

PRESSURE FROM WITHOUT

African Americans, British Public Opinion, and Civil War Diplomacy



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Writing in 1886, Samuel Fielden, one of the Haymarket Martyrs, reminisced of his youth in Todmorden in the 1850s about how his father would take him to political meetings where all the major issues affecting the British working class were discussed. Here, in the small textile town that straddles Lancashire and Yorkshire, young Fielden immersed himself in the heated debates about issues as far-reaching as factory reform and American slavery. This was the genesis of his radicalism. Of the many lectures and meetings he attended, none impressed him more than those at which American fugitive slaves, such as Henry “Box” Brown, spoke: “I went frequently to hear them describe the inhumanity of that horrible system, sometimes with my father, and at other times with my sister.” The system’s inhumanity and the fugitives’ struggle to rid themselves of this oppression had a profound influence on Fielden, who remembered spending hours discussing the lectures with his playmates. The United States of America played a prominent part in all their lives: many of their families and friends had emigrated there, and

those who stayed behind were employed in the textile industry, which relied almost exclusively on the southern states for its supply of cotton. When the Civil War disrupted the flow of cotton to Britain and threatened their livelihoods, there was what Fielden called “intense interest” among the people of Lancashire. They came together in Mechanics institutes and debating societies, town and church halls, and public places to discuss the causes and consequences of the war. During the summer months, “every night in the week there would be seen groups of men collected in the streets, and at the prominent corners discussing the latest news and forecasting the next, and in these groups there was always to be heard the advocates and champions of both sides.”¹

Textile workers’ reactions to developments in the United States, Fielden insisted, were to a significant degree framed by the accounts that African Americans gave of their experiences as slaves and their encounters with racial discrimination. More importantly, these contacts, sustained over thirty years, provided a unique opportunity for wide-ranging discussions between the visitors and their hosts about the meaning and nature of oppression and about the best means to attain freedom. Periodically, African Americans and white American abolitionists ran into resistance from British workers who demanded that more attention be given to wage slavery at home than African slavery many miles away. Following a lecture by Henry Highland Garnet in 1851, a leader of the Tenant League in Ulster suggested that meaningful cooperation in the fight against oppression was only possible when Garnet and the Belfast Anti-Slavery Society, which had sponsored his visit, came to an appreciation of how existing landlord laws were used against tenants. But generally, a consensus emerged that this sort of international solidarity worked to the benefit of both slaves in the United States and workers seeking greater freedom in Britain.²

These antebellum contacts and the discussions that fueled them continued during the war. But the war altered the nature and conditions of the debate. What was once considered the highest expression of trans-Atlantic humanitarian solidarity ran the risk of being construed as foreign interference in the domestic affairs of the United States now that war had begun. But few thought seriously of severing the relationship. On the con-

trary, many believed that these contacts had to be strengthened if emancipation was to be achieved. Most historians of Anglo-American relations during the Civil War undervalue the extent and importance of these contacts. Donaldson Jordan and Edwin J. Pratt, in their path-breaking study of the period, said of African American contributions: "A number of escaped slaves, especially the former coachman of Jefferson Davis, were produced as lions at Unionist meetings; and the Reverend Sella Martin, a negro who received a parish in London, was one of the most effective of all the workers among the Dissenting bodies."³

I have identified almost forty African Americans in Britain who were actively engaged in the effort to win popular support for the Union. Some of them have virtually been forgotten by historians—such as J. H. Banks, a fugitive slave from Alabama who teamed up with J. W. C. Pennington for a series of lectures in Liverpool and Rhyl in early 1862. Other African American agitators in Britain during the war included William Howard Day, John Sella Martin, and Andrew Jackson, Davis's former coachman. Collectively these African Americans played a pivotal role in the effort to win popular support for the Union. We need to remember, however, as we consider their story, that these African Americans did not speak with one voice on all issues concerning the war. Early in the war, William Craft, long a critic of the United States government and influenced by Garrisonian views of the proslavery nature of the Constitution, insisted that war would never have occurred if the country had lived up to the principles of equality contained in the Declaration of Independence. Furthermore, he told a Sunderland audience, the North should allow the South to secede, for he was convinced that the Confederacy could not sustain itself with four million slaves in its midst.⁴ Similarly, Day told a large public meeting of the African Aid Society in Birmingham in late 1861 that the war was a direct result of the arrogance of the "Anglo-Saxon races" who ignored the rights of Africans, and he condemned the Union for not abolishing all slave laws. Yet Day predicted that the slaves would be freed in two to three years, either as a consequence of America's heeding the word of God and doing what was right, or when the slaves united to take their freedom.⁵