

# Why Englishmen fought in the American Civil War

Of the many immigrants from the United Kingdom who took up arms in the American Civil War only a comparatively small number were English.

**Daniel Clarke** looks at the reason for this and explores the experiences of those who served.





# During the

American Civil War people from many countries fought for either the Union or Confederacy. They included immigrants from all over Europe including Scandinavia, Germany, France and Hungary. Men from the United Kingdom also fought in the conflict, the vast majority on the Union side. They included about 170,000 from Ireland and up to 50,000 from England, Scotland and Wales. Yet the number of Englishmen who fought numbered only around 10,000.

Most English immigrants to America did not consider themselves to be immigrants at all and so it is difficult to trace their history in the conflict. Many of the English saw their stay as temporary, due to the fact that the companies that employed them had sent them overseas to manage or monitor their stateside commercial interests. On the other hand, many Welsh immigrants felt their relocation to be permanent as a result of coal and slate mine closures in North Wales. They had decided to seek employment in the coal mines of Pennsylvania and West Virginia. There is the added complication that those who settled in the Northern states after the conflict wanted to keep a low profile, because of Britain's perceived support for Confederate independence.

### Individual and state liberty

The main reason English immigrants fought for the Union was to protect the freedoms and opportunities that they had gained in the United States. Many believed that they were in a country which saw everyone as equal and in which they could participate in the election of their leaders. They saw slavery as holding



**Above: Collett Leventhorpe, Confederate colonel.**

**Previous page: English officers at Yorktown, 1862.**

America back from being the 'First Class power' of the civilised world, so they quickly volunteered to fight to prevent the Confederacy from spreading it northward. This motivation was similar to that of the majority of Irish and German immigrants. The German 'Forty-Eighters', for example, had tried to rise up and replace their monarchies with directly elected governments, similar to the federal democracies of America and Switzerland. After the abortive revolution in 1848 a number relocated to the US because they saw it as representing their ideal.

Many immigrants fought to extend such liberties to slaves working on Southern plantations. One Englishman, Joseph Lester, enlisted in the 6th Independent Battery, Wisconsin Light Artillery and fought in a number of major battles including the Siege of Vicksburg, Mississippi in 1863. From Vicksburg Lester wrote that the progress to free Southern slaves was too slow. He decried the fact that freed slaves in the Union armies were 'allowed to dig, to cook, to drive mules and do menial offices', but that the white officers would not 'let [them] fight for [their own] freedom'. In 1864 Lester returned to this point,

suggesting that by ending slavery the United States would become a beacon of freedom:

*Slavery dies hard, very hard, but die it must and the Restored Union, without that 'nether millstone' to retard its 'onwards march' will vault into its acknowledged position of being a First Class power and the asylum of the oppressed of all Nations.*

Englishmen who fought for the Confederacy also wanted to protect their new freedoms and extend the idea of liberty. However they fought not for the ideal of personal freedom but for state liberty. They believed in states' rights, perceiving the Federal government based in Washington DC to be overbearing in its attempts to remove legislative powers from the individual states. What created still more tension was the fact that President Lincoln's name had not appeared on ballot papers in ten of the 11 Southern states that seceded. As such, they argued, how could he be their rightful leader?

Collett Leventhorpe was one such English Confederate. He was born in Exmouth, Devon in 1815 and joined the 14th Regiment of Foot, where he rose to the rank of captain. He went to America in 1843, becoming a legalised American citizen in 1849. Settling in North Carolina, Leventhorpe retrained as a doctor and married Louisa Bryan of Rutherfordton. He brought a property at Catheys Creek, which included a number of gold mines on the edge of the South Mountain Gold Region. His gold mining ambitions were unsuccessful, however, and he eventually decided to sell the mines. At the outbreak of the war, determined to protect his home, he immediately volunteered and was elected colonel of the 34th North Carolina Infantry in October 1861. Leventhorpe would remain a colonel for most of the war, until he resigned in 1864 to become a brigadier general in the North Carolina militia, for reasons we shall discover.

Francis W. Dawson was another English Confederate. In the year or two before the conflict he had travelled around Europe, before changing his name from Austin J. Reeks in honour of an uncle who had served in the British army. Dawson held a 'sincere sympathy with the Southern people in their struggle for independence and felt that it would be a pleasant thing to help to secure their freedom.' He set sail from Southampton in late 1861 on the CSS *Nashville* and landed in Beaufort, North Carolina in late January 1862. He went on to become a staff officer to Lieutenant General James Longstreet and even dined with General Robert E. Lee.

**Adventure, fame and fortune**

A small number of Englishmen joined the war for the excitement of combat and for financial gain. Perhaps the most famous English soldier of fortune was the impressively moustachioed Sir Percy Wyndham. The son of a Royal Navy captain, Wyndham began his career as a soldier at the age of 15. In the late 1840s he served in the French army and navy before returning to England to join the Royal Artillery. He then travelled to Austria and served there.

**Francis Warrington Dawson, was born in London in 1841. The CSS *Nashville*, on which he sailed to America, was involved in a blockade as illustrated in the 1862 cartoon below.**



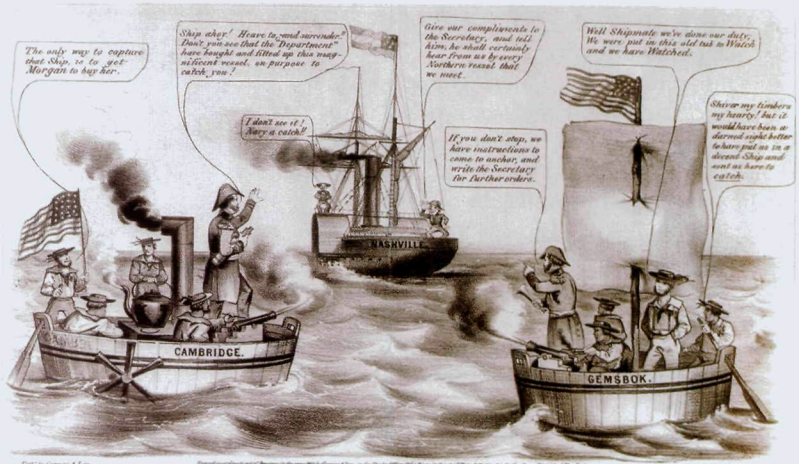
By 1860 Wyndham was fighting with the Italian patriot Giuseppe Garibaldi in his Expedition of the Thousand to Sicily. For this he was knighted by Victor Emmanuel, King of Piedmont-Sardinia and the future King of Italy. When the American Civil War broke out Wyndham offered his services to the Union officer Major General George McClellan. The latter recommended that he be given command as colonel of the 1st New Jersey Cavalry with whom he fought at the Battle of Thoroughfare Gap in August 1862 and led a brigade at the Battle of Brandy Station in June 1863. In 1864, after commanding the District of Columbia, Wyndham resigned his commission and set up a military school in New York.

Sir Percy returned to Italy in 1866 and fought a second time with Garibaldi. Shortly afterwards he travelled to India, married a rich widow, created an Italian opera company and published a magazine, *The Indian Charivari* or *The Indian Punch*. He went on to become the commander-in-chief of the Burmese army. His life ended in 1879 not in combat but in a project to build a large hot-air balloon. Unfortunately on its first flight the balloon exploded.

Less of a Flashman character was John Carwardine, who was born in Earls Colne, Essex in about 1825. He had also joined the British army as a young man and fought in the Crimean War between October 1853 and February 1856. When the Civil War began in 1861 Carwardine quickly went to New York 'from a sense of adventure' and enlisted in the 6th New York Cavalry. In October 1862 he was mentioned in dispatches by Brigadier General John W. Geary, who praised his gallantry in a skirmish:

*Our cavalry exhibited much bravery in their charge ... Colonel Devlin, their commander, Lieutenant-Colonel McVicar, and Major Carwardine, are deserving of much approbation for their display of gallantry and ability.*

It was not just on land where adventure and fortune could be found, as Augustus Charles Hobart-Hampden discovered. A retired captain in the Royal Navy, Hobart had served in the Crimean War. In 1863, bored with his quiet English life, he applied to command the Confederate blockade-runner *Don* under the pseudonym 'Captain Roberts', beating two other



**THE BLOCKADE ON THE "CONNECTICUT PLAN"**

former naval officers to the post. Hobart found that huge sums could be made as a blockade-runner captain. On his first run to the Confederacy with the *Don* Hobart transported 1,000 ladies corsages along with 500 boxes of Cockle's Pills and toothbrushes. He sold them at a profit of 1,100 per cent. After his real identity was discovered he was forced back into 'retirement'. However in the summer of 1864 Hobart went back to sea to command the *Falcon*.

Aware that large amounts of money could be made from blockade running, many English seamen deserted from the Royal Navy to take their chances. Hobart noted that the deserters:

*Were all Englishmen, and as they received very high wages, we managed to have picked men. In fact the Men-of-War on the West India Station [in the Caribbean] found it a difficult matter to prevent their crews from desertion, so great was the temptation offered by the blockade runners.*

Poverty drove others to enlist. James Horrocks of Farnsworth had decided to immigrate to America in 1863 to avoid paying maintenance for a child whom he believed was not his. Horrocks wrote in September 1863 that he had been 'unsuccessful in obtaining a situation', so had joined a New Jersey artillery battery, because his duties would be light, compared with those in an infantry or cavalry regiment. However, perhaps the overriding reason was the \$250 cash bounty he received, some of which he sent to his parents in England.

Edward Samuel Best was originally from London but had settled in New York to work for his family's wine and spirit agency, before falling on hard times just before the Civil War. Best wrote to his aunt Sophie in Somerset that 'the unrest of this [Civil War] is to me that I am absolutely destitute'. He continued by writing that he could not support himself; 'I am weak and living on charity.' To try to aid matters he quickly enlisted in a New York infantry regiment.

**'Domiciled Aliens' and forced enlistment**

For the thousands of English immigrants who took up arms in the Civil War, there were many who refused to be a part of it. Some of these used their British citizenship to travel to Canada or return to Britain before any serious fighting took place.

English immigrants resisted fighting both in the North and the South. Many had travelled to America for business reasons, but had gone on to buy property and even to marry without ever legally becoming US citizens. When the conflict began both the Confederate and Federal governments saw these men as 'domiciled aliens', which meant that they could be conscripted or drafted into military service. In 1861 a journalist from *The Times* newspaper in London reported from New Orleans that English citizens were being forced into 'volunteer' regiments:

*British subjects ... have been seized, knocked down, carried off from their labour ... and forced by violence to serve in the 'volunteer' ranks.*

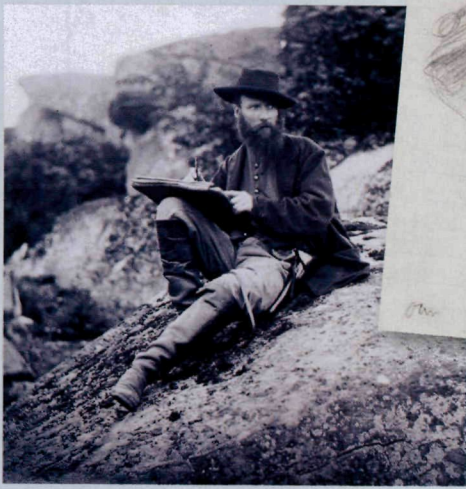


**Top: Colonel Percy Wyndham with his 20-inch moustache in the 1860s. Above: Augustus Charles Hobart at the time of the Russo-Turkish War.**

Englishmen in the North did not experience the same violence that was perpetrated against some fellow countrymen in the South. In October 1861 President Lincoln's secretary of war, Simon Cameron, wrote that he had received a number of letters from a British government minister. The minister had asked for the discharge of British subjects from Union service. Cameron replied that:

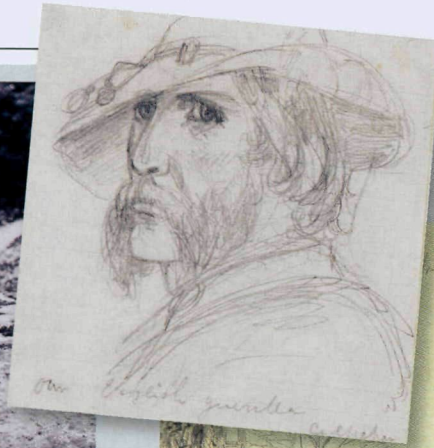
*The numerous applications for discharges daily pouring ... which multiply with the encouragement given by every fresh discharge, have compelled me to deny all.*

The issue of the conscription of British citizens would continue throughout the conflict. In October 1864 Robert Ellson was staying on his brother John's farm in Avon, Ohio. During his visit a draft was called and

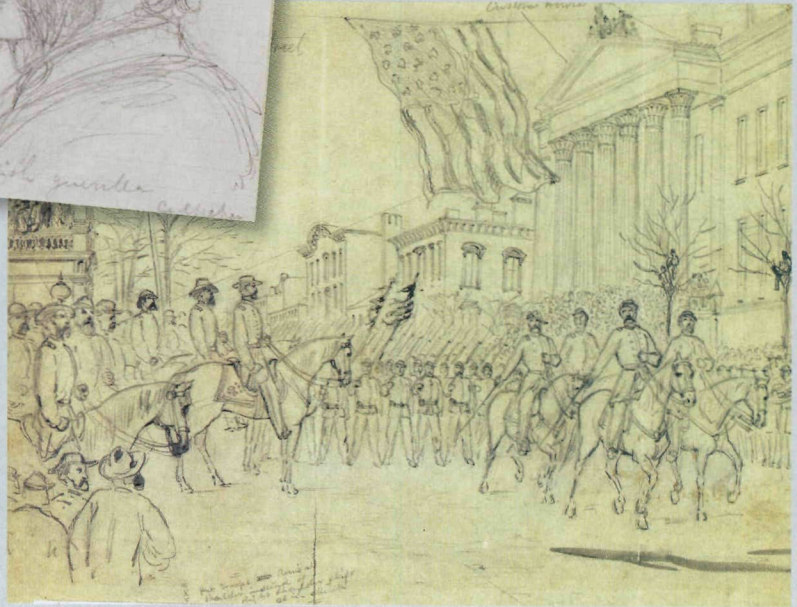


## Witnesses to the American Civil War

Alfred and William Waud were accomplished artists born in London, many of whose Civil War sketches were published as engravings in *Harper's Weekly*. Alfred is shown above, in a photograph by Timothy O'Sullivan, drawing on the battlefield at Gettysburg in 1863.



Left: *Our English Guerilla* by Alfred, and below, William's drawing of General Sherman reviewing his troops in Savannah, 1864. One of the mounted officers is General Geary, who praised the gallantry of Essex-born John Carwardine.



because he was a British citizen Robert did not want to fight in the Union armies. The brothers remained in Avon hoping that they 'could get a substitute or [that] the town would raise a good bounty to give to volunteers'. Before putting any plans into place to avoid his drafting, however, the Ellson's heard that the ports would be closed to stop draftees from fleeing the country. Robert would not be able to take a steamer to New York. John therefore decided to take his brother 'over to Canada in a day to Mr Glovers' to wait until the war had ended. In the end the town of Avon raised enough money to offer bounties to volunteers and so Robert escaped the draft.

### 'It is owing to my being a foreigner'

English immigrants on both sides believed that they were discriminated against during the conflict. In his memoirs Francis W. Dawson touches upon this. While he was with Lieutenant General James Longstreet near Chattanooga, Tennessee in the autumn of 1863 campfire conversations often turned to what an independent Confederacy would be like. In one of these discussions another member of Longstreet's staff, Major Walton, insisted there should be no 'damned foreigners' in an independent Confederacy. This remark provoked a fistfight between Dawson and Walton and the challenge of a duel, though Walton eventually backed down.

Collett Leventhorpe felt he was discriminated against in terms of gaining proper promotion. At the beginning of the war he was made colonel of the 34th North Carolina Infantry and in late 1861 given three other regiments to command. However Leventhorpe was never promoted, writing to his wife Louisa that 'I do not know whether I am to be Brig[adier] Gen[eral]



**An 1861 print of Uncle Sam as a bearded Union soldier ejecting John Bull from his garden, where he has been poaching.**

or not – or only to perform the duties.' In March 1862 Leventhorpe was given the honour of commanding the 11th North Carolina Infantry, a reconstitution of the famous Bethel Regiment, which had won the Confederates their first military victory at the Battle of Big Bethel Church on June 10th, 1861.

In the spring of 1862 the regiment was transferred to the Cape Fear District, North Carolina. However, the district commander was quickly removed after Leventhorpe arrived. His replacement did not arrive for four months, which meant he was left to command around 3,500 troops. By December 1862 Brigadier General Roger A. Pryor, who Leventhorpe wrote 'puts



his Head Quarters, probably four miles in the rear, commanded the district. The same month Leventhorpe and the 11th averted disaster at the Action of White Hall, North Carolina where they restored a breaking line of battle.

In 1863 Leventhorpe's regiment was transferred to the army of Northern Virginia. Even though he was the most experienced colonel in the new brigade, Leventhorpe was an 'outsider' and Brigadier General Johnson Pettigrew was selected as its commander. Leventhorpe was furious, writing that his lack of promotion was 'owing to my being a foreigner'.

During the Gettysburg Campaign of June and July 1863, Leventhorpe was captured and Pettigrew killed. After his release Leventhorpe was again passed over for promotion. This was the final straw and he resigned his commission in the spring of 1864. In a three-page letter to Governor Vance of North Carolina, Leventhorpe wrote that he was forced to conclude 'reluctantly that the President [Jefferson Davis] objects to my advancement as being a foreigner by birth. I am so; but there is no native-born ... soldier more thoroughly devoted to our good cause than myself.' Leventhorpe did manage to find some solace when he became a brigadier general in the North Carolina militia, seeing action in the 1865 Carolinas campaign.

In their biography of Leventhorpe, the historians Timothy J. Cole and Bradley R. Foley suggest that in the Confederate states only 1.57 per cent of the population was foreign born. But, of the Confederate officers who rose to the rank of brigadier general or above, 2.30 per cent had been born abroad. This does not prove, however, that Leventhorpe was imagining the discrimination against him.

There is evidence on the Confederate side of perceived discrimination surrounding promotion, too. The English officer, Henry Feilden, who was on the staff of General Pierre G.T. Beauregard, commented in 1863 that:

**Collett Leventhorpe was captured at the Battle of Gettysburg in summer 1863, painted by Sebastian Mayer, above. Right: Punch published this cartoon in December 1861 at the height of the Trent Affair, showing Jack Tar issuing a warning to the upstart American Union.**



*A good number have, prior to this [year] come out to this country, and I believe have been obliged to serve as volunteers in the Army or on some General's staff until they have proved themselves fit for something.*

As well as the distrust some English immigrants felt was shown toward them, there was an element of 'positive' discrimination on the Union side. This was because the number of German (220,000) and Irish (170,000) volunteers was much higher and so their influential civil and social leaders tended to be given higher ranks and priority within the Union military. Some prominent examples include Brigadier General

Thomas F. Meagher, commander of the 'Irish Brigade', and Germany's Brigadier General August von Willich, Major General's Franz Sigel and the German radical Carl Schurz, who became a leading Republican and the US envoy to Spain. Both of the latter were opponents of slavery, especially Schurz, who left his post as a diplomat to push Lincoln into abolishing slavery in 1862.

The experiences of English immigrants in wider American society during the Civil War varied from the North to the South. In the Confederacy English volunteers and conscripts were generally received well into Southern society. In the North however they tended to be distrusted and disliked outside the military.

When Francis Dawson first arrived in the Southern states he was taken by his commanding officer Lieutenant Robert Pegram to visit his friends, the Rains family of Virginia. It took Dawson only a few hours on this first meeting to find 'a friendly footing with the whole family' and he and the Rains would remain friends throughout the war. Dawson's friendship with Nathaniel Rains, Sr, in particular, would help him later in the war when he became a staff officer and needed to buy new uniforms and equipment, including a horse:

[Rains] had instructed his factors at Petersburg, to honor any draft that I might make upon them; and that I must go there and get [the] money necessary for a horse, and anything else that I wanted.

In the North the situation for English immigrants could not have been more different, because of perceived British support of the Confederacy. Britain even built merchant shipping for the Union in the shipyards of Scotland. Anti-English feeling really began to increase from November 1861, after the Trent Affair, when the USS *San Jacinto* intercepted the RMS *Trent*, and removed the diplomats James Mason and John Slidell, who were bound for Europe to press the Confederacy's case for diplomatic recognition. This incident caused serious tension between Britain and the United States and nearly led to war.

James Horrocks in particular makes a number of references to this anti-English mood. In a letter to his family of October 1863, Horrocks wrote that:

*The English are very unpopular here and so are the Irish even more so ... but the Scotch are a sort of go-between that the Yankees have no particular spite against, ergo – I became – Andrew Ross.*

'Andrew Ross' was the false name that Horrocks had used to enlist in his regiment, as he was planning to desert at the first opportunity. However later in the war Horrocks' commanding officer suggested that he try to get a commission in one of the United States Colored Troop regiments. The incentives were a higher rank and better pay with the added benefit that, compared with white regiments there was less chance of being sent into battle. However these plans never came to fruition, because Horrocks did not take the necessary officers' examination.

Within the ranks of the Union armies there was little of the mistrust that was shown toward English immigrants by wider Northern society. Joseph Lester's relationships with the men in his regiment and others are perhaps some of the best documented. In one of his letters to his family in England Lester wrote that:

*I am widely known in the Division, [I] am constantly hearing myself spoken of as one of the 'Institutions' ... for if one of the Regiments is sent off for a month or more ... on its return I am sure to be greeted with, Hello, Here's our old paper man, 'Bully for you', and 'I want a Newspaper'.*

As well as being close to his comrades, Lester seems to have been quite a businessman. In the same letter he wrote that during his service he had paid off a \$200 mortgage, taken care of his children and made a modest amount of money by selling his stationery business for \$700.

### A unique experience

The English immigrants set themselves apart in terms of their experience in the 'War of the Rebellion'. They were divided on whether or not to participate in the conflict and when they did they did so for a greater variety of reasons than other groups: fighting to protect liberties, to abolish slavery and proving themselves to be 'real' Americans; or even just for the adventure of it. Their experiences were also subtly different. In both the Union and the Confederate militaries some English volunteers felt that they were distrusted, while those from Wales and Scotland seem not to have noticed this. On the other hand, looking at wider American society, English immigrants in the Confederacy felt very comfortable about their Englishness, while those in the North had a sense of unease, especially after the Trent Affair.

Overall it appears that the English had a more diverse experience during the Civil War than those from Wales and Scotland (but not the Irish, who were in a class of their own). Yet it is only in recent years, with historians such as Amanda Foreman exploring the wider international relationships between Britain, the Union and the Confederacy, that we are beginning to understand the English experience in a distinct new light.

Daniel Clarke is currently working on a biography of the Union Brigadier General John J. Abercrombie.

#### Further Reading

Dean B. Mahin, *The Blessed Place of Freedom: Europeans in Civil War America* (Potomac Books, 2002).

Amanda Foreman, *A World on Fire: An Epic History of Two Nations Divided* (Allen Lane, 2010).

J. Timothy Cole and Bradley R. Foley, *Collett Leventhorpe, the English Confederate: The Life of a Civil War General, 1815–1889* (McFarland & Co, 2007).

James Horrocks, *My Dear Parents: The Civil War Seen by an English Union Soldier* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982).

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For God and Country:

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