

Devil's Game: The Civil War Intrigues of Charles A. Dunham

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Review

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Cumming, Carman *Devil's Game: The Civil War Intrigues of Charles A. Dunham*. University of Illinois Press, \$35.00 ISBN 252028902

Termite of historical truth

Author deduces the motives of the war's biggest con artist

It was, I believe, Sir Winston Churchill who pronounced the American Civil War the last war between gentlemen. There is truth in that. Many officers, North and South, were professionals who had known and liked one another in the old army (sometimes as West Point classmates). Their code forbade the savageries that have often marked other fratricidal conflicts. And notwithstanding their grim duties, the supreme leaders on both sides, Lincoln and Davis, Lee and Grant, were men of basic humanity and consideration.

But however gentlemanly the war may have been, it did throw up the usual cast of scoundrels, none more nefarious than Charles Dunham, the subject of Carman Cumming's **Devil's Game**, and by all odds one of the most gifted and energetic con men of American history.

In propria persona or in one of his many aliases, Dunham was at various times: a failed recruiter of volunteer troops in both New York and Virginia; a propagandizing correspondent under various pen-names for the major New York papers, especially Greeley's *Republican Tribune* and Bennett's *Democratic Herald*; a prisoner for a time as an alien enemy in Richmond; a co-conspirator with Confederate plotters in Canada; a cat's paw for Joseph Holt, Judge Advocate General and head of the Bureau of Military Justice and chief prosecutor of the accused conspirators in the Lincoln assassination (Dunham recruited and coached a number of phony witnesses); an agent for congressional Radicals seeking to impeach Andrew Johnson, and then, in a typical turnabout, Johnson's ally in exposing their schemes. And much, much more, always with imagination and panache. A wilderness of mirrors indeed.

But what, exactly, were Dunham's core loyalties? What did he think he was doing, other than amusing himself at the expense of credulous men whose passions were inflamed by the violence and suspicions of war? Even after 262 pages of assiduous detective work, the author admits that he can't pin down Dunham's true motives or fidelities, if any. And if Cumming is uncertain, the truth about those motives and fidelities is probably unknowable. If there is a truth. Knavish sociopaths of the Dunham stripe are often driven by an unappeasable craving to bolster their own inadequate self-regard and have no other agenda. Certainly Dunham was a megalomaniac. Even from prison after the war, when at least a few of his perjuries had caught up with him, he fancied that he could personally have prevented Andrew Johnson's impeachment. The countless fraudulent documents that can be traced with fair certainty to Dunham's hand--forged letters, mendacious legal writs, shaded and shadowy journalism--show that he understood ethical behavior in principle. In fact, he never hesitated to appeal to standards of honor when that suited his purposes. And this, too, is a common mark of sociopathic personalities.

The curiosity is that Dunham's diabolical games appear to have left little lasting mark on the history of the Civil War. His name is hard to find in the standard works, and **Devil's Game** seems to be the first extensive treatment of his mendacious career. But many of his games went beyond pranks and were dangerous and disruptive. In various journalistic roles, he stoked inflammatory rumors of Confederate sabotage from Canada, including a supposed plan (which he himself had devised) to blow up the Croton dam in Westchester County, depriving New York City of water, and other plans to torch that city and Philadelphia. These rumors sharpened the edgy diplomatic tensions between the U.S. and Britain and led Union officials to consider diverting troops northward. During the 1864 presidential campaign, writing as Newton Conover, his favorite alias, for Greeley's *Tribune* and as Harvey Birch for Bennett's *Herald*, he denigrated George McClellan as a closet Copperhead. He drew upon a detailed knowledge of Richmond fortifications to charge that in the Peninsula Campaign two years earlier McClellan could have captured the Rebel capital but desisted for political reasons. (This view of McClellan drew credence from his candidacy against Lincoln as well as the peace views of other prominent Democrats, and a certain specious case can be made for it if one ignores the faulty intelligence he was fed by Alan Pinkerton, the Battle of Antietam, and what McClellan actually said as a presidential candidate about terms of peace.)

Dunham's most daring and dastardly devil's game was his procurement and coaching of phony witnesses against the accused Lincoln assassination conspirators, four of whom were ultimately hanged. It is not certain just how large a role this tainted evidence played in their execution. But both Joseph Holt, who employed Dunham and credulously shelled out funds to finance his search for these witnesses, and Holt's superior, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, had reason to know before the hanging that Dunham's perjurious witnesses had tainted the case and did not intervene. Cumming speculates that Holt kept his silence because he had a past as a slaveholder and southern apologist to compensate for by displays of zeal. He also was involved in financing Dunham's activities to a potentially embarrassing degree. Cumming describes the cautious interplay between Dunham and Holt as that of two scorpions in a bottle, a standoff based on the understanding that one cannot kill the other without being killed.

The reader's mind finally boggles at the brazenness of Dunham's trickery and the extent to which his many gulls swallowed it whole. Just what, then, is the core of the story? Certainly it is a tale of the susceptibility of credulous men to the impostures of clever poseurs. As certainly it is a study in abnormal psychology--one can't help wondering what it was in Dunham's genes or childhood that generated such compulsive mischief. Above all, **Devil's Game** is an instructive study in the tricky mechanics of historical veracity: a fragile commodity at any time and still more fragile when a time of bloodshed and suspicion disposes men to believe the worst, and usually the most complicated worst, about others.

Dunham's trickery did finally catch up with him, in a minor measure. He was convicted in a Washington court for the offense of lying to the House Judiciary Committee (as if, *mutatis mutandis*, Joseph Goebbels had been jailed for double parking). He served two years in the federal penitentiary in Albany, still busily fabricating, before being pardoned by Andrew Johnson in early 1869. He disappeared into obscurity--or should one say greater obscurity?--and died in July 1900.

Dunham probably squandered a talent worthy of a more honorable calling. His gift for fantasy, larded with plausible circumstantial detail, might at other times have earned him a fortune as a writer of paranoid fiction. But if it had, there would be every danger today that his fabrications, resurrected by conspiracy theorists, would be spreading through the blogosphere, tainting truth

in death as in life.

Carman Cumming has done a formidable, sometimes fascinating job of detection. Unfortunately, his command of the fine facts of Dunham's weird story, a virtue in itself, becomes a narrative hazard. The abundant detail, accompanied by the author's worrying and musing over it, often chokes the story line, making the mystery at times more mystifying. The author might better have relegated his Sherlock Holmesian speculation to footnotes and let the story escape from the clutter and tell itself. He might even have devised a chart (reminiscent of the one Cleanth Brooks supplied for the clearer reading of Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!*) distinguishing among fact, surmise and conjecture--and the source of each.,/p>

Cumming knows the political and military background of the story, but he offers little speculation--perhaps too little--about the interplay between the war and Dunham's subversive enterprises. And here we get back to a critical issue--whether Dunham's obsessive scams materially affected either the war or injured its major personalities. For instance: Dunham helped spread the scurrilous tale that Jefferson Davis ordered Lincoln's murder, then worked to discredit the same tale. He claimed that his aim in retailing lies about the Confederate president had been to build a fraudulent edifice that would collapse of its own absurdity, discrediting Davis's enemies and exculpating Davis. And yet at still other times he explained his supposed pro-Union sympathies by his desire to get back at Davis for locking him up in Richmond's Castle Thunder. So what was the ultimate effect on Davis's fortunes, if any? That surely is an important historical issue.

Its blemishes aside, however, **Devil's Game** is well worth reading for a glimpse at the termites that are eternally at work in the foundations of historical truth. On the evidence here, Dunham was among the great termites; and comparison with such masters of the black arts as Goebbels and the nameless forgers of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion is no great stretch.

The one redeeming thought is that Dunham's dirty work had far less dire or lasting effect.

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