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To Make War on Cotton: The Opportunities of Imperial Geography and the British Textile Industry

Clint Alley

Much has been made of the confidence held by Confederate leaders of a quick military victory at the outset of the American Civil War. The concept of defeat on the battlefield was alien to white southerners of all social stations. On the eve of the war, Senator James Hammond of South Carolina, in a speech that has since been dubbed the “Cotton is King” speech, remarked memorably that, if pressed to fight, the South could raise not just a defensive force of peaceful citizens pressed into service, but “an army of soldiers—men brought up on horseback, with guns in their hands” against a northern invasion.¹ Southerners’ belief in their own invincibility before, during, and even *after* the Civil War is a phenomenon that has enjoyed a new birth of attention by scholars over the past decade.

But a topic less-discussed—and arguably more important—than the concept of the self-perception of southern invincibility on the battlefield is the faith held by Confederates in their own economic invincibility. To southern leaders, there was no stronger bulwark than the quality of their cotton, and no fort more impregnable than the

¹ United States Congress. *Appendix to the Congressional Globe: Containing Speeches, Important State Papers, Laws, Etc. of the First Session, Thirty-Fifth Congress*, 70.

world's need for the king of cash crops. The hinge upon which all of their economic hopes and dreams rested was Britain, with its booming textile industry and ravenous cotton mills. Cheap, ready-made clothing was perhaps the most revolutionary aspect of the Industrial Revolution, and southern leaders saw the cotton fields of the South as the soil from which the backbone of the British economy sprang. Later in the "Cotton is King" speech to the United States Senate, Hammond remarked that, should shipments of southern cotton grind to a halt, "England would topple headlong and carry the whole civilized world with her, save the South."²

Southerners' faith in the saving power of southern cotton ran strong throughout the Civil War. Even as Confederate ports became clogged with thousands of tons of baled, unshipped cotton, the trade relationship built around the crop between Britain and the South was the foundation of Confederate hopes for British recognition and the use of the British Navy to destroy the Union naval blockade. However, it was a hope which would remain unrealized: when making their overtures to British diplomats and making their promises of British salvation to embattled southern citizens, Confederate leaders failed to take into account the opportunities presented by the sweeping geography of the British Empire. The tenacity shown by the British textile industry during the American Civil War would serve not only to undermine the Confederate economy during the Civil War and thus unintentionally help the Union to win the war, but would also help to launch, in earnest, the cotton industries of up-and-coming cotton producing parts of the British Empire, particularly Egypt and India.

² Ibid., 70.

However, before examining the evidence of this geographic and economic anomaly, it is important to make a brief apology to the reader and to verify some basic facts. Apologies are necessary because of the dated nature of some of the secondary source material in this paper. The study of the politics and geography of the transatlantic cotton trade is a field that was of great interest to American and British scholars of the early twentieth century, when both the transatlantic cotton trade and the British Empire were still thriving, ever-present parts of the lives of a great many people on both sides of the Atlantic. Indeed, the long-staple cotton trade between Britain and the sea islands of Georgia and the Carolinas carried on much the same as it always had as late as the 1950s. However, regardless of the dated nature of some of the secondary sources, the data contained in these sources are worthy of revisiting, especially when one considers their nearness in time to the events they examine.

As to the basic facts of the cotton trade, primarily, the question must be asked as to how important, in actuality, *was* the cotton trade between Britain and the South during the mid-19th century? Contemporary southerners certainly made much of the relationship, especially when Yankee ears were present. Southern politicians like Senator Hammond, both before and during the war, seemed to regard the economic relationship between the South and Britain as almost symbiotic. In the “Cotton is King” speech, Hammond painted a vivid—and somewhat accurate—picture of southern cotton rescuing both Britain and the North from economic ruin during the Panic of 1857, telling his northern peers in the Senate:

When the abuse of credit had destroyed
credit and annihilated confidence, when

thousands of the strongest commercial houses in the world were coming down, and hundreds of millions of dollars of supposed property evaporating in thin air, when you came to a dead luck, and revolutions were threatened, what brought you up? Fortunately for you, it was the commencement of the cotton season, and we have poured in upon you one million six hundred thousand bales of cotton just at the crisis to save you from destruction.³

But, aside from the fact that southern resilience during the Panic of 1857 was, for the most part, an ephemeral and well-timed stroke of good luck for southern planters, reason would hold that nascent nationalists, especially in an emotionally-charged political atmosphere like that of the United States in the 1850s and 1860s, would naturally tout the economic prowess of their new country. Placing the Confederacy on (or above) the same economic rung as the most powerful empire on earth—an empire which was also in possession of the most powerful navy on earth—was no doubt intended as a potent threat to the North.

But what was the prevailing opinion among Britons regarding the importance of Britain's cotton trade with the South? As an article published in the May 1861 edition of *The North British Review* read, there was no doubt that the trade was an important facet of the British economy, with some Britons going so far as to say that “no trade has

³ Ibid.

ever grown so rapidly or assumed such gigantic proportions.”⁴ In addition to the South supplying five-sevenths of Britain’s imported cotton in 1860, contemporary estimates credited cotton imports with providing work to some four million men, women, and children in the nation’s £65,000,000 textile industry, and projected the industry to experience an unprecedented boom in the coming decades as the world population continued to grow at incredible strides and cotton garments remained among the cheapest and most efficient types of clothing.⁵ The question was whether the southern monopoly on British cotton imports was the keystone of the British economy that Confederate leaders made it out to be. Did British people share Hammond’s sentiment that a disruption in the southern cotton trade would cause England to “topple headlong?”⁶

The answer, as with most things pertaining to Victorian Britain, depended in large part on the social and vocational position of the answerer. Lieutenant-Colonel Arthur James Lyon Fremantle, an officer of the British Army famous for penning a diary of his three months spent travelling the Confederacy during the Civil War, recognized that the trade in cotton was an important relationship. However, Fremantle also intoned that the Confederacy was much more reliant on Britain than vice versa, especially in the event of a southern victory. Waxing prophetic in 1863, Fremantle wrote in his diary that:

⁴ Charles Adams, ed. *Slavery, Secession, & Civil War: Views from the United Kingdom and Europe, 1856-1865* (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2007), 246.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁶ United States Congress, *Congressional Globe*, 70.

The South looks to England for everything when this war is over;—she wants our merchants to buy her cotton, she wants our ships to carry it;— she is willing that England should supply her with all the necessaries which she formerly received from the North.⁷

Although Fremantle's attitude toward the Confederate struggle for independence is generally sympathetic throughout his diary, this passage seems to belie a paternalistic attitude toward the southern economy. As a member of a very old and aristocratic family, educated at Sandhurst and destined for a career of rank, merit, and military glory, it is not surprising that

Fremantle's perspective on the economic situation between the two powers is distant and aloof.

His economic mindset toward the South fits a trend which existed during this period among the British middle- and upper-classes which regarded the import of southern cotton as a means of exerting economic power and influence over the region; a sort of informal imperialism which was introduced before the American Revolution and had continued mostly unchanged in the American South since that time. This idea ran that the South might, indeed, supply a necessary raw material in large quantity, but in the end *southerners would always be*

⁷ Arthur J.L. Fremantle, *Three Months in the Southern States, April-June 1863* (Project Gutenberg, 2007), 229.

much more reliant on the Empire for finished products than Britain relied on the South for cotton, beside the fact that the monopoly on cotton held by the South at the outset of the 1860s would certainly be short lived.

However aloof this attitude might seem, it was rooted in logic more than highhandedness. The simple geography of the British Empire held that an alternate source would arise should the valve of southern cotton be shut by any calamity—manmade or otherwise. *The North British Review* shared this reflection of cotton economy at the outset of the Civil War:

The probabilities are that in 1871 the free labour [non-slaveholding] countries will be able to produce nearly as much cotton as the increased British consumption will require; and with this change, and its accompanying revolution in price, the great Southern monopoly must inevitably be broken up. India will then rival the United States in her production—Africa, begert with free settlements, will supply us with millions of pounds—Greece and Turkey are beginning cotton cultivation—Cyprus has devoted 80,000 acres to it—and Tunis and Australia are moving in the same direction.⁸

⁸ Adams, *Slavery, Secession, & Civil War: Views from the United Kingdom and Europe, 1856-1865*, 247.

Conversely, the British working class saw their lot much more bound with the importation of Confederate cotton than the Fremantles and magazine editors of the world. The fibrous bond between the mill and the field ran especially thick in the “textile towns in Lancashire, Cheshire, Derbyshire, Scotland, and Ulster.”⁹ In these manufacturing regions, southern cotton was the lifeblood of the working class. While many of the textile workers seemed to share the general disdain for slavery common among British people of the time, replacing southern cotton with the still-developing cotton markets of the Empire and other “freelabour” states meant the risk of losing both quality and precious production time. For them, the blockade of southern ports was a matter of urgency; it meant no work, no food, and no security. Had they the means or the interest to read the words of Senator Hammond when he threatened that the whole of the civilized world would come to a screeching halt with no southern cotton, the working classes of the textile regions would no doubt have vehemently agreed; for many of *them*, the world *did* come to a screeching halt.

The effect of the American Civil War on the economy of the cotton districts— particularly in Lancashire, where the lack of cotton decimated the local economy, spurring rampant unemployment, welfare-receipt, and mass-emigration—was so dire that the period of 1861-65 is still popularly known today as the time of The Cotton Famine. This economic codependence is expressed in numerous extant newspaper records, diaries, and letters, but is perhaps most artistically recorded in a line from a Lancashire poem by Samuel Laycock called *Th’ Shurat Weaver’s Song*, which reads:

⁹ R.J.M. Blackett, *Divided Hearts: Britain and the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 7.

*O dear! if Yond' Yankees could only just see
Heaw they're clammin' an' starvin' poor weavers loike me,
Aw think they'd
soon settle their
bother, an' strive.
To send us some
cotton to keep us
alive.¹⁰*

Whether examining the cotton trade from the perspective of the aristocracy and middle class or from that of the working class, it is clear that the possession of a worldwide empire created new opportunities for the British textile industry during the American Civil War. As the war churned on and the supply of the coveted American Sea-Island and Middling Orleans varieties of cotton, in particular, evaporated from storehouses and mills across Britain, British leaders and industrialists were forced to find other means of producing their finished products, lest they face the ugly specter of anarchy as the working class went month after month with no work.

A general understanding of the quality of different strains of cotton is needed to gain the full picture of what was at play during this crucial period for the British textile industry. American strains of cotton were undoubtedly of better quality and more suited to use in textile machinery than varieties grown in other parts of the world. The American South was particularly well-suited in terms of climate and

¹⁰ Samuel Laycock, "Th' Shurat Weaver's Song," John Harland, ed., *Ballads and Songs of Lancashire Ancient and Modern*. Corrected, revised and enlarged by T.T. Wilkinson (London, 1875), 508. <<http://www.archive.org/details/balladssongsofla00harluoft>>, Accessed 27 June 2011.

soil type to grow two varieties of cotton which most commonly fed the mills of Britain. Sea Island, a long-staple cotton which is believed to have originated in the tropics of South America, was cultivated on the islands off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina between the 1780s and the 1950s. Its “long, fine, silky fibers” were “unmatched on world markets” for two centuries.¹¹ Sea Island cotton, when grown correctly, was considered a luxury item, and its fibers would often be mixed with silk to produce fine garments and other luxury textiles. The Middling Orleans strain of cotton was a short-staple variety, but was hardy and could be grown and exported in abundance from the fertile, virgin fields and humid climes of the South. Although a slew of cotton varieties were exported from the South, these two strains were predominant and represented the best that could be produced by the region.

The question of using an alternate source of cotton was not simply one of *quantity*, but of *quantity and quality* together. The antebellum South was unique in that it could produce high quality cotton in bulk, and the use of slave labor to plant, hoe, and harvest the crop ensured that plantation owners could usually sell their crop at a fair price and still turn a tidy profit. This was in stark contrast to varieties of cotton grown elsewhere in the world. India, for example, produced large quantities of a variety of cotton known as Surat. In addition to being a low quality plant, shipments of Surat were infamous among mill operators for being “ill-prepared, ill-cleaned, and even adulterated with such foreign substances as mud, leaves, and stones.”¹²

¹¹ S.G. Stephens, “The Origins of Sea Island Cotton,” *Agricultural History* 50, no. 2 (1976): 391.

¹² Edward Meade Earle, “Egyptian Cotton and the American Civil War,” *Political Science Quarterly* (Vol. 41, no. 4: 1926)

While Surat was not impossible to use in the mechanized production of textiles, it was not the preferred variety to use when making a finished product of any good quality.

This was the dilemma faced by British textile producers when the flow of affordable, high-quality cotton was cut off during the American Civil War. As Hammond had suggested in the “Cotton is King” speech, civil unrest began brewing in the hardest-hit districts not long after the blockade of Southern ports cut the total poundage of imported cotton by 27% in 1861, and then by almost 98% in 1862.¹³ The town of Stalybridge, a region of Lancashire which boasted a thriving cotton-spinning industry before the Cotton Famine, became so full of “indigence and pauperism” that residents assembled by the hundreds at a Town Hall meeting in late 1862 to petition the Queen to recognize the Confederacy as a means of ending the war and putting them back to work.¹⁴ With nearly three-fourths of the residents of Stalybridge out of work by 1863, and more than a thousand people gone due to emigration, it is a small wonder that it was the site of the greatest civil unrest of the Cotton Famine. A detachment of soldiers from Manchester was called to the town in March 1863 to quell a riot that began among the poor over food and coal tickets.¹⁵

Had the English people been confined to the boundaries of their own island, this period may well have been the undoing of the British government, or it may have resulted in the salvation of the

¹³ Mary Ellison, *Support For Secession: Lancashire and the American Civil War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972), 224.

¹⁴ Philip S. Foner, *British Labor and the American Civil War* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1981), 39.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 40

Confederacy. However, by 1861, it was the good fortune of the British textile industry that the British flag waved over nearly ten million square miles of earth, much of which was hospitable to the cultivation of cotton. While Egypt would not formally become a part of the British Empire for another two decades, European influence in the region combined with a climate that was especially good for growing Sea Island cotton and other long-fiber varieties would provide an alternate source of raw material for the hungry mill workers in the cotton districts of England. Some historians have even gone so far as to say that the revolution in cotton production in Egypt at this time played an important role in the British occupation of that country in the 1880s.

Of course, this new burst of cotton production did not occur in a vacuum. Egypt had been home to native strains of cotton since the days of the Pharaohs, as had India. European speculators had attempted to grow Sea Island cotton in Egypt since the late eighteenth century, around the same time that it was first introduced to Georgia and the Carolinas from the Bahamas. After many years of false starts, bad harvests and political upheaval, the cotton industry in Egypt was off on a good foot by 1861, but still stood no contest to the gargantuan American market. Between the years of 1843 and 1857, the amount of cotton exported from Egypt to Britain leapt by 140%, an impressive trend, but one which still accounted for but five percent of the cotton imported by Britain in 1861.¹⁶ However, most, if not all, of this cotton was of the long-staple variety, which boded well for Egyptians seeking to stake a larger share of the cotton market during the war years.

¹⁶ Adams, *Slavery, Secession, & Civil War: Views from the United Kingdom and Europe, 1856-1865*, 247.

Interest in Egypt's blossoming cotton industry in the 1860s was strong enough that talk of State support of turning Egypt into a major player in the cotton market was so strong, in fact, that many of the agricultural resources, which had been used in previous years to produce Egypt's cereal crops, were turned toward cultivating cotton. This left many people in the interior of Egypt in danger of starvation during the winter of 1862 and created a market for British foodstuffs.¹⁷

The fact that Egypt's supply of cotton did not decrease to its prewar levels after the demise of the Confederacy and the reopening of southern ports acknowledges the fact that nothing short of an agricultural revolution occurred in Egypt during the years of the American Civil War. It was a politically significant event because Egypt became a place of interest to Britain during the years of the Cotton Famine. Although Egypt lacked the acreage and the soil quality necessary to break the American monopoly on British cotton imports, it proved that an alternate source of the precious crop was available and vindicated the aristocratic attitude that Britain could *create* new markets when old ones became unavailable. Beginning at the time of the American Civil War, the British held a vested interest in ensuring that law and order were maintained in Egypt. This policy of indirect imperialism built a framework that helped to formally usher Egypt into the Empire when the region lost political stability in the 1880s.

Similarly, the Indian cotton market experienced an unprecedented boom during the American Civil War. However, where Egypt experienced difficulties producing a great quantity of cotton, India produced great numbers of very poor-quality cotton. Like Egypt,

¹⁷ Earle, "Egyptian Cotton and the American Civil War," 531.

India had experienced a promising bump in cotton production before the first shots were fired at Fort Sumter. Between 1843 and 1857, India's cotton output exploded by 288%.¹⁸ During the Cotton Famine, India supplied British mills with the largest share of cotton imports. Rising to the occasion, Indian cotton production increased by 81% from 1860 to 1861, and went from comprising 15% of Britain's cotton import in 1860 to 30% in 1861, and then to a staggering 75% in 1862. Even in 1867, two years after the war, India maintained a 38% share of the British cotton import, compared with the 42% of the market controlled by the United States.¹⁹

	United States	India
1860	80%	15%
1861	65%	30%
1862	3%	75%
1863	4%	70%
1864	4%	67%
1865	18%	50%
1866	38%	45%
1867	42%	38%

Fig. 1.1
 Percentage (by weight) of British cotton imports from U.S. and India during the 1860s. (Data from Ellison, p. 224. Percentages tallied by myself.)

¹⁸ Adams, *Slavery, Secession, & Civil War: Views from the United Kingdom and Europe, 1856-1865*, 247.

¹⁹ Mary Ellison, *Support For Secession: Lancashire and the American Civil War*, 224.

These numbers indicate that, as in Egypt, a cotton-centered agricultural revolution occurred in British-controlled India. However, unlike Egyptian markets, Indian cotton experienced success only in the quantity of cotton exported. After travelling to India and examining the methods used in the production of the Indian cotton crop, the president of the Manchester-based Cotton Supply Association said in a public speech in 1862 that the trip had resulted in the association becoming well-versed in how to grow the “worst cotton on the face of the earth.”²⁰

The Surat cotton imported from India in large numbers during the Cotton Famine was generally looked down upon by mill workers and mill owners alike. However undesirable compared to long-staple American fibers, Surat filled a need that helped the British textile industry stay afloat during a precarious time. In addition to this, the exportation of Surat and other local varieties of cotton transitioned the Indian cotton trade from a local affair to an international one. During the Civil War years, Indian landowners were—for the first time—in command of a lucrative commodity desperately needed in foreign markets. India’s role in wartime cotton production not only caused Britain to make further use of its empire, it brought the empire to India’s doorstep.

The American Civil War was a conflict unlike any the United States has ever known. When the smoke cleared in 1865, a new nation emerged from the ashes of the old, and a generation of Southern men had all but vanished from the earth. In addition to the psychological trauma and practical concerns raised by this loss of manpower, the

²⁰ “The Supply of Cotton,” *The Times (London)*, August 14, 1862. <http://archive.timesonline.co.uk/>. Accessed 29 June 2011.

transatlantic cotton trade between the American South and Great Britain was mangled almost beyond recognition. Due in part to the loss of men, in part to the dissolution of the institution of slavery, and in part to the physical damage done to the earth by four years of constant combat and overgrown fields, it would be many years before the South could match the success of its antebellum cotton exports. But when the Southern cotton economy finally did recover, it found itself contending with several new players, players which had come to economic maturity by taking advantage of the expansive geography and economic needs of an empire.