeting in the town of Stalybridge, just eight miles west of Manchester. Again convened by the mayor of the town and held in the Town Hall, the weavers of Stalybridge quickly took control of the meeting and reversed the direction of the discourse. Instead of the original motion pushing for recognition for the Confederacy, the hundreds of working men present passed a resolution that blamed the famine and unemployment in the manufacturing districts on the rebellion of the southern states.³⁰

The meeting in Manchester on December 31st of the same year was notable then not for its pro-Union resolutions, but for the fact that it was intentionally convened with the idea of supporting the Union. The reaction against the Confederate bias of the *Manchester Guardian* and the impending release of the full Emancipation Proclamation fueled this meeting, which was different also in that it was organized by two members of the working class rather than leading class citizens, although the mayor was chosen to chair the meeting. When it ran its notice on the rally, the *Guardian* counseled the workers that they were doing nothing more than inviting the supporters of the Confederacy to hold meetings of their own; other Manchester papers were less kind.³¹

²⁹ Ibid., 36-38.

³⁰ Ibid., 39.

³¹ Ellison, 182-184. Foner, 39-42.

Thomas Evans was one of the first speakers, and a laborer. His speech was greeted with applause as he said that “they might not know what the North was fighting for, but they all knew what the South was fighting for.”³² One of the organizers of the meeting, J.E. Edwards, blamed the upper classes of England for perpetuating the myth that the current war was not about slavery but the power of the North, and chastised them for trying to mobilize the workingmen of Lancashire to support their flawed cause. A resolution containing this message was put forward. Edward Hooston, who had organized the meeting along with Edwards, supported the motion saying that he believed the aristocracy supported the Confederacy because they were afraid of the growing influence of the United States and its example of democracy; if the meeting had been held in the United States instead of Britain, all those present would have had the right to vote. The resolution containing this sentiment passed unanimously, and a second commending President Lincoln’s actions also passed with few dissenting votes.³³

The final act of the meeting is the most celebrated. The workers present voted on and supported a resolution for an address to be sent to President Lincoln. The address stated in part that: “We are truly one people, though locally separate. And, if you have any ill-wishers here, be assured they are chiefly those who oppose liberty at home, and that they will be powerless to stir up quarrels between us, from the very day in which your country becomes undeniable, and without exception, the home of the free.”³⁴ It was assumed that with the coming Emancipation Proclamation there would be no way to stop

³² Foner, 40.

³³ “Emancipation Meetings in England,” *New York Times*, January 15, 1863, 2. Foner, 40-41.

³⁴ “Emancipation Meetings in England,” 2.

short of a complete end to slavery.

Lincoln's reply to the address was carefully created with the aid of Charles Sumner and included one of the President's most famous statements.³⁵ To the workers of Lancashire he attributed "an instance of sublime Christian heroism which has not been surpassed in any age or in any country."³⁶ Both the original address and its reply were widely reprinted in Britain and in the United States, generally to praise. The *Manchester Guardian*, although criticized at the same meeting, printed both. However, the *Guardian* also ran editorials that claimed the entire thing was too neat to have actually occurred spontaneously, implying that the entire meeting and exchange was arranged in advance merely to appear spontaneous, albeit it had no evidence to support such a claim.³⁷ Pulitzer Prize winning Lincoln biographer David Herbert Donald also states that the Manchester meeting and several other pro-Union rallies were secretly funded by the United States. Unfortunately, Donald also fails to cite any sources for this rumor.³⁸

The debate over the Manchester meeting and address reveals that, much as with the labor press and the Confederacy, the public gatherings of working men cannot be taken at face value to mean that support for the Union was widespread among the citizens of Lancashire. Although they were hijacked with a pro-Union message, the meetings in Blackburn were originally called to support the Confederate cause, and there were other meetings across Lancashire that were not diverted and did voice their opinions in favor of

³⁵ David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Touchstone, 1995): 415.

³⁶ "President Lincoln and the Working Men of Lancashire," *The Times*, February 12, 1863, 9.

³⁷ Foner, 43-44.

³⁸ Donald, 660.

mediation and an immediate end to the conflict. Taking the Manchester meeting as an example, there is also doubt cast that any of the gatherings of the working men of England in support of the United States were actually attended by working men, or if they were organized by the middle class and local elites.³⁹

However, these same doubts are also expressed about the meetings that supported the Confederates. The very idea that the unemployed, starving workers would peacefully congregate together to support either side is viewed as something more in line with what would be expected of the middle, rather than working, class.⁴⁰

The majority of the support for both the pro-Union and pro-Confederate meetings comes from the labor press.⁴¹ Considering that the press was consistently critical of the North, statements in papers such as the *Manchester Guardian* and *Bee-Hive* that the meetings in Manchester and Blackburn that passed resolutions supporting the United States were comprised mainly of the working class are interesting, since expectations would be that the press would disparage or discredit the validity of the gatherings. Although the *Guardian* questioned the spontaneity of the textile workers' meeting in Manchester, it did not claim that the event was organized or attended by anyone other than the working class.

The same cannot be said of the meetings in Lancashire that supported the Confederacy; despite the fact that the majority of the press supported the ideals expressed at the pro-Southern rallies, few claims were made that large numbers of working men

³⁹ Ellison.

⁴⁰ Dubofsky, 398.

⁴¹ Blakett, Foner, Ellison.

were present at any of them, much less as speakers. The number of men in attendance at the Confederate meetings was also reported as being lower than that of those for the Union, again despite the sympathetic press.⁴²

In a way, the visible editorial bias of the labor press lends credibility to the veracity of the claims that the working men of Lancashire supported the Union vocally in public meetings. This is especially true when added to the consideration that one of the most famous was called in part to criticize the Confederate bias of the *Manchester Guardian*, and that the *Bee-Hive* was forced to change its policy by a similar meeting. However, there is other evidence that must be considered before a conclusion can be reached about the political perceptions of the working class.

Outside Factors

In Manchester on March 10, 1863 a procession was to be held in honor of the wedding of the Prince of Wales. Workers from the city and around Lancashire were to take part. At the end of the demonstration 15,000 two pound loaves of bread were going to be distributed. However, the parade never took place. The loaves of bread that were to be distributed were on wagons that would follow the procession, pulling two boats. One of these boats was painted black and represented the *C.S.S. Alabama* that Great Britain had supplied the Confederacy by allowing it to be constructed at Liverpool; at the end of the demonstration this ship was to be burned at Kersal Moor. Over the other boat the flag of the United States was flying; it was intended to represent the relief ships from America

⁴² Dubofsky, Foner, 11-25.

which arrived in port just a few weeks previous.⁴³

The demonstration was overtly political in nature, especially considering that the *Alabama* was still sailing and raiding on the oceans. The workers would have none of it. The bread was seized from the ships in the Stevenson's Square before the march could begin. There was no procession and no political statement was made.⁴⁴

The aid ships sent by the United States with supplies for those starving in Lancashire began as a result of a series of articles in the *New York Times*. In September 1862 they sent a reporter to Lancashire to chronicle the effects the American Civil War was having there. The descriptions included scenes of paupers unable to warm themselves through the winter because they had sold all of their clothing and blankets to buy food, and that these former workers were now completely dependent on what aid was given them.⁴⁵

The articles were followed by an unaccredited editorial on November 8, 1862 titled "Our Friends in England—A Practical Suggestion." After referencing the meetings of the working men in Stalybridge and other towns where the people of Lancashire showed their support for the United States and criticized the calls for interference from members of the British government, the author of the editorial makes his suggestion:

The applicants for relief increase in awful ration. The cold, dismal, dreaded winter is upon them, and it seems almost hopeless to try to keep thousands from positive

⁴³ Hernon, 363-364.

⁴⁴ Hernon, 363-364.

⁴⁵ "Our London Correspondence," *New York Times*, September 12, 1862, 2.

starvation... Would it not be a magnificent thing for the people of these States, even in this, our great day of national trial, to send these our poor friends in England a contribution—to offer them a shipload of corn and wheat out of the God-given bounties of our land?⁴⁶

The editorial was well received. An appeal for provisions followed, and various societies and Chambers of Commerce began to accept donations. A ship named the *George Griswold*, 200 feet long with a capacity of eighteen hundred tons and named after the man who had purchased it for the purpose, left New York on January 9 1863. On board were 13,236 barrels of flour, 315 boxes of bread along with 125 barrels of the same, 500 barrels of corn, 50 barrels of pork, 102 boxes of bacon, 3 tierces (barrels equal to 42 gallons) and 2 bags of rice along with cash donations.⁴⁷ In fact, there was enough money donated that the surplus was used to send not one but two more ships, the *Achilles* and the *Hope*, which left several weeks later. These missions were smaller however, with the *Achilles* containing only 5,000 barrels of flour.

The *George Griswold* arrived at Liverpool on February 11, 1863 and was greeted with enthusiasm and thanks from the locals. After the cargo was unloaded a meeting to greet and thank the officers and crew of the ship was held in the Free-Trade Hall in Manchester on February 24th; the same hall had housed the meeting in December that sent the address to President Lincoln. The turnout was so great that an overflow meeting

⁴⁶ “Our Friends in England—A Practical Suggestion,” *New York Times*, November 8, 1862, 4.

⁴⁷ “An Appeal for the Suffering Operatives of Great Britain,” *New York Times*, December 10, 1862, 5. “Ho! For England,” *New York Times*, January 10, 1863, 5. “The Sailing of the Ship,” *New York Times*, January 10, 1863, 4.

was held for two thousand people who were unable to get in to the Free-Trade Hall.⁴⁸

And yet, despite this apparent enthusiasm, there is the example only a few weeks later of the procession in Manchester where the bread was taken off the wagons by the working men before it could be used in a parade designed to support the Union. Clearly, once again, events cannot be taken at face value.

Conclusions

The traditional argument about the perceptions of the British working class in the American Civil War is that they either supported the Union almost unanimously, or they supported the Confederacy with equal enthusiasm.⁴⁹ It seems clear that the reality was much more complex than either of these simplifications.

If the labor press is taken as the primary example of how the men suffering through the Lancashire cotton famine felt about the American Civil War, then the editorial policy of those papers would seem to indicate that support for the Confederacy was strong due to distrust for the intentions of the Union and a respect for the will of the people, who had democratically seceded. But the criticism heaped upon the *Bee-Hive* and the *Manchester Guardian* for their Confederate articles and leanings shows that the labor press did not speak for a large portion of the working class in Lancashire or London.

At the same time, the evidence that more working men attended meetings sympathetic to Union than those supporting the Confederacy cannot be used to irrefutably state that the lower classes of England universally supported the actions and war aims of

⁴⁸ Ellison, 82-83. Foner, 50-51.

⁴⁹ Blackett, Ellison, Foner.

the United States. Beyond any doubts cast upon the true composition of the meetings, and ignoring even the accusations that the rallies were in actuality pre-planned and organized by middle class operatives with money from America, the juxtaposition of the rally around the crew of the *George Griswold* in Manchester one night while two weeks later a pro-Union procession fails to incite any positive interest reveals that the sincerity of these meetings might not be quite what they seem.

The working classes of Britain did not act as a monolithic entity during the American Civil War. They were not one unit with one mind. A body composed of individuals, members of the working classes supported both the Confederates and the Union, although not in equal measure. Support for the Union was more prevalent, as revealed by even the labor press. But this does not mean that support for the North was in overwhelming majority, or that it was as enthusiastic as the Free-Trade Hall meetings in Manchester would suggest it was.

There are many reasons why the working classes would support the Union, however slightly, over the Confederates. Mentioned at every meeting was the issue of slavery. Although not necessarily thrilled with the limitations of Lincoln's stated purposes with regards to granting the slaves their freedom, any Northern ambiguity was cancelled out by the well-known stance of the South. A reaction against the outspoken support for the "Aristocratic" South among the elites of Britain, even one as famous for supporting the working man as William Gladstone, may also have played a part.

Another, less commonly cited example is the fact that over 2,000 families of cotton workers left Lancashire during 1864 alone for the North, a long existing trend of

immigration.⁵⁰ Not only does this show in part where the working class sympathies lay, it also reveals a reason for them. Letters from friends and family in the United States would certainly have influenced the cotton workers of Lancashire when they thought about the war.

There is also the reality of active Union attempts to drum up popular support among the people of Britain. Even without evidence that American money had a hand to play in funding some of the larger pro-Union meetings in Lancashire, the example of the *George Griswold* and the *New York Times* editorials that spawned it undoubtedly had an effect on public opinion. In fact, at the Free-Trade Hall meeting in Manchester one of the speakers cited the actions taken in New York and elsewhere to send relief to the workers against the Confederacy, noting that there were no such editorials or actions there.⁵¹

It is impossible to end without stating the one certain truth about the perceptions and opinions of the British working class during the American Civil War: they had no actual political effect. The workers could not vote. Whether they voiced their support for the Union or the Confederacy, anything short of a rebellion of their own meant that Parliament was going to go its own way. Despite fears and accusations to the contrary, in the end, Great Britain directly supported neither combatant.

⁵⁰ Dubofsky, 398-399.

⁵¹ Foner, 47.

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