

### Ambivalent Nation: How Britain Imagined the American Civil War

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## Review

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**Dubrulle, Hugh.** *Ambivalent Nation: How Britain Imagined the American Civil War*. Louisiana State University Press, \$49.95 ISBN 978080716880

In *Ambivalent Nation: How Britain Imagined the American Civil War* Hugh Dubrulle makes a valuable contribution to the body of scholarship that seeks to expand the temporal and geographical frame that scholars employ when examining the American Civil War. Through an analysis of the way that Britons discussed topics including American politics, race, nationalism and the military during the antebellum, Dubrulle reconstructs popular attitudes on the eve of the conflict. He then highlights the areas of continuity with British Civil War discourse. By treating British responses to the Civil War as part of an on-going conversation, Dubrulle emphasizes the 'passionate ambivalence' that characterized popular attitudes towards the conflict. Furthermore, he offers a valuable codicil by suggesting that such an analysis public discourse also enriches our understanding of the Palmerston administration's diplomatic approach in which 'sentiment and policy' seemed so at odds.

Dubrulle places on emphasis on viewing the United States through a postcolonial lens and this approach pays dividends. It allows him to tease apart the different ideological strands that made up the Anglo-American connection in this period. Dubrulle's introductory vignette (focused on a hoax letter to the London *Times* in 1856 regarding 'railways and revolvers in Georgia') is indicative of the value of such an approach and suggests that it has the potential to further disrupt our assumptions about the Anglo-American relationship. Crucially, the post-colonial lens helps to shed light on the contradictions that emerged when Britons tried to define American national character.

Notwithstanding the value of Dubrulle's postcolonial approach, it would have been good to see some engagement with Sam W. Haynes' *Unfinished Revolution: The Early American Republic in a British World*. Although Haynes is more concerned with the American side of the equation, both texts set out to explore the 'postcolonial predicament' in

antebellum Anglo-American relations.<sup>1</sup> As a result, an explicit discussion of Haynes' work on public responses to the key incidents of the period might have added further layers to Dubrulle's analysis.

While Dubrulle's overall approach is impressive, there are aspects of his text that deserve particular commendation. His treatment of some of the more well-known incidents and figures in the history of Anglo-American Civil War relations feels remarkably fresh. Dubrulle's discussion of William Howard Russell (the London *Times* war correspondent) manages to be both concise and compelling. The same can be said for his analysis of William E. Gladstone's 1862 Newcastle speech. In addition, the work which has been undertaken to trace Civil War communication networks deserves immense credit. Despite being a relatively brief interlude within the text, it feels as though this overview has the potential to inspire a future generation of scholars to delve into the personal connections that Dubrulle has identified.

Although Dubrulle's work has very few weaknesses, some claims may have benefited from the further elucidation of key concepts. The terms 'middle class' and 'British radicalism' are used without robust definitions or an analysis of how their meaning might have changed across the period. Furthermore, while Dubrulle is correct to recognize that Henry Hotze's pro-Confederate newspaper the *Index* failed to secure a large circulation, such a comment should probably include the proviso that Hotze explicitly stated that he never intended to reach a mass audience. Seen within the broader contribution that the work makes to the field, however, these quibbles are minor and do nothing to detract from Dubrulle's exceptional scholarship and compelling conclusions.

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<sup>1</sup> Sam W. Haynes, *Unfinished Revolution: The Early Republic in a British World* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010) p16.