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LORD LYONS and the Civil War Diplomacy 1859 - 1865

By Eric Heslop

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Richard Bickerton Pemell Lyons, subsequently second Baron and first Earl Lyons, was born in Hampshire on 26th April 1817. His father, 1st Lord Lyons, was a naval officer. Richard the son was originally intended for a career in the navy and at age ten was a midshipman on his father's vessel. However, he was not suited to a life on the quarterdeck - or below it - and graduated via Christchurch, Oxford, to the diplomatic service. After minor posts at Athens and the Vatican he was transferred, following his father's death, to Washington as British Minister which, although a more senior post, had not the standing of more established appointments in Europe. Although indebted to Lord John Russell for his posting to the Vatican, he owed his Washington posting in 1859 to Palmerton, who had become Prime Minister.

The United States was at that time in an uneasy lull before the onset of its war. The president - Buchanan - and Lyons were both free traders, but this may well have been one of the few attributes common to them both. Buchanan, then and now regarded as an inept president, was acidly described by Lyons as "too weak to wring his hands". At that time before rapid intercontinental communications were available, resident diplomatic ministers, who ranked below ambassadors, had perforce, greater freedom of action than later in the century,

In manner reticent, but with a subtle intelligence and steely resolve, he was able with discreet maneuvering to defuse potentially explosive situations that arose between England and The United States. During the San Juan crisis of 1859, the so-called "Pig War", where under the Clayton Bulwer Treaty the island was jointly occupied by Britain and The United States, he ignored his instructions by showing to the United States the ultimatum he had been instructed to deliver. This enabled both sides to arrive at a modus vivendi before a shooting match started. Lord Lyons also discovered that feeding United States Senators with Moet & Chandon Champagne assisted the breakdown of more formal diplomatic protocol. Like other diplomats, Lyons frequented Willard's Hotel, where gossip was purveyed. Although careful not to reveal his sentiments to his hosts, his dispatches indicated that he disapproved of Southern jingoism. His choice of route for the Prince of Wales' tour in 1860 involved the visit of HRH (His Royal Highness) to the centres of Republican sentiment in New York, Massachusetts and Ohio and meetings with the influential politicians Sumner and Chase.

Lincoln, elected as the next president to serve from 1861, was regarded by Lyons as little known and a rough westerner. Seward, although better known, was regarded as anti British and a loose cannon who strove for effect, but was reluctant to fire a broadside, except in a spate of invective. In the absence of instructions from London, Lyons instructed his staff to be neutral in dealings with both North and South since any interference would gain the hatred of both.

The French ambassador Mercier was a friend of Lyons and both counseled against recognition of the South. Although it was thought that the importance of King Cotton would cause British manufacturers to sympathize with the South, Lyons was adamant that national interests should not prevail over his principles.

Lyons made use of the information provided by his network of British consular officials in both North and South. In modern parlance, he was adept at keeping his “ear to the ground”.

Perhaps his most signal service was his adroit handling of the *Trent* Crisis following the seizure by Captain Wilkes, of the US Navy, of the envoys from the South, Mason and Slidell, to England and France. By his discreet and unauthorized advance disclosure of the firm British attitude he allowed calmer and less belligerent attitudes to be accepted by both the North and England. In short, an apology and the criticism by the North of the excessive zeal of Wilkes, enabled good relations to continue. For his efforts he was awarded the Order of Bath. His was also a calming influence in the tension that later arose because of the building by British shipyards of Confederate raiders such as the *Alabama*. Although careful not to reveal where his sympathies lay, he entered into negotiations between England and the USA in 1862 for the abolition of the slave trade. Alexander Stephens, Vice President of the Confederate States, surmised that perhaps that event was an indication of England’s leaning.

Although Lyons endeavored to maintain friendly personal relations with all Lincoln’s cabinets he did not get on too well with Lincoln’s Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Wells. Perhaps a reason for this was that England was a great naval power and might possibly prevent US warships capturing British vessels as “prizes” after they had run contraband into Southern ports.

In February 1865 he resigned his position in Washington. Greater diplomatic posts beckoned, Constantinople and ultimately the plum of the diplomatic service, Ambassador to France. His behind-the-scenes negotiations contributed to the settling of the *Alabama Claims* (1872). Disraeli sounded him out in 1878 for the post of Foreign Secretary, which Lyons declined, possibly because his health was not robust.

A lively question time ensued. It emerged Lyons was incensed by the operation of British privateers working for the South. The difference between privateers and pirates



Lord Lyons’ grave (Courtesy Crossfire Magazine)

was almost a distinction without a difference. Recognition by the Confederacy of privateering “licence” however apparently avoided the obloquy of a privateer being deemed to be a pirate. Lyons also viewed with distaste the attempt by Napoleon to install Maximilian as Emperor of Mexico.

Earl Lyons GCB, GCMG, Hon DCL (Oxon) died at Norfolk House, St James Square, London, on 5th December 1887.