Lincoln's Spymaster: Thomas Haines Dudley and the Liverpool Network

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Review

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Diplomacy and deceit

Espionage abroad played significant role in Union victory

**Lincoln's Spymaster: Thomas Haines Dudley and the Liverpool Network** is the engrossing, well-written story of Thomas Haines Dudley's efforts as United States consul in Liverpool to gather secret intelligence about the Confederacy's attempt to build a navy in British shipyards. Dudley's efforts helped to prevent diplomatic recognition of the Confederate States of America by Great Britain, a move that may have influenced the outcome of the war.

Dudley successfully followed the admonition of George Washington who, in 1777, wrote: The necessity of procuring good Intelligence is apparent & need not be further urged. All that remains for me to add, is, that you keep all the whole matter as secret as possible. For upon Secrecy, Success depends in most Enterprizes of the kind, and for want of it, they are generally defeated, how well planned & promising a favourable [sic].

At the outbreak of the Civil War, the Confederate government was faced with a dearth of naval resources, forcing Southern leaders to look abroad for the means to construct naval vessels. James Dunwody Bulloch was selected as the Confederate Secret Service agent to direct these naval affairs in Europe. His duties included the construction and arming of vessels, as well as insuring their dispatchment for confederate service. He did this despite legislation dating to 1819 that prohibited the fitting out or equipping of vessels in Great Britain for war purposes without government approval and despite Great Britain's proclamation of neutrality. As a result, Bulloch was able to commission the construction of some of the most modern naval vessels in the world for use by the Confederate States of America.
Bulloch had arrived in Liverpool in June 1861, some six months before Dudley's arrival. Bulloch more than met his match in Dudley. In *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, James M. McPherson described Dudley as a combative Quaker. McPherson depicted the subsequent duel between Dudley, the North's master spy, and Bulloch as a contest of lawyers, spies and double agents that would furnish material for an espionage thriller.

David Hepburn Milton's finely crafted work reads like a story of intrigue and deception as much as a historical text. It provides a vital contribution to our understanding of the foreign element during the American Civil War.

As the author states in his introduction, without Dudley, the North might well have lost the struggle to prevent the construction of a Confederate navy in British shipyards.

As Milton points out, one of the great Civil War historians, Allan Nevins, unequivocally stated, No battle, not Gettysburg, not the Wilderness, was more important than the contest waged in the diplomatic arena and the forum of public opinion.

Soon after his arrival, Dudley emerged as the actual head of Northern intelligence operations in Europe. Having played a key role in the nomination of Abraham Lincoln for president, he was rewarded with the Liverpool appointment. A zealous abolitionist, diplomat, and spymaster, Dudley became an appropriate soldier for the administration and its policies.

Upon taking up his post, Dudley found himself in the middle of a crisis in England's major port city, which had become a Confederate stronghold. Confederate agents had already initiated the construction of Southern warships in Liverpool shipyards. A few months later, Dudley would write Secretary of State William H. Seward that the people of this place if not the entire Kingdom seem to be becoming everyday more and more enlisted in the Confederacy.

Dudley immediately assembled an intelligence network to unearth as much information as possible on Confederate warships under construction and all blockade runners chartered to the South. The U.S. consul quickly enlisted a group of spies made up of shipyard workers, private detectives, paid informers, and other Northern sympathizers. Under Dudley's leadership, they were...
ultimately able to uncover Confederate covert activities in Britain. Neither a Confederate ship under construction nor a blockade-runner escaped Dudley's scrutiny. His timely dispatches to the State and Navy departments regarding the date and destination of blockade-runners led to the capture of many by the Union navy.

Despite some setbacks – Dudley failed, for example, to prevent the escape of the *Florida* and the *Alabama*, which were used by the Confederacy to destroy the Union merchant marine – Dudley proved instrumental in preventing two ironclad, steam-powered warships, known as the Laird Rams, from joining the Confederate navy.

Employing his diplomatic skills along with those of the U.S. Minister in London, Charles Francis Adams, Dudley labored to convince Britain's Foreign Minister, Lord Russell, and Prime Minister Palmerston, that such warships were destined for the Confederacy. At first, the English government refused the evidence as hearsay. Dudley requested that the Collector of Customs in Liverpool detain the Laird Rams, which he considered to be the most formidable and dangerous ships afloat. The initial refusal by the British government to detain these ships generated a crisis between America and Great Britain. With Lord Russell refusing to accept Dudley's evidence, Charles Francis Adams sent his famous note to the Foreign Minister declaring that if the Rams were allowed to escape, it would be superfluous in me to point out to Your Lordship that this is war.

Both Dudley and Adams nervously awaited Russell's answer in London, convinced that war was imminent. With relief, they eventually received a note from the Foreign Minister indicating that governmental detention was still under consideration. In fact, as Milton points out, Russell had already made the decision to detain the warships and, like Lincoln's handling of the *Trent Affair*, was searching for the political means to defuse the situation. Finally, after weeks of maneuvering by England's legal authorities, Russell â under pressure of war with the United States and the immediate danger that the rams would escape to the sea â issued the order to seize them. The British navy ultimately purchased them for itself.

Thus, the efforts of Thomas Dudley and Charles Adams not only prevented the construction of a modern Confederate navy within British territory but also averted the threat of war between America and Great Britain.
Lincoln's Spymaster is a convincing, succinctly told story of Dudley's successful contributions to the Union's war effort. Thomas Haines Dudley's work to thwart the Confederate war effort in England is fascinating. Milton's impressively researched book reads like a spy novel. He makes history come alive with a worthy contribution to Civil War literature.

Frank J. Williams is Chief Justice of the Rhode Island Supreme Court and Chair of The Lincoln Forum. His latest book Judging Lincoln has just been published by Southern Illinois University Press.