President Lincoln’s preliminary Emancipation Proclamation after the battle of Antietam in September, 1862, produced an immediate outcry in the North. Surprisingly to modern readers, it was the Archbishop of New York, John Hughes, who warned Lincoln: “We Catholics . . . have not the slightest idea of carrying on a war that costs so much blood and treasure just to gratify a clique of Abolitionists in the North.”¹ But perhaps less well known, or understood, is the controversy that the Proclamation attracted abroad. Both Union and Confederate supporters in Britain tried to use it as a propaganda tool, and in the beginning at least, it was the Confederates who benefited the most. The reasons for this were laid down at the beginning of the war, when the British government was still pondering its response to the conflict. A poem in Punch, on March 30, 1861, neatly expressed Britain’s cotton dilemma:

Though with the North we sympathize,
It must not be forgotten,
That with the South we’ve stronger ties,
Which are composed of cotton.

The revelation by the London Times journalist, William Howard Russell, that the South hoped to exploit these ties, along with his poignant descriptions of slave life, provoked outrage in England when his reports started to appear the following month. But the North gained less support than Southerners feared once news crossed the Atlantic that President Lincoln had promised not to interfere with slavery in his inaugural address.
The British attitude dismayed the US Minister Charles Francis Adams. “People do not quite understand Americans or their politics,” he wrote to his son, Charles Francis Jr. Adams was particularly disappointed by the reactions of America’s two most vociferous supporters in Parliament: Liberal MPs Richard Cobden and John Bright. Cobden thought separating from the South would be good for the North. John Bright had come out strongly for “strict neutrality.” “[British politicians] think this a hasty quarrel,” complained Adams, “They do not comprehend the connection which slavery has with it, because we do not at once preach emancipation. Hence they go to the other extreme and argue that it is not an element of the struggle.”

Adams was himself guilty of mischaracterization. The English reaction was far more complicated than he allowed. The celebrated novelist, Mrs. Gaskell, an ardent admirer of the United States, confessed to being “thoroughly puzzled by what is now going on in America.” “I don’t mind your thinking me dense or ignorant,” she wrote candidly to the future President of Harvard, Charles Eliot Norton, “But I should have thought (I feel as if I were dancing among eggs,) that separating yourselves from the South was like getting rid of a diseased member.” She added, “You know I live in S. Lancashire where all personal and commercial intimacies are with the South. Everyone looks and feels sad (oh so sad) about this war. It would do Americans good to see how warm the English heart is towards them.”

Charles Darwin, whose *Origin of Species* had been published in 1859, highlighted another aspect that troubled the English. “Some few, and I am one of them, even wish to God,” he wrote to the botanist Asa Gray, “that the North would proclaim a crusade against slavery.” A leading abolitionist, Richard Webb, voiced a similar complaint from his country house in Sussex: “Neither Lincoln nor [Secretary of State William] Seward has yet spoken an antislavery syllable since they took office.” Seward had specifically instructed all US ministers and consuls to avoid mentioning the word in connection with the Union. The deliberate omission was a grievous miscalculation. Seward had sacrificed the North’s trump card in Britain in the hope that it would appease the South, but instead had provided ammunition to his critics who accused the North of hypocrisy. The *Economist* declared, “The great majority of the people in the Northern States detest the coloured population even more than do the Southern whites.”

Yet for all the finger-pointing and public criticism of the North, the Southern Commissioners William Lowndes Yancey and Ambrose Dudley Mann charged with presenting the Confederacy’s case for independence to the British government failed to make the slightest