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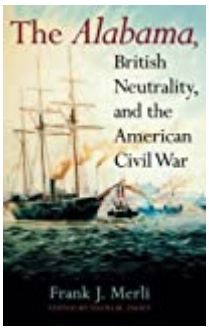

Frank J. Merli. *The Alabama, British Neutrality, and the American Civil War.* Fahey. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004. xx + 223 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34473-1.

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Published on H-CivWar (November, 2006)

What Might Have Been

Frank J. Merli spent his academic career studying British Neutrality during the American Civil War. He was best known for his 1970 work *Great Britain and the Confederate Navy, 1861-1865*, which was recently reprinted by Indiana University Press. This is still an important work for understanding the failure of Confederate diplomacy during the war. Although this was his only monograph, he did publish numerous essays and reviews, many concentrating on the career of the Confederate raider *Alabama*. Probably no one knew the sources in Britain better. Unfortunately for historians, Merli passed away in 2000.

Merli was working on four books at the time of his death. Among these was a volume on the *Alabama* and another that would dramatically revise the thesis he presented in his 1970 work. But, as David Fahey notes in his introduction, Merli was a perfectionist, constantly writing and re-writing, all in longhand, as he added more and more from his examination of archives throughout Britain. In this book, Fahey has gathered, combined, and edited Merli's work to present seven chapters that try to show the direction of his research. This was not a simple task, as Fahey had to combine various drafts, notes, and chapters, all written out in longhand by Merli, but he has succeeded admirably.

The chapters loosely center around the British Foreign Office and the cruise of the *Alabama*. There are three themes that echo throughout the book. First is a vigorous critique of the pioneering work of E. D. Adams and Frank L. Owsley.[1] Merli felt that these authors were incorrect both factually and in their central interpretive framework. Second is his admiration for James D. Bulloch, the Confederacy's chief of foreign vessel procurement. Third is Merliâs correction of the chronology behind the escape of the *Alabama*.

The first chapter will be of most interest to generalists. It is a very useful summary of the international dimensions of the Civil War based primarily on the relations between the Confederacy and Great Britain. Merli argued that one of the biggest blunders of the Confederacy was their failure to understand diplomacy. He was especially critical of the failure of Jefferson Davis and his

secretary of states to grasp the significance of foreign affairs because they were unable to free themselves from the myth of King Cotton. As Merli put it, Davis "paid more attention to the quality of the stationary than to the cultivation of a broad base of mutual interests between the Confederacy and the great naval powers of Europe" (p. 12). The only positive accomplishment by the Richmond government was the appointment of James Bulloch as purchasing agent. Merli's admiration of Bulloch shines through in each chapter of the book.

Merli saw that the best hope for the Confederacy to win independence was through an Anglo-American war. The first chapter examines the three occasions that might have led to such a conflict: the *Trent* affair of late 1861 and early 1862, the "mediation maneuvers" in the fall of 1862, and the Laird rams controversy of late 1863. Of these three events, Merli argued that the first two were the most important, and he highlighted the role played by Lord Russell, the British foreign secretary. He credited Russell, with an assist from Prince Albert, with guiding the diplomatic response that defused the *Trent* affair. But, ironically, he argued that through the mediation maneuvers Russell almost single-handedly brought Britain into war against the United States. Merli argues that without help from either of the belligerents, "the government of Queen Victoria, in the fall of 1862, deliberately and unemotionally came to the brink of intervening in the war" (p. 19). The beginnings of a cotton shortage, new leadership in the French foreign ministry, and Robert E. Lee's success in Maryland convinced Russell now was the time to do something to stop the carnage. But timing was everything, and Lee's defeat at Antietam led to the loss of support from the Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston, for the mediation effort. The first chapter also lays out Merli's criticism of Adams and Owsley's methods for analyzing the foreign dimension of the Civil War.

The second chapter was originally planned to be the introduction to the book Merli was writing on the *Alabama*. It serves as an introduction to the next four chapters that all revolve around the famous commerce raider. Built by Laird in Liverpool, the famous Hull "290," the ship was commissioned into the Confederate Navy in the Azores. Under the command of Raphael Semmes, the *Alabama* sailed half way around the world, sunk a Union warship and captured over sixty other prizes worth $6,000,000 before being sunk herself by the USS *Kersarge* off Cherbourg. This chapter also lays out Merli's objectives for writing about the *Alabama*.

The third chapter is the longest and most interesting to both diplomatic and naval historians. Entitled "The Law of the *Alabama*," it focuses not on the law, but on the process of the law–how the papers and opinions moved from the U.S. Embassy to the various departments of the British government. Here, he is concerned with establishing an exact chronology of how the British responded to the Union complaints leading to the escape of the cruiser from Liverpool. Merli convincingly shows that Adams, Owsley and others are incorrect in arguing that Bulloch was warned by a British official that the government was going to seize the ship, which allowed the *Alabama* to escape to sea. American complaints were answered by the British with reasonable efficiency and much of the delay was due to the tardiness of the Americans. Ultimately, Merli argues that the Confederates were simply lucky. At the crucial moment in the process, the *Alabama* dossier disappeared for nearly a week. The reason for this was not conspiracy, but a human tragedy. The dossier was sent to the chief law officer of the Crown, Sir John Harding, at the exact time he was incapacitated by mental illness, which his wife was trying to hide. By the time the dossier was recovered, it was too late; the *Alabama* had left port just a few hours later.

Having established the proper chronology of events, chapter 4, a combination of two manuscripts, is an attack on Adams and, to a lesser extent, Owsley. Merli explains why he believes these authors were led astray and defends Palmerston and Russell's handling of the affair. He believes that there is no credible evidence to the oft-repeated story that a clerk in the Foreign Office sent a telegraph to Bulloch telling him to get the *Alabama* to sea.

The fifth chapter is simply an account of the *Alabama*'s escape penned several years later by Mathew Butcher, the British captain who commanded the ship out of Liverpool to the Azores, where it was commissioned into the Confederate Navy. Merli introduces the account, which he edited with Renata Eley Long. Although this memoir had been published in a Liverpool journal in the 1980s, the current version is fully annotated and documented.

The sixth and last chapter dealing with the *Alabama* looks at Semmes and the *Alabama*'s final battle off Cherbourg. Again, Merli tries to establish the chronology of the events leading to the battle. Semmes's motives, both in 1864 and again in his 1868 memoirs, are examined. Merli wondered why Semmes described the battle in only four pages of an eight-hundred-page mem-

oir. He concludes that Semmes's actions, including the scorn the *Alabama's* captain heaped on the sympathetic account written by the British novelist and poet George Meredith, was an example of the inability of Southerners to understand Europe, which, in turn, was symbolic of the diplomatic failure to win European support for the Confederacy.

The book's final chapter deals with one of the war's lesser know events–the effort of the Confederate government to purchase an entire fleet of warships that the British had originally sold to China. In 1861 China was being torn apart by the Taiping Rebellion and the government in Peking was looking to purchase a modern steam fleet to protect the coast and battle pirates. Known as the Lay-Osborne Flotilla, the ships sailed for China in 1863, but when they arrived in Chinese waters, crossed signals and mangled communications led to the Chinese government's refusal to accept the ships. The British then put the eight modern steam cruisers up for sale. This attracted the attention of Bulloch, who tried to purchase what Merli calls the "Confederacy's Chinese Fleet." The focus of the chapter concerns how the Foreign Office dealt with the Lay-Osborne Flotilla and the question of neutrality during a civil war. Although the situations were similar, there were some key differences between the American Civil War and the Chinese Taiping rebellion. Unlike the Confederacy, the Taiping were never granted belligerency status and the Chinese government in Beijing, an officially recognized government, was trying to buy the ships. But in both cases, the British government had to deal with questions of neutrality. Merli argues that the British answered these questions very differently for the Chinese than they did for the United States.

Alabama, British Neutrality, and the American Civil War is ultimately both an intriguing and frustrating book. Merli's depth of understanding of the British Foreign Office gives the reader real, and for the first time, an accurate chronology and information about the *Alabama* affair. He presents a new interpretation of British foreign policy that suggests Her Majesty's Government was closer to going to war with the United States in 1862 than is generally believed today. But the book is also frustrating. It whets the appetite for more and makes one wonder what might have been if Merli had been able to finish his four incomplete books and flesh out the arguments presented in the present volume.

Note

[1]. Ephraim Douglass Adams, *Great Britain and the American Civil War*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Green, 1925); and Frank Lawrence Owsley, *King Cotton Diplomacy: Foreign Relations of the Confederate States of America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931).