

American Sectionalism in the British Mind, 1832-1863

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Review

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For decades, historians have debated whether or not the persistent Confederate dream of British intervention on their behalf in the Civil War ever had any chance of being realized. Always, that debate has focused on events, policies, and competing interests that influenced British decisions during the war itself. Peter O'Connor offers a fresh perspective on this enduring controversy by studying British attitudes towards the American sectional conflict during the antebellum years when the dispute was building and approaching the violent dimensions it would soon assume. His *American Sectionalism in the British Mind, 1832-1863* concludes that during the years of growing sectional conflict the British developed a "sophisticated understanding" of the North-South dispute, "which led them to explicitly reject . . . a simplified formulation of the war" as an "abolitionist crusade." (1) He focuses on the role played by "cultural commentators" who traveled to the United States in the antebellum period and provided the British public with an "understanding of American sectionalism that informed reactions to the conflict." (2) O'Connor believes his analysis provides greater insight into British attitudes and actions than have previous studies of Britain during the Civil War.

O'Connor contends that examining the sectional conflict in a transnational context reveals that a surprising number of issues in dispute in America were also contested in Great Britain itself. Having debated slavery, free trade, industrialization, and other issues, the British had a well-developed perspective on these questions as the North and South divided over them in the decades leading up to the war.

First and foremost, O'Connor demonstrates that the British did not see a clear dichotomy between southern slavery and northern free labor. Southern slavery was a more benevolent institution, in their view, than was often claimed, and to these foreign observers, northern society appeared more cruel by contrast. Morality did not reside so clearly with the North, the British concluded, as they read accounts of American urban life in the decades before the Civil War. The impact of this conclusion on British attitudes during the early years of the war, O'Connor argues, was significant and consequential.

In addition, from the start of the sectional conflict Britain viewed the crisis through the lens of American regional identities. The degree to which the various regions—New England, mid-Atlantic, and the South—were seen as sympathetic to Great Britain determined the judgments the British made of them. For example, the British saw

the mid-Atlantic region as Anglophobic and as result came to negative conclusions about it. The British were also intensely aware of sectional divisions in the United States over free trade policy and over commitments to state's rights.

Given this history of familiarity with sectional issues, O'Connor claims that the British population as a whole was not surprised by secession and, since it did not associate the North with abolitionism, was quite sympathetic to the Confederacy. All of this changed, O'Connor concludes, not surprisingly, with the Emancipation Proclamation, which "reformulated" British views of American sectionalism by introducing a moral distinction between the North and the South. (10) O'Connor traces this transformation through the first years of the war, including the Trent Affair and its resolution and the issuance of the Proclamation. In the end, pre-war bias in favor of the South could not survive the impact of the newly "recast" perception of the war as a "moral contest." (11)

Fundamental to O'Connor's argument is the claim that in the antebellum period the British saw slavery as a national institution with both sections complicit in it. Northerners, he argues, were hostile to abolition, racially prejudiced, and even profited from slavery, while southerners were kind, paternalistic masters. O'Connor attributes this perception to the impact of numerous cultural commentators, such as Frances Trollope, who travelled to America and conveyed these views to their readers back home. Even Harriet Martineau, along with many others who had a harsher view of southern slavery, believed northerners to be complicit in the institution. In the "British Mind" sectionalism did not reflect moral divisions over the peculiar institution.

The British were particularly sensitive to the Irish character of much of the urban North and especially of New York, which they regarded as representative of the North as a whole and the center of Anglophobia. This view heightened their sympathy for the South, which they believed to be a very "British" section of the United States. Compounding these preconceptions was British awareness, stemming in large part from their understanding of the nullification crisis, of American antebellum political divisions over state sovereignty and free trade, and by a grave skepticism about the advantages of democratic rule in the United States. As a result, the British doubted the existence of a coherent national American political culture and therefore were not surprised by disunion. Furthermore, argues O'Connor, these assumptions about politics in the United States provided a rich source for both pro-union and pro-confederate propagandists once the war began.

Having established a comprehensive portrait of British antebellum views of American sectionalism, O'Connor concludes his book by demonstrating how these views influenced the course of British attitudes toward the Union and the Confederacy during the first years of their conflict. He shows, for example, how the British reaction to the boarding of the *Trent* was based on the antebellum conceptions of sectionalism in America that he carefully developed in the first chapters. Finally, emancipation sounded the death knell to British ambivalence. As O'Connor concludes: "Few in British political life could continue to push the cause of the South in a conflict that had taken on the aspect of a war against slavery." (183) The British population, explains O'Connor would

"no longer see the war through the prewar lens" that had given the public a particular understanding of sectional and national identity in the United States." (185)

O'Connor's comprehensive presentation of British attitudes towards the United States over the antebellum period is a valuable contribution to our understanding of the nineteenth-century transatlantic connection and the history of foreign relations during the Civil War. The depth of O'Connor's scholarship is impressive and its grasp of complexity remarkable. As always, there are areas, both minor and important, in which more study is called for. Further analysis of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example, could have shown ambiguities in the novel's treatment of the differences between the sections that would have reinforced O'Connor's understandings of British assumptions about those differences. More significantly, a deeper examination of the representative nature of O'Connor's sources would have given increased authority to his findings. But these suggestions do not take away from O'Connor's achievement. His contribution has laid the foundation for further study and initiated a long overdue debate over the role antebellum beliefs had in determining British responses to the American Civil War.

However, what is striking about O'Connor's presentation is how wrong British antebellum views of American sectionalism were. The British appear to have bought into the southern claim of slavery's paternalism and have also mischaracterized, as did the South, the overwhelmingly agrarian North as urban and industrial. In these positions the British followed closely the South's defense of slavery as well as its antebellum critique of northern society. More significantly, while emancipation was clearly not the initial goal of the Union's war effort, its adoption as the North's objective in the midst of the conflict was not so far removed from the war's original motive force—fear of the Slave Power's threat to the Union. The issuance of the proclamation should, therefore, not have been a shock to the British. But because in their early assessment of sectionalism the British focused on northern racism and the North's lack of support for abolition, they missed the broad northern discomfort with slavery and the strong northern consensus against slavery expansion. These northern positions made the transition to a war against slavery possible and even relatively easy for Lincoln to engineer. Why the "British Mind" accepted these pre-war misconceptions of American sectionalism and why it continued to be dominated by them is the subject for another study, one that is given greater urgency by O'Connor's important work.

Stephen Maizlish is Associate Professor of History at the University of Texas—Arlington. He is the author of A Strife of Tongues: The Compromise of 1850 and the Ideological Foundations of the American Civil War (2018) and is currently working on a book titled: "Slavery Expansion: The History of an Idea, 1787-1861."