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Title: The Trent Affair of 1861
Date of first publication: 1922
Author: Fred Landon (1880-1969)
Date first posted: June 14, 2024
Date last updated: June 14, 2024
Faded Page eBook #20240605

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The *Trent* Affair of 1861

By Fred Landon

Canadian Historical Review, Volume III, 1922

The *Trent* Affair of sixty years ago has been described as "the most farcical incident in the history of Anglo-American relations".[1] It was farce, however, that seemed for a time to be nearing the border of tragedy; and its results, particularly the alienation of British sympathy from the North during a large part of the Civil War period, were regrettable. Sixty years afterwards, one may well wonder how either nation would have justified itself to posterity had war actually come; and there is room for speculation as to what would have been the future of Canada had the British provinces been the battle-ground of a second Anglo-American struggle.

The beginning of the incident need be reviewed but briefly. In the autumn of 1861 the government of Jefferson Davis decided to send to Europe commissioners in the persons of James Murray Mason and John Slidell, both of whom had been formerly senators at Washington. No two men were more hated in the North, and when, on the morning of November 8, Captain Wilkes, of the U.S. sloop *Jacinto*, halted the British steamer *Trent*, plying between Vera Cruz, Mexico, and the Danish islands of St. Thomas, and by force removed the two southerners, there was wild enthusiasm all through the North. It was the first effective blow that had been struck at the South in months, and from cabinet secretaries down to the meanest citizen there was nothing but praise for Wilkes, who at once became a national hero.

There was no cable to carry the news swiftly to Europe and thus, although the capture took place on November 8, and became known in the United States on the 15th, it was not until the 27th that anybody in England knew about it. In those latter twelve days there was quite a cooling off in some quarters in America, doubts arising in a few men's minds as to the legality of the seizure by Captain Wilkes, but while doubts were arising in the United States, war fever was at a tremendous height in England, and Henry Adams, son of the ambassador at London, could write to Charles Francis Adams, Jr., at Boston: "This nation means to make war. Do not doubt it."[2]

Henry Adams, in London, was astonished at the childish way in which his own people across the Atlantic were treating the incident. “There’s Judge Bigelow,” he wrote, “parading bad law ‘at the cannon’s mouth’, and Governor Andrew all cock-a-hoop, and Dana so unaccustomed confident, and Mr. Everett following that ‘great authority’, George Sumner, into a ditch, ‘blind leader of the blind’.”[3] There does not seem to have been any fever for war with Great Britain in the circle in which the Adams family moved in Boston. “We have been quaking over the seizure of Mason and Slidell,” wrote C. F. Adams, Jr. on November 10, and he expressed a suspicion that Seward was trying to get the United States into a foreign war.[4] This suspicion was in the minds of many other people, including Lord Lyons, the British ambassador at Washington, in whose correspondence the idea recurs again and again. Lord Lyons had a marked dislike for Seward even before the latter had taken office. “I cannot help fearing that he will be a dangerous foreign minister,” he wrote early in 1861, and again, “His view of the relations between the United States and Great Britain has always been that they are a good material to make political capital of. He has even to me avowed his belief that England will never go to war with the United States”.[5] The British ambassador was uneasy over the character of the Lincoln cabinet generally. “Neither the president nor any man in the cabinet has a knowledge of foreign affairs,” he wrote to Lord John Russell.[6] All through the spring months of 1861 the ambassador’s anxiety increased, so apparent were the signs that, in the minds of many, a foreign war would be the solution of the distracted domestic situation in the United States.[7] The culmination of his anxieties came in June when he reported to the British government his discovery that Seward had prepared a despatch which was all but a direct announcement of war, and that it was only the intervention of the president and of the more reasonable members of the cabinet which prevented its being sent to the American minister in London.[8] In the summer of 1861, however, Lord Lyons thought that matters were improving and in August he wrote to the governor of Canada, Sir Edmund Head, that relations were more peaceful than they had been in some time. He attributed this improvement to the firmness with which the British government had stood for its rights and to the preparations for defence.[9] Writing to Lord Malmesbury he said: “I should hardly say that the bulk of the common people are hostile to the old country but I think they would rather enjoy seeing us in difficulties.”[10]

The elder Adams was undoubtedly right when he sent word from London: “This nation means to make war.” Almost daily the old Duke of

Cambridge was busy inspecting troops that were setting out for Canada, and indeed some of the finest regiments in the British army were crossing the Atlantic. Especially among the upper classes was there a readiness for war. "England," wrote a prominent foreign office official, "is naturally and rightly furious at this outrage. Apart from this, ministers and the upper classes are in favour of the South, while the Queen and the lower orders favour the North."[11]

Thus was the situation neatly and concisely put by one of the upper class. England was quite right in the stand that she took with regard to the action of Captain Wilkes, but there was a bitterness of feeling towards the North during 1861 that stands out in striking contrast to the Anglo-American courtesy of recent years. The leaders in *The Times* were often savage, so much so that in October of 1861 John Bright was moved to complain that "in *The Times*, the most powerful representative of English opinion, at least of the richer classes, there has not been, since Mr. Lincoln took office in March last, one fair and honourable and friendly article on American affairs".[12] What must Bright's feelings have been, about a year later, when he read in *The Times* this sentiment: "Is the name of Lincoln ultimately to be classed in the catalogue of monsters, wholesale assassins and butchers of their kind?"[13] Perhaps, had war actually come, we should to-day have reason to place a part of the blame on the newspapers both in England and America. Lady John Russell, writing to Lady Dunfermline, said Lord John felt that "not a word had been spoken, not a deed done by him but what showed the friendliest feeling to the United States, and the strongest wish to remain at peace with them". But she added:

> I wish the newspapers were blameless; but there was a sneering, exultant tone in many of them after the military disasters of the North which was likely to irritate. Mr. Motley said long ago that *The Times* would, if possible, work up a war between the two countries, and though I can't speak from my own knowledge, as I have seldom looked at its articles, I have no doubt from what John and others say that he was right. . . . There can be no doubt that we have done deeds very like that of Captain Wilkes—not exactly alike because no two cases ever are so—but I wish that we had not done them, and I suppose and hope that we shall admit that they were wrong.[14]

When the crisis was passed, the United States having acceded to the British demands and surrendered the two Confederate commissioners, Lady

John Russell was sufficiently observant to note the "very tempered joy, or rather the ill-concealed disappointment of London society" over the outcome.[15] Not all the jingoes were in Washington in November and December of 1861.

The part played by the dying Prince Consort in smoothing out the difficulties must not be overlooked. The last official act of his life was the revision of the despatch that was to go to Washington. "A violent despatch," was the way a foreign office official could describe the document which was sent to the Queen for approval. At seven o'clock on the morning of December 1, the Prince Consort wrote, with a quavering hand, a series of suggestions for alterations to the draft. It was a softening down of its wording sufficient to leave the way open for peace. Two weeks later, the Prince was dead. His last act had materially aided in averting war.[16]

Lord Lyons, the ambassador at Washington, deserves credit too for the manner in which he played his exceedingly difficult part. His own view was expressed in his letter to Lord John Russell on December 23, 1861, when he said: "I am so convinced that unless we give our friends here a good lesson this time, we shall have the same trouble with them again very soon, under less advantageous circumstances, that even my regard for them leads me to think it all important that they should receive the lesson."[17] In his dealings with Seward there was no trace of either bullying or weakness, and Seward, when he was finally cornered, had to admit that the British note was "courteous and friendly and not dictatorial or menacing."[18] He could hardly have said that of the original draft of the despatch.

What of the Canadian provinces during this period when it appeared that they might become the battle-ground of a great war? There was evidence of the possibility of war in the steady movement of garrison troops westward to the lake borders and in the arrival of the fresh British troops a little later on. There was great activity in the volunteer militia, and a patriotic wave swept the whole country. But patriotic fervour did not blind clear minds to the horror of a possible war. The Toronto *Globe* expressed this feeling when it said, in its issue of December 13, 1861:

> The Canadian people do not desire war with the United States. On the contrary, and notwithstanding the hot feeling now rising, a war with the Americans would be regarded with horror by the great mass of the community.

At an earlier date the *Globe* had pointed out:

> The danger is that hard feelings may be incited . . . and that pride may prevent justice being done on one side or the other. Patriotic men on both sides of the line should use all their exertions to prevent that result.

The Toronto *Leader* was less temperate in its comment. It was regarded as the newspaper voice of the government of the day, so that its utterances were of some weight. Eventually, probably under pressure from the government, the *Leader* found it necessary to present prominently a statement that it was not to be regarded in its editorial utterances as voicing the views of the administration. There was a good deal of quarrelling between the rival Toronto journals, the *Leader* charging the *Globe* with pandering to "Yankee bluff" and the *Globe* in turn charging its rival with seeking to bolster up a tottering ministry by stirring hatred against the United States.[19]

In December of 1861, while the excitement was at its height, the Hon. A. T. Galt, then finance minister, was in Washington and had an interview with President Lincoln of which the details have been preserved.[20] Lincoln disclaimed for himself and his cabinet all thought of aggression towards Canada and said that he himself had been opposed to Seward's circular putting the coasts into a state of defence, but had been overruled. Galt asked what was meant by the recommendations to erect fortifications and provide depots of arms on the Great Lakes, to which the reply was: "We must say something to satisfy the people." About the Mason and Slidell case Lincoln remarked: "Oh, that'll be got along with," and he also volunteered the observation that if he could not within a reasonable time get hold of Virginia, Kentucky, and Missouri, and keep Maryland, he would tell the American people to give up the contest, for it would be "too big" for them.

Lincoln impressed Galt with his sincerity and honesty of purpose, but Galt was of the opinion that there was a considerable lack of harmony in the cabinet. He brought back with him to Canada a letter from Lord Lyons to the governor-general of Canada, urging the necessity of immediate further preparations for defence.

It is interesting to note that during the crisis of the *Trent* incident the French-Canadian press and the Roman Catholic hierarchy in Quebec took a decided stand with regard to preparations for defence. In its issue of January 4, 1862, the Toronto *Evening Leader* said:

> There is not a single organ of French-Canadian opinion that has not urged the necessity of being prepared for war; and done more or less to inspire its compatriots with a sense of duty on the approach of danger.

The administrator of the diocese of Quebec, the Rev. Charles François Baillargeon, issued a pastoral letter to be read in all the churches of the diocese, urging the young men to join the militia and ordering special prayers "for the preservation of peace or for the happy success of our arms, if war takes place".[21]

The *Trent* incident, perhaps more than any other single incident during the Civil War period, was an influence in the development of the transportation systems of both Canada and the northern states. There was an immediate movement, through the northwestern states in particular, for the building of larger canal systems that could not be troubled by "the ghost of British fleets upon the lakes". The danger of war had probably been much exaggerated in the Northwest, and some of the resolutions that were passed by state legislatures and conventions of various kinds have within them more or less indication of panic. In June, 1863, at a ship canal convention held in Chicago, and attended by five thousand delegates, it was urged that the federal government be asked to aid in the construction of a waterway from the Mississippi to the lakes and from the lakes to the Atlantic. While the federal finances did not permit acceptance of such plans, there was a decided impetus given to the development of internal waterways. The restrictions that were being placed upon the Canadian canal system also encouraged the states to develop their own waterways.[22]

The *Trent* incident and its attendant difficulties were presented to the British government as good reason for assisting with the building of the Intercolonial Railway.[23] An application for aid made in 1857 by Macdonald and Rose had failed, but in 1861, with the possibility of war ahead, the home government looked at the railway project in more favourable light and agreed to extend a guarantee to the road. But, since it was for military purposes that the road was being considered by the British government, strong pressure was brought to bear to have a route well separated from the Maine boundary. In Canada there was a fear that unless the "northern route" were adopted the imperial authorities would be disinclined to extend their guarantee, and so in a sense we owe the present inconvenient route of the government railway through the maritime provinces to the act of Captain Wilkes and its consequences.

[1] Villiers and Chesson, *Anglo-American Relations, 1861-1865*, London, 1919, p. 51. Mr. Charles Francis Adams says: "Seen through the perspective of fifty years, it may now, with reasonable assurance, be asserted that in the controversy which ensued, the United States did not have, and never had, in reality, a justifying leg to stand upon, and least of all was there any justification for the course pursued by Captain Wilkes." (*Amer. Hist. Rev.*, vol. xvii, no. 3, p. 544).

[2] *Cycle of Adams Letters, 1861 to 1865*, edited by Worthington Chauncey Ford, 2 vols, Boston, 1920, I, 76, letter of November 30, 1861. This was but three days after the news had reached London.

[3] *Ibid.*, I, 83, letter of December 13, 1861.

[4] *Ibid.*, I, 70, letter of November 10, 1861. In a letter written on November 19 Charles Francis Adams, Jr., says that "at first every one thought it must be a violation of national law," but opinion changed when "Dana crowed with delight" (*Cycle*, I, 71). Lord Lyons noticed that mixed with the enthusiasm there was a certain amount of fear of the consequences. Writing to Lord John Russell on November 25, he says: "The people here are extremely frightened about the capture on board the Trent. The New York money market gives signs of this. Another indication is the moderation of the newspapers which is, for them, wonderful." (*Lord Lyons*, I, 57).

[5] Lord Newton, *Lord Lyons, a Record of British Diplomacy*, 2 vols, London, 1913: Lyons to Russell, vol. I, p. 30.

[6] *Ibid.*, I, 37.

[7] "I am so seriously alarmed by what I see passing around me here, and especially by the conduct of the cabinet, that I have thought it my duty to call the attention of our

government to the danger which I conceive to exist." (Lyons to Sir Edmund Head, May 22, 1861, quoted in *Lord Lyons*, vol. I, p. 39). To Sir Edmund Head he also wrote: "Canada is, as you know, looked upon here as our weak point. There are in the cabinet men who are no doubt as ignorant of the state of feeling in Canada as they were of that in the Southern States and who believe that there is a strong American feeling in Canada. You will not have forgotten that Mr. Seward, during the presidential canvass, publicly advocated the annexation of Canada as a compensation for any loss which might be occasioned by the disaffection of the South." (*Lord Lyons*, vol. I, p. 40).

[8] *Lord Lyons*, vol. I, pp. 46-47.

[9] *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 50.

[10] *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 16.

[11] F. W. H. Cavendish, *Society, Politics and Diplomacy, 1820-1864*, London, 1913, pp. 362-363. In his diary for December 3 Cavendish wrote: "I hear Lord Palmerston wrote a violent despatch to go to Washington, which the Queen and Prince Albert modified. France is warmly backing us up while Russia, Austria and Prussia are most sympathetic."

[12] Speech at Rochdale, Sept. 4, 1861.

[13] *The Times*, October 14, 1862. It is to the credit of *The Times*, however, that during the actual crisis of the Trent affair its editorials, while firm, were not too aggressive and many public men wrote to Delane thanking him for his attitude on the issue. See Sir Edward Cook, *Delane of the Times*, New York, 1916, p. 131.

[14] *Lady John Russell, a Memoir*, London, 1910, p. 194.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 195.

[16] See Sir Theodore Martin, *Life of His Royal Highness the Prince Consort*, London, 1875-1880, vol. v, pp. 416-427.

[17] *Lord Lyons*, I, 69.

[18] *Ibid.*, I, 65-66.

[19] The *Leader* had on its editorial staff for a time one George Sheppard, lately come from Richmond, Va. The New York *Times*, in its issue of January 1, 1862, hinted that the *Leader's* editor was in the pay of Jefferson Davis. The *Leader* took note of this and denied it on January 6, 1862. The New York *Commercial Advertiser* was quoted by the *Globe* as saying: "We are loth to apply any harsh epithets to a part of our Canadian neighbours, much less to all. But if such journals as the Toronto *Leader* were to be accepted as the mouthpiece of public sentiment they would do their best to make us believe hard things of those of whom we have always thought and spoken in the kindest spirit" (*Globe*, Dec. 27, 1861). An example of the *Leader's* bitterness might be quoted from its issue of January 4, 1862, in which it said: "The government of Mr. Lincoln is a standing monument of incompetence and wickedness." The occasion of this denunciation was the sinking by the federal authorities of some old stone hulks to block the entrance to the harbour of Charleston, S.C.

[20] Galt's memorandum on his interview with Lincoln, dated December 5, 1861, is printed in full in Skelton, *Life and Times of Sir Alexander Tilloch Galt*, Toronto, 1920. See also Newton, *Life of Lord Lyons*, vol. I, p. 60. In a letter to his wife, Galt said of Lincoln: "I went by appointment last night to see the President and had a long and satisfactory private interview. He is very tall, thin, and with marked features, appears fond of anecdote, of which he has a fund. I liked him for his straight-forward, strong common-sense." Of Seward, Galt wrote: "He did not impress me much, seemed fidgety and out of temper." (Skelton, *Life of Sir A. T. Galt*, pages 314-315).

[21] *Evening Leader*, January 4, 1862.

[22] See Callahan, *The Lake Frontier during the Civil War* (American Historical Association, annual report, 1896, vol. I, particularly pages 340-342). In the same way needs of defence had had much to do with developing the Canadian canal system at an earlier date.

[23] See *Canada and its Provinces*, vol. x, pp. 417-419.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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