A proposal on the British Reaction to the Emancipation Proclamation

I have chosen to focus my research on how Britain responded to the Emancipation Proclamation. With the Civil War being such a pivotal moment in American history, many people forget that the U.S. still had to deal with foreign issues during the war’s duration. Even fewer probably realize that much of these foreign relations centered on the issue of foreign involvement in the war. Recognition of the Confederacy, and possibly even intervention on the side of the Confederacy was a fear of many in the north. Great Britain, despite its ties to the U.S., was one of the primary sources of anxiety. U.S.-Briton relations stood in an odd place at the outset of the war. Though not the enemies they had been from the Revolution to the War of 1812, they were not nearly the allies they would become. This intermediary position exhibited itself in that while there were friendly relations, there was also much animosity, and contempt on both sides of the Atlantic. Much of the contempt on the British side stemmed from the continuance of slavery in the U.S.

Due to this contempt of slavery in the south, you would assume that upon the breakup of the free north and slave south, Britain’s choice would be easy. Things are never this cut and dry in history however, and there were a few factors that prevented Britain from coming outright in support of the Union. The first reason being that while Britain abhorred slavery, she paradoxically loved slave-grown cotton. It was one of the country’s highest imports and thousands of textile workers livelihoods depended upon it. Britain simply couldn’t turn her back on the south and its biggest product. The second reason really accounting for Britain’s refusal to take sides with the north, and somewhat favoring of the south was that many upper-class Britons identified more with the South. This was due to the more stratified Southern society; the socialites that made up the power structure in Britain felt a closer kinship to the Southern planter
class. The final reason was most Northerners, Abraham Lincoln included, cited the preservation of the union rather than slavery as the reason for the war. This omission of slavery as the cause allowed Britain to ease their consciences that any support for the south would be support for slavery. I will thus look at how Lincoln thought the Emancipation Proclamation would turn the tide of British sentiment, and how Britons actually responded to the Proclamation.

There has been a vast amount of historical literature written about Abraham Lincoln. However, this literature is decreased dramatically when the focus narrows down to foreign affairs during his presidency. The major overall theme from almost all the historians I have looked at is that British sentiment toward the north did not increase after the Emancipation, despite the fact that they were for abolition. In fact, the chances of British intervention, either through mediation or on the side of the Confederacy, actually initially increased after the proclamation as they feared the north was using this measure as an incendiary tactic to get the slave population to rise up in violence. The oldest and still to this day one of the most useful sources on the topic is E.D. Adams’ 1924 book *Great Britain and the Civil War*. One of the next major works on foreign affairs during the Civil War came during 1992 with Howard Jones’ *Union in Peril*. Jones’ next work on the topic, *Abraham Lincoln and a New Birth of Freedom: Union and Slavery in the Diplomacy of the War* focused on just the British reaction to the Proclamation. In 1999 Dean Mahin write *One War at a Time* focusing on Lincoln’s navigation of foreign diplomacy and it provides another good look at the British response.

The first real serious look at how the British responded to Lincoln’s Proclamation or foreign affairs during the Civil War in general was Adams in the 1920s. Adams’ writings on the proclamation reveal two things; first although Lincoln was primarily concerned about the domestic impact of the proclamation, he believed that it would deter Britain and other European
nations from interfering on the side of the south. Adams argues that Britain actually thought even more of interfering in the American Conflict following the news of the Emancipation Proclamation. Jones differs slightly from Adams in that he believes that even after Britain declared neutrality, they still favored the Union due to their realization that supporting the south was supporting slavery. Jones writes that some in the British government were still confused about the exact role of slavery in the war. Some believed that since the North had not declared Emancipation upon the South’s secession slavery was not the real issue, others believed that the separation of North and South would ensure slavery’s end. The Emancipation Proclamation didn’t directly influence Britain to stay out of the war. However, it eliminated slavery as a consideration, allowing Britain to only consider how intervention would directly affect them. Mahin emphasizes Lincoln’s belief that the Emancipation would automatically mean the end of British interference. Mahin cites previous historians who claim that the Proclamation ended any chances of a British intervention, but then counteracts that with the statement that intervention still seemed very real as late as February 1863, 4 months after the initial Proclamation. In addition to the secondary sources I mentioned in my historiography, I will be consulting books by Amanda Foreman, Doris Kearns Goodwin, David Donald, and D.P. Crooks.

As far as my research goes, most of my primary sources will come from across the Atlantic. British newspaper archives, diaries and memoirs of British MPs, and journals of ordinary Britons, particularly textile workers, will be at the heart of my research. From the American perspective I will be looking at the personal papers of Lincoln, Secretary of State William Seward, head of the Senate’s foreign relations Committee Charles Sumner, and the diplomat to Britain, Charles Francis Adams. The British diplomat in D.C., Lord Lyons’ writings

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1 Howard Jones, Union in Peril, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press) pg 54
2 Ibid.
will also be used, as well as diaries and papers from embassy members for both nations. Thankfully, many of these British sources have been digitized, making my research a lot easier and cheaper than it would have been twenty years ago. Most of the secondary sources I made note of are in Atkins Library, though there are a few that I will need to use interlibrary loan to access. It would be hard to put any of these sources above the others in terms of importance. The correspondence of diplomats and other government officials will obviously be crucial as they will show the opinions of the men who had the power to intervene in the war. Newspapers and cartoons are extremely important as they will show how some of the more educated people in Britain thought about the Proclamation, as well as what the masses would have been reading. The working class’s voice is crucial as it will show me how those most affected by the Civil War and coinciding depletion of cotton viewed the Proclamation and how Britain should react.

The secondary sources I have chosen for my research will all be important because they all provide a glimpse of U.S.-British relations during the Civil War. A few of these works hone in on the role slavery played in these relations and how the Emancipation Proclamation affected British neutrality. These books will provide a tremendous foundation for me to build on, both in terms of the research they’ve already done as well as providing me with multiple sources to investigate on my own. My primary source research will of course be important because I will be looking first-hand at the players in this issue and their thoughts and feelings. Hansard will provide me with transcripts of Parliament meetings. With this I will be able to see what MPs made pro-South proposals and what response they were met with. The British papers of the day, be they the Times, London Spectator, or Illustrated News all provide me with a representation of British feelings on the topic. In some cases these papers served as government mouthpieces, providing admissions that government officials might be wary of coming out themselves and
saying. With these sources I will be able to get a firm grasp of U.S.-British relations prior to the Civil War, Britain’s feelings on the secession movement, and finally Britain’s views throughout the war.

I wrote my thesis question in the introduction but it bears repeating. How did Britain respond to the Emancipation Proclamation? Another way to put it would be how did the Emancipation Proclamation affect Britain’s feelings toward the U.S. Civil War? With this question I will be looking at the British government, public, and press reactions. I will also be examining how Lincoln expected Britain to respond, as well as the contrast between this expectation and the actual response. I will look at both initial reactions, the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862 and the final one in January 1863. I will also look at the long-term response, how it changed Britain’s role or feelings in the final two years of the war. No matter how much has been written on a topic, you always want to bring in some fresh research. With this topic I hope to shed some light on the long-term effect of the Emancipation Proclamation. I want to investigate whether it ultimately kept Britain from intervening on the side of the south or trying to mediate between north and south.

There in a nutshell is what I propose to focus on with my honors research. In conclusion, I will reiterate that my main focus is to answer the question of how Britain responded to the Emancipation Proclamation. I will be studying this reaction, both to the initial Proclamation as well as the final one. I will be looking at reactions from British government officials, newspapers, and workers. In addition to studying this reaction I will look at relations between the North and Britain prior to and following the Emancipation Proclamation. With this I can understand how the Proclamation hindered or improved these relations. I will be trying to shed
some new light on this as I don’t believe a lot of historians have really looked at how the
Emancipation Proclamation affected Britain’s ideas of the Civil War.

Lay Summary on Britain’s Reaction to Emancipation Proclamation

For my honors topic I have chosen to look at how the British responded to the
Emancipation Proclamation. Most people do not realize that Great Britain thought very seriously
about recognizing the Confederate States through the first couple years of the war. Around the
time of the initial Emancipation Proclamation, late 1862, they were very close to either this
recognition, or mediating between the north and south. Due to this, my study of this reaction to
the Proclamation will look at how it affected their feelings of intervention in the Civil War. My
study of the reaction will be two-fold; I will look at how they initially responded to the
Proclamation, as well as how it affected them in the long-term. When I say that I’ll be studying
the British reaction, I mean that I will study every level of society in Britain. I will of course be
looking at how the British cabinet and parliament reacted, as well as the press, and finally, the
British worker. My research will involve both primary and secondary sources. That is, both
sources from people who were alive during the Civil War in either Britain or America, and
sources from historians who have written on the topic many years later. Part of my paper will in
fact be a historiography, which is writing about how other historians have written about this
topic.

I will start my paper by looking at U.S.-British relations just prior to the war, particularly
slavery’s role. Slavery still existed in the U.S. of course, but it had been abolished for some years
in Britain. This contributed to some tension between the two nations. At the beginning of
secession, and the outbreak of the Civil War, I will shift my focus to how Britain viewed this
breakup. Something the reader will likely find curious is that though Britain was against slavery, she in some ways leaned towards the south early on. This was due in large part to cotton, which was one of Britain’s biggest import and provided work for hundreds of thousands of textile workers. The early part of my paper will really delve into how cotton, slavery, and other factors affected Britain’s judgment of the war. The heart of my paper will revolve around October 1862 to February 1863. These months are so important because they encompass Britain on the brink of mediating between the Union and Confederacy, and both the preliminary and final Emancipation Proclamation, as well as Britain’s reactions. After really digging into how Britain responded to both of these Proclamations and how it changed their view of the war, I will study the final two years of the war and British sentiment at this point. The overarching question I am really looking to ask with this paper is how did Britain respond to the Emancipation Proclamation? Did it deter them from involving themselves in the Civil War or was its impact minimal?

I hope that provided a clear and concise summary of my honors research. In conclusion, I will reiterate that my main focus is to answer the question of how Britain responded to the Emancipation Proclamation. I will be studying this reaction, both to the preliminary Proclamation as well as the final one. I will be looking at reactions from British government officials, newspapers, and workers. In addition to studying this reaction I will look at relations between the North and Britain prior to and following the Emancipation Proclamation. With this, I can understand how the Proclamation hindered or improved these relations.
Primary Sources


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