



Painting by Edward Billings - Alabama Department of Archives 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.

On Lord Mayor’s Day (November 9), 1861, Yancey, Dudley Mann and the Confederate purchasing agent Caleb Huse were all invited to a banquet at the Fishmongers’ Hall on London Bridge. In his brief memoir of his Confederate service, Huse describes what happened:

“I never heard [Yancey] address an audience but once, but that once convinced me he was a born orator. It was at a Fishmongers' Guild dinner, and the few representatives of the Confederate States were the guests of the evening. Mr. Yancey sat on the left of the Lord Warden. I sat four or five seats from him, on the opposite side, the tables being arranged in the form of a horse shoe. There was a large number present, and many were evidently Americans from the North.

Very early in the list of toasts, the toastmaster, - a butler possessed of a ringing voice, and who stood just behind the chair of the Lord Warden, from whom he received his orders - called out: ‘Gentlemen, fill your glah-ses, the Lord Warden will take wine with you.’ The glasses being filled, the toast was announced. I do not now recall the words, but it had reference to the ‘new nation,’ and to Hon. William L. Yancey and our guests from the Confederate States of America.” The Lord Warden made a short address of welcome and called on Mr. Yancey. All the Confederate guests were expected to stand while their spokesman replied. But I declined to make myself so conspicuous, fearing that in a company so entirely new to Mr. Yancey, as I felt sure this English company was, his speech would be anything but appropriate.

I could not have been more in error. What he said exactly fitted the place and the occasion; the audience was delighted, except some people at the lower ends of the tables, who, by rattling their glasses and moving their feet, did their best to disconcert the speaker. In this they failed. The speech was short, and at its conclusion the storm of applause clearly showed the pleasure it afforded the great majority of the audience. I remember well a barrister - a member of the city government - who after the dinner was over, commented enthusiastically on the eloquence of Mr. Yancey.”¹¹

Strangely enough, I have not so far been able to find any reference to the dinner in the Fishmongers’ voluminous Archives. Yancey’s speech was printed in full, however, both in *The Illustrated London News* for November 22, 1861, and in the November 25 issue of *The New York Times*. It ran as follows:

“Upon the part of Americans, I sincerely respond to the sentiment just expressed by the Prime Warden for the restoration of peace in America. Such a wish, proclaimed by a company of intelligent Englishmen, must kindle a corresponding feeling in the bosom of every enlightened and impartial American. The name American no longer represents a united people. There exist now two American nationalities - the Confederate and the Federal Americans. I - as you may, perhaps, be aware - am a Confederate, or - as the

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.

¹¹ Caleb Huse, *The Supplies for the Confederate Army: How They Were Obtained in Europe and How Paid For* (Boston, Mass., 1904), pp. 29-30.

Federal American, unmindful of the character of our common forefathers, disdainfully terms me - a rebel. But the justice and the sense of right of this great Government, promptly coincided in by France and Spain, speedily wiped out that stigma from our brows, and my countrymen are acknowledged here, at least, to be belligerents. [Cheers.] Though indebted to an enlarged and enlightened view of public law, and not to the mere grace or favor of England for this acknowledgment of our unquestionable rights and locus standi, I must freely express here to-night, that deep sense of thankfulness, which I am sure all my countrymen feel, for its early public avowal - 'Bis dat qui cito dat' - [prolonged cheers.] From no other Power could it have come so gracefully. In this - 'the old country' - the principle of self-government is recognized and practiced, however blended with the prerogatives of the Crown and the rights of the aristocracy. To your institutions Americans are indebted for the chief of those vital principles which have caused them to style their Republic - The land of the free and the home of the oppressed.

Such invaluable rights as the old English writ of habeas corpus, of a speedy trial by jury, of freedom of speech and freedom of the Press, are the main pillars of American Constitutional liberty; and I am both happy and proud to say are observed at least throughout the Confederate American States as vital and practical rights, even during their stern struggles to preserve their 'national life.' [Hear, hear, and cheers.] I feel how unbecoming it would be in me to intrude upon such an occasion as the present any merely partisan views of the causes which have broken up the late Federal Union. No matter what they may have been, one thing is clear, and that is that the contest now going on is upon the part of the people of the Confederate States for the right to govern themselves and to resist subjugation from the North. [Hear, hear.] They occupy a territory as large as England, France, Spain and Austria together - they are ten millions in number - they are chiefly producers of important raw materials, and buyers of every species, of all kinds of manufactured goods. Their pursuits, soil, climate, and production, are totally different from those of the North. They think it their interest to buy where they can buy cheapest, and to sell where they can sell dearest. In all this the North differs, toto coelo, from them, and now makes war upon us to enforce the supremacy of their mistaken ideas and selfish interests. [Hear, hear, and Cheers.] In defence of their liberties and sovereign independence, the Confederate States and people are united and resolute. They are invaded by a Power numbering 20,000,000; yet for eight months has the Confederate Government successfully resisted - aye, repelled - that invasion along a military frontier of 1,000 miles. Though cut off by blockade from all foreign trade, their internal resources have been adequate to the equipment and maintenance in the field of an army of over 250,000 troops. Can all this be, and yet these 6,000,000 of whites be divided? The idea is preposterous. So much has been said about our efforts to obtain foreign intervention that I may be allowed to declare emphatically that the Confederate States have neither sought nor desired it. They can maintain their independence intact by their own strength. As to their recognition by the Powers of the world, that of course they desire. They are a people, a nation, exhibiting elements of power which few States of the world possess. But they have no reason to complain, nor do they feel aggrieved, because these great Powers see fit for a season to defer their formal recognition and reception into the family of nations. However they may differ with them as to the period when their recognition should take place, they fully understand that such action is purely a question to be determined by those countries each for itself and with reference to its own interests and views of public policy. Other nations having trading relations with us have quite as much interest to send Ministers and Consuls to us as we have to send such representatives to them. [Hear, hear.] Why, then, shall there not be peace? Simply because the North in its pride will not admit that to be a fact - a fait accompli - which Old England, followed by the first Powers of Europe, has recognized, and which the Confederate Government and armies have repeatedly demonstrated to be a stern and bloody fact - the fact that we are a belligerent Power. There can be no basis for

negotiations, or for peace proposals or consultations, so long as the Confederates are deemed to be and are treated as rebels. [Hear.] But when our adversary shall become sufficiently calm to treat us as a belligerent power, the morning of peace will dawn in the horizon. When that hour shall arrive I think I may say the Confederate Government will be inflexible upon one point only - its honor and its independence. For the great interests of peace and humanity it will yield much that is merely material or of secondary importance. [Mr. Yancey sat down amid loud and continued cheering.]”

By a curious coincidence, Charles Francis Adams, the U.S. Minister to Britain, was dining at exactly the same time at the Guildhall, a guest of the Lord Mayor, William Cubitt. *The Saturday Review*, which tended to echo the views of its proprietor, Alexander Beresford Hope, reported in its issue of November 16 on both banquets, comparing Yancey’s speech with that of his Unionist rival, to the great advantage of the former. After referring to “*Mr. Adams’s forced and stiff dignity of contemptuous indifference*”, the magazine continued: “*Mr. Yancey did not discuss London Bridge, nor did he dilate on Dr. Johnson’s rooms in the Temple, or on the recent sale of Shakespeare’s garden at Stratford. Such large themes he left to the orator at Guildhall. But he certainly went to the core of the matter when he publicly acknowledged the fair and upright conduct of England in recognising the belligerent rights of the South; and when he announced that Free Trade was the natural policy of the Confederate States, he did much more for his cause than if he had gone into a stirring oration on the tyranny of the North, or the demerits of the Morrill tariff. In Mr. Yancey, at any rate, we see one American public man who neither affronts our feelings by cynicism or our temper by swagger.*”

It was therefore with understandable delight that I discovered, earlier this year, that our old family G.P. was doctor to the Fishmongers, and found myself invited by him to follow in Yancey’s footsteps and attend a Livery Dinner on May 13.

The interior of the Hall had been badly damaged by a bomb in 1940, but once the war was over the Fishmongers hastened to restore it to its original splendour, selling a number of their London properties in order to be able to ensure that the work was done to the highest standards and using the best materials. Since the 1835 exterior escaped the bombing relatively unscathed, the Hall now looks, both internally and externally, exactly as it did in 1861. Of course there are women at these dinners now (Princess Anne, amongst others, at this particular one), but otherwise things can have changed very little since the three Confederate representatives were there, and it is easy to imagine oneself stepping back in time. To complete the illusion, the waiters pouring the champagne before dinner, uniformly dressed in tails, appeared to have been chosen not merely for their skill and professionalism but also for their physiognomy, since two at least of them had faces which were pure Victorian. I had in fact brought a copy of Yancey’s speech with me, and was urged by my neighbours at dinner, one of whom had a daughter-in-law from South Carolina, to stand up and declaim it, but wisely refused.

In a final example of serendipity, a few days later I suddenly came across a copy of the engraving from *The Illustrated London News* accompanying the paper’s report of the 1861 dinner. The banqueting hall appears today exactly as it is in the engraving, showing that the Fishmongers’ post-war restoration of their Hall was both careful and accurate. It would be pleasant to think that the two standing figures shown at the end of the room represent Yancey and the Prime Warden, but I suspect that it may be more likely that they and the rest of the diners in the engraving are merely standard figures, representing no one in particular. Whatever the case, though, engraving and report together remain a pleasing and valuable record of one of the few moments of real success in the brief diplomatic career of William Lowndes Yancey.