

Friends and the American Civil War: the Trent affair

THE seizure on 8th November, 1861, of the two Confederate envoys to Britain and France by Captain Charles Wilkes, commander of the *San Jacinto*, an American warship, while they were travelling across the Atlantic on the British mailship *Trent*, caused a great wave of hysterical excitement both in Britain and the northern states of America. Wilkes, although he acted entirely on his own responsibility, without orders, was acclaimed as a popular hero in many circles in the northern states. He had paid Britain out in her own coin, and rightly so, thought the Americans, for Britain's own interpretation of belligerent rights at sea in the era of the Napoleonic wars had long rankled in their minds. In Britain feeling ran no less high. There was tremendous excitement and much righteous anger: Britain had done nothing to provoke a war, but now it was being deliberately forced upon her, she was being challenged on two points on which she prided herself as always having taken a firm stand, the freedom of the seas and the right of asylum. One American wrote home from London, "the people are frantic with rage, and were the country polled, I fear 999 men out of every thousand would declare for immediate war."¹ The *Trent* incident, in reality, provided a focal point for the widespread sympathy in Britain for the southern secessionists and for the hostility, especially among the governing classes, to the North. In fact, there was hardly anyone in England who did not think that the northern secretary of state, Seward, wanted a war.

The British Cabinet was forced to act quickly, once the law officers had declared the seizure of the Confederate envoys to be illegal. A despatch was sent to Washington demanding the restoration of the envoys, an apology and a reply to be made within seven days; defence preparations were put in hand. While the American reply was awaited nearly everyone was discussing what the war would be like,

¹ E. D. Adams, *Great Britain and the American civil war* (1925), i, p. 217.

rather than whether it would materialise, so inevitable had its prospect become.¹

It was in this critical situation that developed from 27th November, 1861, onwards, when the first news of the seizure of the envoys reached England, that Friends in Britain seized the opportunity to witness for peace. They were not the only forces working for peace. Americans of the northern persuasion, resident in Europe, did their best to dispel the idea that their countrymen were impatient for war with Britain. Cobden and Bright came out for peace, but they stood almost alone among public men in this respect. They needed support if they were to make any impression on the public mind. This support they received from the nonconformists and especially from Friends, who seem to have been the first in the field among the churches.²

Friends' intervention took the form of a memorial³ from Meeting for Sufferings in London, to the British government, on the subject of Anglo-American relations. It contained a special appeal to the government to avoid war between "two independent nations so closely united together . . . by the combined ties of blood, of language, of religion, of constitutional freedom, and of commercial interest." The memorial asked that while the American reply was awaited, the British cabinet should prepare "so to meet that reply (whatever it may be) that the next step may not be a declaration of war, but the putting of the remaining issue, if any, between the two countries in train for a pacific decision." Friends recommended that the government should propose referring the dispute to arbitration, which principle they rejoiced to see had been strongly recommended by the powers who were parties to the treaty of Paris in 1856, although they admitted that no prospective provision for arbitration existed that covered this particular dispute. Nevertheless, the memorial urged, there were good reasons why Britain should preserve a conciliatory attitude. It would be ungenerous to proceed to extremes when the United States was struggling for "their national integrity, if not their national existence." Furthermore, it would ill behove England "after the vast sacrifices

¹ D. Jordan and E. J. Pratt, *Europe and the American civil war* (1931), pp. 28-35, for public opinion; E. D. Adams, *op. cit.*, especially i., p. 217.

² D. Jordan and E. J. Pratt, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-39.

³ Prepared by Josiah Forster, John Hodgkin and seven other Friends, appointed by Meeting for Sufferings, 5.xii.1861.

which she has made for the abolition of the slave trade and slavery in her own possessions, which has been an object so consistently promoted through life by the statesmen whom we are now addressing [i.e. Palmerston and Russell] if, by being involved in this war, England should eventually find herself in active co-operation with the South and slavery against the North and freedom." At this point Friends were careful to add a qualification to the simple version of the civil war just enunciated. They did not intend, the memorial continued, to express approval, in all respects, of the course pursued by the North in reference to slavery. Finally, Friends mentioned their "special religious as well as national interest in the question" of peace with America, in that "the principal Founders" of two of the American states, "and many of the original settlers of other states, were our brethren in religious profession, between whom and ourselves a cordial correspondence has been maintained for nearly two centuries." The signatories promised that they would urge American Friends to use their by no means inconsiderable influence on their state legislatures in the cause of peace.¹

Such was the impressive memorial drawn up on behalf of the Society for presentation to the Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston, and the Foreign Secretary, Earl Russell, after full deliberation of the London Meeting for Sufferings on 6th December, 1861, and at an adjourned meeting on 9th December. The draft had been prepared by John Hodgkin. The background to the preparation of the memorial is a little obscure, although it is clear that one of the moving spirits in bringing Friends to consider the American question was Jonathan Pim, of Dublin. He apparently advocated the settlement of the dispute by referring the whole question of the rights of neutrals in time of war, and the limitations under which the right of search should be exercised, to a congress of all the maritime powers including Britain and the United States.² This view he pressed on several Friends in different

¹ Printed copy of the memorial of 9.xii.1861 in Meeting for Sufferings minutes [Friends House, London]; and in the Pim MSS. in the possession of Mr. Jonathan Pim of Dublin, whose kindness in permitting me to see these papers is gratefully acknowledged.

² The Pim MSS. contain a printed copy, almost certainly the work of Jonathan Pim, entitled "War with America," reasons for offering to the United States the alternative of arbitration before appealing to the sword, which embodies the above views.

parts of Britain, meeting with their approval.¹ While he was doing this, Meeting for Sufferings met in London on 6th December, and decided to send a memorial on the threatened war to the government. A committee was appointed to prepare it, which met on 9th December and approved John Hodgkin's draft. At the first meeting it was evidently thought that a specific recommendation to apply the practice of arbitration to this particular case had not been deemed feasible. But Pim's advocacy of the importance of stressing the principle of arbitration impressed some Friends, especially William Tanner of Bristol, where the Friends decided to send a messenger to London in the hope that he would arrive in time to procure the insertion of Pim's suggestions in the memorial.² Plainly Pim's views were adopted in part as the memorial did contain a specific reference to arbitration, although his more extensive plan of a congress of maritime powers was not taken up.³ The upshot of the efforts of Friends was, however, not encouraging. Palmerston refused to see a deputation from the London Meeting for Sufferings. As Rickman Godlee told Pim, the memorial would, however, go to him and Earl Russell all the same and it was printed.⁴ The efforts of Jonathan Pim did not cease here. He was encouraged by John Hodgkin to continue to use every possible method to press his views as embodied in a paper that Hodgkin thought was the best he had seen on the American difficulty. Hodgkin urged Jonathan Pim to persevere, to "try the Earl of Carlisle, Sir Robert Peel, the Earl of Clarendon, or any private channell" to bring his notions before Earl Russell "effectively and reiteratedly," for Pim's views "differed from either arbitration or mediation and it may not be too late." John Hodgkin's letter of 20th December, 1861, just quoted from, shows just how deeply a Friend felt about the dangers of war at this time, for he concludes,

¹ J. Pim to J. Ford, 7th Dec., 1861; J. Ford to J. Pim, 9th Dec., 1861 (Pim MSS.).

² William Tanner to J. Pim, 9th Dec., 1861 (Pim MSS.).

³ Rickman Godlee to J. Pim, 9th Dec., 1861, reporting that at the adjourned meeting "it was expressly agreed that the method of proposing a reference to arbitration should be pressed on the government," while William Tanner in his letter of the same date (see note 4) had said that at the meeting on 6th December such a step had not been deemed feasible (Pim MSS.).

⁴ Rickman Godlee to J. Pim, 17th December, 1861 (Pim MSS.).

I have sought relief in prayer that He who can turn the hearts of rulers as easily as the skilful husbandman can direct the stream in a well prepared channel of irrigation, will be pleased to stay the feelings of wrath which are so likely to be kindled at Washington by a temperate and well reasoned request for surrender. But prayer does not preclude the diligent, skilful use of means—quite the contrary. And whether the American answer be *nearly* all that we could desire, or *quite unfavourable*, there is yet the *possibility* that the meekness, and the wisdom and the right temper of our chastened Queen and her rulers may after all prove efficacious to bring about a right result, which we can hardly look for from the passions of the multitudes on either side of the Atlantic. Possibly our memorial may, in some directions and especially with men of Christian feeling, have a sedative effect, and tend to lessen the pressure upon our government to vindicate the national honour. I think we ought to leave no stone unturned.¹

This may well remain a fitting epitaph of Friends' witness for peace in the critical six weeks that elapsed between the receipt in Britain of the news of the seizure of the Confederate envoys and the American reply that consented to restore the envoys to freedom, but contained no formal apology. The reply dispelled the myth that the Washington Cabinet wanted war and ensured peace. The worst of the war tension, however, was over before the reply was received.² Friends' endeavours had not been entirely in vain.

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¹ John Hodgkin to J. Pim, 20th December, 1861 (Pim MSS.). The reference to the chastened Queen is an allusion to the death of the Prince Consort that had taken place a week previously.

² D. Jordan and E. J. Pratt, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-46.