

Merseyside Connections with the American Civil War

by John Townley, 1990

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Commissioned by the Wirral Tourist Board in support of preserving the Cammell-Laird shipyard dock in which the historic vessel CSS Alabama was built.

It has become common knowledge recently that Liverpool, Lancashire, the Wirral and most of what is now known as the Merseyside area in Northern England had profound political, emotional and financial connections and sympathies with the Confederate States of America during the American Civil War (1861-65). It has been quoted that at one time "more Confederate flags fluttered above Liverpool than over Richmond" (the Confederate capital in Virginia). Hundreds of blockade runners and naval cruisers were built in Merseyside for the benefit of the Southern Cause and to help keep open the lifeline of cotton upon which both the South and the Lancashire mill workers depended. It has been the traditional wisdom that the economic ties were the only reason for the Merseyside area supporting the south, but there is much that lies deeper, much that still very much ties the spirit of the area to the culture of the South, undercurrents that surged to the surface during the four years of the great American conflict. These are the sinews of friendship and kinship that have abided and may yet flourish again.

The real reasons for Merseyside's close ties with the South during the Civil War, like the reasons for the Civil War itself, have been largely shrouded in an obscurity that closed over all Southern sympathy engendered by histories written by the victors and those who wished to be allied with the winning side. Indeed, many of the issues surrounding the conflict were so hot and bitterly controversial that even today they are papered over with pat explanations and knee-jerk political aphorisms that do little to serve the cause of truth or educate future generations in ways to avoid getting into such conflicts again. In fact, the American Civil War may itself have been the continuation of a previous conflict that was denied resolution by these very forms of social censorship. and perhaps it might have been avoided had those aware of it been able to speak and be heard.

To get an understanding of how Merseyside became so involved in the American conflict, it is necessary to turn to America and trace the roots of the Civil War -- what people have said it was about then and now, and perhaps what it really was about at a deeper level. Most textbooks written over the last hundred years will give one or more common reasons for the war in about this order of importance:

It was about:

1. Slavery
2. A political/economic power struggle between North and South
3. States' rights vs. national unity
4. Conflict between two cultures unlike in style

Curiously, there is near-unanimity among previous historians that the war was somehow inevitable and that despite its tragedies America (and the world at large) was a better, more progressive place because of it. Almost never is it ever seriously suggested that it was a

colossal error or that mankind has been far worse off because the South was not simply allowed to peacefully secede and become a separate nation. The inevitable and positive results attributed to this bloody affair generally are the ending of slavery and the uniting of America as a powerful force for world democracy and social technology.

It might be said, in fact, that to disagree with this stance would make one seem racist and unpatriotic -- exactly the effect history written by the victors is supposed to have, the continuing intimidation of the conquered and the obscuration of views that might let in another version of the truth. It is very much the style of mainstream history writing to defend the rightness of what has gone before because it justifies the status quo and thus helps maintain it, giving it not only the power of law and order but of morality and truth. Extreme examples of writing history to support the political establishment may be found recently in histories written by Nazis, Stalinists, and Maoists, and World War II Western propagandists. These are obviously one-sided, but to a lesser extent such self-serving historicism is suffused throughout every culture and is often more damaging because it is more insidious and harder to spot.

But if one is to understand the part the people of Merseyside played in the American Civil War, some serious reevaluation of traditional historical interpretation is absolutely essential, as without it the plain facts just don't make sense. For instance, how could a people who totally rejected slavery have so totally embraced a culture that practiced it? Why were Lincoln, the great "emancipator" and his fellow Northerners viewed with such utter hostility, distrust and contempt? Was something going on here politically, economically, or culturally that no one has bothered to investigate?

Before approaching these questions, it is a good idea to look a little more closely at the traditional causes for the Civil War given by most historians:

Slavery. From the beginning, the U.S. Constitution had permitted slavery, subject only to state laws governing it, and early on most of the slave trade was organized out of Boston in the North, as New Englanders were a seafaring culture that could handle the necessary logistics and maritime trading skills involved. As the 19th century progressed, however, slavery gradually died out in most of the Northern states, driven out by more competitive free labor (free wage earners work lots better than slaves) and by a general repugnance for the custom once it ceased to pay economic dividends. The U.S. and Britain outlawed the international slave trade in 1807, though already-owned slaves in British colonies remained unfree until the middle 1830's, and in the South until the Civil War. This extension of slavery was probably the result of the plantation system, where it was believed large colonies of slaves was still the optimum labor force. The freeing of the slaves in British colonies in the 1830's by the gradual process of apprenticeship and purchased manumission revealed that a slave labor force was not necessary or superior in running even plantation economies. In fact, it proved that the imported black labor force could be peacefully integrated into the economy by the gradual removal of slavery rather than by abruptly eliminating it and throwing an unready free labor force into a market unprepared to deal with them, as happened in the South later during Reconstruction.

The South was much slower to abandon slavery because of its highly agricultural economic base, and as the rest of the world continued to rid itself of the institution (the French in 1848, for instance), slave owners became increasingly self-conscious and even concocted racial theories that slavery was beneficial to white and black alike. Slaveholders comprised a mere three percent of the South's population, so it was their considerable wealth and not their meager philosophies which gave them power in defending the status quo. In fact, what attempts there were to actually spread the institution as new Western territories entered the union as states were failures. In the frontier societies, like the increasingly industrial Northern and European societies, slaves simply had no functional place. African slavery in the West was a 300-year experiment that was swiftly and inevitably coming to a close.

Although much fervor and hatred were stirred up over the issue of Southern slavery and the possibility of its spread or abolition, war was not declared because of it. Lincoln was not an abolitionist, though he personally opposed slavery, and in 1860 he was elected on the platform of continuing to allow slavery in those states that voted to retain it legally under the provisions of the Constitution. After the war was well underway, however, Lincoln saw in the abolition of slavery a method to help the Northern cause abroad where slavery was unpopular and to encourage slave insurrections in the South, so he issued the now-famous Emancipation Proclamation. This edict claimed to free the slaves in "the states in rebellion" but it left in slavery all those in Northern slave states such as Maryland and Delaware, where Lincoln had real authority to free them but did not wish to antagonize his slaveholding constituents. In Europe (and particularly in Merseyside) the Emancipation Proclamation was widely viewed as solely a propaganda move that exploited the conditions of the blacks and fomented racial violence in the interests of the Northern war effort. Not until after the war and Lincoln's death did the 13th Amendment to the Constitution actually end slavery in the United States.

The racial antagonism that was deliberately fostered by the North to aid its cause found its logical conclusion after the defeat of the South and its occupation by Northern troops and governors labelled "reconstruction." During this time, in an attempt to prove the doubted sincerity of slave liberation, northern governors made wholesale appointments of freed slaves to thousands of administrative posts and backed them up with the force of the army. Unfortunately, most of the former slaves were totally unprepared to govern, having little or no education or experience of any sort, and there ensued a period of desperate chaos and lawlessness that brought racial hatred and resentment in the South to an unprecedented level. From the point of view of an exterior conquering nation, this policy was no doubt a great success, as by putting the former slaves above the former masters with disastrous consequences, it sufficiently divided the South in a racial war against itself that precluded any possible rebirth of the Confederacy as a national entity. When Northern troops finally did pull out, white Southerners very quickly took back all political power and did all possible to see that it never left their hands again -- and Northern politicians did little or nothing to oppose it. Quite far from the integration of skills and socialization that took place in the British colonies, the sudden, violent end of slavery in the U.S. polarized the races and effectively prevented blacks from attaining the education or the place in the labor market that was available in more gradual transitions, a uniquely American legacy not even addressed until the freedom marches of the 1960's.

Thus, the abolition of slavery may be seen as a result, and not necessarily a cause, of the American Civil War. Indeed, in hindsight it is easy to see that abolition would have eventually occurred by economic necessity and world political pressure without a war to spur it on, had the Confederacy persevered as a nation (in fact, Arkansas abolished slavery while still in the Confederacy before the war's end). In the heat of confrontations in America, it must have been much more difficult to see this, but it was evident to Europeans who had already been through it, most particularly to those in Northern England who frequently wrote about it and believed that, "We regard slavery as repugnant alike to the reason and the sentiments of the present age; we believe it to be highly prejudicial to the interests of the South; we deprecate the system and desire its removal not in passion or vindictiveness, but by calm and direct provisions, so that the momentous change in the condition of four millions of people may not lead to anarchy and ruin, but result in benefit to all classes of the community. We have no faith in the slaughtering of white men as means of benefiting those of another colour. We hold that the independence of the South is the true and sure means of extinguishing slavery." (from a contemporary Manchester paper).

No one was listening to these voices of reason on the other side of the pond, and slavery in nearly as oppressive a form but under the technical name of freedom was to be the sentence of blacks for another hundred years as a result. But if this tragic mishandling of the abolition of slavery to serve the ends of warring parties was just the result of the Civil War, what then were its real causes?

Political and economic struggle. In America in recent years, blaming the Civil War on slavery has rather fallen out of favor in lieu of a political/economic view, to wit that the growing radical urban technocracy of the North came in conflict with the traditional conservative agrarian Southern establishment and that it was the wave of the future that the North would dominate the national situation. This is probably because historical philosophy has shifted its emphasis from moral to economic/political interpretation everywhere in the light of Marx, the struggles of socialism vs. capitalism, and the like. Certainly there can be no doubt that the North was rapidly becoming an industrialized nation while the South was lagging far behind in this respect. But perhaps "behind" is not the entirely appropriate word. The North was forced by necessity and geography to lean far more heavily on trade and manufacture, lacking the much greater base for traditional agricultural production of the South.

But simply to admit this fact in no way implies that there must be a war over the differences. Industrial nations have traded peacefully with agrarian ones both before and since the Civil War without having to go to war over it. Economically, the South doubtless felt it was being exploited by unfair tariff and trade regulations that gave too much profit to the North off Southern production. Such a situation may even have contributed greatly to the concept of secession as a lawful solution to make the two parts of the continent more equal trading partners with each other and with Europe. The threat of losing the South as a monopolized resource was certainly feared in the extreme by the ruling class of Northern businessmen and industrialists, and it was through their deliberate intercession and interference that last-minute peace attempts were scuttled in the days just preceding the outbreak of war. However, it would probably be stepping over the line of credibility to attribute to the entire Northern people such an overwhelming greed for Southern produce as to summarily subjugate them in the bloodiest

war that continent was ever to see. Economics played greatly in developing these two parts of the United States as trade adversaries, but unless you are in dire economic desperation (which neither was) you don't go into a war to the death with those you consider your own people over disagreements about tariffs.

States' rights and national unity. This, of course, brings up the question of whether North and South really did look upon each other as one people, and what the notion of a "nation" truly was at the time. From the time of the American War of Independence, the original colonies had looked on themselves as individual "states" which formed a confederation for the combined severing of ties with England and for mutual interest in general. Initially, the ties between these sovereign states were fairly loose and the central government more of a coordinating rather than a ruling body. The country itself was always referred to in the plural ("these United States") and not the singular noun used today. States' rights were primary, and federal authority was secondary, and as the greatest national income was from agriculture, the South generally held political sway, Virginia in particular.

But with the growth of industrialism and the powerfully-organized nation-state system in Europe at the beginning of the 19th century, the picture in America began to change. Slowly the national emphasis shifted from just wanting to be left alone to becoming a nation-state along the European line but with a special emphasis on greater individual democracy. Nation-states were aggressively expanding everywhere taking the British and French example, and that meant greater control internally and greater influence externally. Beginning with the "Monroe Doctrine" which asserted U.S. hegemony over the smaller lands in America, the concept of "Manifest Destiny" began to take shape, in which The United States spread its borders from coast to coast and became a great world power. By the 1850's some of these notions were becoming alarming to the Europeans -- particularly William H. Seward's (Sec. of State under Lincoln) contentions that the United States would soon rule Canada and Mexico!

This new spirit of federalism was a Northern phenomenon, as the South could tend its fields quite happily without getting involved elsewhere -- but of course there was no escaping it, and Southern states took increasing exception to the growing power and expansion of the federal government at the expense of states' rights and privileges. It became more and more clear as one culture faced the other during the 1840's and '50's that the two parts of the country had totally different ideas about how things should be run -- and the South found itself between a rock and a hard place because the explosive growth of the immigrant Northern population and the addition of Western states were putting the South in the voting minority for the first time since 1776. With disputes on economics, foreign policy, slavery, and dozens of other issues dividing the Southern states from the rest of the country, an increasing number of Southerners suggested opting out of the whole arrangement -- at the time of the adoption of the Constitution, individual states had retained for themselves all rights not directly granted to the federal government, and that included the right of secession. For irreconcilable differences -- in a word, divorce.

To the Southern mind-set, and to the European one, this seemed like a simple and not unreasonable solution. But to the North, it appeared to undermine the very foundation of what had come to be considered the essence of a nation -- its unified power and indivisibility. A

"nation" couldn't just stand around and mind its own business -- it had to go forth and conquer, to make its mark upon destiny, particularly promoting as it was the new idea of individual democracy. To allow the South to depart would make a laughing-stock of freedom and the democratic experiment and encourage tyrants everywhere to tighten their bonds on the people. This sounds very much like hyperbole now, but it was felt just like that at the time, and it really was something to die for, or kill your neighbor for. It was the one thing that Lincoln insisted the Civil War was all about -- preserving the union -- and it curiously is what gave him greatest fame and what has made historians look at the Civil War as something inevitable and good for all its tragedy. America the great nation was something that just "had to be" even though born out of the crucible of a terrible civil war. To say otherwise would be un-American -- indeed, un-Western and undemocratic. No wonder this view gets so much respect!

In similar situations today a North might not so easily get the vote of history for beating up on its South -- the ever more "unified" Germany or Spain of the 1930's or the Soviet moves of the 1950's and '60's have given gratuitous unification a bad name lately -- and the most recent moves in Europe suggest that secession and loose federation may indeed be a legitimate and peaceful approach. Certainly the majority of Southern sympathizers in Merseyside saw it that way during the Civil War -- the South was lionized for fighting for peace and independence against a greedy, conquering North. In the British press the South was repeatedly characterized as a willowy "Sister Caroline" fending off the brutish advances of the North's "Brother Jonathan." Perhaps in this respect, as in the slavery issue, the people of Northern England had a peculiar clarity and wisdom that becomes more evident with years.

The conflict of cultures. To have a serious war, particularly a long, drawn-out one, it is necessary for there to be intense hatred between the parties involved, not just intellectual issues that take flight when you see the person you just killed is your brother. In many cases in this war, brother literally did fight brother -- but were the peoples of the North and South really of the same blood, the same roots, the same culture and yet still capable of slaughtering each other wholesale face to face for four years?

As anyone can tell you even travelling in the South today, the answer is very much no. Northern and Southern culture are dramatically different and herein may lie the most important root causes of the war -- though most historians have only touch superficially on the subject. Historically, Southerners have been labeled "Cavaliers," "gentry," "aristocrats," as opposed to the more plebian, puritan and egalitarian Northerners. Southern hospitality vs. New England chill. Gentleman farmers vs. ruthless Yankee traders. Pretty superficial cultural analysis, but where do you start when trying to distinguish between two radically different cultures?

Recently, Grady McWhiney, Lyndon Baines Johnson Professor of American History at Texas Christian University, has written a landmark book and study that may throw a whole new light on the subject. Entitled "Cracker Culture," it details the settling of the South and the North from the earliest colonial times up to the Civil War and reveals some fascinating statistics. Far and away the majority of those who settled the American South were from, the North of England and from the Celtic fringes of Scotland and Ireland. Similarly, the American North was populated primarily by immigrants from the South of England, in particular East Anglia. He finds that the legendary character traits and differences between Southerners and

Northerners in the U.S. astonishingly parallel those that set off the Celts and the North from Southern English culture. His data is encyclopedic, and his excerpts of letters from travelers in the South and in Celtic regions mimic each other with incisiveness and sometime hilarity.

Celts are described by the English as:

Lazy, rude, slothful, indolent, dilatory, fierce, savage, wild, unruly, thieving, profane, whoring, dancing, disorderly, and whiskey-soaked.

Southerners are described by the Northerners as:

Superstitious, dirty, slovenly, poor as rats, proud as dons, lazy, immoral, uncivilized, quarreling, fighting, drinking, uncouth, gamblers, idle, wanton, violent, profane, wicked, scurrilous, and licentious.

English are described by the Celts as:

Stodgy, manipulative, money-grubbing, stingy, dull, unctious, uncaring, condescending, plodding, unfriendly, and selfish.

Yankees are described by Southerners as:

Prudish, cold, unfriendly, hypocritical, dishonest, thieving, sneaky, dishonorable, intolerant, dogmatic, prejudiced, greedy, uppity, hostile, malign, stuck-up, and avaricious.

One can hardly wonder that these two cultures have been more or less at each others' throats since well before the Normandy invasion!

There are also more complimentary keywords that describe the Celt/Southern and English/Yankee cultures which the cultures more often used to describe themselves, such as musical, fun-loving, hospitable, proud, easygoing for the former and prudent, thrifty, neat, inventive, resourceful, religious for the latter. Clearly the cultural differences are well-defined, in a fashion which we today would label process-oriented vs. object-oriented. One lives for the moment and for the life it gives, the other for the future and the wealth it may deliver. Both are necessary to live a happy life, but by themselves in extreme they are quite antithetical and when they characterize whole cultures that come into contact, strife is bound to occur as it has for centuries in Britain it is likely the two cultures brought these same gut level issues of character and conflict with them to the New World where it was only a matter of time until another terrible conflict would ensue from it.

Perhaps, in their support for the South during the Civil War, Merseysiders knew at a gut level who and what they were supporting -- themselves in another guise. Perhaps when they heard Lincoln and the North wax on about the desirability of "union" they already knew that code word -- it meant conquest. But could they express it? Not without being anti-British, just as sure as supporting the Confederacy in a historical context has been considered anti-American or anti-black.

If Merseyside had had its way, certainly the Confederacy would have remained an independent nation. The question arises, would the world really have been better off? Were the views of the people of Northern England really seriously more detached and enlightened than

their more Union-supporting cousins to the South? How would the world have been changed with two independent American nations, North and South? Some speculation...

First, would the fears of a disastrous end to democracy as a result of a splitting of the "great American experiment" have been justified? Decidedly, no. England was already expanding its franchise to match America's and moving well ahead of it with its social programs. So were other European governments. Popular government was a natural, if sometimes rocky, development of technology and expanded education in the West and was in the nature of things, just as was the end of slavery. Indeed, it may well be the sin of pride and simple short-sightedness to believe that the actions of any one individual or country determine the course of history.

Would the United States have further broken up with the West becoming a third country? Perhaps, but not likely. The West lived off the North's technology and didn't have the established trade setup with Europe that the South did. It was easier to deal with the North, and culturally there was much less difference. Probably the North (and with it the Western Territories) would have quickly made over the Constitution in such a way that secession could not happen again and have grown to become a very powerful industrial nation, more powerful than the South because of its greater resources and cultural inclinations. Perhaps the two countries would have become reunited again, had they been able to part as friends.

Would a "weakened" Western power structure have meant disaster later on when the Allies faced the likes of Adolf Hitler? Perhaps had the Western power structure not been so strong in World War I, there never would have been a second conflict to arise from the humiliations of the first. But we are stretching here, too many years, too many changes -- would an even more unified American nation (if the U.S. had taken over Canada and Mexico, a la Seward) made things any better? It probably never could have happened to begin with.

We can say with relative certainty that had the South been allowed to go her way, 600,000 American lives would have been saved and a hundred and twenty-five years of a unique kind of racial oppression and hatred subsequent to it might have been prevented.

Of course, much of what we see through the clarity of hindsight we cannot reasonably expect the participants at the time to have seen. The certainty of the growth of popular government or the demise of slavery were not widely recognized at the time, as the theories of history that support these views had not been fully formulated. The future looked very uncertain ahead to many -- and most didn't believe a war of secession would really last, on either side. It just snowballed into a horrible, inescapable disaster. The view of the roads of destiny was murky indeed from the American point of view, and everyone just did what they could.

But at the edges of such all-consuming abysses in history, there are often pools of stillness and clarity that see how things really are when all others are losing their heads. Merseyside appears to have been such a place during that time -- the people of Northern England saw what could and should have been done and said so -- and put out their hands to the

South in support of it. At the time, no one else was listening. Let us hope they are listening now...