

Civil War Treasures: English Satire on the American Civil War From the Pages of Punch

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Feature Essay

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Rasmussen, Hans and Taylor, Michael. *Civil War Treasures: English Satire on the American Civil War from the Pages of Punch.*

Punch, or the London Charivari, a justly famous British weekly satirical magazine established in 1841, had become a national institution by the time the American Civil War began. Its brilliant writers and cartoonists naturally made sport of the politics of the war, casting their witty and disparaging opinions on issues like slavery, secession, Anglo-American diplomacy, wartime economics, and Union fortunes on the battlefield. The LSU Libraries Special Collections holds original issues of *Punch* for the years 1861-1863, affording an amusing glimpse of how English opinion makers interpreted and encouraged others to view the American Civil War.

Even before the war began, the writers of *Punch* were positively prescient about its outcome. As soon as South Carolina seceded from the union, they predicted that a war begun to preserve slavery would counterintuitively result in emancipation, a viewpoint expressed in the opening lines of a satirical poem: Secede, ye Southern States, secede,
No better plan could be,
If you of Niggers would be freed,
To set your Niggers free.¹

Their bafflement over why southerners would leave the union and foolishly forfeit the benefit of the fugitive slave act commenced the magazine's wholehearted condemnation of slavery in the South, a position consistent with the majority opinion in Britain. Their abolitionist attitude dominated all references to American politics before the war, such as a particularly biting ditty sung to the tune of *Rule Britannia* that ended each stanza with "Rule Slaveownia, Slaveownia rules, and raves / "Christians ever, ever, ever shall have slaves."²

Once hostilities began, however, the thrust of *Punch's* satire switched from condemning slavery to ridiculing the United States, whose earlier pretensions of international ambition, expressed particularly through the Monroe Doctrine, had completely disintegrated owing to its current troubles. For instance, one song published barely a fortnight after Fort Sumter snickered at the nation's inability to answer Spanish colonial encroachment in Santo Domingo. Another a month later laughed at the folly of engaging in a civil war and ridiculed the poor judgment of the American people: And here you are about to fight,
And wage intestine war,
Not either of you in the right:
What simpletons you are!³

Punch didn't hesitate to mock the Yankees after their resounding defeat at First Manassas, publishing a ten stanza poem and full-page cartoon using the defeat as proof of the feebleness of the claim that the United States might seize Canada out of anger over Britain's official declaration of neutrality in May 1861. In subsequent months, they scoffed at the idea that Britons would loan money to the United States to put down the rebellion: "You'll spend all you borrow in powder and ball, / And then have to show for it—nothing at all." A cartoon later that year suggested British textile manufacturers would buy cotton from India if they couldn't get any from the United States, depicting a frustrated John Bull angrily declaring, "Oh! If you two like fighting better than business, I shall deal at the other shop."⁴

Not surprisingly, the Trent Affair of November-December 1861 evoked passionate scorn from patriotic English satirists: Your passion and arrogance,
JONATHAN, bridle,
And let me know what you call MASON and SLIDELL.
Are they rebels? What right, if you take that position,
Had you, boarding the *Trent*, to demand extradition?

They turned the tables by interrogating if the Americans would have objected if Britain had seized John Mitchel and Thomas Francis Meagher, two escaped Irish revolutionaries then living in the United States.⁵ Several cartoons illustrated the anxiety over the possibility for war between the two countries before the crisis was resolved, as well as the smugness felt over this British diplomatic victory. A song sung to the tune of *Yankee Doodle* expressed this joy at bettering an upstart nation in a tight predicament: ROWDY DOODLE is in wrath,

And would on us have poured it;
But war's so dear a luxury,
He can't just now afford it.
He owns that he would much enjoy
The Britishers to lick, Sir:
But now, alas! He's so hard up,
He cannot buy the stick, Sir!⁶

Once the Trent Affair had passed, *Punch's* satirical aim returned to a broad ridicule of the war's political, moral, and especially economic futility, as well as a mockery of Lincoln's inability to crush the rebellion in the months before Antietam.⁷ The Emancipation Proclamation, rather than being welcomed as a long-awaited instrument of liberation, was satirized in cartoon and verse as "Abe Lincoln's Last Card," a desperate measure that failed to meet Britons' hopes for truly national emancipation: From the Slaves of Southern rebels
Thus I strike the chain:
But the slaves of loyal owners
Still shall slaves remain.⁸

Lincoln's quandary over how to deal with the tenacious issue of slavery that had challenged every previous president wasn't lost on *Punch*, who well knew of previous ideas and schemes for abolition that had failed in the United States. The Emancipation Proclamation's inability to actually free slaves in rebellious states and the dilemma of continued enslavement in the "Border States, that's neither flesh nor fish" all conspired to paint a picture of a ridiculously weak and ineffective president in early 1863.⁹ Despite these shortcomings in the Union's conduct of the war, *Punch* approved of arming freedmen and condemned the New York City draft riots of 1863.¹⁰

Whatever its opinion of Americans north or south, *Punch's* writers and artists never made an issue of British neutrality, decidedly insisting that Britons wanted no part in the American war. Although they never ceased in their principled sympathy for slaves and freedmen, the Civil War was also critically an economic issue, a matter of grain imports, loans, investments, and the cotton trade. Thus, they imagined John Bull as a merchant explaining "to his American bullies" that "Into your confounded quarrel / Let myself be dragged I'll not," because "What I want to do with either / Is impartially to trade."¹¹ Mid-Victorian Britain was a manufacturing dynamo for which the American Civil War proved to be only a nonsensical nuisance.

¹*Punch*, January 12, 1861, p.11.

²*Punch*, January 26, 1861, p.41, February 2, 1861, p.54, March 9, 1861, p.98, April 20, 1861, p.160.

³*Punch*, April 27, 1861, p.169, May 25, 1861, p.209.

⁴*Punch*, August 17, 1861, p.66-67, September 7, 1861, p.100, November 16, 1861, p.197.

⁵*Punch*, August 17, 1861, p.66-67, September 7, 1861, p.100, November 16, 1861, p.197.

⁶*Punch*, January 25, 1862, p.33.

⁷*Punch*, February 1, 1862, p.45, June 7, 1862, p.227, July 26, 1862, p.35, August 9, 1862, p.55, August 23, 1862, p.77, September 13, 1862, p.111, September 27, 1862, p.131.

⁸*Punch*, October 18, 1862, p.160-61.

⁹*Punch*, January 24, 1863, p.34.

¹⁰*Punch*, August 8, 1863, p.57, August 15, 1863, p.69, September 26, 1863, p.129.

¹¹*Punch*, October 3, 1863, p.138-39.