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An Englishman's plea for French intervention

By Charles Priestley

One of the more curious examples of Confederate propaganda in Europe is a pamphlet of 30 pages entitled *La France et les Etats Confédérés* ("France and the Confederate States"). Published in February 1865, it was the work of an Englishman named John Welsford Cowell, who is described on the title page as "*agent et représentant, muni de pleins pouvoirs, de la Banque d'Angleterre aux Etats-Unis dans les années 1837, 1838 et 1839*" ("agent and representative, with full powers, of the Bank of England in the United States in the years 1837, 1838 and 1839"). It is of interest chiefly because its English author, despairing of any such action on the part of his own country, makes a sustained and, indeed, passionate plea for France to intervene on the side of the Confederacy.

John Welsford Cowell was born on 30 March 1796, the son of John Cowell of Bedford Square, London, and was educated at Eton and (like Beresford Hope) at Trinity College, Cambridge, from which he graduated in 1818. He had been admitted to Lincoln's Inn in 1815, but appears to have found the law less appealing than the world of economics.¹ He tells us that he helped David Ricardo and James Mill (father of the perhaps better-known John Stuart Mill) to set up the Political Economy Club in 1821, and we know that he served both on the Poor Law Commission and later, in 1833, on the Factory Commission, which aimed at improving conditions for those employed in Britain's factories, particularly the children. As such, he must surely be the only Old Etonian mentioned by Marx in *Das Kapital*; in Chapter 20 (Chapter 22 in the first English edition), the bearded revolutionary quotes Cowell as saying, in a report on the spinning industry, that "in England wages are, in

¹ Eton College Archives; J.A. Venn: *Alumni Cantabrigienses*, Part II, Vol. II (Cambridge University Press, 1944).

effect, lower for the manufacturer than on the Continent, even though they may be higher for the worker.”² In this context, incidentally, it is interesting to note that the impulse for factory reform in England appears to have come mainly from Anglican Tories, while the largely Nonconformist factory-owners, fervent Abolitionists where America was concerned, seem to have been curiously reluctant to accept any suggestions for ameliorating the lot of their own workforce.

The Cambridge University lists describe Cowell simply as having been “in the Bank of England.”³ Curiously enough, the Archive of the Bank has no record of precisely when he joined and when he left its employ. We do know, however, that in November 1834, he was appointed Agent at the Bank’s Gloucester Branch, the previous Agent having proved unsatisfactory. To obtain this position, Cowell was required to provide security to the value of £10,000, a considerable sum for those days.⁴ So successful was he in this post, however, that in 1836 he was made responsible for the Bristol Branch as well.⁵ Then, in 1837, the Bank sent him to America.

At this time, a number of British firms (the so-called “American houses”) which had been doing business with companies in the United States found themselves in serious financial trouble as a result of the failure of their American business partners to settle their debts. In order to avoid a crisis, the Bank agreed, in March 1837, to support these firms by taking over responsibility for the debts. Since the sums involved were large, the Directors of the Bank then decided to send a representative to America to collect the money due to them as backers and creditors of the British firms. The employee entrusted with this delicate task was Cowell, who was thereupon instructed to take the packet ship *Independence*, due “to sail from Liverpool on or about the 24th September to New York”, in order “to recover from persons in the United States the amounts of unpaid Bills and Notes, drawn, endorsed or accepted by them.”⁶

Cowell had married, on 30 March of that year, Frances Maberly, daughter of a former MP for Abingdon; the marriage took place in the British Embassy in Paris. Leaving behind his pregnant wife (their son, John Jermyn Cowell, was born on 30 January 1838 in London), Cowell now embarked for New York and took up residence in Philadelphia; this city was chosen probably because it was the seat of the United States Bank of Pennsylvania (formerly the Bank of the United States), with which the Bank of England had been in contact for a year or two past. Here he stayed until the spring of 1839, joined, at some point, by his new family. The Bank of England Archive contains a long and interesting letter to the then Governor of the Bank, T. A. Curtis, dated 19 February 1839, in which Cowell lists the sums of money successfully collected, complains of the “interference” and the “dilatatory” attitude of various representatives of British companies on a similar mission to his own, states that he has achieved what he was sent out to do and, accordingly, asks to be allowed to return home in April because he wishes “to spend as much time as I can in Switzerland this year.”⁷

² “In England die Löhne der Sache nach niedriger für den Fabrikanten sind als auf dem Kontinent, obwohl sie für den Arbeiter höher sein mögen”; the translation is mine, from the original German.

³ J. A. Venn, op. cit.

⁴ W. Marston Acres: *The Bank of England from Within*, Vol. II (Oxford University Press, 1931). The Bank of England Archive has the original agreement, drawn up by Freshfields on 14 October 1834. Cowell’s salary was to be £600 p.a.

⁵ W. Marston Acres, op. cit.

⁶ W. Marston Acres, op.cit. Sir John Clapham: *The Bank of England: a History*, Vol. II (Cambridge University Press, 1944).

⁷ I am grateful to Sarah Millard, of the Bank of England Archive, and her colleague Jenny Mountain for their help in my researches.

In the first paragraph of this letter, Cowell tells his correspondent: "I go to Washington tomorrow where I have not yet been and where I wish to pass a few days before the breaking up of Congress on the 4th proxo. for the purpose of seeing some of [the] distinguished men of the States." Was one of these "distinguished men" John C. Calhoun? Certainly Cowell seems to have had a number of meetings with the Southern spokesman, whom he describes as an "eminent statesman" ("*homme d'Etat éminent*") and who had apparently informed him that the cotton-producing states had "taken the irrevocable decision to withdraw from the Union at the first favourable opportunity" ("*avaient pris irrévocablement la résolution de se retirer de l'Union à la première occasion favorable*").⁸ Cowell's stay in the United States and his position there as the representative of the Bank of England inevitably brought him into contact with many of the important men of the day, North and South, and gave him a chance to see at first hand the workings of American public life ("*tous les rouages de la vie agricole, industrielle, commerciale et financière de l'Union*"). In particular, his background in economics enabled him to understand what he described as "the most complete organization of the protectionist system ever seen", which, he quickly decided, was "incompatible with the maintenance of the Union". He returned to England convinced, both from his own observations and from his conversations with Calhoun and others, that Southern secession was both inevitable and justified.

When the Civil War began, more than twenty years later, Cowell lost no time in expressing his views, which remained unchanged. "For four years", he tells us, "I ... tried, on various occasions, to explain to my fellow-countrymen the vital duty which England had, in 1861, been called upon to fulfil towards herself, towards her race in the South and towards the whole of humanity." As a part of his efforts on behalf of the South during the first years of the war, he published two pamphlets, *Southern Secession: A Letter Addressed to Captain M. T. Maury, Confederate States Navy, on his Letter to Admiral Fitzroy* (1862) and *Lancashire's Wrongs and the Remedy* (1863). England having failed to listen, however, he had no option, as "a devoted friend of the cause of the South" ("*un ami dévoué de la cause du Sud*"), but to turn to France. "My only aim," he explains, "is to contribute to bringing about between France and the South an agreement which will spare the latter any further suffering and put her in a position to establish her independence."

La France et les Etats Confédérés was apparently published simultaneously in Paris and London. Its Paris publisher was E. Dentu, of 17 & 19, Galerie d'Orléans, in the Palais Royal; in London, it was issued by Hardwicke, of 192, Piccadilly. Both firms had already published a number of pro-Confederate pamphlets by various authors. It seems unlikely, however, that Cowell would have found many readers in England for his final literary effort on behalf of the Confederacy, since the pamphlet deliberately addresses, from the start, the interests of a patriotic French audience. He explains that if it had been a purely political question, he would have accepted England's lack of action as the decision of the majority of his countrymen. In this case, however, it is a question of principle, involving "the highest and most sacred interests of human nature" ("*les intérêts les plus élevés et les plus sacrés de la nature humaine*"), and these must take precedence over the "narrow and purely material interests" of his own country. It is therefore "the French people, and the populations [sic] of the Confederate States, and not the English public, that I am addressing today."

He starts with an appeal to French national and commercial pride. The whole world knows that France has a natural and, indeed, legitimate desire to be as powerful on sea as she is on land. Furthermore, her manufacturers long to be free of their dependence on England for their supply of cotton. Napoleon III now has in his hands the means to achieve

⁸ This and all subsequent quotations from the pamphlet are translated directly from the French text.

both of these objectives and to establish French naval and commercial supremacy for the future to an extent which he can never have imagined possible. However, France must act fast. England might yet decide to move, and tomorrow the opportunity could be gone for ever.

Cowell then goes on to deal with the background to the war, emphasizing, in passing, his qualifications, in terms of both his profession and his experience, for speaking as he does. Calhoun had shown him, he says, that the apparent power of the Yankees (Cowell uses this term throughout the pamphlet) depended entirely upon the South. First, the protective tariff of 1816 had given Yankee ship-owners a monopoly to transport Southern products, principally cotton. In 1860, "the last year of the Union", the value of American exports, excluding gold from California, amounted to 1,750,000,000 francs (£70,000,000), in round figures; of this, cotton and other Southern crops accounted for 1,250,000,000 francs (£50,000,000), or more than 70%. Secondly, Northern industry relied entirely upon a system of protectionism; this had led to a form of capitalism which had eventually involved, directly or indirectly, the entire population of the North in an "artificial system of exploitation" of the country's resources. The South was "the victim whose blood fed this system." Secession, however, had ended at last Northern exploitation of the South. The Yankees thus now had a desperate need to regain both their sole right to transport Southern products and their monopoly of the Southern market. Otherwise, they were doomed to lose all political, commercial and naval power. As a result, in order to recover their privileges they were now "massacring men, women and children throughout the South" and showing "a degree of ferocity which surpasses the cruelties practiced in the Wars of Religion."

This leads Cowell into a brief sketch of the Yankee character. The narrow, fanatical puritanism of their ancestors, which was at least sincere, has now, he tells us, "degenerated into a mixture of hypocrisy, cruelty, falsity, total lack of self-respect, gross presumption and indifference to the opinions of others, absolute ignorance of good, savage delight in doing evil and total moral depravity." These, he says, are now revealed to the entire world as the characteristics of the Yankee, female as well as male, and he follows this up by listing a selection of contemporary villains conforming to the type of the "pure-blooded Yankee", including Butler, Seward and Sheridan but also (rather unfortunately for his argument) the Russian-born Turchin.

The South, however, was a different matter entirely. The natural riches of "these privileged regions" had inevitably impelled the first colonists there to adopt the agricultural way of life, "which men have everywhere found the most agreeable and which has always contributed most powerfully to forming a national character of the noblest stamp." Cowell shared the view, common among the more upper-class sympathizers with the Confederacy in Britain (and not uncommon in the South itself, of course), that the Virginians, Carolinians and Georgians, at least, were of the stock of the old English country gentry. This race, "generous of old, noble alike in the men and the women it produced," had "in no way degenerated on Southern soil." Secure on their plantations, which provided all their needs, confident in their ability to supply the world's ever-increasing demand for their wonderful crop, the Southerners were not tempted to indulge in commercial or maritime ventures. They "never had nor ever could have the slightest interest in common with the Yankees"; their temporary alliance during the Revolution had ceased in 1783, and since then they had gained nothing but harm from the association. The South's one aim was to cultivate its cotton and other crops to meet European demand; the "natural role of the European nations" was thus to send their ships to fetch these products and to bring in manufactured goods in return. The two sides had "no more need of the intervention of Yankee ship-owners and financiers" than they had of that of "Eskimos and Patagonians."

Clearly, the South would never submit again to the "commercial and financial yoke of

the Yankees.” Equally, the Yankees could not give up their attempt to impose it once more; if they did, their “artificial system of production” and their maritime power would be finished for ever. The South’s problem was that she had allowed the Yankees “to organize a powerful navy at her expense.” As a result, her coast was blockaded and, her attempts to build a navy herself having failed totally (one wonders how Raphael Semmes, for example, would have received this statement), her only hope was to form an alliance with a power strong enough to break the blockade – and France was more than strong enough for that. However, the South must make sure that any such alliance was both commercially and politically in France’s interest. Cowell’s suggestion, therefore, would be that the South imposes immediately a double import duty and a 3% export duty on all goods carried on ships other than those belonging to citizens of France or of the Confederacy. This would have the effect (as he shows by means of specific examples) of immediately giving France’s merchants a huge advantage over their English rivals and, within quite a short time, of shifting the main European depot for cotton from Liverpool to Le Havre. An alliance with the South would make the Second Empire more glorious and more powerful than the First, and France would never need any other alliance either in Europe or in America. “A nation as intelligent, active and ambitious as the French” surely would not hesitate for a second!

But what must France do in return for this extraordinary opportunity? Nothing that will cause her the slightest inconvenience. She is already on the point of modifying and relaxing her maritime laws; all that she needs to do is to accelerate this process. In particular, French merchants must be permitted to buy the best ships at the best price wherever they may happen to find them. By Cowell’s calculations, two-thirds of the merchant marine in the United States in 1860 had been dedicated to the transport of Southern products. Since the secession of the South, these ships must therefore have been lying idle, and would be available cheaply. Why, then, should French shipping companies not be permitted to buy them up, and with their crews too? After all, most sailors on Northern ships were not native-born; in 1839 (according to Cowell’s figures), 40,000 to 50,000 English sailors were employed on American vessels, and that number would certainly have increased since then. The only stipulation would have to be that on each vessel the captain, the officers and a quarter of the crew should be French by birth.

Naturally, there would be objections to this plan on the part of certain French politicians, and Cowell shows that he has anticipated these. For a start, France had been conditioned for years to think of the United States as “a strong naval power, essentially hostile to England”, whose friendship she could always count upon. The Yankees, well aware of this, had taken care always to proclaim their natural alliance with France against the common enemy. In normal circumstances, of course, France would be sorry to see a State which she considered her ally lose its power at sea. If, on the other hand, all of this power was to come by default to her, surely she should rejoice rather than lament; and that was precisely what would happen if she was prepared to ally herself with the South.

A more serious objection was that France might thus find herself at war with the United States. Any such war, however, could only be a minor one (“*mesquine*”). If the Yankees really wished to damage France, they could only do so by means of a war of aggression. Now, they were able to carry out a war of aggression against the South because they had command of the sea and because England had recognized the blockade and allowed the North to buy arms and to recruit soldiers and sailors from Britain; she could hardly permit this in the event of a Union war against France. Certainly, Union privateers would be able to cause a certain amount of harm at the outset, but they would hardly be able to keep it up for very long. After four years of war, the Union treasury was almost bankrupt; annual production in the North could not possibly have replaced the capital expended so unproductively. Furthermore, their Navy today consisted of a few undoubtedly formidable

ships and a large number of aged and unserviceable vessels. While these might possibly be enough to defend the coast of the United States against a French blockade, they could only do so at the expense of raising the blockade of the South.

The Yankees would thus be unlikely, in Cowell's opinion, to declare war on France. Yet, so blind are they to the realities of their situation, that they might think it worth risking such a war. "Vain, bombastic, rash, audacious", they try always to push things as far as they possibly can and as their own ignorance and their opponents' fears allow them. On the other hand, they lack moral fibre. "They have no dignity, no human respect, they are totally lacking in pride, in greatness both of spirit and of character." If France were to declare herself openly in favour of the South, supporting this with the necessary military and naval preparations, there was little doubt, in Cowell's experience, that the Yankees would quickly yield.

Blair's recent mission to Richmond could be a simple "Yankee trick." In Cowell's opinion, however, this was evidence of the "desperate condition" to which the Yankees realized that they had been reduced. "All the world" could see that they were on the edge of bankruptcy. Their credit had dried up, and for some months now they had been forced to re-export "entire cargoes of goods" without unloading them, since they were unable to pay for them either in specie or in products of an equal value from their own territories. Recruitment, too, had ceased, even with the incentive of a bounty of \$1,000 per man. There was thus no solid basis to their much-vaunted power. From Cowell's observations during his stay among them, and from his experience of their "vacillating and presumptuous character", he was convinced that, "the moment France raised her voice above the clamour of this contemptible boasting (*"cette misérable jactance"*), the empty shadow of their short-lived greatness would be seen to vanish."

However, it is essential for France to show herself firm and resolute. If she does so, she will be amply repaid for the costs of any war which she might possibly find herself forced to undertake against the North. Aligning herself with the South, in short, will give France a faithful ally in permanence and will make her the greatest power in the world. Moreover, thanks to France's presence in Mexico and to what Napoleon III has already achieved there, this result can be obtained even more quickly.

Furthermore, France would have justice on her side. By virtue of previous treaties, she has as much right to trade with Charleston, New Orleans and Mobile as she has with New York and Boston. For four years she has been prevented from exercising this right. Now, either these ports are integral parts of the Union or they are not. If they are, then the Yankees have no right to deprive France of the freedom to trade with them. Should France demand compensation for the harm done her, as she would be perfectly entitled to do, the Yankees could hardly object that an external force hindered them from protecting her in her enjoyment of her rights, since the whole world knows that the cities in question would be only too happy to trade with France and that they are only prevented from doing so by the Yankees themselves. If, on the other hand, the Southern States are no longer *de jure*, as they are no longer *de facto*, members of the old Union, then what possible right can the Yankees of a new Union claim in order to justify impeding France in the exercise of a right given her by treaty and upheld by the States directly concerned themselves? Finally, Cowell reminds his readers that the people of Louisiana are French. France ceded Louisiana to the former United States under certain conditions; these conditions are now being flagrantly violated by the Yankee Government, and France owes it to her old subjects to demand that they be fulfilled.

Cowell ends by restating his conviction that, by following the course outlined by him in the previous pages of the pamphlet, France is now in a position to affect the transfer of the main European cotton depot from Liverpool to Le Havre. The choice before her is between

becoming completely independent of England for her supply of cotton, on the one hand, and, on the other, seeing her commerce subordinated to England's within a very short period. Already, England is making enormous, and largely successful, efforts to increase the cultivation of cotton in India. Unless France's manufacturers and merchants are prepared to abandon all hope of ever competing with England in the international market, there is no time to lose.

Cowell's approach is thus very different from that of other British sympathizers with the Confederacy. Although he admits, at one point, that his one aim is to help the South to establish its independence, his appeal throughout is to French self-interest and to France's envy of England as a commercial and maritime power. Furthermore, he ignores completely the question of slavery. Whereas men like Spence and Beresford Hope, writing for a British audience, had felt compelled to bring this awkward issue out into the open in order to anticipate and deal with the most obvious objection to what they were proposing, there is not a single reference to slavery in the whole of Cowell's pamphlet. Presumably he either considered it irrelevant to his argument or felt that it would be unwise to remind his French readers of its existence.

One final point of interest is that the copy of the pamphlet in the possession of the writer of this article is inscribed on the front cover, in Cowell's hand, "*M. de Montalembert de la part de l'auteur*" ("Monsieur de Montalembert from the author"). Charles de Montalembert was a Liberal Catholic writer, a champion of the cause of Polish independence and well known in French literary and political circles. His father had been a French Diplomat under Charles X, the last reigning Bourbon king of France, together with the father of the Confederate General Camille Armand Jules Marie, Prince de Polignac. Unlike Polignac, however, Montalembert was a firm supporter of the Union. He was a friend of John Bigelow, the energetic U. S. Consul in Paris, and he wrote a lengthy article in the *Correspondant* hailing the victory of the North.⁹ Cowell must have been well aware of Montalembert's views. Why, then, did he present him with a copy of the pamphlet? Can he seriously have expected to convert the Frenchman, or was this merely the literary equivalent of scrawling a moustache and a pair of spectacles on a political poster?

Cowell did not long survive the fall of the Confederacy. He died on 9 February 1867 in St. Leonard's-on-Sea, at a boarding-house run by a Frenchman.¹⁰ Since the cause of death was given as "chronic bronchitis", we can presume that Cowell had gone to the Sussex coast for the sake of his lungs. His son, Jermyn, who appears fully to have shared his father's views on the War,¹¹ died unmarried in December of the same year. Cowell's house, however, at 41, Gloucester Terrace, London, is still standing, although as a result of renumbering it is now 126, Gloucester Terrace. A modest, bow-fronted Victorian building, it is thus one of the few remaining relics of an elderly Englishman whose devotion to the ideal of Southern independence was such that he was prepared to appeal to England's hereditary rival in a final, desperate attempt to bring it about, even at the possible expense of his own country's commercial interests.

⁹ Reproduced in full, in translation, in John Bigelow: *Retrospections of an Active Life*, Vol. III, pp. 4-42, (New York, 1909).

¹⁰ 21, Grand Parade. The owner was one René Lecieux.

¹¹ See, for example, Jermyn Cowell's letter of 23 April 1865 to the Cambridge philosopher Henry Sidgwick, in which he expresses his "pity and admiration" for the South and his "horror and burning indignation against the most wicked and hypocritical tyrants", who could destroy "thirteen sovereign republics and subjugate 8 millions of civilized men." (Sidgwick Papers, Library of Trinity College, Cambridge).