

REVIEW:

CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES: THE CIVIL WAR YEARS

by Robin W. Winks

Harvest House Limited; pp. 432; \$4.50 paperback

Originally published in 1960, Professor Winks' study of Canadian-American relations during the Civil War is an impressive example of multi-archival research. The book, which has been reprinted recently with minor revisions in paperback, demonstrates the variety of sources available for the indefatigable student who wishes to pursue in greater depth any of the many questions suggested by Winks' survey of this crucial period in Canadian history.

As Winks notes, the phrase "Canadian-American relations" is not technically accurate for the Civil War period. Before Confederation, Canada consisted of eight separate units under a Governor General of British North America. This makes it impossible to ignore the Imperial context which is a major theme in the book. The United States, moreover, was no longer united but had split into Federal and Confederate governments, each engaged in diplomatic manoeuvres with both British North America and the Imperial government. This multiplicity created a complex and rich situation which Winks examines with clarity and a balanced awareness of the issues involved.

Winks' major manuscript sources were found in the National Archives of the United States and the Public Archives of Canada, complimented as "the most accessible of archives". Apparently no research was done abroad but photoduplications of the relevant British Colonial and Foreign Office records were used at the Library of Congress and the Public Archives. The author also consulted numerous smaller Canadian and American repositories. For example, by using the papers of Joshua Giddings at the Ohio Historical Society, Winks gained insights into the American Consul General at Montreal not revealed by the consular dispatches.

The book contains a short, but valuable, note on sources which lists where the author obtained his major documentation. This note is useful for its comments upon the state of various archival collections. There is a good discussion of both the Canadian "G" series (Record Group 7) at the Public Archives and the State Department Consular Correspondence at the National Archives. Winks especially praises the William Henry Seward papers at the University of Rochester for being superbly organized with an extensive nominal index of correspondents while he notes that the Charles Sumner papers at Harvard are organized in a somewhat cumbersome manner. In Canada, the Macdonald papers are also cited for their superb organization.

Except for public figures, Winks found that there were less private papers available for the Civil War years than for the preceding period. He suggests that this might have been caused by the introduction of cheap postage in the 1850's which could have made people treasure their letters less. Lacking large collections relating to small town merchants and farmers, Winks used newspapers from small communities to study the opinions expressed by these groups. Newspapers are employed throughout the book, but they become especially important in Chapter Eleven, "Public Opinion in British North America on the Civil War", which is a good demonstration of

how such sources may be applied to historical analysis.

Although the author hoped to go beyond G. M. Young's description of diplomatic history as "what one clerk said to another clerk", the book inevitably gets bogged down at times in the endless dispatches that form the necessary basis for such a work. The number of consuls, commissioners, agents and spies involved in plots which rival anything Italian opera could devise is also sometimes overwhelming and the reader will find the book's excellent index invaluable long before he reaches the concluding chapter. What rescues the study from a potential slough of detail is Winks' ability to recreate vividly such fascinating incidents as the abortive plot to attack Johnson's Island, a Northern camp for Confederate prisoners of war in Lake Erie; the mad career of John C. Braine who captured the U.S.S. Chesapeake in the winter of 1863; and the St. Albans Raid with its subsequent legal complexities. The description of these incidents represents the fruits of meticulous research.

The main benefit of Winks' book is that it provides a solid foundation from which more detailed studies of the period may commence. Undoubtedly many of his observations require refinement or alteration. The author admits that his conclusion which posits the development of Continentalism and Collective Security binding the United States and Canada in the century since the Civil War received too much emphasis in his book. Likewise, such statements as "In effect, both parties in Canada West served to increase anti-Americanism, the Liberal-Conservative party from principle and the Reform group from expediency" (p. 59) indicate the type of generalization which deserves greater analysis. There is also the question of the blacks which Winks has investigated in a separate volume. But within the framework of an introductory survey, the book makes a valuable contribution to the understanding of the Civil War years and provides a significant lesson in historical methodology.

--Robert J. Taylor  
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