



In the Shadow of the Alabama: The British Foreign Office and the American Civil War (New Perspectives on Maritime History and Nautical Archaeology)

Renata Eley Long

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This book looks at an allegation of betrayal made against a young Foreign Office clerk, Victor Buckley, who, it was claimed, leaked privileged information to agents of the southern States during the American Civil War. As a consequence, the CSS *Alabama* narrowly escaped seizure by the British government and proceeded to wage war on American shipping. Victor Buckley's background is examined against the hitherto erroneous belief that he was an insignificant member of the foreign office staff.

The American minister Charles Francis Adams oversees a network of spies endeavoring to prove contravention of The Foreign Enlistment Act. The South's agents, Captain James D. Bulloch and Major Caleb Huse, are the prime targets, and a battle of wits ensues as Bulloch oversees construction of his ships on Merseyside.

A member of a prominent City family offers to enlist the help of a relative who, he claims, holds a confidential position in the Foreign Office. The Confederate agents are soon receiving information about the status of Anglo-American diplomacy and are able to outwit the Union spies and dispatch arms and supplies to the South. Their coup d'état is achieved with the arrival of a message that hurries the Confederate's most formidable warship out of British waters.

After the escape of the *Alabama*, the government moves to curtail Bulloch's operations. When the war ends in 1865, investigations begin into the circumstances surrounding the *Alabama*'s departure. As America demands reparation, evidence apparently incriminating Victor Buckley is acquired, but before the claim reaches its hearing in Geneva, diplomatic moves (some involving Anglo-American Masonic influence) result in a treaty and ensure that no allegation is made against any individual member of foreign office staff. Queen Victoria, anxious to see the *Alabama* claims settled, is spared embarrassment.

A scandal erupts in the foreign office in 1878 as a freelance clerk, Charles Marvin, leaks sensitive information to the press and subsequently writes of his experiences, revealing much of the ethos of the office pertinent to Buckley's story. The writer Arthur Conan Doyle becomes fascinated by Anglo-American diplomacy and the *Alabama* question, and, soon after joining a London gentlemen's club where Buckley's alleged contact is a member, writes a Sherlock Holmes story involving a Foreign Office clerk's apparent betrayal.

Coincidentally, Conan Doyle has been acquainted with Buckley's associate some years earlier, and he soon makes a thinly veiled appearance in a fictional work by England's most famous crime writer.

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