



---

2021

## "Good Neighbourhood": Canada and the United States' Contentious Relationship During the Civil War

Michael R. D. Connolly  
*University of Ottawa*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/gcjcwe>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

[Share feedback](#) about the accessibility of this item.

---

### Recommended Citation

Connolly, Michael R. D. (2021) "'Good Neighbourhood': Canada and the United States' Contentious Relationship During the Civil War," *The Gettysburg College Journal of the Civil War Era*: Vol. 11, Article 5. Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/gcjcwe/vol11/iss1/5>

This open access article is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact [cupola@gettysburg.edu](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

## "Good Neighbourhood": Canada and the United States' Contentious Relationship During the Civil War

### Abstract

For the majority of the Civil War, Canadians were divided in their loyalties to the Union and to the South. However, in 1864, after years of sending agents and conspirators into Canada, the South became bolder in their affairs north of the border. These efforts culminated into two attacks, planned and executed from Canada by the South: The seizing of the *Philo Parsons* on Lake Erie on September 19, 1864; and the raid on St. Albans, Vermont, a month later, on October 19, 1864. These two attacks forced Canada and Great Britain to reassess their neutrality and, under pressure from the Union, Canada had to adopt more stringent neutrality laws. Canada also lost its nearly unfettered access to the much-needed American market when the Union cancelled the Reciprocity Treaty in early 1865.

### Keywords

Canada, Diplomacy, Philo Parsons, St. Albans Raid

**“GOOD NEIGHBOURHOOD”:  
CANADA AND AMERICA’S CONTENTIOUS  
RELATIONSHIP DURING THE CIVIL WAR**

**Michael R. D. Connolly** | *University of Ottawa*

On May 30, 1867, Jefferson Davis, former president of the Confederate States of America, arrived in Toronto following his imprisonment after the Civil War. “I thank you for the honour you have shown me,” he exclaimed to the crowd that had gathered to welcome him for his five-month visit; “May peace and prosperity be forever the blessing of Canada, for she has been the asylum of many of my friends, as she is now an asylum for myself... May God bless you all.”<sup>1</sup>

During the Civil War, Canada became a safe haven for Americans on either side of the Mason-Dixon line. Draft-dodgers, refugees, traitors, diplomats, and agitators all made the Province their home for a multitude of reasons. Yet while both Northern and Southern agents spent their efforts spying on each other and reporting intelligence back to their respective capitals, the Confederacy accomplished far more in Canada than the Union. In 1864, after years of courting politicians in Great Britain as well as Canada, Confederates decided to push their luck from across the northern border. Their planning culminated in two attacks executed from Canada: The seizure of the *Philo Parsons* on Lake Erie on September 19, 1864, and the raid on St. Albans, Vermont in

---

<sup>1</sup> Adam Mayers, *Dixie & the Dominion: Canada, the Confederacy, and the War for the Union* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2003), 20.

the following month. These attacks forced Great Britain to reassess its neutrality and Canada to adopt more stringent neutrality laws under pressure from the Union. They damaged the Confederacy's image in turn among Canadians who had previously been hospitable to Southern partisans, with figures such as Clement Vallandigham—an anti-war Democrat exiled from the North and then deported from the South—earlier finding refuge in Ontario. But the impact of the raids was far from universal, and many Canadians continued to hope for a Confederate victory well into the final year of the war. This article examines how and why so many Southerners, all the way up to Jefferson Davis, found their way in Canada during the and after the American Civil War.

### **Canadian Considerations**

The Civil War coincided with a growing sense of Canadian national identity.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, attitudes toward the war centred around three primary issues: The prospect of a stronger Canada when faced with a divided America; the morality of slavery; and republicanism as an alternative political structure. As historian Sydney F. Wise put it, most

---

<sup>2</sup> In 1841, British possessions in North America were merged into the Province of Canada, consisting of Canada West (also known as Upper Canada, or Ontario) and Canada East (also known as Lower Canada, or Quebec). Due in part to the conditions created by the American Civil War, the 1860s saw increased calls for the United Canadas to join with other British colonies in a single Canadian Confederation, governed by one Parliament and colonial administration. The Province merged with Nova Scotia and New Brunswick into the Dominion of Canada on July 1, 1867, laying the foundations for the modern Canadian state.

Canadians were not “pro-North” or “pro-South,” but rather “anti-North” or “anti-South.”<sup>3</sup> From the American Revolution onward, the United States posed a constant threat to Canada, its territory, and its parliamentary democracy. This was a fact widely recognized by colonists and Britons alike. For many Canadians, it was clear that a strong Union was more likely to attack its northern neighbour than a divided one. Moreover, the British government believed that by inclining its sympathies toward the South—through the buying and selling of contraband, the harbouring of fugitives, and diplomatic recognition of the Confederacy—it might be able to prevent Canada from falling victim to the doctrine of Manifest Destiny.<sup>4</sup>

Given these considerations, Canadian politicians greeted the outbreak of war with some enthusiasm. In 1861, Joint Premier of the Province of Canada John A. Macdonald<sup>5</sup> expressed his belief that the South would gain independence from the United States: “If they [Americans] are to be

---

<sup>3</sup> Sydney F. Wise, *God’s Peculiar Peoples: Essays on Political Culture in Nineteenth Century Canada* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1993), 138.

<sup>4</sup> George Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 217-21.

<sup>5</sup> From its formation in 1841, the Province of Canada was governed by a Parliament with equal representation from Canada West and Canada East; this is the legislature referenced throughout this paper. Each region’s delegation was headed by a Premier, with the two men working in tandem as joint heads of government. John A. Macdonald served as Joint Premier from Canada West from 1856 to 1862 and again from 1864 to 1867. Upon Confederation, the Provincial legislature was replaced with the modern-day Parliament and Macdonald became Canada’s first prime minister.

severed in two, as severed I believe they will be, they will be two great, two noble, two free nations [that] will exist in the place of one.”<sup>6</sup> Thomas D’Arcy McGee, Macdonald’s ally in Parliament and a fellow Conservative, voiced much the same sentiment in an 1863 letter to the *Toronto Globe*: “If stability be essential to good government, [the United States] have not had stability, and therefore, their description of government cannot be good either for themselves or for others.”<sup>7</sup>

In Macdonald and McGee’s view, the United States was doomed because it had failed to create a stable government like that of Great Britain. American institutions, from Congress to the presidency, lent inherent instability to the state. Further, by changing its head of state so frequently (prior to the Civil War, the United States had not had a two-term president since Andrew Jackson three decades earlier), the US government was unable to settle its affairs before another president from another party could take power with a new set of policies, patrons, and cabinet appointments. With a change in administration every four years from 1837 to 1861, it is easy to understand why Macdonald and McGee thought the United States was not built for longevity. For these men, the Civil War was but the natural outgrowth of republican democracy.

George Brown, an adversary of Macdonald’s in the liberal Reform movement and founding editor of *The Globe*,

---

<sup>6</sup> Richard J. Gwyn, *John A: The Man Who Made Us* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2007), 245.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas D’Arcy McGee, “Letter From the Hon. Mr. McGee: A Fair Trial for the Monarchical Principle,” *The Globe* (Toronto), July 6, 1863.

was of a similar mind. In an article from 1849, Brown attacked the United States for its preservation of slavery and Canadian annexationists for their desire to join the failing republic: “We turn... to this side of the Atlantic and ask what has the great and swelling Republic of the United States done for Freedom? We answer—nothing. We say it has gone back since it started into existence from its connexion with England.”<sup>8</sup> An ardent abolitionist, Brown believed that America’s failure stemmed not from its republican institutions per se, but because it had failed to end slavery like Great Britain had done in the early nineteenth century. He was Garrisonian in his condemnation:

It is difficult to believe that the Government will be perpetually on the side of freedom, when the very preservation of that unholy bond, the Union, is based on the principle that in vast tracts of their country the human mind is placed under Russian restraint, that it is death in some places to teach children to read if they have a drop of coloured blood in their veins; that for a man to speak of freedom is imprisonment or possibly death from a lawless mob... They have maintained their own rights as the Emperors of Russia and Austria maintain theirs, but they have as little regard for liberty or the rights of others as these tyrants have.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> George Brown, “What Has Republicanism Done for Freedom?” *The Globe* (Toronto), December 6, 1849.

<sup>9</sup> Brown, “What Has Republicanism Done for Freedom?”

Brown detested America for its hypocrisy. The United States styled itself as the land of liberty, yet continued to preserve slavery and even expand it throughout the continent. It laid claim to liberalism, and while it had a democracy in name, its ruling elite harboured similar attitudes toward the lower classes as European autocrats.

Brown's hatred of slavery inclined him to support the Union when the war broke out, but he remained distrustful of the North's republican tradition. Macdonald and McGee, for their part, were far more concerned for Canada and its future than the liberty of American slaves. In July 1861, Conservatives in Parliament cheered the Confederate victory at the First Battle of Bull Run until they were angrily silenced by Macdonald, as he understood the British government's need for strict neutrality.<sup>10</sup> Yet sympathies for the South did not break along party lines; there were also a number of Liberals who expressed support for the Confederacy. Malcolm Colin Cameron, a Liberal politician from Ontario, stated in 1865 that "he had no hesitation in declaring that his feeling and sympathy were more aroused by the manly and brave fight the people of the Southern States were making for their independence, than by the attempts of the North to put them down." This remark came while debating an immigration bill before Parliament. Brown responded by contrasting Cameron's love of British

---

<sup>10</sup> Gwyn, *John A*, 245.

freedom and his “sympathy with those who were fighting to keep 4,000,000 slaves in bondage.”<sup>11</sup>

In short, Canadian feelings toward the Civil War were consistently mixed. As they argued over what shape their own country would take throughout the 1860s, many Canadians held an independent South to be in the national interest. A successful rebellion would prove the United States a failed experiment, demonstrating the rightfulness of Canada’s place in the British Empire to annexationists. For others, such as George Brown, a Confederate victory would spell doom for the millions of enslaved people south of the Mason-Dixon. While supportive of the Union effort, it is important to remember that Canadian abolitionists were often as hostile to republicanism as their pro-Southern counterparts. Following in the longer tradition of British abolitionism, they forcefully opposed slavery without questioning Canada’s broader political constitution.

### **Rebels in the Great White North**

Divided attitudes toward the war did not prevent Canada from sheltering one of the Union’s best-known Southern partisans. Congressman Clement Vallandigham was a notorious Peace Democrat who, having lost his re-election to the House after Republicans in the Ohio state legislature gerrymandered his district, was arrested for delivering an anti-Lincoln speech and exiled to the Confederacy in the

---

<sup>11</sup> “Our Relations with Canada: Interesting Debate in the Provincial Parliament. The Alien Bill upon its Second Reading,” *The New York Times*, February 3, 1865.

summer of 1863.<sup>12</sup> However, he was equally unwanted in the South. Diarist Mary Boykin Chesnut thought Vallandigham useless to the Southern cause, writing on July 8, 1863 that “I am sure we could not trust him to do us any good, or to do the Yankees any harm. The Coriolanus business is played out.”<sup>13</sup> Referencing Shakespeare’s tragedy, Chesnut believed Vallandigham had outlived his usefulness the moment he lost his seat in Congress.

Realizing the dearth of political prospects in the South, and sure that he would be killed if he returned to the Union, Vallandigham was more than happy when Jefferson Davis “ordered the Confederacy’s problematic guest to be escorted to Wilmington, North Carolina, where he could board a blockade runner bound for neutral British territory.”<sup>14</sup> According to historian Robin Winks, Vallandigham was “fêted” at a “public dinner in Montreal” upon arrival in Canada in July 1863. He was visited by a number of elite Canadians, including William Walker, manager of the Grand Trunk Railway, as well as Governor Alexander Dallas of Rupert’s Land and Premier Macdonald himself. Vallandigham was even introduced on the floor of the Parliament by Thomas D’Arcy McGee.<sup>15</sup> Given the Southern sympathies of many in government (see above),

---

<sup>12</sup> Fergus M. Bordewich, *Congress at War: How Republican Reformers Fought the Civil War, Defied Lincoln, Ended Slavery, and Remade America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2020), 173.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Boykin Chesnut, *A Diary from Dixie* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1905), 216.

<sup>14</sup> Bordewich, *Congress at War*, 231.

<sup>15</sup> Robin Winks, *Canada and the United States: The Civil War Years* (Montreal: Harvest House, 1971), 143.

Canadian Tories were more than willing to accommodate their Copperhead visitor. While he had been worthless to the Confederacy while in exile there, from Canada Vallandigham was able to forward his political agenda and launch a bid for governor of Ohio.

Once settled, Vallandigham ran his gubernatorial campaign from Windsor, Ontario, just across the river from Detroit. He was assisted by Jacob Thompson, former United States Secretary of the Interior and Inspector General of the Confederate States Army, who was sent to Canada as a leader of the Confederate Secret Service. Thompson offered logistical support from the Confederate government. In turn, Vallandigham offered information regarding public opinion toward the war in the Union, however skewed his own perspective may have been. Thompson even offered money and arms to spark a Copperhead uprising in the Midwest<sup>16</sup> after Vallandigham insisted that a “feeling of fatigue and rising anger had been building in the North following the staggering casualties at Gettysburg.” He believed that with only a slight push, “an uprising in the Midwest would create a second confederacy and end the war.”<sup>17</sup> None of this was true. But whether he had received inaccurate information or had simply misread the results of the 1862-63 midterm elections, Vallandigham, in a direct attack on British neutrality, was working to incite violence in the United States.

---

<sup>16</sup> Cathryn J. Prince, *Burn the Town and Sack the Banks: Confederates Attack Vermont!* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006), 116.

<sup>17</sup> Mayers, *Dixie & the Dominion*, 28.

Both Canadian and American authorities, well aware of the comings and goings of Confederate agents in Canada, kept a close eye on Vallandigham. Rumours circulated throughout the Union that Vallandigham was “conniving” with Canadians and Confederates “to let an armed steamer pass through the Welland Canal” into New York; the Rochester *Evening Express* further suggested that a “Canadian Gunboat” was “on the way to burn Sandusky [Ohio],” a city on the shores of Lake Erie.<sup>18</sup> Though false, these rumours damaged Canada’s credibility in the eyes of many Northerners. The fact that Canada was known to harbour Southern fugitives and agents—and especially that it hosted the likes of Vallandigham in a town where he could see Detroit from his bedroom window—did not endear Northerners to their foreign neighbours.

The Union’s fears were almost realized from across the northern border on September 19, 1864. That night, a Virginian named John Yates Beall, Captain Charles H. Cole of the Confederate Army, and a group of around thirty Southern sympathizers attempted to free the Confederate soldiers held on Johnson’s Island, which housed a prison camp three miles off Sandusky Bay, Ohio. Organized in Canada, the plan was fairly straightforward. Cole was to prevail upon the captain of the USS *Michigan*, an ironclad warship stationed in Sandusky, to drug and subdue the ship’s crew. Then Beall and his company would steal a ferry (the steamship *Philo Parsons*), regroup with Cole, overtake the *Michigan*, turn its guns on Johnson’s Island, and liberate the

---

<sup>18</sup> Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 148.

camp’s 2,500 Confederate prisoners. Finally, they would organize the soldiers into a small army and ravage the Midwest,<sup>19</sup> although how exactly the conspirators intended to lead thousands of “sick, injured, and malnourished officers” was never fully explained.<sup>20</sup> But the raid did not go as planned, as the captain and crew of the *Michigan* caught on to Cole’s act fairly quickly. By the time Beall and his compatriots had arrived at Sandusky on the *Philo Parsons*, it was clear that Cole had not fulfilled his part of the mission. The crew returned to Windsor and scuttled the ferry. In their haste, however, Beall had broken British neutrality law by stealing baggage and arms from the *Philo Parsons*’ passengers, as well as the ship’s piano and one hundred dollars belonging to the ship’s captain. Because the conspirators had robbed the ship and violated Britain’s neutrality, Canada was able to extradite them to the United States on charges of robbery.<sup>21</sup>

The Canadian press was outraged by the attack. Even traditionally pro-Southern newspapers such as the *Toronto Leader* believed that the raiders had “abused Canadian hospitality” in their commandeering of the *Philo Parsons*.<sup>22</sup> The colonial government was equally incensed. Governor General Charles Monck, who had urged Parliament to increase firepower on the Great Lakes earlier in the war, feared what the plot might spell for British neutrality.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Mayers, *Dixie & the Dominion*, 28.

<sup>20</sup> Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 288.

<sup>21</sup> Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 290.

<sup>22</sup> Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 290-91.

<sup>23</sup> Prince, *Burn the Town and Sack the Banks*, 90.

Monck wanted to ensure Canada's ability to thwart any future Southern incursions, requesting greater legal authority from Westminster to "seize vessels and munitions on the lakes, including the incendiary materials used by the rebels to fire on American cities." He also sought the authority to expel anyone suspected of violating British neutrality, or at least to imprison them, in his language, on charges of "levying war from Her Majesty's Dominions against a friendly power."<sup>24</sup>

Monck knew that there was a greater problem at hand: that his government had been unable to track the actions of Southern agents in Canada. He was aware that spies and agitators were operating in the country, but had been promised by agent James Holcombe in May 1864 that the Confederacy "did not plan any hostile acts from Canadian soil," and that its actors "would not violate any local or Imperial laws."<sup>25</sup> By September of the same year, it was obvious that Monck could not trust what Confederate agents had told him.

At the same time as the *Philo Parsons* incident, the Confederacy was steadily losing control of its own territory. Generals Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman had already pushed deep into the heart of the South (Union forces entered Atlanta just two weeks before the Sandusky raid), and the upcoming presidential election in November meant that Confederates needed to do whatever they could to terrorize pro-Union voters and embolden Copperhead

---

<sup>24</sup> Mayers, *Dixie & the Dominion*, 90.

<sup>25</sup> Mayers, *Dixie & the Dominion*, 35.

Democrats. While sliding autumn temperatures made another naval attack from Canada unlikely, the Union was forced to temporarily withdraw from the Rush-Bagot Treaty—a naval disarmament pact between the United States and Britain signed after the War of 1812—and reinforce the Great Lakes out of precaution.<sup>26</sup> As the Union believed Great Britain to be failing its promise of neutrality and knew that many powerful Canadians harboured Southern sympathies out of self-interest, this move only worked to heighten diplomatic tensions.

Northerners were still reeling from the raid on Lake Erie when they learned of a second incursion from across the border. This time, however, the consequences would be far greater. The raid on St. Albans, Vermont occurred on October 19, 1864, exactly one month after the *Philo Parsons* incident and the same day as a decisive Union victory at the Battle of Cedar Creek. In the days leading up to the attack, Southern agents arrived in the small trading town just south of the border with Quebec. Posing as Canadians in a hunting club,<sup>27</sup> the men went practically unnoticed by the locals, who “never paid much heed to the comings and goings of strangers,” as they were accustomed to traders and travelers frequenting their town.<sup>28</sup> At three o’clock in the afternoon on October 19, a twenty-one-year-old Kentuckian named Bennett Young, who had previously served with the expert Confederate raider John Hunt Morgan,<sup>29</sup> stepped out onto

---

<sup>26</sup> Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 293.

<sup>27</sup> Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 298.

<sup>28</sup> Prince, *Burn the Town and Sack the Banks*, 126.

<sup>29</sup> Prince, *Burn the Town and Sack the Banks*, 124.

his hotel's front porch, waved his Navy Colt revolver in the air and loudly proclaimed: "In the name of the Confederate States, I take possession of St. Albans!"<sup>30</sup>

Young and his band proceeded to sack the three banks of St. Albans, stealing horses and weapons in the name of the Confederacy. Aware of the problems that had hindered the *Philo Parson* affair, Robin Winks writes that Young "had instructed his men clearly to stamp the raid as an act of war, but despite his own announcement from the hotel porch, his followers left themselves open to serious charges by the way in which they identified themselves."<sup>31</sup> The raid itself lasted only a few hours but left a devastating psychological impact on the inhabitants of St. Albans. The goal was not to rape and pillage, but to strike fear into the hearts of Northerners and give them a taste of what Southerners were feeling at the same time. As one of the raiders put it:

I wish to say that killing women and children was the last thing thought of. We wanted to let the North understand that there were two sides to this war, and that they can't be rolling in wealth and comfort, while we in the South are bearing all the hardships and privations. In retaliation for [General Philip H.] Sheridan's atrocities in the Shenandoah Valley, we desired to destroy property, not the lives of women

---

<sup>30</sup> Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 299.

<sup>31</sup> Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 299.

and children, although that would, of course, have followed in its train.<sup>32</sup>

Today these actions would be labeled as terrorism, but in the context of nineteenth-century warfare, they were understood as revenge. The raiders were keenly aware that if Southern attacks in other areas were as successful as they had been in Vermont, if the *Philo Parsons* plot had gone off as planned, if Confederates had a proper army to invade the Union from Canada, then they could copy the scorched-earth tactics that Northern forces were using in their homelands.

At the raid’s conclusion, the agents rushed back across the Canadian border, followed by a posse of townspeople from St. Albans. Though they failed to capture most of the attackers, the pursuers did get a hold of Young after crossing into Quebec. But the St. Albans men, with Young in tow, were stopped by a British officer, who informed them that they were in violation of Canadian neutrality. The soldier then took Young to join the other raiders, who had already been apprehended by British forces.<sup>33</sup>

Canadians were swift to condemn the raid. An article in *The Globe*, printed two days after the attack, protested that “Our country affords an asylum for thousands of Southern refugees, and it would be most infamous for the Confederate government to send men here commissioned to plunder our neighbours with whom we are at peace.” The author also

---

<sup>32</sup> Prince, *Burn the Town and Sack the Banks*, 129.

<sup>33</sup> Mayers, *Dixie & the Dominion*, 110.

hoped that “the Confederate robbers were acting upon their own responsibility” rather than on orders from the government.<sup>34</sup> Canadians had every reason to be outraged: they had opened their doors to Southerners who, in turn, stabbed them in the back whenever it became convenient. The Confederates were also in a difficult position. By October 1864, with William Tecumseh Sherman fighting through Georgia and Philip Sheridan’s Valley campaign brought to a successful conclusion in Virginia, the tide had shifted in the Union’s favour. It was clear that the Confederacy would need to turn to increasingly drastic actions, even if it meant provoking a friendly nation like Great Britain.

Yet no nation was so provoked as the Union. Secretary of State William Seward believed that Canadians “were not displaying ‘good neighbourhood’ in permitting such raids to be planned in their midst.”<sup>35</sup> For Seward, Canada was responsible for the Confederate agents in its territory, whose conduct “might endanger peace with Canada.” Seward’s feelings were not helped by the fact that, during his trial, Bennett Young claimed that he was sent to Canada “as a commissioned officer in the provisional army of the Confederate States and that he had violated no law of Canada.”<sup>36</sup> Young contended that the raid was not planned in Canada and therefore did not violate British neutrality.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> “The St. Albans Raid,” *The Globe*, October 22, 1864.

<sup>35</sup> Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 303.

<sup>36</sup> James Morton Callahan, *The Diplomatic History of the Southern Confederacy* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 235.

<sup>37</sup> Prince, *Burn the Town and Sack the Banks*, 204.

But the Union took the matter seriously, and was compelled to take diplomatic action in response.

### **Wars and Rumours of Wars**

In his annual address to Congress on December 6, 1864, President Abraham Lincoln discussed the situation with Canada. He brought forward his recommendations for retaliatory action against the Province:

In view of the insecurity of life and property in the region adjacent to the Canadian border, by reason of recent assaults and depredations committed by inimical and desperate persons who are harbored there, it has been thought proper to give notice that after the expiration of six months... the United States must hold themselves at liberty to increase their naval armaments upon the lakes... The condition of the border will necessarily come into consideration in connection with the questions of continuing or modifying the rights of transit from Canada through the United States, as well as the regulation of imposts, which were temporarily established by the Reciprocity Treaty of the 5th of June, 1854.<sup>38</sup>

The Reciprocity Treaty had eliminated customs tariffs between the United States and Canada, creating an economic

---

<sup>38</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Annual Message to Congress,” in *The Civil War: The Final Year Told by Those Who Lived It*, ed. Aaron Sheehan-Dean (New York: Library of America, 2014), 497.

boom north of the border. The prospect of its revocation would deprive Canada of one of its most lucrative trading markets and force it to rely more heavily on Great Britain for imports.

Lincoln maintained that “the colonial authorities of Canada are not deemed to be intentionally unjust or unfriendly towards the United States... there is every reason to expect that... they will take the necessary measures to prevent new incursions across the border.”<sup>39</sup> He was not looking to attack Canada, but to prod Canadians into doing what he wanted of them: stop Confederate agents from working in the country and draft stronger neutrality legislation. He was also aware of the economic damage he could inflict to leverage his hand. An article from the *New York Albion* on December 17 questioned Lincoln’s ability to abrogate the Reciprocity Treaty and criticized his administration for failing to protect the Union: “The termination of the Reciprocity Treaty appears likely to pass both Houses [of Congress] at a gallop. Yet it is by no means certain that the Executive will be in a hurry to act in this manner... it does not desire to quarrel with the North West, whose interests lie [in the continuance of the Treaty].”<sup>40</sup> In other words, Lincoln needed to pay heed to the Old Northwest (known today as the Upper Midwest), where many Copperheads remained influential and where the Reciprocity Treaty was seen as an economic benefit. Yet in

---

<sup>39</sup> Lincoln, “Annual Message to Congress,” 497.

<sup>40</sup> “The St. Albans’ Raiders: A Canadian Difficulty,” *The Albion: A Journal of News, Politics and Literature* (New York), December 17, 1864.

the time between Lincoln’s address to Congress on December 6 and the *Albion* article from December 17, the judge presiding over the St. Albans case in Canada had handed down a ruling that further enraged the Northern public.

On December 13, 1864, after more than a month of hearings, Judge Charles-Joseph Coursol ruled that he lacked a warrant from the Governor General and that no machinery for extradition existed under the Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1842.<sup>41</sup> “Consequently,” he said, “I am bound in law, justice and fairness to order the immediate release of the prisoners upon all charges brought before me. Let the prisoners be discharged.”<sup>42</sup> Needless to say, this was a result that neither Canada nor the Union was hoping for. On December 14, the United States Senate passed two resolutions condemning the ruling, and on the same day Governor General Monck stated that the ruling was absurd and ordered that the raiders be re-arrested.<sup>43</sup> He also urged the government to investigate Coursol for any possible misconduct.<sup>44</sup> Further, on December 17, the US State Department issued the passport controls that Lincoln had threatened in his message to Congress, bringing cross-border traffic to a halt.<sup>45</sup> In the span of just four months, Southern agents in Canada had gone from refugees to unwelcome guests, and Anglo-American relations from strained to

---

<sup>41</sup> Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 313.

<sup>42</sup> Prince, *Burn the Town and Sack the Banks*, 211.

<sup>43</sup> Prince, *Burn the Town and Sack the Banks*, 214.

<sup>44</sup> Mayers, *Dixie & the Dominion*, 176.

<sup>45</sup> Mayers, *Dixie & the Dominion*, 190.

nearly broken. The raiders were indeed re-arrested following Monck's order and put on trial with a different judge, but the damage was already done.

From late December 1864 to April 1865, the threat of war loomed over Canada and Great Britain like the sword of Damocles. One newspaper referred to the threat of invasion as “a war in anticipation” with the Union.<sup>46</sup> As the United States maintained a strong professional army that had been fighting for over four years, it was doubtful that Canada would remain in British hands were war to break out. For Confederates, a war between Britain and the Union would be a best-case scenario, as they believed the North would be unable to fight a two-front war. A clerk in the Confederate War Department wrote that “A war with England would be our peace,” and the diarist George Templeton Strong believed that a military reaction to Coursol's ruling “would be an inducement for Confederates to repeat the [St. Albans] raid” to push the North into war.<sup>47</sup> Canadian and British media began to turn even more strongly against the South. The *Telegraph* from Saint John, New Brunswick claimed that “the Confederacy was abusing provincial hospitality in order to embroil Great Britain in war with the United States.”<sup>48</sup> *The Globe* insisted in March 1865 that “There could be but one object in these acts—if at all acts of war—and that would be to occasion war between England and the

---

<sup>46</sup> Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 301.

<sup>47</sup> Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 303.

<sup>48</sup> Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 307.

United States, as such alone could aid their [Confederate] cause.”<sup>49</sup>

Even as General Grant neared Richmond, the Confederacy had a newfound confidence on the world stage. The St. Albans raid had worked spectacularly to incite the Union’s anger against its colonial neighbour, and Canada’s neutrality laws had given Southern agents a chance at freedom. Yet as Robin Winks has written, “Any satisfaction gained in the South by the daring that the raiders displayed was more than offset by the feeling created in the Canadas that the Confederacy had abused British hospitality... Even papers that had been highly sympathetic to the South, like the *Montreal Evening Telegram* and the *Toronto Leader*, deplored the acts of ‘the brigands.’”<sup>50</sup>

The raids destroyed any remaining credibility the Confederacy may have had in Canada as the fear of war and annexation by the United States increased. Addressing Parliament in February 1865, John A. Macdonald decried “those who had come to make use of our country as the base of operations against the United States, and to induce if possible a war between Great Britain and the United States.”<sup>51</sup> Despite his well-known Southern sympathies, Macdonald was forced to move against the Confederacy to preserve peace with the Union. Even Lord Palmerston, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, acknowledged that the North should be allowed to voice its displeasure. In order

---

<sup>49</sup> “Latest from Montreal: The St. Albans Raid Case. Mr. Devlin’s Argument,” *The Globe* (Toronto), March 22, 1865.

<sup>50</sup> Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 306.

<sup>51</sup> “Our Relations with Canada.”

to avoid “an angry debate” between the two nations, Palmerston recognized that “things did take place of which the United States were justly entitled to complain.”<sup>52</sup> To pacify the Union, both Canada and Britain needed to ensure that another St. Albans would never happen again—and if it did, that its perpetrators could be extradited. In short, they needed to adopt more stringent neutrality laws.

Though it remained officially neutral throughout, the British government’s attitude toward the war had ebbed and flowed with the tide of Southern military fortunes. By 1865 it was confident of a Union victory—and while there were “many well-wishers both to the North and South” in Britain, popular opinion as the war neared its end was summed up in *The Times* of London: The Union and Confederacy “entered into this ill-advised quarrel without consulting us; we wish that they would put an end to it under the same conditions.”<sup>53</sup> This article was reprinted in the *Toronto Globe*, indicating that it spoke for many Canadians as well. Britons had simply grown tired of the war; they had lent assistance to the South when it suited them, but now were ready for the drama to be over with. War weariness was a sentiment understandably shared by the Northern public as well.

In February 1865, Canada’s Parliament finally passed a revised neutrality law in the hopes of preventing an Anglo-American conflict. The bill, dubbed the Alien Act, had three primary components. First, it enabled the Canadian

---

<sup>52</sup> Callahan, *The Diplomatic History of the Southern Confederacy*, 237.

<sup>53</sup> “British Neutrality to be Maintained,” *The Globe* (Toronto), January 31, 1865.

government “to remove from this country aliens who are coming here and seeking an asylum in consequence of war, who may have in their own land by their conduct, proved themselves unworthy of that asylum.” It then cited the Neutrality Act, first ratified by the United States Congress in 1794 and updated in 1838, as an example of American legislation “prevent[ing] incursions into Canada.” Finally, the bill expressed its “purpose of requiring persons manufacturing arms and munitions of war, which might be suspected to be intended to be used in hostilities against the United States, to give an account of them.”<sup>54</sup> The chief goal of the Alien Act was to lessen friction with the United States, and in that it can be counted as a success. Its invocation of the Neutrality Act as a reminder of friendly relations in the past had even come at the suggestion of Secretary Seward.<sup>55</sup>

The Conservative government, however, was not so willing to acknowledge American pressure. In Parliament Macdonald asserted that the act “had been initiated entirely at the suggestion of the Canadian Government, and not from any declaration, suggestion, and so much as expression of desire on the part of the United States Government to have such legislation.” George Brown repeated the claim on the floor of Parliament, adding that “he supported the bill, not as a partisan of North or South, but as a citizen of Canada, anxious to preserve the peace of the country, and prevent war between Great Britain and the United States.”<sup>56</sup> But it was

---

<sup>54</sup> “Our Relations with Canada.”

<sup>55</sup> Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 316.

<sup>56</sup> “Our Relations with Canada.”

obvious that the Alien Act had indeed been drafted at the North's insistence. As a matter of course, it also enumerated the extradition powers that Governor General Monck had earlier requested from London.<sup>57</sup> Although these powers came too late for Monck, they were part of Canada and Britain's efforts to maintain good relations with the United States no matter the outcome of the Civil War. Most pointedly, the act denied Confederates the ability to wage their guerilla war from across the Canadian border. Yet by the time it passed through Parliament, Sherman's March to the Sea had moved into the Carolinas and the Siege of Petersburg was well underway. The South had already lost.

### **Ottawa and Appomattox**

Unfortunately for Canada, the Union was not as forgiving as it would have liked. Despite Parliament's appeals to the Northern government, the United States was unwilling to renew the Reciprocity Treaty. In a letter to British politician John Bright written less than a month before Lee's surrender, Senator Charles Sumner (R-MA) stated the following:

I came into the proposition to give the notice to terminate the Reciprocity Treaty, because I was satisfied that we could not negotiate for its modification, on a footing of equality unless our hands were untied... Congress has separated in good humor, without anxiety for the future, & indeed confident that we are on the verge of peace. My desire is that

---

<sup>57</sup> Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 292.

England should do something to take out the bitterness from the American heart—before the war closes.<sup>58</sup>

Sumner was not opposed to continuing the Reciprocity Treaty, but the *Philo Parsons* incident, the attack on St. Albans, and the harbouring of Southern refugees did not endear the senator to Canada. While he lacked an appetite for armed confrontation after years of bloodshed, he wanted more than the steps already taken in the Alien Act.

Canada did attempt to “take out the bitterness from the American heart.” The Montreal Telegraph Company offered to work with the Union by diverting Confederate messages to Washington, but the State Department refused; according to Seward, the offer was “incompatible with the self respect of the U.S.”<sup>59</sup> The Canadian government also proposed financial restitution for the raid on St. Albans. This effort was more successful than initiatives from the private sector. In April 1865, the government paid a sum of \$60,000 to the three banks of St. Albans in compensation for the money stolen during the attack.<sup>60</sup> Thus the crisis in Canadian-American relations was brought to a close at the same time as the Civil War—even though the Confederacy bore most of the responsibility for the diplomatic nadir.

Canada had demonstrated its willingness to meet American demands in the form of neutrality legislation,

---

<sup>58</sup> Charles Sumner, “Charles Sumner to John Bright,” in *The Civil War*, 631.

<sup>59</sup> Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 326.

<sup>60</sup> Prince, *Burn the Town and Sack the Banks*, 230.

intelligence exchange, and cash. Yet the United States never reinstated the Reciprocity Treaty, which had done so much to grow Canada's economy during its short lifespan. Indeed, the Civil War would impact Anglo- and Canadian-American relations for decades to come. Canada's initial sympathies toward the South provided Confederates with a base for intelligence operations and guerilla warfare. Moreover, its willingness to accommodate other Southern sympathizers like Clement Vallandigham damaged Canada's relationship with the Union, and allowed Confederate agents to feel welcome enough to abuse British hospitality for their own benefit. The *Philo Parsons* affair and the St. Albans raid showed Canadians that many of their Southern guests were not mere refugees, but hostile actors conspiring against their closest neighbour. Canada's deficient neutrality laws pushed Great Britain and the Union closer to war, which would have been of significant benefit to the Confederacy. All of this led to a weakened Canadian economy and restrictions on the free movement of people and goods between Canada and the United States both during and after the Civil War. These conditions led in no small part to Canadian Confederation in 1867 and the foundation of the modern Canadian state.

Canadians were charmed by Confederates. Their charisma and aristocratic ways were similar to those of the English. Anti-Americanism further allowed Canadians to be fooled into a tacit support for Southern agents within their borders, hoping that a fractured Union would lead to a stronger British Empire. What resulted was a plate full of crow for Canada.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

“British Neutrality to be Maintained.” *The Globe* (Toronto), March 22, 1865.

Brown, George. “What Has Republicanism Done for Freedom?” *The Globe* (Toronto), December 6, 1849.

Chesnut, Mary Boykin. *A Diary from Dixie*. New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1905.

“Latest from Montreal: The St. Albans Raid Case. Mr. Devlin’s Argument.” *The Globe* (Toronto), March 22, 1865.

McGee, Thomas D’Arcy. “Letter From the Hon. Mr. McGee: A Fair Trial for the Monarchical Principle.” *The Globe* (Toronto), July 6, 1863.

“Our Relations with Canada: Interesting Debate in the Provincial Parliament. The Alien Bill upon its Second Reading.” *The New York Times*, February 3, 1865.

Sheehan-Dean, Aaron, ed. *The Civil War: The Final Year Told by Those Who Lived It*. New York: Library of America, 2014.

Connolly

“The St. Albans Raid.” *The Globe* (Toronto), October 22, 1865.

“The St. Albans Raiders: A Canadian Difficulty.” *The Albion: A Journal of News, Politics and Literature* (New York), December 17, 1864.

## Secondary Sources

Bordewich, Fergus M. *Congress at War: How Republican Reformers Fought the Civil War, Defied Lincoln, Ended Slavery, and Remade America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2020.

Callahan, James Morton. *The Diplomatic History of the Southern Confederacy*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1968.

Gwyn, Richard. *John A: The Man Who Made Us*. Toronto: Random House Canada, 2007.

Herring, George C. *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776*. Vol. 1, *Years of Power and Ambition: U.S. Foreign Relations, 1776-1921*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Mayers, Adam. *Dixie & the Dominion: Canada, the Confederacy, and the War for the Union*. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2020.

“Good Neighbourhood”

Prince, Cathryn J. *Burn the Town and Sack the Banks: Confederates Attack Vermont!* New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006.

Winks, Robin W. *Canada and the United States: The Civil War Years.* Montreal: Harvest House, 1971.

Wise, Sydney F. *God's Peculiar Peoples: Essays on Political Culture in Nineteenth Century Canada.* Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1993.