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Will Kaufman

**'Our Rancorous Cousins': British
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Will Kaufman

‘Our Rancorous Cousins’: British Literary Journals on the Approach of the Civil War

That the Civil War marked a turning point in the history of British-American relations is beyond question. At no time since the War of 1812 had the mother country and her transatlantic offspring come so close to armed conflict as in 1862, following the Federal seizure of the neutral British ship, the *Trent*. For almost the entire course of the war, speculations over British intervention or recognition of the Confederacy were controlling factors in the military and diplomatic policies of both the Lincoln and Davis governments. There is no shortage of historical and critical attention to British reactions to the Civil War.¹ Yet as Martin Crawford notes, in their consistent focus on the actual war years, 1861 to 1865, historians and cultural analysts have ignored the preceding decade in which the ‘structural weaknesses’ of the British-American communications network were most heavily exacerbated.² In spite of the mutual tolerance that generally characterised the decade’s diplomatic activity, the steady breakdown of public communication left the transatlantic relationship ‘ill-prepared to cope with the final separation of North and South’ (Crawford 5). The decade of the 1850s marked the start of an increasingly hostile period of what Crawford calls ‘critical arousal’ in both the British and American press (13). Very shortly after the first shots of the war were fired, ‘criticism of the press’s role in the development of Anglo-American friction became widespread on both sides of the Atlantic’ (134). Crawford’s own focus on the part of the London *Times* in this process of mutual exacerbation is understandable, given that paper’s ‘pre-eminence’ in the British press; and indeed for many historians and critics, the *Times* has been the major source of British opinion about America during the Civil War and the years immediately preceding it (18, 19).

¹ The most recent and comprehensive study is Brian Jenkins, *Britain and the War for the Union*, 2 vols. (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1974–80). See also Ephraim D. Adams, *Great Britain and the American Civil War*, 2 vols. (Gloucester, Mass: Russell, 1957, reprint of 1925 ed.); David Paul Crook, *The North, the South, and the Powers* (New York: Wiley, 1974) and *Diplomacy During the American Civil War* (New York: Wiley, 1975).

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