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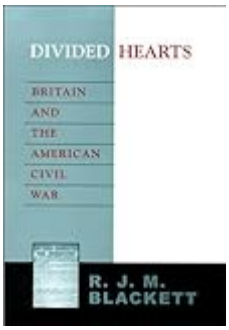

R. J. M. Blackett. *Divided Hearts: Britain and the American Civil War.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001. xiii + 273 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2595-3.

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Britons Debate America's Civil War

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R. J. M. Blackett's *Divided Hearts: Britain and the American Civil War* reminds Americanists that the war had impacts that reverberated far beyond the disunited nation's borders. By the 1860s, the United States had become not just one of the world's leading economies but a much-debated exemplar of the perils and possibilities of political democracy–"the last best hope" of Lincoln and so many others. Blackett is Moores Professor of History and African American Studies at the University of Houston, and his previous scholarly work has sought to place reform, and especially abolitionism, in an Atlantic context.

In *Divided Hearts*, Blackett attempts to delineate the varying, conflicting, and changing range of British attitudes toward the Union and the Confederacy and their war, with much focus inevitably on the vexed (for Britons seemingly as much as white Americans) questions surrounding human slavery and the rise of racism in the century of emancipation. Blackett examines what British commentators–up and down the social scale, Establishment and Dissenter and nonbeliever, and of every conceivable political hue–wrote and said about the travails of the American nation, and how their quarrels reflected and shaped political discourse and political events in Britain during the war and in the years after 1865. Blackett believes that discourse about America was more crucial in–and therefore presumably should be more revelatory about–British political and social life than contemporary discussions about events in Italy, Poland, Hungary, or elsewhere. Given his previous scholarly interest in abolitionism in Britain, Blackett is particularly interested in how Britain's antislavery workers and supporters responded to the war.

Having said what Blackett's book is about, it is necessary to state what it is not about. It is usually and rightly regarded as churlish to find fault with an author for writing the book he or she wrote rather than the one the critic wishes had been written. Even so, it is necessary to note in a review written for a list intended in the first instance to serve Americanists that *Divided Hearts* is a book written mainly for specialists in British political and social history and the history of Atlantic reform. This is not a full and complete history of British reflection on and in-

teraction with the Union and the Confederacy; there is, for example, very little on British policies and attitudes toward the Canadian colonies and virtually nothing regarding the *Trent* affair or French adventurism in Mexico. Those whose knowledge of the complexities of British political debate in the mid-nineteenth century has been formed by dimly remembered undergraduate courses in English or European history and an occasional dose of Dickens will find some parts of *Divided Hearts* to be tough sledding. Some of the nuances Blackett is exploring inevitably will escape those readers who are not already conversant with the details of the scholarly literature on politics and reform in British life and with at least some of the impressive range of his primary sources. The specialist in nineteenth-century American history looking for a general diplomatic or foreign affairs history of Anglo-American relations during a crucial period will want to continue to look elsewhere.[1] Something like *The American Civil War as a Problem in British Political and Social Life* or even *The American Civil War as a Problem in British Abolitionism* (the echoing of David Brion Davis is deliberate) might have been more accurate, or at least more informative, subtitles.

Blackett recognizes–and demonstrates with his impressive research in an array of relevant sources–that "the complexity and subtlety of reactions to the war are almost staggering" (p. 35). While he begins by restating and generally supporting the traditional class-based view about who in Britain supported whom in the American Civil War, Blackett's project goes beyond a restatement of views traditional in scholarly and other discourse on both sides of the Atlantic since the 1860s. Rather than merely defending old pieties, he seeks to demonstrate their truthfulness by an assiduous mining of sources, including contemporary pamphlets and especially writings in a vast variety of British newspapers and other periodicals.

Stripped of the complexities that Blackett so painstakingly analyzes, this view holds that more conservative–and Conservative–members of British society, drawn mostly from the aristocracy and the upper reaches of the middle classes, tended to be supporters of the Confederacy in the American conflict and scornful of the possibilities of liberalism or democracy at home. Many of the spokespeople for this group accepted and publicized the Southern apology for slavery as the basis of a properly hierarchical society. Those in the middle–Liberals whose spokespeople often were Dissenting ministers or members of the growing professional groups–tended to support the Union, but held and displayed a variety of views on race, slavery, and democracy. Working class spokespeople tended to abhor slavery as another system of human exploitation, and they for the most part stood firm to these beliefs even during the Cotton Famine and other war-related economic dislocations. Less certain in the views of some revisionists, notably Mary Ellison, was the loyalty of workers (as opposed to their spokespeople) to the antislavery cause, particularly and not surprisingly among those in the textile industry in Lancashire and Cheshire.

Ultimately, after a great deal of twisting and turning that in part represents the difficulties of the question and in part his style of literary presentation, Blackett decides that even in these counties hardest hit by the war and the Cotton Famine, pro-Union forces prevailed in carrying public opinion among the mill workers. Events in the war's early months–for example, the Morrill tariffs and the *Trent* affair–tended to inflame, at least temporarily, nationalist and often anti-Union passions at all levels of the social scale, including the lower reaches. The Emancipation Proclamation sparked renewed debate about slavery, race, servile insurrection, and the possibilities and perils of whites and blacks living together in freedom, but ultimately helped to energize the Union cause in Britain at least as much as in America.

Blackett acknowledges that this picture was complicated–not overturned but complicated–by the rise of racism and racial antipathy throughout British (and European and North American) society, including even among many of the traditional white supporters of abolition and reform. By the 1860s, many of those British traditionally friendly to blacks and black aspirations on either side of the Atlantic were increasingly pessimistic about black capabilities, including in the United States. Antislavery Britons at mid-century, perhaps disillusioned with some of the perceived results of British and other emancipations and coming under the influence of the increasingly racialist social thought of the nineteenth century, seen to have suffered a decline in energy.

The generalized rise in racial denigration variously reinforced and cut across the largely class-based attitudes about America and slavery in British life during the war years and thereafter. Here, Blackett momentarily moves beyond the evidence of the published written word on this point, and ventures into a discussion of some of the recent scholarly analyses of blackface minstrelsy in Britain, an entertainment form of growing popularity which he argues reinforced and implanted derogatory racial stereotypes among working-class men, helping in

some cases to undermine their full support for the Union and emancipation. He may well be correct on this point–and on a trans-Atlantic basis–but this scholarly excursion mainly reminds historians how little most nonspecialists know about the parameters of popular entertainment in Britain and America in the middle part of the nineteenth century, and how poorly that knowledge has been integrated into more generalized accounts. Blackett also makes a couple of mentions of singing war-related songs–sometimes planned by the organizers and sometimes instigated by hecklers–at public meetings (e. g., at p. 200), but only in an effort to impart general atmospherics.

As an historian of the English-speaking abolitionist movement on both sides of the Atlantic, Blackett is pained to acknowledge the rise of racism among some British abolitionists. This discontinuity is the primary meaning of the divided heart imagery of Blackett's main title. He wonders "to what extent did this divided heart reflect a loss of British abolitionist traditions; to what extent would a country that had freed its own slaves lend its support to the perpetuation of the institution elsewhere?" (p. 47) His answer to the question that serves as the title of his second chapter, "Have We Departed from the Faith of Our Fathers?" is, put simply, "no, not very much." Blackett believes that "while British abolitionist sentiment had lost some of its bite with the passage of time and the death of many of those who had promoted the cause of West Indian slaves, there existed a residue, a tradition, that could be called upon in times of need. Abolition still had currency" (p. 88).

This saving remnant of British abolitionism, Blackett argues, was particularly energized by Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, a development that led even abolitionists with strong pacifist beliefs to some support of the Union war effort. The transformation of Union war aims beyond a war to preserve the Union into a war to end the system of slavery which supported the social system that threatened the Union is a familiar theme in recent Civil War historiography. However, Blackett may not draw comfort from the usual corollary that the change hardly reflected a softening of white views of blacks and the desirability of black freedom. Also, Blackett does not adequately account for the impact that the growing post-Proclamation military successes of the Union war effort must have had on British opinion, including that of his abolitionist residue. It's a little crude and probably unfair to point out that people generally prefer to back winners, but Union victory was increasingly foreseeable after the start of 1863 than before.

Divided Hearts is based on extensive research in a variety of sources–the author consulted runs of almost 125 newspapers from throughout the country–and nowhere is this more apparent than in Blackett's devotion to exhaustively analyzing the pamphlets, memorials, newspaper editorials and articles, addresses, petitions, accounts of public meetings, pieces of visual propaganda, and so forth written, distributed, and argued about by various supporters of the Union or Confederate causes. Blackett also attempts to draw lessons by examining the biographical information that can be recovered about leaders and members of a variety of pro-Union or pro-Confederate organizations in Britain, ranging from the tiny and the ephemeral to the better-known Union and Emancipation Society and the London Emancipation Society and the Southern Independence Association.

Among the topics Blackett illuminates are the role of the movement to support free-labor systems by boycotting slave products in forming and informing antislavery opinion at the start of the war; the efforts of Confederate propagandists, agents, and diplomats; and, perhaps of particular interest to Americanists, the role of African Americans resident or traveling in Britain in promoting the Union cause. Among the dozens of individuals discussed are such interesting characters as James Spence ("One cannot imagine a Confederate movement in Britain without Spence" [p. 140]), John Cairnes (Spence's opponent in a pamphlet war), and the fugitive American slave and minister J. Sella Martin.

While the Confederates–thanks to the efforts of Spence and others–took an early lead in the propaganda war in British society, pro-Union forces were ultimately able to draw upon the organizational, literary, and oratorical skills of many, especially including antislavery and abolitionist workers, to drown out pro-Southern voices. Blackett's accounts of how Union propagandists were able to manage public lectures and meetings to reinforce pro-Northern feeling is particularly illuminating in this regard.

Blackett's excursions into the power of visual propaganda in coalescing pro-Union opinion during the latter years of the war recognizes that not all of the possible sources for gauging opinions in Britain and elsewhere about the war are verbal. Aside from portraits of Stonewall Jackson (Blackett's research suggests that Jackson had great popularity as a hero-martyr in Britain as well as in Virginia), Robert E. Lee, or Jefferson Davis, pro-Confederate iconography seems to have been nonexistent. Antislavery forces, with an iconographical

tradition dating back to the Wedgewood (eighteenth-century spelling) cameos of kneeling supplicant slaves and illustrations of tightly-packed slave ships (these images remain familiar today), were more successful in exploiting the possibilities of nonverbal communication. Especially effective were the widely distributed carte de visites of the scourged back of a slave named Gordon that had appeared originally in the American newsmagazine *Harper's Weekly*. The growing importance of the printed word as a force in nineteenth-century life is an undeniable commonplace, but historians of the Civil War as it was lived and experienced have also to remember that the nineteenth-century was a century of mass-produced and distributed images that should serve as more than obligatory space-filling illustrations of books and articles.

Blackett's final chapter, exploring British reactions to the assassination of Lincoln, reads very much as an essay that could have been separated from the main body of the book. Examining what Britons wrote and said about the events of 1865, Blackett is able to show that the end of the war in favor of the Union, Lincoln's developing image as a man of humble origins, and the horror elicited by the murder, combined to make a martyr with appeal beyond the most pro-Union or antislavery Britons. This apotheosis of Lincoln was not uncontested, particularly after the first weeks and months following his murder, but Abraham Lincoln proved a more appealing martyr for most Britons than had John Brown, and the late President provided a ready-made point of reference for those in post-Civil War Britain interested in expanding political rights and other reform causes. This part of Blackett's work deserves a much larger audience than it is likely to get buried at the end of a specialist monograph.

In sum, Blackett believes that Britons of almost all types were "very knowledgeable about America and generally partial to the cause of union and emancipation," but, especially in the first year of the conflict had to be reminded and even "persuaded that its interest lay in maintaining the union of American states" (p. 212). Eventually, almost all except the most conservative got behind the Union war effort. "All the indications are, however, that even in Lancashire, where Spence and his coworkers had hoped to exploit the crisis to rally support for the Confederacy, the friends of the Union carried the day" (p. 212), particularly in the wake of the Emancipation Proclamation.

While he does an excellent job of mining the nuances of controversy from his sources, not all of Blackett's readers will be totally happy with his decision to keep his focus largely in the solipsism of public debate as revealed in printed sources. Was it only, or even mainly, the Emancipation Proclamation that solidified so much British public opinion behind the Union? What effect did these debates have on British government policies toward the United States and the war? What impact did debates and events in Britain have on Union and Confederate military and political leaders? These are some of questions raised by Blackett's analysis that other scholars may wish to continue to pursue.

As implied by the price, this is an academic monograph aimed at an audience of a small group of scholarly specialists and supposedly deep-pocketed academic libraries. The book's illustrations are predictable, split between portraits of some of the major participants in the debates Blackett chronicles and reproductions of some of the propaganda images he discusses. The index is adequate and the bibliography full and informative. While Louisiana State University Press is to be congratulated for placing notes at the foot of the page, my copy of the book has a serious and distracting production error involving the running titles of the chapters at the top of the odd-numbered pages.

Some readers may find Blackett's literary style to be ultimately wearying. Detail is piled upon detail, with summary and other authorial guidance provided perhaps too rarely. Blackett's book does exactly what he wants it to do, by providing an exhaustive and meticulous exploration of British public debates about the war, focusing particularly upon abolitionist contributions to those debates. Even so, Americanists are warned that some parts of *Divided Hearts* may not be for the faint-hearted among them.

Note

[1]. Among standard works on American-British interaction during the war years are Ephraim Douglass Adams, *Great Britain and the American Civil War* (London and New York: Longman's, Green, 1925); Eugene Berwanger, *The British Foreign Service and the American Civil War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997); Mary Ellison, *Support for Secession: Lancashire and the American Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), a work with which Blackett has direct disagreements; Philip S. Foner, *British Labor and the American Civil War* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1981); Howard Jones, *Abraham Lincoln and a New Birth of Freedom: The Union and Slavery in the Diplomacy of the Civil War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999); idem, *Union in Peril: The Crisis over British Intervention*

in the Civil War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Robert E. May, ed., *The Union, the Confederacy, and the Atlantic Rim* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1995), which contains an article by Blackett on African Americans in Britain; Frank L. Owsley, *King Cotton Diplomacy: Foreign Relations of the Confederate States of America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931); Gordon H. Warren, *Fountain of Discontent: The Trent Affair and the Freedom of the Seas* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1981); and Robin W. Winks, *Canada and the United States: The Civil War Years* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1960).