

A “Military Despotism” and a Danger: Montréalais Perception of the American Civil War

In 1861, as the Civil War began in the United States, Montréal was the most populous city of the British colonies in North America and already over two hundred years old. It buzzed with nearly 100,000 inhabitants and enjoyed extensive infrastructure and amenities, including an underground sewer system, a privatized streetcar service, and numerous newspapers in both French and English.¹ With its aristocratic society, powerful financial center, and relative proximity to the Union border, Montréal was incredibly attractive to the Confederacy, which in the later years of the war sought to bring the battle as far north as possible. A survey of the two most prominent Montréalais newspapers of the time shows that, despite their traditional abolitionist sentiments and sympathies for the North, the citizens of Montréal found themselves growing increasingly frustrated with the Union’s conduct in the Civil War. It was this frustration, coupled with an overarching sense of Canadian nationalism and a growing sympathy for the rebelling Confederacy, that ultimately allowed for the development of the Confederate Secret Service in the city in the later years of the war.

As the armies of North and South prepared themselves for battle in the spring of 1861, Montréal prepared itself for the consequences. Characterizing the conflict in the United States as an “upheaval,” the Montréal-based French-language newspaper *La Minerve*, one of the most influential Canadian papers of the time, cautioned its readers to accept American currency with the “utmost reservation,” as the banks could “become penniless in the very near future.”² Another Montréalais newspaper, *Le Canadien*, the first uniquely French paper

¹ Paul-André Linteau, “Montreal 1850-1896: The Industrial City,” in *McCord Museum*, comp. McCord Museum, trans. McCord Museum, excerpt from *Brève histoire de Montréal* (Montréal, QC: Boréal, 1992), accessed January 7, 2018, goo.gl/irnbIU.

² *La Minerve* (Montréal), May 4, 1861, trans. Lillian Rountree, accessed December 22, 2017, goo.gl/Dn8Od5.

of Québec, documented the return of Québécois to Montreal from the United States as the Civil War escalated, “by foot, a hundred and fifty to two hundred a day.”³

The papers didn’t yet concern themselves with the minutiae of the armies, though as the conflict escalated in size they did begin to publish more detailed articles on the army’s movements. In the early months of 1861, they instead concentrated almost exclusively on the consequences for Canada, a focus that quickly turned to anxiety over a potential attempt at Canadian annexation by the United States. Ever since the annexation of Texas following the Mexican-American War, Canadian politicians and citizens had worried that their land would be next. Various lower-level American politicians did indeed encourage the annexation of Canadian land throughout the 1860s, and Secretary of State William Seward’s quite public expansionist desires, which frequently included Canadian territory, did little to assuage Canadian fears.⁴ A bill even made its way to the United States House Committee on Foreign Affairs in 1866 motioning for the president “to publish by proclamation that [...] the States of Canada East and Canada West [...] are constituted and admitted as States and Territories of the United States of America,” though it never reached the House floor proper.⁵ These expansionist voices, however few, were enough to set the Montréalais alight with worry. “Since the scission of the United States and the war between these states [...] it would be prudent for us Canadians to take measures to defend our country in case of danger,” a nationalistic editorial in *La Minerve* declared on December 7, 1861. “The Canadians will never let Americans invade their land.”⁶ Here were the first inklings of the Union discontent

³ *Le Canadien* (Montréal), May 6, 1861, trans. Lillian Rountree, accessed December 26, 2017, [goo.gl/1WfN9E](https://doi.org/10.2307/3637972).

⁴ Shi, David E. “Seward’s Attempt to Annex British Columbia, 1865-1869.” *Pacific Historical Review* 47, no. 2 (1978): 217-38. doi:10.2307/3637972.

⁵ H.R. 754, 39th Cong., 1st Sess. (1866). Accessed January 1, 2018. [goo.gl/xVYcVj](https://doi.org/10.2307/3637972).

⁶ *La Minerve*, Dec 7, 1861, trans. Lillian Rountree.

that would later open the door for the Confederate Secret Service to establish themselves in Montréal.

Still, it took over half a year of war and a fully fledged diplomatic scandal for the Montréalais to truly pick sides in the Civil War. On November 8, 1861, Union captain Charles Wilkes seized two Confederate commissioners from the neutral British ship *Trent*. This action, known as the *Trent* Affair, was egregious in both British and Canadian eyes and nearly prompted another war between Great Britain and the United States. It was only when the Union relented and released Mason and Slidell in late December of that year that the situation de-escalated. Nonetheless, the damage had been done to the Union's reputation in Montréal. Montréalais papers reported the situation with barely hidden spite: "This last insult against England may be the last straw. Indeed, nothing can justify the arrest of ambassadors Slidell and Mason aboard an English vessel," *La Minèrve* published on December 7, 1861.⁷ *Le Canadien* had similar sentiments, suggesting on December 6, 1861, that the United States "would do better to meet the request by releasing Mr. Slidell and Mr. Mason."⁸

The drama surrounding the *Trent* Affair opened the door to Southern sympathies as Montréalais began to fully see the advantages of a separated United States. A weakened Union would not be in any position to annex Canadian territory, and, although many Montréalais morally disapproved of Southern slavery, they did sympathize with the idea of states fighting for their liberties against an overly powerful government, particularly if they had entered the union voluntarily in the first place. Southern trade options were also tempting, offering free trade where the Union clung to high tariffs, as *Le Canadien* noted on December 6, 1861.⁹

⁷ *La Minèrve*, Dec 7, 1861, trans. Lillian Rountree.

⁸ *Le Canadien*, Dec 6, 1861, trans. Lillian Rountree.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Much more than sympathizing with the South, however, many Montréalais disliked the Union. The majority of biased Québécois articles during the war expressed anti-Union sentiments, and a particularly disdainful spotlight was cast on President Lincoln.¹⁰ While Montréalais newspapers relied on Union government telegraphs to relay the movements of the war to their audience, these accounts were frequently far from dependable, as *La Minerve* noted on October 3, 1861:

It is truly difficult, using the telegraphs that we receive each night, to have reliable information on the current position of the armies in the United States; the Union government considerably exaggerates its successes and does everything possible to gloss over its defeats. The news that is published is contradicted two or three days later.¹¹

The list of Montréalais grievances continued: not only was the Union mixing fact with fiction in reporting on the war, but it was slipping into moral depravity as President Lincoln began the suspension of the writ of *habeas corpus*, an unthinkable act to the Montréalais. *Habeas corpus* is “a sacred right above all others,” *Le Canadien* claimed on July 22, 1861, after Lincoln ordered the writ suspended. Without it, “the overarching principles that mark the progress of civilization are trampled by the feet of a military despotism.”¹²

Lincoln was a particularly controversial figure among the Montréalais, and the newspapers frequently did little to hide their frustration with his conduct as president of the Union. *La Minerve*'s analysis of a speech Lincoln delivered in December 1864, in which Lincoln noted that “the war continued,” had this to say of the President's comment: “Well, isn't he perceptive?”¹³ During American trade negotiations with Europe at the beginning of the war, *Le Canadien* similarly reported that “[Lincoln] is trying to make [Europe]

¹⁰ François Jacob, “La Perception de la Guerre de Sécession dans la Presse Québécoise, 1861-65” (master's thesis, Université Laval, 2010), pg #151-157, accessed December 30, 2017.

<http://www.theses.ulaval.ca/2010/27175/27175.pdf>

¹¹ *La Minerve*, Oct 3, 1861, trans. Lillian Rountree.

¹² *Le Canadien*, July 22, 1861, trans. Lillian Rountree.

¹³ *La Minerve*, Dec 9, 1864, trans. Lillian Rountree.

understand that the surest way to promptly re-establish commerce would be to help not the South, but the North [...] One must wait and see if England and France appreciate this little lesson in economic policy.”¹⁴

Montréalais anger extended into military matters as well. In need of more soldiers, Union recruiters began crossing the American-Canadian border early in the conflict to convince Canadians to volunteer to fight. Approximately 50,000 Canadians ended up fighting for the Union in the Civil War, and their service was a contentious topic of discussion back home.¹⁵ Montréalais newspapers published several editorials in which impassioned Montréalais attacked “Yankee-fied Canadians” as heartless, “humanoid monsters” luring their innocent fellow citizens to death in the American Civil War.¹⁶ Even Canadian soldiers serving in the American armies cautioned their fellows against joining the war, as one Canadian soldier wrote in *La Minèrve* on June 16, 1864:

[American] agents come continually to Canada to turn [Canadians] into victims. You wouldn’t know, my dear friend, how to even think of the number of Canadians who are in the Union army. One counts them not by the hundreds, but by the thousands. Such unfortunate young men! How they curse the day of their departure from their country, fooled by false promises by an even falser people who have thrown them into the camps for cannon fodder!¹⁷

Those who opposed Canadian service in the Civil War typically expressed nationalistic sentiments while doing so, claiming to argue “in the name of our compatriots” as a “Canadian by blood, by heart, by birth, and by name.”¹⁸ To many Montréalais, Canadian service in the Civil War was not an honorable act, but a traitorous one, especially when fears of Canadian annexation were still so high. In their eyes, to fight for the Union was to betray Canada.

¹⁴ *Le Canadien*, Dec 6, 1861, trans. Lillian Rountree.

¹⁵ Jacob, “La Perception.”

¹⁶ *La Minèrve*, Oct 21, 1864, trans. Lillian Rountree.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, June 16, 1864, trans. Lillian Rountree.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, Oct 21, 1864, trans. Lillian Rountree.

With the Union becoming such a distasteful option, Montréalais opinion slowly began to favor the South in the war. Historian Barry Sheehy credits the *Montréal Gazette* with being the first influential newspaper to openly support the Confederacy, establishing an entire column dedicated to “Southern news.”¹⁹ As the war continued, other newspapers followed the *Gazette*’s lead—*La Minèrve* and *Le Canadien* included—translating Confederate speeches and news articles into French for their audience.²⁰ Especially attractive to the Montréalais was the behavior of the Southern troops on the battlefield. “If a half of the bravery shown by the Southern soldier was found in that of a Northern one, the war would have long ago been in the North’s favor,” a letter from a Canadian soldier published in *La Minèrve* stated on June 16, 1864. “The mingled cries [of the Southern troops] in the fanfare would even *terrify the devil* [*sic*].”²¹ An editorial in *La Minèrve* referred to the Confederates as Canada’s “compatriots,” and the Confederate victories were described more and more fondly as the war dragged on.²² It was this subtle sympathy, paired with the strong, established distaste for the Union that made the appearance of Confederate agents in Montréal so tolerable; by 1864, Montréal had become one of the few cities in Canada decidedly sympathetic to the Confederacy.

Consequently, it was Montréal that became the home of the headquarters of the newly created Confederate Secret Service, funded by a Confederate Congressional bill that placed one million U.S. dollars in mainly Montréal-based banks specifically for clandestine operations out of Canada.²³ Led by Senior Confederate Commissioners Jacob Thompson, C. C. Clay, and Edwin Gray Lee, this Secret Service planned various attacks on the Union,

¹⁹ Barry Sheehy, Vaughnette Goode-Walker, and Cindy Wallace, *Savannah: Immortal City*, ed. Aberjhani, vol. 1, *Civil War Savannah* (Emerald Book Company, 2011), pg #414, accessed December 26, 2017, goo.gl/wjueHA

²⁰ *Le Canadien*, Oct 31, 1864, trans. Lillian Rountree.

²¹ *La Minèrve*, June 16, 1864, trans. Lillian Rountree.

²² Jacob, “La Perception.”

²³ Barry Sheehy, *Montréal, City of Secrets* (Baraka Books, 2017), pg #19, accessed December 30, 2017, goo.gl/k8QvFp.

including raids of prisoner-of-war camps, the burning of various New York City hotels, the destruction of warships on the Mississippi, and the disruption of the new, American “Greenback” currency. All of these attempts were met with differing levels of success, and all held the goal of forcing the North to sue for peace or begin a new border war with Canada.²⁴

The St. Lawrence Hall Hotel (shown between 1865-1870 in fig. 1), located on what was then St. James Street, became the primary home of the Confederate Secret Service during its time in Montréal in 1864.²⁵ Equipped with supposedly the only bar in Canada to serve mint juleps, a popular Southern cocktail, and a full newsstand of newspapers sympathetic to the Confederate cause, St. Lawrence Hall was a veritable safe haven for the Southern soldiers.²⁶ Records from the hotel give evidence of many highly ranked Confederate officers’ presence in the city. Historian Barry Sheehy deciphered several code names in the hotel’s bookkeeping to determine that in addition to the main leaders



Figure 1: the exterior of the St. Lawrence Hall Hotel

of the Secret Service, other significant Confederates in Montréal during the Civil War included John Porterfield, a banker with a scheme to destabilize Union currency; Dr. Luke Blackburn, a Confederate doctor who attempted to use yellow fever for biowarfare; Confederate Richmond to Montréal couriers Josephine Brown and Sarah Slater; and Belle Boyd, a famed Confederate spy.²⁷ These accounts are further corroborated by photographs by

²⁴ *Ibid*, pg #21.

²⁵ James George Parks, *St. Lawrence Hall, St. James Street, Montréal, QC, 1865-70*, photograph.

²⁶ Sheehy, *Montréal, City*, pg #19.

²⁷ *Ibid*, pg #193-201.

influential Montréalais photographer William Notman and notes in the diary of Senior Confederate Commissioner Edwin Gray Lee. Notman was quite popular in Confederate circles and photographed several Confederate agents in his Montréal studio during the war, including Josephine Brown, John Porterfield, Edwin Gray Lee, and even, during his years in exile, Jefferson Davis (see appendix A). During their time in Montréal, the Confederates did not try to hide but rather integrated themselves into a welcoming Montréalais upper class with relative ease and apparent relish.

The Confederate Secret Service's operations out of Montréal culminated in October 1864 with the St. Albans Raid. On October 19, 1864, 21 well-armed Confederates from Montréal laid siege on the town of St. Albans, Vermont, shot three men, robbed three banks of a total of U.S. \$210,000, and attempted to burn down the town before escaping back across the border on stolen horses.²⁸ Officially the northernmost action of the Civil War, it was intended to be the beginning of the northern border war the Secret Service had long desired. When Canadian officials arrested the raiders, however, what instead followed were a series of trials and retrials in Canadian court that rapidly turned into a diplomatic scandal. It took Lee's surrender to resolve the conflict, with Canadian authorities subsequently releasing the raiders still in custody and repaying the banks robbed in indemnification.²⁹ The South had wanted a border war to come from St. Albans; instead, the raid spelled the end for the Confederacy in Montréal, forcing the Montréalais to realize these Southern "gentlemen" they hosted were much more threatening than they had originally seemed.³⁰ While covering the trial, the *Vermont Transcript* of St. Albans remarked on November 11, 1864, that "The Montreal papers continue to discuss the case of the raiders, and are quite bitter in their articles,"

²⁸ Rick Beard, "When the Rebels Invaded Vermont," *New York Times* (New York, NY), October 17, 2014, Opinion, accessed January 6, 2018, [goo.gl/P3HhGy](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/17/opinion/when-the-rebels-invaded-vermont.html).

²⁹ Beard, "When the Rebels," Opinion.

³⁰ Sheehy, Goode-Walker, and Wallace, *Savannah: Immortal*, pg #419.

evidence of Montréalais' discontent with the situation. Though the Confederate Secret Service lingered in Montréal until the war ended, the scope of its actions were significantly reduced after the St. Albans Raid.

While the St. Albans Raid brought the Confederate Secret Service's effectiveness to a close and definitively harmed the Southern cause in Canada's eyes, Confederate sympathies remained in Montréal for years to come alongside a distaste for Lincoln that continued after his death. In the wake of his assassination, *Le Canadien* expressed on April 21, 1865, that:

We would like only to state [...] certain journalists are busy creating a pedestal for the deceased President and are using the current public affection to transform him into a legend. Just a few days ago, he was but a mediocre man in a position all too evidently above his station by error and circumstance. Today, under the public grief and with this exaggeration particular to the American spirit, one does not hesitate to place Mr. Lincoln alongside Washington, and even compares him to Moses [...] The *Herald* of Montréal writes "that it is impossible to exaggerate the loss felt by the entire world due to Mr. Lincoln's passing." This exceeds all limits of postmortem embellishment.³¹

The end of the war also encouraged more explicit Confederate sympathies to the Montréalais papers as the destruction of the South was revealed. Lee's residence "has suffered the most from the Federal devastation," wrote *La Minerve* on April 17, 1865. "The ex-General of the South is without residence and without possessions. One would support his wish to leave for Europe."³² It was not Europe but Montréal itself that ended up housing most of the exiled Confederates, as the city was still ultimately sympathetic to the defeated Southerners. Some Confederates crossed the border into Montréal, while others had been operating out of city and found themselves stuck. Senior Confederate Commissioner Edwin Gray Lee, for example, was unable to return home after serving in Montréal. He remained in the city for several months after the end of the war, though Lee seemed unaware of why he was barred

³¹ *Le Canadien*, Apr 21, 1865, trans. Lillian Rountree.

³² *La Minerve*, Apr 17, 1865, trans. Lillian Rountree.

from the United States: “Went to the Am. Consul,” he wrote in his diary on June 30, 1865.

“No objection to my return home if ‘pardoned.’ [I] don’t know of anything against me.”³³ Lee

was joined by Jefferson Davis and his family; James Mason, one of the diplomats at the center of the *Trent* Affair; Dr. Luke Blackburn; Josephine and Robert Brown, Confederate couriers; and dozens of other Confederates.³⁴ These elegant exiles were welcomed warmly in Montréal. Jefferson Davis was particularly beloved, as the *New York Times* recounted on August 4, 1867, when Davis was recognized at an occasion at the St. Lawrence Hall Hotel in the city:

It was discovered that President Davis was present. Like a flash the news spread... again burst forth loud cheers and hurrahs, hats were tossed in the air... then the cry “Dixie, dixie, dixie” echoed and reëchoed until the orchestra sounded forth that air so sacred to Southerners. Intense excitement prevailed... such a unanimous tribute of esteem never greeted a famous monarch as that expressed for Mr. Davis.³⁵

Such reports evidence that, regardless of their opposing viewpoint on slavery, the Montréalais were ultimately still sympathetic toward the Confederacy, even after the Civil War. Repeated Union misconduct, from the *Trent* Affair to the suspension of *habeas corpus*, made the admission of the Confederate Secret Service into Montréal tolerable. A disappointing Union had created space for the Montréalais to see the supposed nobility of the Confederate fight. It was this shift in perception that allowed for Montréal to become a hub for the Confederate cause and a home for Confederate supporters, both during and after the war.

³³ Edwin Gray Lee, “Canadian Diary 1865,” 1865, Box 2, Edmund Jennings Lee II papers, 1746-1963, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Durham, NC.

³⁴ Sheehy, *Montréal, City*, pg #45-48.

³⁵ “Southern Relief in Canada,” *New York Times* (New York), August 4, 1867, accessed December 26, 2017, <https://goo.gl/oCsgCu>.

Appendix A (Figures 1 - 4)



Figure 1 - A photo of Josephine Brown, wife of Robert Brown, and a noted Confederate courier on the Richmond-Montréal line during the Civil War. Pictured here in Montréal in 1866 in exile.

Notman, William. *Mrs. R. W. Brown, Montréal, QC*. 1866. Photograph. Accessed January 1, 2018. <http://collections.musee-mccord.qc.ca/en/collection/artifacts/I-20023.1>

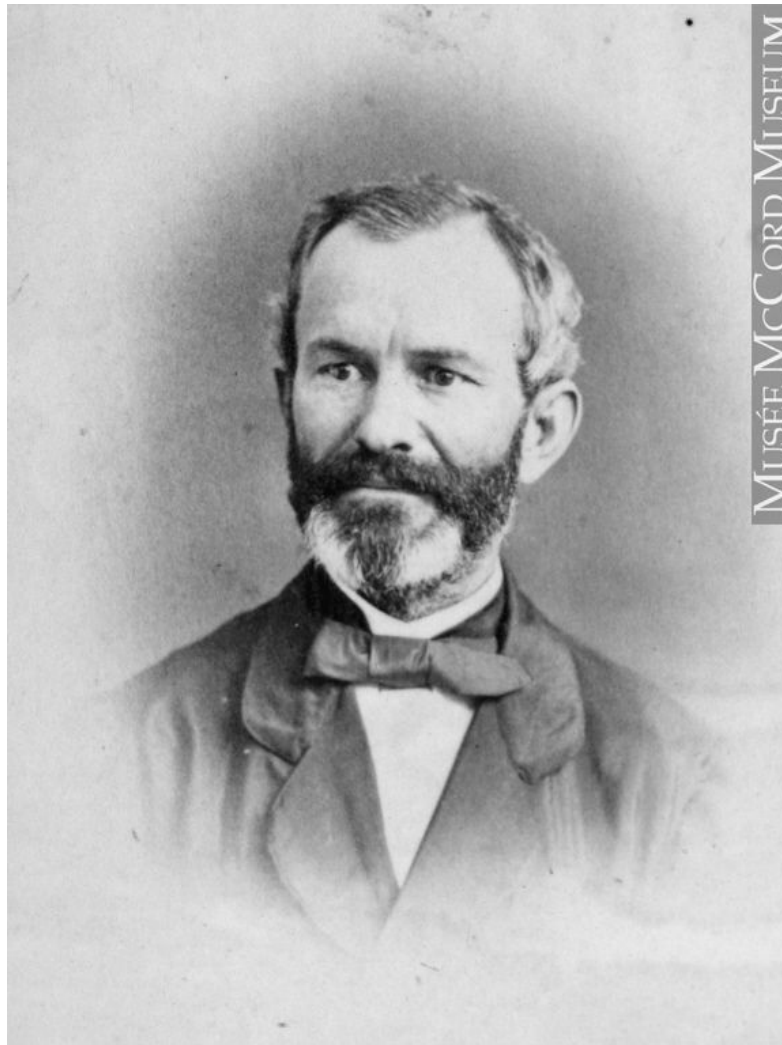


Figure 2 - A photo of John Porterfield, a Confederate involved in a failed conspiracy to short the American Greenback during the Civil War. Pictured here in Montréal in 1862.

Notman, William. *John Porterfield, Montréal, QC*. 1862. Photograph. Accessed January 1, 2018. <http://collections.musee-mccord.qc.ca/en/collection/artifacts/I-3606.1>.



Figure 3 - A photo of Senior Confederate Commissioner Edwin Gray Lee, who ran operations out of Montréal beginning in winter of 1865 and spent many months after the war in exile in Montréal. Pictured here in Montréal in 1865.

Notman, William. *Gen. Edwin Gray Lee, Montreal, QC*. 1865. Photograph. Accessed February 1, 2018.
<http://collections.musee-mccord.qc.ca/en/collection/artifacts/I-17037.1>.



Figure 4 - A photo Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederacy, with his wife. The Davis family fled to Montréal after the war and integrated easily into Montréalais society. Pictured here in Montréal in 1867 in exile.

Notman, William. *Jefferson Davis and wife, Montréal, QC.* 1867. Photograph. Accessed January 6, 2018.
<http://collections.musee-mccord.qc.ca/en/collection/artifacts/I-28149>.

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