



Painting by Edmund Ballings - Museum Department of Antiques and History

WILLIAM YANCEY and the Fishmongers

By Charles Priestley

Jefferson Davis's choice of William Lowndes Yancey to lead the original Confederate commission to Europe has not generally been considered one of his wisest decisions. Writing at the time, Mary Chesnut gives the view of her circle: "Send a man to England who had killed his father-in-law in a street brawl! That was not knowing England or Englishmen, surely."¹ Frank L. Owsley's summary was that "the velvet gloves of diplomacy were not worn well by an outspoken agitator."² In his recent, very readable, volume on the international ramifications of the Civil War, *The Cause of All Nations*, Professor Don H. Doyle accuses Davis of "a certain tone deafness" in questions of diplomacy and quotes Edwin De Leon's description of Yancey as "not a winning or persuasive man", bold, antagonistic and somewhat dogmatical" and "not at all impressive in personal appearance, and decidedly negligent in dress". Professor Doyle also wonders "what the English made of Yancey."³

What Don Doyle fails to mention, however, is that De Leon also says of Yancey that he was "a great talker and a strong reasoner, and when brought into contact with Englishmen of marked note, never failed to make a strong impression on them."⁴ Owsley, too, describes Yancey elsewhere as "a very able man ... possessed of poise and dignity, in private intercourse straightforward and pleasant mannered" and "a clear-sighted realist in most matters", who "might have been fairly well qualified to send to Europe" had he not been "so identified with the institution which both England and France hated."⁵ Finally, we have solid evidence of what some, at least, of "the English" made of Yancey, as will be seen.

Yancey arrived in London on April 28, 1861, having left Montgomery, Alabama, on March 15. He put up initially at the Bath Hotel, Arlington Street⁶, where rooms had been engaged for the three Commissioners by William Thomson, United States Consul at Southampton.⁷ Moving on May 4 to the Westminster Palace Hotel in Victoria Street⁸, Yancey finally, on May 16, settled into rooms at 15, Half Moon Street, "at 3½ guineas per week for the season, fires, lights & attendance included."⁹

¹ Mary Boykin Chesnut (ed. Ben Ames Williams), *A Diary from Dixie* (Cambridge, Mass., 1949), p.126

² Frank Lawrence Owsley, *King Cotton Diplomacy* (2nd edition, revised by Harriet C. Owsley, Chicago, 1959), p.77.

³ Don H. Doyle, *The Cause of All Nations* (New York, 2015), pp. 39-40.

⁴ Edwin De Leon (ed. William C. Davis), *Secret History of Confederate Diplomacy Abroad* (Kansas, 2005), p. 50.

⁵ Owsley, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-52.

⁶ The Bath Hotel was at 25, Arlington Street, on the corner of Piccadilly. The Ritz now covers the site.

⁷ Thomson was U.S. Consul at Southampton from 1859-1861 and then from 1869 to 1876. He died in Southampton in 1887. He was presumably removed from his post in 1861 because of his Confederate sympathies.

⁸ The Westminster Palace Hotel was at 6, Victoria Street, on the corner of Tothill Street and diagonally opposite Westminster Abbey. The building no longer survives.

⁹ The house, which is still standing, is listed in the London Directory for 1861 as owned by one Arthur Newman Dare.

He appears to have become increasingly disillusioned with his post – understandably so, given the cool attitude towards the three Commissioners of the Foreign Secretary, Lord John Russell. Yancey’s diary, which he had started on leaving Montgomery, comes to an abrupt end on June 18, following his return to Half Moon Street from a short visit to Paris. He seems to have requested to be relieved of his duties sometime around the end of August, 1861, his resignation being accepted by the Confederate Secretary of State, R.M.T. Hunter, on September 23.¹⁰ From then on, Yancey was able to do little more than wait to be replaced, until the arrival at the end of January, 1862, of the new Commissioner to Great Britain, James Murray Mason, finally allowed him to return to Alabama. Nevertheless, during the long months of waiting Yancey did at least score one conspicuous success, albeit one on a relatively modest scale.

To be continued ...

¹⁰ *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* (Washington, DC, 1894-1927), Series I, Volume 3, p. 273.