

Intelligence in Public Media

Our Man in Charleston: Britain's Secret Agent in the Civil War South

Christopher Dickey (Crown, 2015), 388 pp., notes, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by Clayton Laurie

In spite of the title and cover blurbs where the words *clandestine*, *secret*, *intrigue*, *espionage*, and *spy* appear, *Our Man in Charleston: Britain's Secret Agent in the Civil War South* is not actually a book about any of those things. It is, though, a well-written, well-researched, and very readable and interesting history of the relatively mundane pre-Civil War diplomatic career of low-level British Foreign Office Consul Robert B. Bunch in Charleston, South Carolina, from 1853 until 1861–62.

The author, Christopher Dickey, a journalist, who has reported for the *Daily Beast*, *Newsweek*, and the *Washington Post*, has consulted many Foreign Office Records in the British National Archives and the papers of the primary participants, as well as published correspondence and books on British and American diplomats, diplomacy, and pre-Civil War history. The diplomatic history revealed here has appeared elsewhere, however, as has the history of the often tense relations that marked Anglo-American interactions prior to the blossoming of the late 19th century “Special Relationship.” The all too familiar disdain and disregard with which British aristocrats in the foreign office held the American popular democratic “experiment” in self-government also shows through. Notably absent in the notes and bibliography, however, are references to any scholarly or popular intelligence histories—covering either the specific timeframe, or intelligence in general. Consulting such standard works as Christopher Andrews’s *For the President's Eyes Only*, or Edwin Fishel’s *The Secret War for the Union*, would, at a minimum, have provided the context needed to make Dickey’s study more plausible as intelligence history. The lack of an obvious familiarity with intelligence history may also explain the overly broad use of intelligence terminology to describe what most would view as routine diplomatic reporting.

Indeed, the vast majority of the activities attributed to this British “secret agent” are not secret at all. Bunch’s regular diplomatic reporting was not derived from espionage or “spying,” nor was the information he collected secret in any sense. Without doubt, most of his observations and insights, sent to London via diplomatic pouch in

envelopes marked “secret” and “confidential,” denoted a restrictive handling requirement to keep the contents from prying eyes of those who would have resented Bunch’s candor. Bunch’s views were no different from those of any journalist or astute observer of current events in the American South, or to those who had business or family ties and intimate knowledge of the views of leading Southern citizens, especially those in the slave-holding plantation aristocracy, or those who had contact with anyone in the region. While pro-slavery, anti-government, and secessionist views certainly predominated in Charleston, and while they may have been more unyielding and longer held than elsewhere in the South, such views were not secret, and South Carolinians had publicly voiced such attitudes as far back as the Nullification Crises of 1828–32. Intelligence officers looking for spy intrigue, insights into 19th century tradecraft, and sea changes in world events brought about through clandestine intelligence collection and reporting will not find it here.

For students of Anglo-American diplomatic relations before and during the early Civil War era, Dickey’s book is sure to enlighten and entertain. Consul Bunch, a young officer aspiring to higher diplomatic ranks, accepted the hardship Charleston post as a career-enhancing move after service in New York and Philadelphia. Although not a major American city at the time, with a mere 40,000 people, Charleston was a major Caribbean trading port whose local population had long had difficult relations with the US and British governments. Bunch’s primary job for five years after his arrival in 1853 was to soothe relations with the local population—relations that had been damaged by his haughty and overbearing aristocratic predecessor—to gain their trust, and to seek repeal of the notorious South Carolina state Negro Seaman Law. This statute allowed the incarceration of uniformed Royal Navy sailors of West Indian descent on shore leave in Charleston. The intent of the locals was to reduce the chances that these sailors would incite the local slave population to insurrection by their mere presence in the city. The local authorities would pass costs of detention to ship commanders and

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.

sell the sailors into slavery if payment did not appear. As the federal government would not intervene, and as other Southern states considered similar legislation, it remained to the British Foreign Office, in Consul Bunch, to curry favor with South Carolinian politicians and planters to have the law rescinded, which he accomplished in 1858.

Most of the book, however, describes Bunch's efforts to seek the friendship, cooperation, and acceptance of the Charleston and South Carolinian slave-holding planter elite to elicit information to inform British policymakers and diplomats. Bunch and his superiors—Foreign Secretaries Lord Palmerston, Lord Clarendon, and Lord Russell, staunch abolitionists all—clearly detested and despised the Southern slaveholding aristocracy for their ruthless, brutal, and inhumane treatment of their slaves and for the racist attitudes they espoused to justify holding human beings as chattel. Ever the diplomat, and perhaps through his professional bearing and training, Bunch always confined his personal views to his secret dispatches to London while moving freely among the Charleston elite, soon being trusted and counted as one of their number. Although hating the South, hating Charleston, and hating the slaveholding aristocracy, Bunch always maintained a friendly professional demeanor, never offering even a hint of his true feelings.

The United States and Great Britain had abolished the African slave trade in 1808, yet it continued unabated until secession in 1861 due to the rising world demand for cotton, the cost of native-born slave labor, and the limited US Naval resources committed to anti-slavery patrols on the West African Station. The refusal of the United States to allow the Royal Navy to intercept and board suspected American-flagged slave ships traveling from New York to West Africa to Spanish Cuba meant that new cargoes of Africans completed the Middle Passage on a regular basis. From Cuba, local slavers would continue the illicit smuggling of slaves all along the southern and gulf coasts. Only the US Naval blockade placed on the South during the Civil War stanching the trade. Through this era, Bunch wrote detailed dispatches describing not only the ongoing brisk slave trade, but also Southern thoughts and discussions about secession, the establishment of a permanent slaveholding Southern nation, and a full resumption of the West African slave trade and expansion to the American West and Caribbean.

Ultimately, Dickey's thesis that Bunch's pre-war reporting caused the British government to withhold diplomatic recognition of the Confederate States of America after secession in April 1861 is unconvincing. The British government had enforced prohibitions against slave trading throughout the Americas for most of the half century before the Civil War. In spite of Southern hopes, Her Majesty's government was not about to end this international and much publicized moral crusade on behalf of the commercial textile interests of the British Midlands, the primary customers for Southern cotton. Bunch reported on the efforts of South Carolina planters to have him intervene on their behalf with the British government, especially after the Confederacy placed an embargo on exports of cotton. Nonetheless, policies long ago established remained in place as Parliament and prime minister remained steadfast, even encouraging efforts during the pre-war years to accelerate cultivation of cotton in the Empire, specifically Egypt and India, to replace American supplies they suspected would one day soon trickle to a halt. Secessionist talk, threats of cotton embargoes, and wartime disruptions of trade had filled Bunch's dispatches for years, as they did the dispatches of other British diplomats in the United States, as they did newspapers North and South for years before the war. One consul in one small American city simply did not shape or change British foreign policy.

In 1861, soon after the Battle of Bull Run in July, Bunch embarked on a minor diplomatic mission to the Richmond government to negotiate a pact of neutrality of navigation and trade on behalf of the Foreign Office. Once this negotiation became public in the North, Union Secretary of State William Seward branded Bunch a Southern sympathizer and pulled his diplomatic credentials in fall 1862. Far from jeopardizing the Anglo-American relationship, at least not to the extent of the Trent Affair that would soon follow, Bunch would leave Charleston for diplomatic postings in South America. Far from making or breaking his career, let alone changing history, Consul Robert Bunch's 10 years in Charleston constituted little more than an entertaining and interesting interlude in what would become a long and inauspicious diplomatic career.

