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This thesis outlines British attitudes toward Negro suffrage during the American Reconstruction period. To determine the nature of British opinion on this issue, a variety of sources were studied: newspapers, travelogues, consular reports, individual commentaries, and personal diaries and letters. These sources reflected opinion both pro and con, but the evidence strongly suggests that British opinion was against black enfranchisement.

This opposition was based primarily on racism, on the belief that Negroes were innately inferior and therefore unfit to act as voters. In Victorian England, there was also a pervasive fear of revolutionary change, which, of course, Negro suffrage represented. Many Englishmen feared that the American example might encourage the movement for broadening the franchise in England. The question arises whether Negro suffrage in America did influence the passage of the British Reform Act of 1867, which extended the vote to one million workingmen. The tentative answer is that the American example had some impact.

BRITISH ATTITUDES TOWARD NEGRO SUFFRAGE

DURING AMERICAN RECONSTRUCTION

by

Rosemary Roberts Yardley

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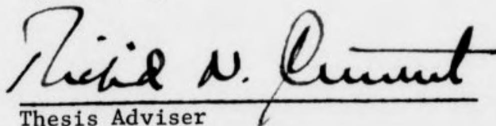

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APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In two bold strokes, American Negroes in vast numbers received the franchise for the first time in the nation's history. The Reconstruction Act of March 3, 1867, gave the vote to blacks in the unreconstructed South. Three years later, in March, 1870, the Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution extended the franchise to Negroes throughout the entire country.

Together, these strokes had momentous impact upon public opinion abroad as well as at home. No other slaveholding nation had ever freed its slaves and then proceeded to bestow upon them the full rights of citizenship. By way of contrast, Britain had ended slavery in its far-flung empire in 1833 but had not followed up the gesture by giving blacks the vote. In short, American policy was a unique social and political experiment--one for all the world to observe with wonder and, no doubt, with worry.

Aside from the tumultuous controversy it aroused in the United States, Negro suffrage provoked a strong reaction three thousand miles away in Victorian England. In 1866 The Manchester Guardian wrote that Lee's surrender at Appomattox had concluded only the first chapter in the "revolution"; the second chapter would be the enfranchisement of four million Southern blacks.

The primary question to be answered is this: What were British attitudes toward Negro suffrage during Reconstruction? Other questions

are the following: What were the Victorians' attitudes toward race? What was the British view of Reconstruction as a whole? What democratizing effect, if any, did American Negro suffrage have on Britain? And, finally, when we speak of British attitudes, _whose_ attitudes are we talking about?

To find answers to these questions, a variety of sources in England as well as the United States were surveyed. These include comments of the British press; diarists; private commentators, British travelers who journeyed through the South shortly after the war and who took back to England lively and sometimes incisive observations; British consuls who regularly wrote detailed reports of their impressions of the American South; and, finally, historians who have worked over some of this ground in the past in their own quest for answers.

CHAPTER II

VICTORIAN RACISM--THE ROOTS OF THE PROBLEM

To understand British attitudes toward Negro suffrage in America, it is absolutely essential to understand British attitudes toward race in general. For racial attitudes more than any other factor influenced Victorian public opinion toward black enfranchisement in the United States.

Mid-nineteenth-century Victorian society was complex, yet certain characteristics stood out prominently. It was rigid, humorless, obsessed with respectability, piously moral, optimistic, yet ridden with anxieties. It was also intensely racist and never hesitated to say so. Victorian racial attitudes had their roots planted as far back as Elizabethan times. J. H. Plumb writes:

> The Elizabethan Englishmen coming across primitive black men for the first time were repelled. To them, black men were associated with beastliness; their inferiority made them the lowest link in the great Chain of Being. Blackness stimulated the Englishman's sense of guilt and horror. His Devil was, after all, black, and he always put a high price upon fairness of skin. The primitive societies of West Africa, with their strange and divergent customs, strengthened the Elizabethans' belief in the eternal, God-given inferiority of the Negro--a little higher maybe than the apes, but infinitely lower than the white Englishman.[1]

Victorian explorers tracking darkest Africa in search for the source of the Nile would confirm the impressions of their Elizabethan forerunners of three hundred years before. Sir Richard Burton wrote voluminously in books and journals about his wanderings in Africa, and these observations heavily colored Victorian opinion. As British

historian Christine Bolt writes:

> Burton's description of the typical Negro itself highlights what the average Victorian disliked. He was physically repulsive with 'retreating forehead, more scalp than face, calfless, cucumber skinned, lank heeled, with large broad and flat feet; his smell is rank, his hair is crisp and curly.' Only the familiar criticism of the African mouth and nose are omitted from this offensive passage.[2]

The African was usually naked or near to it, and this further offended Victorian sensibilities of buttoned-up modesty.

Other Victorians traveling through Africa wrote home to reinforce Burton's stereotypes. Lionel Phillips, for one, wrote of the African: "He seems to belong to one of those childish races which never rising to man's estate, fall like worn-out links from the great chair of animated nature."[3] Phillips and others brought back the idea that the African could not learn. After all, went their argument, the black man had produced no literature, no written language, no architecture of enduring beauty, no art, no religion of recognizable truth, and no music with intelligible melody. One Victorian writing in 1884 summed it up this way: "No full-blooded Negro has ever been distinguished as a man of science, a poet, or an artist, and the fundamental equality claimed for him by ignorant philanthropists is belied by the whole history of the race through the historic period."[4]

Further confirmation of black inferiority was found by many Victorians in anthropological studies of the period. Charles Darwin's _On the Origin of Species_ (1858) and his _Descent of Man_ (1871) fostered the idea of a superior breed of human being. The French writer Arthur De'Gobineau in _The Inequality of Human Races_ (1854) had divided mankind into three types: black, yellow, and white. Of the three, De Gobineau

wrote, "The Negroid variety is the lowest and stands at the foot of the ladder. His intellect will always move within a very narrow circle."[5]

Another force shaping Victorian racial prejudices was the experience of empire. Englishmen living in the far-flung empire among Her Majesty's black, brown, and yellow peoples found their conviction of white supremacy strengthened by what they saw. Foremost among these Englishmen abroad was "the poet of the empire," Rudyard Kipling. Kipling's writings served to reinforce what Victorians already thought about the inferiority of non-whites. His poem "The White Man's Burden," written in 1899, could well have been the race motto of the entire Victorian Age:

> Take up the White Man's burden--
> Send Forth the best ye breed--
> Go forth your sons to exile
> To serve your captives need;
> To wait in heavy harness
> On fluttered folk and wild--
> Your new-caught, sullen peoples
> Half-devil and half-child.

Victorians were convinced that the "half-devil and half-child" of the empire required the steady, guiding hand of the civilized white man. Racial paternalism characterized the editorials of the London prestige press of that period. In 1865 The Times declared:

> It is essential to keep ever displayed before the eyes of barbarians the signs and symbols of civilized authority . . . . Two or three generations hence, instruction and increased civilization may have made a change, but every age legislates for its own wants and according to its own circumstances; and it seems to us that the best policy for any people who have to deal with the black race is to keep a strong hand over them.[6]

Echoing these views, a writer in The Pall Mall Gazette noted "that some races, including the African, are not fit to stand alone, though most valuable when guided and ruled by superior intelligence . . . ."[7] Even The Spectator, one of the most enlightened British journals on the race question, agreed: "The more inferior they are to us, the more mercy we should have supposed that we owe them."[8]

Still another factor enhancing Victorian racism, at least in an indirect way, was the deeply entrenched British class system. In a society that assigned people, even white people, to fixed ranks in life, it was easy to believe that God ordered "black barbarians" to the lowest rank of all. To illustrate how pervasive and overt the class system was in Victorian England, it would do well to note the words of a hymn sung throughout the country at the Sunday church hour.

> The rich man in his castle,
> The poor man at his gate,
> God made them, high and lowly,
> And ordered their estate.[9]

Thus, British attitudes toward race were heavily influenced by such factors as the Negro's offensive appearance, by his absence of learning and civilization, and indirectly by a class system that relegated all mankind to fixed stations in life. Certain events of the mid-1800s served further to harden racial attitudes. Upheavals in the empire changed the image of the non-white from a docile creature to a menacing threat. The Indian Mutiny of 1857 shook the sub-continent and sent shock waves throughout England. Colonial peoples in South Africa and New Zealand became increasingly rebellious, and in 1865 the Jamaica Uprising erupted in the Caribbean. "The old, somewhat patronising

view of the peaceful 'child of nature' was now disturbed by fear."[10] This fear inspired a month-long reign of terror after the suppression of the revolt; a thousand homes were burned, nearly five hundred Negroes were killed, and many more were brutally tortured.

The hardening of racial attitudes after these events went so far as to affect the treatment of British abolitionists. A highly respected group before and during the American Civil War, the abolitionists suddenly lost much of their financial support after the Jamaica Uprising. Those in Bath, for example, reported that many previously loyal supporters now sympathized with friends who were plantation owners in the West Indies.[11] In some quarters the British antislavery workers began to be jeered as "Nigger-Philanthropists."[12]

The British press, meanwhile, wrote of the Uprising with an I-told-you-so tone. The Times, never one to take a charitable view of the Negro anyhow, editorialized:

> At this moment when the Negro question is the great problem of the United States, it will certainly not dispose the minds of the Americans towards treating the black race more kindly to know that in one country, at all events, they have been capable of a wanton insurrection against a government from which they had received nothing but benefits, and under which they possessed almost every right that even the extreme abolitionists would confer upon them. The lesson of the Jamaican revolt comes at an important time and shows how cautious the American states should be in dealing with their great population of Africans . . . We are convinced that it is for the benefit of the white man and the Negro that the latter should remain essentially under the tutelage of the former.[13]

The Daily Telegraph chimed in: "Events have proved that the Negro is still a savage. We must rule the African with a strong hand . . ."[14] The Morning Post echoed: "We have done all that could be done for the

Negroes in our colonies. We cannot change and raise their nature from Africans to Englishmen, and as Africans we must deal with them."[15]

Amid the outcry over the Jamaica Uprising, a few lonely voices begged for calm. One was David Macrae, a Scottish minister and loyal friend of the Negro. Macrae wrote: "The comparative failure of emancipation in the West Indies was greedily seized upon [by the press] as a strong argument against a similar experiment in the States."[16] The radical politician John Bright was another who urged British freedmen's aid groups not to lose faith in the American Negro. Jamaica and the United States were two separate places, Bright argued. Nevertheless, his voice and those of other moderates were drowned out by the louder voices of the British press and public.

Some mid-century Englishmen--abolitionists, humanitarians, Radical politicians--looked with compassion on the Negro, as we shall see in later chapters. But a decided majority was racist. The average Englishman, The Spectator said, was "blinded by a prejudice against colour which in its strength and permanence is to cool reasoners scarcely intelligible."[17] The Saturday Review sarcastically inquired:

> What have the English people done that the irrepressible negro should make an eruption into their daily papers, disport himself at their dessert, chill their turtle, spoil their wine, and sour their pineapples and their temper? Is it not enough that he has divided and distracted one population of thirty million Caucasians (in America), but he must needs also come to divide another population of equal numbers and similar combative qualities? Are we henceforth to be separated as a nation into negrophiles and anti-negroites? Is every dinner party and every tea party, every society of social twaddlers, to be worried and wearied by prosy conversationalists on the brutal inferiority or the angelic superiority of the sons of Ham?[18]

In truth, the race question had grown so bitter and pervasive that distinguished men of letters met head-on over it. Thomas Carlyle and John Stuart Mill disagreed so bitterly they destroyed their friendship. In an 1849 article in Fraser's Magazine, entitled "The Nigger Question," Carlyle protrayed the Negro as the lowest form of life, scarcely higher than a domesticated animal. He recommended that lazy or rebellious blacks be whipped into submission, even though they were free men. In reply, Mill in "The Negro Question" fiercely disputed Carlyle's belief that the Negro was innately inferior. Mill wrote that the white man's treatment of the black had created most of the latter's deficiencies. Thus the black man's "environment" and not his innate "nature" had shaped his character and abilities.[19] Mill's enlightened viewpoint was years ahead of its time.

On a whole, "What emerges undeniably . . . from a study of Victorian opinion, in so far as it can be estimated through travelers, books, reviews and newspapers, and testimony of eminent individuals, is the existence during the 1870s of an impatient hostility towards the Negro."[20] This prejudice reverberated through Britain while America debated the question of Negro suffrage for its newly freed slaves.

CHAPTER II

NOTES

[1]J. H. Plumb, In the Light of History (Boston, 1973), 105.

[2]Christine A. Bolton, Victorian Attitudes to Race (Toronto, 1971), 134.

[3]Quoted in Ibid. p. 137.

[4]Quoted in Ibid. p. 209.

[5]Christine A. Bolton, The Anti-Slavery Movement and Reconstruction: A Study in Anglo-American Co-operation (London, 1969), 150.

[6]The Times, London, 4 November 1865.

[7]The Pall Mall Gazette as cited in Anti-Slavery Movement, 150.

[8]The Spectator, London, 22 September 1866.

[9]Richard A. Altick, Victorian People and Ideas (New York, 1973), 174.

[10]H. C. Allen, "Civil War, Reconstruction, and Great Britain," in Harold Hyman (ed.), Heard Round the World: The Impact Abroad of the Civil War (New York, 1969), 51-52.

[11]Christine A. Bolt, "British Attitudes to Reconstruction in the United States, 1863-1877," (doctoral thesis, University of London, 1966), 257.

[12]Ibid. p. 37.

[13]The Times, 3 November 1865.

[14]The Daily Telegraph as cited in "British Attitudes to Reconstruction," 253.

[15]The Morning Post as cited in "British Attitudes to Reconstruction," 254.

[16]Quoted in Ibid. 257.

[17]The Spectator, 25 August 1866.

[18]The Saturday Review as cited in Ibid. 141.

[19]Eugene August, John Stuart Mill: A Mind at Large (New York, 1975), 131-132.

[20]Bolt, Anti-Slavery Movement, 151-152.

CHAPTER III

BRITISH ATTITUDES TOWARD RECONSTRUCTION AS A WHOLE

Before looking specifically at British attitudes toward Negro suffrage, it would be well to look briefly at the British view of Reconstruction as a whole. The American Civil War had been debated heatedly in Victorian England. The majority of the British press--including the influential Times, which thundered against the Union cause to the bloody end--had staunchly supported the South. On the whole, British public opinion, at least early in the war, had also sided with the Confederacy. Nonetheless, the Union all along had had its own vocal supporters among Victorians. Foremost among them were abolitionists who had lobbied long and hard for American emancipation. Other eminent supporters of the North were Radical politicians such as John Bright, John Stuart Mill, Goldwin Smith, Richard Cobden and the Duke and Duchess of Argyle, all of the ruling class whose rhetoric often exceeded their influence. Several leading British newspapers editorialized regularly for the Union cause, among them The London Daily News, The Morning Star, The Spectator, and The Manchester Examiner.

Following Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, there was a dramatic turnabout in British public opinion in favor of the North. According to historian H. C. Allen, "The country as a whole probably allowed its antislavery sentiments full rein . . ."[1] To illustrate the shift in thinking, a man from Lancashire, the textile

area hardest hit by the Union blockade of Southern cotton, said after the Proclamation was publicized: "Better for the cotton trade of this country to perish, and to perish forever, than that its future prosperity should be restored with slavery as its basis and foundation."[2]

Throughout the course of the Civil War, the official British government's position was one of neutrality, though it was not very well maintained according to Union authorities. Not surprisingly, after the war when Reconstruction was being thrashed out in the halls of Congress, the official British position was again neutral. Whitehall's stance was to maintain a scrupulous silence on the internal affairs of the United States.

Although the British government remained silent on the political tinkering underway in Congress, the British press and people in great numbers did not hesitate to air their opinions. "In general in England . . . the basic approach to Reconstruction was conservative, compassion going out to the planter and suspicion being aroused by the radical programme of the North."[3] President Andrew Johnson, like Lincoln before him, had offered a conciliatory hand toward the rebel leaders of war-devastated states of the former Confederacy. Radical Republicans looked upon Johnson's policy as a betrayal of the cause of union and freedom. For the most part, the people of England sympathized with Johnson, wished for a generous settlement for the South, abhorred the idea of military occupation and confiscation of property, and intensely mistrusted Republican motives.[4] Even such faithful Union supporters as John Bright favored a conciliatory

Reconstruction for the South. Writing in 1865 to his old friend Charles Sumner, the Boston Radical Republican, Bright asked for compassion toward the former Confederacy:

> One of the great objects of your government now should be to change the character of the South, to root out the brutality and cruelty which have sprung from slavery, to create a reverence for human life, and to prove the mercy no less than the justice of your Federal Government . . . ."[5]

Throughout 1865 and 1866, British hopes for a conciliatory peace were reflected in an overwhelming press support for President Johnson in his conflict with Congress. The Daily Telegraph wrote in 1866 that "public opinion among Englishmen was almost unanimous in favor of the Executive."[6] A correspondent for The Belfast Northern Whig wrote soon after the war ended: "The newspapers in England who were so strongly on the side of the South, and who were so ready to ridicule President Johnson when he took the reins of power into his hands, are now enthusiastic in their admiration of his conduct . . . ."[7]

British diplomats favored the President. The British ambassador to America wrote home that Republicans were "doing their utmost" and that everything was "tending to increase the power at the expense of the Executive and Judiciary."[8] William Barnes, a British consul based in the United States, lashed out in a letter home at "the Radical determination to make all other departments of government subservient to Congress."[9]

Nevertheless, some of the British press and public strongly approved Congress's hard stance toward the South. Both The Daily News and The Spectator, long-time supporters of the Union during the

war, thought the South deserved revolutionary measures. By 1868, when Johnson's impeachment proceedings were under way, British public opinion almost unanimously disapproved of impeachment, yet "had become fairly phlegmatic in tone."[10] This shift toward a more passive view had developed because the English had come to regard Johnson as increasingly stubborn and unbending. The changing attitude toward the President was hinted at by Charles Dickens who, during his second visit to America, was granted a private interview with Johnson. Writing home to his daughter, Dickens described the President as a man "of tremendous firmness of purpose, not to be turned or trifled with."[11]

As Reconstruction moved forward and President Grant's administration took the helm, British public opinion was deeply disturbed by the corruption that had seemingly infiltrated every root and branch of government. Even America's most zealous friends abroad had a difficult time defending Reconstruction. Many British newspapers, never friendly to the North in the first place, sounded off indignantly about American corruption. In 1876, The Scotsman wrote that "a system of corruption . . . was rapidly degrading American politics to such a level that nobody could touch them and keep his hands clean . . . . Every branch of the public service is . . . rotten to the heart . . ."[12] Many Englishmen, like many Americans blamed the carpetbaggers for imposing bad government on the South. "In view of the widely held British belief in the venality of Northern politicians, it is scarcely surprising to find that the affairs of the

carpetaggers government imposed upon the South were regarded with disfavor."[13]

In summary, British attitudes toward Reconstruction had favored a conciliatory program for the former Confederacy. What the British had hoped for after the war was a return to the way things had been before the war, with the exception of slavery. Neither the South nor the majority of Victorians got what they wanted in Reconstruction.

CHAPTER III

NOTES

[1]Allen, 68.

[2]Quoted in Ibid. 69.

[3]Bolt, Victorian Attitudes to Race, 42.

[4]H. C. Allen and C. P. Hill, British Essays in American History (New York, 1957), 192.

[5]Quoted in "British Attitudes to Reconstruction," 52.

[6]The Daily Telegraph as cited in Ibid. 46.

[7]The Belfast Northern Whig as cited in Ibid.

[8]Quoted in Ibid. 57.

[9]Quotes in Ibid. 58.

[10]Ibid. 73.

[11]Quoted in Ibid.

[12]The Scotsman as cited in Ibid. 120.

[13]Ibid.

CHAPTER IV

NEGRO SUFFRAGE--ITS BRITISH CRITICS

Of all Radical Reconstruction proposals, none caused greater indignation among the British than the one calling for Negro suffrage. To the Victorian's way of thinking, this smacked of political tinkering of the most dangerous kind. To some conservatives it was downright revolutionary. Nevertheless, in 1867, Congress in the Reconstruction Act gave Negroes living in the unreconstructed South the right to vote. In 1870, Negroes throughout the country received the franchise through the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution. These dramatic, sweeping actions were indeed precedent-setting. Never before had a slaveholding nation freed its slaves and shortly thereafter bestowed on them the full rights of citizenship.

Most Victorians were deeply opposed to Negro suffrage. Their opposition stemmed from several causes, the primary one being racism. The black man's physical differentness, his seeming ignorance, and his apparent lack of civilization in Africa had assured the majority of Victorians that he held the lowest rank among mankind and had no business having a voice at the ballot box. Also underlying this attitude toward suffrage was a "feeling of antagonism toward the Negro in British colonial territories . . . ."[1] Racism in general and colonial uprisings in particular had shaped this "antagonism."

Still another reason for British opposition to Negro suffrage was a deep-seated fear of anything revolutionary. And what many Britishers were reading in their newspapers about the turmoils in America during Reconstruction was disturbing. Corruption in government, Negroes strutting about with power, President and Congress quarreling bitterly--these were the headlines from America in most of the conservative London papers. So far as Britons were concerned, "Increasing turbulence and corruption in the South confirmed their worst fears about 'advanced' democracy and 'mob rule' . . . ."[2] For decades, Victorians had harbored a fear of revolution. This had been most prominent in 1848, when Englishmen could look across the Channel and see Europe beset with revolutions. Britain itself had gone untouched, but the seeds of worry lingered on. Bertrand Russell's grandfather, as he lay on his deathbed in 1869, "heard a loud noise in the street and thought it was the revolution breaking out."[3] The author of _The Victorian Mind_ notes: "For all its solid and imposing strength, Victorian society, particularly in the period before 1850, was shot through from top to bottom with the dread of some wild outbreak of the masses that would overthrow the established order and confiscate private property."[4] By the late 1860s this fear of revolutions had subsided, yet not enough to relieve Victorian unease about Negro suffrage in America and the revolutionary repercussions it could have on the disenfranchised at home. _The Manchester Guardian_ observed in 1866: "It has always been doubtful whether the great collapse of Confederate military power which followed the fall of Richmond last year was the end of a war or one state in a Revolution."[5] This "Revolution" in

America and the political fallout it might have on British institutions bothered conservative Victorians.

To be sure, there were a handful of liberal Englishmen who favored Negro suffrage, but the overwhelming and vocal majority strongly opposed it. There was "almost unanimously hostile reaction of Victorians to the enfranchisement of Southern Negroes, with British conservatism formidably strengthening British racism."[6]

> . . . . Outside the Reform organizations, their own and labour journals, and certain extreme Radicals, there was no support for universal suffrage in Britain. American proposals seemed little short of Revolutionary."[7]

The big guns of the British press frequently thundered against Radical Reconstruction. These publications--The Times, The Daily Telegraph, The Economist, The Pall Mall Gazette, and The Saturday Review (a weekly)--had supported the South during the Civil War and continued to support the South against Radical Republicans after the war. Although many of these newspapers focused their broadsides on corruption in Southern states, or on carpetbaggers, or on mounting debts and bad legislation, the sharpest attacks were saved for Negro suffrage. To the establishment press, it was appalling that an ignorant, propertyless individual would be given the franchise. One of the most vociferous critics of Negro suffrage, Walter Bagehot, editor of The Economist, wrote in 1872:

> There never was in the history of democracy so dangerous an experiment as that of entrusting full electoral power to nearly four millions of black persons, but just emancipated from actual slavery, totally uneducated, and hungry for material advantages.[8]

The Daily Telegraph, another conservative newspaper of wide circulation, editorialized in 1865 when full political rights for freedmen were under discussion: ". . . However wise and just and necessary it may be to prevent individual wrong to the emancipated slave, it would seem absolute madness to entrust him, ignorant, brutified by long servitude and childlike by race, with anything so important as political power."[9]

The majority of the British press advocated the gradual extension of suffrage. Given time, given education, given property ownership, went the press litany, the emancipated slave might be properly prepared to cast his vote. The Times favored an "educational condition" before granting suffrage; The Saturday Review wanted a property qualification; and The Scotsman thought the ex-slaves would earn the vote in "the course of time if they had all the good qualities that their friends assign them."[10] The Daily Telegraph as late as 1876 continued to argue for gradualism long after black suffrage was in effect: "No impartial surveyor of American history can fail to see that a graduated suffrage resting at the outset upon an educational basis, however, scanty, would have been better for the Negro and safer for the State."[11]

Had gradualism won the day, as these leading newspaper urged, it would have doomed Negro suffrage for years, if not for generations. Without the vote, there was little chance that the Negro could obtain the political power to acquire an education or even property. The property argument was an old one in both England and America. When

after 1815, many Eastern states in America were revising state constitutions and considering universal suffrage for all white males, conservative delegates demanded property ownership as a qualification. Daniel Webster argued at the Massachusetts constitutional convention in 1820 that "power naturally and necessarily follows property" and that "property as such should have its weight and influence in political arrangement." More than forty years later, while Parliament was debating the Reform Act of 1867, the same issue of property arose in England.

The other demand of the gradualists--the education qualification--was not so urgent on either side of the Atlantic as was the property qualification. (The Southern literacy test for the Negro would not be employed until the 1890s to deprive him of his vote.) Yet it was still disturbing to conservative Victorians that four million ignorant freedmen, unable to read, indeed unable to speak intelligibly, would be given the vote. With this in mind, The Times and The Economist thundered on, begging for time and "education conditions" before the freedmen be granted the ballot.

Even the most rigid newspaper critics of Negro suffrage realized, however, that without the vote the Negro would have little political protection. Walter Bagehot and other editors were torn by their opposition to black enfranchisement and their recognition of the urgent need for protecting the Negro's basic rights. In 1865, Bagehot wrote: ". . . Unless the Negro has some power of making himself heard in the Legislature, the tendency of that body will be to side with the

employer against the employed."[12] Two years later Bagehot's sentiments had not changed: "By putting so much political power into the hands of the Negroes, it will make it their former masters' interest to treat them with decent humanity, if not, indeed to court their support."[13] Even The Daily Telegraph, a vociferous opponent of Negro suffrage, admitted in 1876: "No amount of statutes could have secured the freedman fair play had not the leaders of the North placed the ballot paper in his hand."[14] Despite this ability to see both sides of the suffrage issue, The Economist, The Times, and other influential British periodicals held to their stance for gradualism.

An attitudinal study of liberal Englishmen on the issue of Negro suffrage shows that many individuals who had supported the North during the Civil War favored only gradual suffrage after the war. Among these liberals and radicals was John Bright, the North's foremost supporter, who had been referred to in Parliament as "the member from the United States," Bright, a Liberal from a Midland constituency, was a close friend of antislavery Republicans Charles Sumner, John Greenleaf Whittier, and Horace Greeley, who dedicated his The American Conflict to Bright. Therefore it seemed out of step for Bright to favor gradualism over immediacy on the suffrage question in America. He thought long and hard on the matter and finally concluded that some sort of waiting period should elapse during which blacks should be prepared to vote. In 1865 he wrote his friend Charles Sumner in Boston:

> I can see some difficulty in the way of the President if he attempts to give the suffrage to the Negro . . . . Even in

a majority of the free states, the suffrage law does not appear to be the same for the two races. How then could he insist on doing that in the South which he cannot enforce in the North?"[15]

John Stuart Mill was another Victorian liberal who favored gradualism on the suffrage question. On November 1, 1865, Mill wrote:

> I have no objection to requiring as a condition to the suffrage, education up to the point of reading and writing, but upon condition that this shall be required equally from the whites. The poor whites of the South are understood to need education quite as much as the negroes, and are certainly quite as unfit for the exercise of the suffrage without it."[16]

Still another Victorian radical, Goldwin Smith, was deeply concerned about enfranchising former slaves. His solution to the knotty problem was not gradualism but emigration. Writing to a friend shortly after the Civil War, Smith said:

> The Negro suffrage question is the one which to a distant observer seems most difficult and almost desperate. How can there be social fusion while the differences of colour and the physical antipathy remain? I cannot help thinking that Negro emigration on a large scale will prove the best way out of the wood."[17]

The eighth Duke and Duchess of Argyle were two other Victorian liberals who had strong misgivings about immediate suffrage. Before the war the couple had been dedicated abolitionists. After the war the duke and duchess had been the patrons of the freedmen's aid movement in Britain, giving substantial sums toward Negro relief in the South. Nevertheless, the duke had strong reservations about immediate Negro suffrage. The Duke wrote to Charles Sumner in 1865: "I have great confidence that the United States will get through their political-social difficulties at last as they have done through war. But I don't like the present aspect of things . . . I don't feel sure of the Negro suffrage being good policy."[18] The Duchess of Argyle, also a faithful

supporter of the American freedmen, had her doubts about suffrage as well. Writing to Charles Sumner from Inverary Castle in Scotland in 1865, she said, "Do not think too little of the great gains already won, even if political rights are delayed."[19]

Still other eminent Englishmen, such as James Bryce, the historian, came out against suffrage--even gradual suffrage. Bryce, "the unofficial interpreter of the United States to Great Britain," wrote in The American Commonwealth in the 1870s: "To nearly all Europeans, such a step [Negro suffrage] seemed and still seems monstrous."[20] Even Americans in England had misgivings about black enfranchisement. Charles Francis Adams, the American ambassador to Britain from 1861 to 1868, wrote in his diary: "As to making Negro suffrage an issue, it is simply suicide in the state of popular feeling in America."[21] To buttress their positions, these Englishmen and Americans could look back to 1862 when Lincoln had told a delegation of Negroes at the White House: "When you cease to be slaves, you are yet far removed from being on an equality with the white race . . . I cannot alter it if I would. It is a fact."[22]

Much of the foot-dragging on Negro suffrage by Victorian liberals and Radicals can be explained not as racism but as merely wanting the black to be prepared for his responsibilities as a citizen. Walter Bagehot's proposal for gradual suffrage stemmed "not from prejudice against the Negro as such, but from his deep doubts as to the fitness of any educated and propertyless class for the franchise . . . ."[23] Gradualism was what many eminent, liberal Victorians were asking for.

It was this same gradualism that The Times, The Economist and other prestige newspapers mentioned earlier were recommending. And it was this same gradualism that American conservatives would argue for a century later during the civil rights movement of the 1960s when legislation for voting rights and public accommodations was being debated in Congress. In both centuries, gradualism bowed to immediacy.

In surveying British attitudes toward Negro suffrage so far, we have looked at England's prestige newspapers--The Times, The Daily Telegraph, The Economist and others--and found them to be overwhelmingly opposed to American Negro suffrage. In addition, we have looked at the views of many eminent Victorians--including individuals whose liberal-radical leanings would indicate strong support for suffrage--and have found that they, too, were lukewarm on black enfranchisement. Now we will look at another sector of public opinion on the suffrage issue, namely that of British officials.

As was pointed out earlier, the British government maintained a policy of strict non-interference in American internal affairs during Reconstruction. Whitehall remained silent on this subject while engaging in disputes with the United States over such matters as the Alabama Claims. Nevertheless, British officials based on America held lively opinions on Reconstruction--opinions they delivered in reports to the Foreign Office or in letters home to friends. These opinions were overwhelmingly negative.

Clare Ford, an English diplomat stationed at the British Embassy in Washington wrote to Lord Stanley on October 15, 1867:

> Your Lordship will not fail to remark the inconsistency which can only be excused on the score of expediency of forcing Negro suffrage on the Southern portion of this continent whilst its adoption is so strenuously opposed in some of the Northern states.[24]

In a later communique to Lord Stanley, Ford wrote: "[It is] . . . not unreasonable to infer that Negro suffrage has been considered rather with reference to party interests among the whites in those states than as it affects the Negro himself."[25] The British ambassador's deputy in Washington wrote to Lord Stanley in 1874:

> So far, the result of universal suffrage in many of the states . . . has been to invert the relative positions of master and slave. The system of government is controlled by the coloured vote, and the Negro, who is unfitted for such duties either by natural instinct, education principle or self-restraint, is involuntarily placed in positions of high responsibility. It is impossible to predict the ultimate result of the experiment. As yet, it has proved a failure, and the policy of reconstruction which mainly depended for its success upon the vote of the coloured population has been fruitful of nothing but discord, anxiety and crime.[26]

British consuls based in Southern cities during Reconstruction sent home vivid, first-hand reports on the South--reports that were unfailingly critical of Reconstruction. They "regarded the prospects of coloured voters--as they had all aspects of Radical policy--with suspicion and gloom."[27] Tasker Smith, the British consul in Savannah, wrote in 1869: ". . . There is existing and very naturally too a grave antipathy that such recently enfranchised, uneducated and inferior people should be foisted into offices demanding qualities which neither by nature, habit nor instruction do the coloured race exhibit or possess."[28] William Barnes wrote home from Galveston in 1867:

> Although the negroes are quiet as yet, it is evident that enfranchisement has increased their idleness and sense of self-importance. The partizans who gave them votes will be sure to instruct them how to use this privilege according to their dictation and the least difficulty between them and the whites will be exaggerated into a riot . . . ."[29]

H. P. Walker, the consul in Charleston, privately lambasted the "outrageous legislation" for black suffrage; he said emancipation had brought on "a relapse towards barbarism [that] is apparent to every observer."[30] F. J. Cridland wrote home from Mobile about "the fearful and barbarous outrage constantly committed throughout the state by Negroes against unprotected white women," and he went on to criticize enfranchising the Negro, "who is unfitted for such duties either by natural instinct, education principle or self-restraint . . . ."[31]

The overwhelmingly negative reaction of British consuls to Negro suffrage is not surprising. These diplomats brought to America deeply entrenched racial prejudices endemic to the Victorian ruling class. The consuls were regularly thrust into the company of Southern planters, lawyers, and other ex-Confederate leaders. In short, these Southerners reinforced the consuls' negative outlook on suffrage in the South.

A number of Britishers came in the 1860s and 1870s to see the postwar South, and seemingly each of them felt inclined to write a book about his journey. No doubt these travelogues had some influence on Victorian opinion back home. In any event, almost to a man, the travelers disapproved of what they saw in the South. Giving ignorant

blacks the vote was deplorable, they thought, because it was done not out of altruism but out of partisan interest.

George Rose, an English author and humorist, after traveling through the North and the South in 1868, wrote The Great Country or Impressions of America. Rose complained about American food and his inability to get a decent cup of tea, then turned to the ex-slaves and told how unfit they were for political rights: "The Negro is an idle, thoughtless creature, incapable of even seeing his own interest. . . . His sole delight is to bask in the sun and indulge in every low gratification of the senses. He is dirty, degraded and indolent to the last degree."[32] Rose also had harsh words for Radical Republicans in Congress: "However loudly the Northerners may talk of their love for the Negro, they have no desire to place him on an equality with themselves and would only grant him the franchise in the South that he may humiliate and outvote the white man."[33]

Robert Somers, another Englishman who came to America during Reconstruction, penned his impressions in The Southern States Since the War, 1870-71. Somers traveled widely in the Deep South and addressed many of his comments to the freedmen's new political rights. In South Carolina, he found the House of Representatives composed of eighty Negroes and twenty whites. Referring to Negro delegates as "dupes of designing men," Somers wrote: "The exclusion of the superior part of the population from all influence in public affairs must of itself tend to magnify the enormity of everything enormous, and to distort everything not quite square that is done."[34] He added:

> I allude at this length to political affairs in South Carolina because it is very obvious that a system of government resting almost wholly on the votes of Negroes is not a desirable state of affairs as regards either the State itself or the general interest of the Union.[35]

In New Orleans he found that "almost the first question put to a stranger is whether he has seen 'the Negro Legislature?"[36] He himself went to see it and came away with the following impression of it:

> . . . I am not disposed to attach radical importance to the 'incompatibilities of colour' in legislation . . . [but] it is strange, abnormal and unfit that a Negro Legislature should deal, as the Legislature of Louisiana has been dealing, with the gravest commercial and financial [matters] . . . over the community of merchants, planters and white people of business and industry, who, though a numerical majority of the population, have as little power in the government as if they were inhabitants of another sphere . . . . This state of things is not any advancement of the Negro. It is only his exaltation, through the exigencies of Federal politics since the war, into a delirium of folly and corruption . . . ."[37]

Still another Victorian, F. Barham Zincke, an Anglican chaplain to Queen Victoria, who came to America in 1868, concluded that freemen were given the vote only to be controlled by Northern Republicans. Zincke outlined these views in a book with a long-winded title, Last Winter in the United States: Being Table Talk Collected During a Tour Through the Late Southern Confederation, the Far West, the Rocky Mountains, Etc. He said the extension of the franchise had been dictated by "the necessities of the dominant party." "Of course no man who knows anything of the capacity and of the history of the black race, even if he be of the Republican party, abstractly thinks that they are qualified for taking part in the government of the country and of legislating for and governing many of the Southern states."[38]

One of the most interesting visitors among these Victorian travelers was a writer named W. H. Dixon. His views changed sharply between his first visit to the South in 1867 and his second visit in 1876. In 1867 he was accompanied by Charles Dilke, a British political radical who may have influenced Dixon's approving attitude toward Radical Reconstruction. In his book In New America Dixon observed: "That the Negro is fitted by his humour, by his industry, by his sociality, for a very high form of civil life may be safely assumed."[39] After visiting some of Richmond's forty Negro schools, Dixon exulted: "These men are not wailing for the world to come and cheer them with its grant endowments and its national schools; they have begun the work of emancipating themselves from the thralldom of ignorance and vice."[40] After his second visit to America--this time without Dilke --Dixon unburdened himself of some harsh opinions about Negroes in White Conquest:

> The African brain is limited in range . . . . A Negro cannot stand the impact of free life . . . . Nature has given the White man brain and strength, invention, courage, and endurance of a higher quality, on a larger scale, than she has given these elements to the Black.[41]

If Dixon's views in 1876 appear unduly harsh, those of Charles Dickens, who was in America on a lecture tour in 1868, seem egregiously racist. Writing to his daughter from Baltimore, Dickens said:

> The ghost of slavery haunts the houses; the old, untidy, incapable, lounging, shambling black serves you as a free man. Free of course he ought to be; but the stupendous absurdity of making him a voter glares out of every roll of his eye, stretch of his mouth, and bump of his head.[42]

There is no way to determine if these Victorian travel accounts enjoyed a wide readership in England. But even if they did, they likely did not produce any surprises because most Englishmen were already reading the same negative viewpoint on suffrage in the leading newspapers of the day.

CHAPTER IV

NOTES

[1]Bolt, "British Attitudes to Reconstruction," 39.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Walter E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind (New Haven, 1957), 54-55.

[4]Ibid.

[5]The Manchester Guardian as cited in "British Attitudes to Reconstruction," 64.

[6]Bolt, Victorian Attitudes to Race, 64.

[7]Ibid. 62.

[8]The Economist, London, 9 November 1872.

[9]The Daily Telegraph as cited in "British Attitudes to Reconstruction," 162.

[10]Press opinion cited in Victorian Attitudes to Race, 65.

[11]The Daily Telegraph as cited in "British Attitudes to Reconstruction," 163-64.

[12]The Economist, 17 June 1865.

[13]Ibid. 30 March 1867.

[14]The Daily Telegraph as cited in Anti-Slavery Movement, 163.

[15]Quoted in Ibid. 167.

[16]Quoted in "British Attitudes to Reconstruction," 169-70.

[17]Quoted in Ibid. 168.

[18]Quoted in Ibid. 170.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Quoted in Victorian Attitudes to Race, 64.

[21]Quoted in "British Attitudes to Reconstruction," 172.

[22]Quoted in British Essays in American History, 191.

[23]Allen, Heard Round the World, 54.

[24]Quoted in "British Attitudes to Reconstruction," 166.

[25]Quoted in Ibid.

[26]Quoted in Ibid. 167-168.

[27]Ibid. 165.

[28]Quoted in Ibid.

[29]Quoted in Ibid.

[30]Quoted in Ibid. 131.

[31]Quoted in Ibid. 132.

[32]George Rose, The Great Country or Impressions of America (London, 1868) 152-153.

[33]Ibid. 154.

[34]Robert Somers, The Southern States Since the War, 1870-71 (London, 1871), 42.

[35]Ibid. 43.

[36]Ibid. 226.

[37]Ibid. 227.

[38]F. Barham Zincke, Last Winter in the United States: Being Table Talk Collected During a Tour Through the Late Southern Confederation, the Far West, the Rocky Mountains, Etc. (London, 1868), 98-99.

[39]W. H. Dixon, New America (London, 1867), 328.

[40]Ibid. 330.

[41]Allen, Heard Round the World, 61.

[42]Charles Dickens, Life, Letters and Speeches, Vol. II (Boston, 1894) 311.

CHAPTER V

NEGRO SUFFRAGE--ITS BRITISH SUPPORTERS

Although British opinion overwhelmingly opposed Negro suffrage in America, there was a small minority of Englishmen who steadfastly defended it. Admittedly, they were a handful. But they spoke their convictions courageously when the weight of public and press opinion went against them.

Among the British press, The Spectator stood in the front of supporters of enfranchising the American Negro. During the Civil War, it had done yeoman service for the Union cause. Its approval of Radical Reconstruction was a logical follow-up. In 1867, The Spectator editorialized against President Johnson's Reconstruction plan because it put restrictions on black enfranchisement: "It makes the education of the Negroes the condition of giving them any political security for justice, whereas political security for justice is properly the only conceivable condition of their education."[1] One year later, The Spectator continued in the same vein: "The Negro must either be a chattel or a citizen. Once free under a government like that of America, his presence must be recognized . . . ."[2]

Along with The Spectator, another leading liberal newspaper, The Daily News, also spoke out forthrightly for Negro suffrage. Throughout the Civil War, the newspaper had been a defender of the Union side,

and now it continued to defend the North. Two months after Appomattox, The Daily News warned that "to secure in any of the States a majority really faithful to the United States, the negroes must be called to the ballot box."[3] Two years later in 1867, while Congress was debating the Reconstruction Act, The Daily News advised that the former Confederate states should be reorganized on the "broadest basis of democratic liberty," which meant equal rights for blacks and whites.[4] Still, another liberal newspaper, The Northern Whig, editorialized sharply against Southerners when it came out for Negro suffrage in 1866:

> The Southerners were ready enough to increase their own weight in Congress by their Negroes when they were really slaves. Now that they have been declared free, the Southerners and their admirers cannot bear that these same slaves should have any political representation at all. This is the former passion for domination in another form; it is the old foe with a new face; but whatever may be its immediate aspect, it still preserves its original character of hostility to political equality and the progress of mankind.[5]

Publications of the British freedmen's aid movement sounded forth for Negro suffrage after the war. This movement had grown out of the old British abolitionist crusade and after the war sent the emancipated slaves all kinds of assistance--old clothes, schoolteachers, and more than $800,000. Freedmen's aid groups, like abolitionist groups before them, were popular in Britain during the late 1860s. That freedmen's aid was so successful is a tribute both to its workers' zeal and to the humanitarian instincts of generous Victorians. Freedmen's aid competed with many reform causes in England during the latter 1860s--poor relief, temperance, education, and care

for the sick and aged--and it almost always was successful. In 1869, William Lloyd Garrison, writing from Boston, heaped praise and gratitude on the movement:

> . . . On this side of the Atlantic, we have nothing but wonder to express, thanks to give and congratulations to proffer at such a splendid contribution in so short a period in aid of a hapless race 3,000 miles away on the part of our British friends . . . . They have far exceeded our expectations and set a brilliant example of international benevolence.[6]

Despite their generosity toward the freedmen's material needs, there were many members of the movement who demurred when it came to Negro suffrage. As was noted earlier, the Duke and Duchess of Argyle favored gradual suffrage only.

Even the three publications of the freedman's aid movement--The Freedman, The Reporter, and Friend--had originally tried to maintain a neutral stance on Reconstruction and to minimize political comment. As time went on, however, they grew more outspoken in favor of Radical Reconstruction in general and Negro suffrage in particular. Writing in The Freedman on December 1, 1865, Thomas Hughes, a barrister, author, and Liberal member of Parliament, said:

> I for one have been quite confident that nothing but an immediate extension of the suffrage to the negroes would secure abolition in fact as well as in name. President Johnson's hesitation in the matter seemed to me like cowardice, or treason. I could not see the least reason why, when he was laying down his conditions of re-constitution for the rebel states, he should not have added to the concession of civil rights, in the courts and elsewhere, the crowning political right of the ballot. Nor do I see the reason now . . . .[7]

The Reporter wrote during early Reconstruction "that whatever forms a citizenship in any state, whether education or pecuniary, ought to

have an impartial reference to white and black alike . . . ."[8] The British Quakers' publication Friend echoed the thought in an editorial of November 1, 1865:

> We have more than once adverted to the great importance of fixing on a right basis the civil and political status of the American freedmen and have pointed out the danger of withholding from them the rights enjoyed by all the white population . . . .[9]

Thus publications of the freedmen's aid movement joined the small minority of the British press that supported Negro enfranchisement.

Besides a handful of the press and the freedmen's aid publications, there were also individuals in Victorian society who spoke out vigorously for Negro suffrage. Their numbers were small but their voices were strong. Charles Dilke, a radical member of the Liberal Party, was among this group. He wrote:

> It is clear that the Southern Negroes must be given a decisive voice in the appointment of the legislatures by which they are to be ruled . . . Government through the Negroes is the only way to avoid government through an army which would be dangerous to the freedom of the North.[10]

As for the gradualists who believed that Negroes should be educated before they were enfranchised, Dilke wrote: ". . . If the Negroes were to vote as soon as they could read, it is certain that the planters would take care that they never should read at all."[11]

Sir George Campbell, another Victorian who, like Dilke, had traveled through the South during Reconstruction, went back to England with praise for Radical Reconstruction, excepting corruption in government. On the issue of Negro suffrage (which Campbell thought the British should adopt for Negroes in the empire), he wrote

that it was "absolutely necessary that the South should honestly accept the 15th Amendment."[12]

One of the most articulate Victorians who endorsed Negro suffrage was David Macrae, an Edinburgh minister and author who had traveled through the South in 1870 and wrote his impressions in a book entitled, The Americans at Home: Pen and Ink Sketches of American Men, Manners and Institutions. On the issue of Negro suffrage, Macrae wrote:

> In a government which derives its rights from the consent of the governed, why should four million of the governed by gagged? And in a Government which says that taxation without representation is tyranny, why should representation be refused to the coloured people who are taxed as heavily as the whites are . . . ? It is easy to say, 'They should have been educated and fitted for the franchise first, and then been granted it.' But it may be doubted if they would ever have been granted it, or ever allowed the education which would have fitted them for it, or had any fair field for self-development, unless they had been enabled by means of the suffrage to secure these for themselves. And, perhaps after all, the speediest way of prearing a negro or any other man to exercise the suffrage is to give it to him.[13]

Macrae, who had supported the North during the Civil War, had stinging words for the North in the late 1860s because most northern states still barred Negroes from the ballot box.

> It will certainly seem that the North is not very clean-handed in the matter, when it is remembered that while she has forced Negro suffrage upon the conquered South, she still refuses to submit to it herself. Some of the New England states grant the suffrage to their few coloured citizens. But Pennsylvania refuses, Maryland refuses, etc. This is to say the least of it, a monstrous inconsistency.[14]

On the other hand, Macrae had stern words for the South and its fanaticism against "Negro government." In 1870, Macrae wrote,

> The idea of the Negro ruling the South is preposterous. Granting that he has a vote, he is even at present in the minority. In round numbers the black population of the entire South is 4 million, the white population 12 million, enabling the whites to outvote the blacks three to one.[15]

During his travels in the South, Macrae had been impressed with the ex-slaves and what he called their "wide-spread desire which is found amongst them for education."[16] To the obdurate Victorians back in England who believed the black to be ignorant and incapable of rising above his lowly rank, Macrae issued this counter argument:

> Whether the negro is capable of a high culture as the white man is a question which I do not pretend to settle. I believe there are differences between races as there are between individuals of the same race. Even in the same family we find one boy cleverer than his brother; and in the family of mankind one race is found to excel in one point, another race in another; and the white race has shown more energy, more grasp of thought and more power of command than the black race. But a boy in the family who is not naturally so gifted as his brother, may be capable of immensely improving by education; and this I take to be the case of the negro.[17]

There is no way to determine the impact on public opinion of Macrae, Dilke, and other Victorians who wrote glowingly about Negro suffrage. They may have been preaching to their friends who were already converted, or else to minds made up to believe otherwise. Still, they were a few lonely voices that served a reminder to Victorian England that American Reconstruction had its reasoned, articulate defenders.

CHAPTER V

NOTES

[1]The Spectator, 10 February 1867.

[2]The Spectator, 27 June 1868.

[3]The Daily News as cited in "British Attitudes to Reconstruction," 175.

[4]The Daily News as cited in Ibid. 176.

[5]The Northern Whig as cited in Ibid. 175.

[6]Quoted in Ibid. 15.

[7]The Freedman as cited in Ibid. 235.

[8]The Reporter as cited in Ibid. 241.

[9]Friend as cited in Ibid. 231.

[10]Quoted in Ibid. 172.

[11]Quoted in Ibid. 173.

[12]Quoted in Ibid. 174.

[13]Quoted in Ibid. 175-176.

[14]David Macrae, The Americans at Home: Pen and Ink Sketches of American Men, Manners and Institutions (Edinburgh, 1870), 13-14.

[15]Ibid. 15.

[16]Ibid. 57.

[17]Ibid. 66-67.

CHAPTER VI

NEGRO SUFFRAGE AND BRITISH ELECTORAL REFORM

One of the questions that historians have puzzled over for a century now is whether or not the American Reconstruction--and particularly Negro suffrage--had a democratizing effect on Great Britain.

First to be put to the test by historians is usually the Reform Act of 1867. This parliamentary milestone was initiated by William Gladstone, the Liberal Party leader, but it was later expropriated for his own party by Tory Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli. "Dizzy's" motives were political. He had taken the pulse of the nation, found "household suffrage" to be popular among the disenfranchised, and felt sure the new voters would swell Tory party rolls in gratitude for the vote. The Reform Act extended the vote to a million better-off, urban workingmen, thereby doubling the electorate to 2,225,000 or about one in three of the adult male population.

As debate for the Reform Act of 1867 (and before that the unsuccessful 1866 act) got under way in Parliament, the conservative wing of the British press warned readers to be wary of American political experiments. ". . . Among the British press, The Times, the Daily Telegraph, Manchester Courier, Scotsman and Dublin Evening Mail all consistently deplored the application of the American constitutional example in Britain."[1] These same newspapers, it should be remembered, had sided against the North during the Civil War and against the Radical

Republicans throughout Reconstruction. They consistently warned readers that the turmoil unleashed by Reconstruction could strike England if political experimentation were imported from America. On June 2, 1866, The Edinburgh Evening Courant stated:

> . . . The American Radicals wish to annihilate [the political rights of white Southerners], just as our Radicals seek to destroy in the House of Commons the influence of the landed interest and the Conservative classes. The American Radicals make the Negro their stalking-horse, just as our Radicals . . . use the working man . . . [It is] the most reason for us to stand upon the ancient ways.[2]

The Manchester Courier warned in 1871--four years after the Reform Act had passed but at a time when even greater enfranchisement was in the wind--that Englishmen should be wary of the American example. It wrote: "We should hope that what we see on the other side of the Atlantic will operate as a warning to deter us from following Mr. Bright and even Mr. Gladstone in that rapid and easy descent down the avenues which they are inviting us to commence."[3]

Many British liberals, including John Bright in particular, used the American example in arguing for reform in Britain. As early as May, 1865, Bright was writing Sumner in Boston: "Every man who hopes for liberty in Europe breathes more freely now when your success is secured."[4] Bright was not alone among English statesmen in approving America's democratic innovations. Even Liberal Party leader William Gladstone, who had leaned toward the South during the Civil War and who once called Americans "a dishonest, unprincipled people," changed noticeably after the war. ". . . The victory of the Northern states had an important effect upon Gladstone's outlook. All traces of his

former prejudice was slowly dissolved, and he presently came to regard the American democratic experiment as one of humanity's supreme achievements."[5]

Despite the approval of the American example, there was very little mention of it during the parliamentary debates on the Reform Act of 1867. Only a very small percentage of speeches--less than two per cent--cited America.[6] John Bright himself, always voluble on the subject of the United States, evoked the word "America" only five times during the debates. This silence is unimportant as a measure of America's impact on Britain. For Bright, Gladstone, and others to have raised the American flag too often in Parliament would have offended British chauvinism. ". . . There is ground for thinking that supporters of reform deliberately eschewed the American argument in the House of Commons . . . lest it unnecessarily alienate some members . . ."[7]

In the early years after the Civil War, American historians gushed with self-praise about their country's democratic impact abroad. In a speech before the New York Historical Society in 1868, historian John Lothrop Motley said: "The effect of the triumph of freedom in this country on the causes of progress in Europe is plain. Who can doubt that . . . the English household suffrage bill (of 1867) is the fruit of the Appomattox apple-tree?"[8] A Fourth of July orator speaking in 1870 agreed with Motley. The Fourth of July speaker boasted:

> The great principles that underlie our polity, as a nation, do not yet express themselves by giving rise in Europe to forms of

> government like our own. But in the latest (1867) advance of English reform, in the formal recognition of the sovereignty of the people by the Emperor of the French, in the latest assertion of the right of the people to hold the reigns of government by the people of Spain; and, in fine, in the general awakening of the people throughout Europe, we see the principles of our own government, giving the promise of a better future, and the first faint manifestations of its coming . . . . The people of Europe have learned from the new world that they have rights.[9]

But on the other extreme is Charles Seymour, an American diplomatic historian, who outlined British voting changes in his book, Electoral Reform in England and Wales. No where in his study does Seymour even mention America as being an influence on British electoral reform.

Most historians nowadays fall into the middle ground on the question. None is so enthusiastic as Motley, yet none is so damning by silence as Seymour. British historian Christine Bolt writes: ". . . There seems little doubt about the important impetus given to reform in Britain by the victory of the North in the Civil War."[10] To support her position, she says,

> The Saturday Review in 1867 said that as Mr. Bright and his followers sometimes complain, the Negro in the United States may possibly obtain the franchise before the English workman; and indeed the Lancashire statesman constantly argued from the American example during Reconstruction using the black vote as a precedent for manhood suffrage in Britain.[11]

Henry Pelling agrees with Bolt's position on the importance of America's influence. In his book, America and the British Left, Pelling, a Cambridge historian, writes:

> The ideal expressed so eloquently by Lincoln found ready response among British Radicals, and in the two years after his death, little concern for current American political difficulties or future economic problems marred their enthusiasm for the constitutional panacea of democracy on the transatlantic pattern. And

> since the Civil War had ended in triumph of the Union the American example, being a rallying-point for the forces of British Radicalism, played its part in setting Britain further and more decisively upon the path that led to full democracy.[12]

Still another historian belonging to this school of thought is G. D. Lillibridge. In Beacon of Freedom: The Impact of American Democracy Upon Great Britain, 1830-1870, Lillibridge gives the United States its due on the question. "Though there were many forces and factors leading to this long awaited day in 1867, who will now deny that the role of the American destiny was not a humble one in this decisive triumph of the democratic movement in England in the 19th century."[13]

H. C. Allen, in his essay on Reconstruction in Heard Round the World, seems reluctant to come out four square on the subject. On the one hand, he writes: "There can be no doubt at all that during the course of the war itself, the cause of the Union was, generally speaking, a rallying point for forces seeking democracy in Britain."[14] On the other hand, he writes that British opinion tended to reject the American example:

> By and large British opinion . . . still agreed with Disraeli, who said in a characteristically perceptive speech against Gladstone's Reform Bill of 1866: 'Are we to consider this subject in the spirit of the English Constitution, or are we to meet it in the spirit of the American Constitution? I prefer to consider the question in the spirit of our own Constitution . . . !'[15]

Nonetheless, most historians, contemporary and earlier, seem to agree that, when the vote was called in Parliament on the Reform Act of 1867, the American precedent of extending the suffrage played a role in Britain. The disagreement among historians arises on the question of degree--great or small.

CHAPTER VI

NOTES

[1]Allen, Heard Round the World, 44.

[2]The Edinburgh Evening Courant (2 June 1866) as cited in Bolt, "British Attitudes to Reconstruction in the United States, 1863-77," 85.

[3]The Manchested Courier as cited in Ibid.

[4]Quoted in Ibid. 89.

[5]Philip Magnus, Gladstone (New York, 1954), 154.

[6]Allen, Heard Round the World, 86.

[7]Ibid. 84.

[8]Harold Hyman, ed., Heard Round the World (New York, 1969), vi.

[9]Ibid. viii.

[10]Bolt, "British Attitudes to Reconstruction," 34.

[11]Bolt, Victorian Attitudes to Race, 62.

[12]Henry Pelling, America and the British Left: From Bright to Bevan, (London, 1956), 13.

[13]G. D. Lillibridge, Beacon of Freedom: The Impact of American Democracy Upon Great Britain, 1830-70 (Philadelphia, 1963), 122.

[14]Allen, Heard Round the World, 66.

[15]Ibid. 44-45.

CHAPTER VII

WHOSE OPINIONS?

One of the most vexing questions faced by historians studying attitudes is this: Whose attitudes are we talking about. Phrases such as "The Edwardians believed . . ." or "The Victorians thought . . ." are fraught with dangers since they raise the question of which Edwardians or which Victorians. In recent years, highly sophisticated techniques have been developed for measuring attitudes and public opinion on contemporary issues. But historians working with the past are not so blessed and have sometimes made sweeping generalizations about public opinion when their sources for determining it were limited. In recent years, young revisionist historians in particular have been sharply critical of earlier opinion studies for their narrowness. These critics charge that often historical studies were based on newspapers, diaries, letters and travelogues written by the educated, privileged classes and were strictly a view from the top of society. In no way, they say, do these studies reflect the opinions of the lower, working classes who were often illiterate and lacked the means of articulate their views.

This study of British attitudes toward Negro suffrage runs into the same difficulty. Its sources draw heavily from the well-off classes--the prestige press, travelogues (and who could afford to travel but the well-to-do?), and British officials based in America

(Foreign Service Officers came from the educated classes). And on the other side of the coin, educated voices are still the speakers--newspapers such as The Daily News and liberals such as Carles Dilke and David Macrae argued for Negro suffrage. But what seems to be missing here is working-class opinion. How did the working man, himself disfranchised, feel about the Americans giving newly freed slaves the vote? To know the answer would round off the opinion spectrum since we've already observed the attitudes of the educated classes, both conservative and liberal.

There are reasons why the answer is hard to find. In the first place, workingmen's newspapers--which would have reflected working-class views on Negro suffrage--were scarce. Secondly, those that existed printed very little coverage of foreign news.[1] They operated on a shoestring budget and with limited page space, and most of their available columns were devoted to domestic news. This could explain their noticeable silence on Negro suffrage in America, which of course would fall into the category of foreign affairs. The Beehive, Reynolds Weekly, and Lloyd's, all working-class journals, simply did not have the space to give much mention to foreign issues when problems at their own doorstep loomed larger to the working-class reader. "The newspapers which gave most coverage to American events were thus the main London and provincial journals, and their readers, like those of travelers' books and memoirs, were largely middle class."[2] Individual journalists on the prestige papers may at times have speculated about workingmen opinion on the issues of the day. "So often, what the masses believed was actually what journalists thought the masses believed."[3]

The overall attitude toward the workingman's opinion was probably best summed up by Louis Blanc, a French political commentator of the day who visited England in the 1860s:

> The working classes here count for nothing in the eyes of diplomacy. They are not represented in the play of public powers. Barely are they represented in the press. It is not their opinion, therefore, especially on points of foreign questions in that which is held by what are here called 'the governing classes.'[4]

This indifference on the part of the ruling class toward the working class could also account for the fewness of the records on working class attitudes that have been left to history.

CHAPTER VII

NOTES

[1]Bolt, "British Attitudes to Reconstruction in the United States, 1863-1877," 19.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid. 40-41.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

British opinion was overwhelmingly opposed to Negro suffrage in America after the Civil War. The reasons for this opposition were several, the most basic one being racism. To the average, middle-class Victorian, the black man was ignorant, slothful, physically repulsive, and incapable of amounting to much in life. This image was originally brought home to England by the early Elizabethan explorers who first encountered the black man in Africa. By Victorian times, the image had changed little except to take on even more menacing characteristics after Negroes in the West Indies and South Africa mounted uprisings. In addition to racism, Victorians were greatly influenced by a fear of anything that smacked of revolutionary change, which, of course, Negro suffrage did. No doubt, they sensed that enfranchising American Negroes could sow seeds of discontent among their own disfranchised working class in England. In any event, influential British newspapers such as The Times, The Daily Telegraph, The Economist, and others printed reams of copy criticizing the enfranchisement of freedmen who could neither read nor write and who owned no property. Press opinion, meanwhile, was reinforced by British travelers who journeyed to the United States after the war and went home to write florid accounts of deplorable "Negro governments" in the South. British diplomats based in America

after the war also filed reports and wrote letters about the unfitness of freedmen to become full citizens.

Negro suffrage was not the only aspect of Reconstruction under attack from the British. The entire Radical Republican plan for the South came under sharp criticism. The British, whose sympathy early in the war had rested with the South, had hoped for a conciliatory Reconstruction for the conquered Confederacy after the war. In essence, what the British wanted (and throughout this paper we are talking about private opinion since the British government adherred to a strict policy of non-interference in American domestic affaris) was a return to prewar conditions in the South--except for slavery, which the British wanted to see ended.

But while Reconstruction as a whole stirred concern in England, Negro suffrage in particular fanned the most bitter controversy. To men such as Walter Bagehot, the brilliant editor of The Economist, it was inconceivable that the United States would give the vote to millions of ex-slaves who were "totally uneducated and hungry for material advantages." Even dependable liberals such as John Stuart Mill, John Bright, and the Duke and Duchess of Argyle believed that freedmen were yet unfit for the ballot. They asked for time, for gradualism, for education, or for property ownership first and then the ballot.

Though the great weight of British opinion was against Negro suffrage, there were still some Victorians--and admittedly a small minority--who defended it. They believed the ballot box was the

strongest protection that Southern freedmen had against their former masters. The Daily News and The Spectator, among others, performed yeoman service for the cause. Men such as David Macrae and Charles Dilke spoke out courageously for black enfranchisement, arguing that if gradualism should win the day, the blacks would likely never get the vote, since whites would deny them education or property or whatever qualifiers the gradualists were asking for. Whether men such as Macrae, who argued eloquently that "the speediest way of preparing a negro or any other man to exercise the suffrage is to give it to him," had any sway on British attitudes is unknown. Nonetheless, they served a very vital function of keeping the suffrage issue a two-sided question of debate.

Whether Negro suffrage in America had a democratizing influence on Britain's passage of the Reform Act of 1867 is also something of a question mark. There is ample evidence that British conservatives feared the American example and the "mob democracy" it might unleash for export. In the early years of Reconstruction, Americans liked to boast that their "great experiment" had energized British electoral reform in the 1867 Act. As time has passed, most historians have tempered their conclusions and decided that the American precedent did play a part in the passage of the act, though not so large a part as early historians liked to think.

One of the most difficult problems in writing a paper on public opinion is the need to present all shades of it. For the Victorian period, it is simple enough to measure attitudes of the educated middle

and upper classes who dominated the press, wrote books, penned travelogues, et cetera. But gauging the attitudes of the working class, who were poorly educated, if at all, and who had limited outlets for expression, has presented problems of some proportion. Still, if an hypothesis can be ventured, it is probably accurate to say that most English workingmen welcomed suffrage for the American Negro because it might give their own chances for enfranchisement a boost. The passage of the Reform Act of 1867 suggests that to some extent it did just that.

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