REVIEW


The Civil War in the United States was a defining moment in history. What many people tend to forget is that more countries had a vested interest in the outcome of the war than just America. Ben Wynne has provided us with the letters and correspondence of Sir James Fergusson, a Scottish nobleman, the heir of the fifth baronet of Kilkerran in Ayrshire and head of the Clan Fergusson (p.10). He was sent to the United States by Prime Minister Henry Temple Palmerston to assess the situation. Britain was leaning towards siding with the Confederacy due to trade and philosophical considerations and they were also concerned with the potential threat to Canada, fearing that the United States would attempt annexation (p.11).

Fergusson began his correspondence back to England from shipboard. He entertains the reader with vivid descriptions of his experiences and his fellow passengers. He does not necessarily have the highest of opinion of the Yankees he encounters on his voyage: “some specimens of the untamed Yankee on board are rather disgusting, and they indulge in the well-known habits of their race, which I need not more exactly particularize” (p. 44). He does, towards the end of his journey, change his opinions. Upon landing he paints a detailed picture of the scenery and the people and events that he encounters as he travels from Canada to the Southern United States and his interactions with various soldiers and commanders from both the Union and the Confederacy. Because he is a politician, he is able to provide insight into the political situation in the various
places he travels through and addresses the feelings towards the Civil War from all sides.

This text crosses many areas of interest including Scottish history, Canadian history and the history of the Civil War and the United States. It gives us a unique perspective on the period. We are given a look at the Canadian fears and perceptions of the upheaval taking place south of their border. This is something that is not always included in writings on the Civil War in America, but there were valid fears on the part of the Canadians in respect to the outcome. Because of his access and connections to the government, Fergusson is able to visit and to interact with soldiers and military leaders on both sides of the war, and to give insight into what was going on. The collection of letters are not just a description of political maneuverings and battles, but also a look at the social customs and the people in Canada and the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Fergusson spends a great deal of his writing admiring the beauty of the landscape that he is travelling through and the people that he is interacting with. He even, at times, reveals a dry wit and sense of humor that help to create a personal connection to his descriptions.

This collection of letters gives the reader a new point of view towards the Civil War in the United States. Fergusson’s easy writing style and personal insights, as well as his contact with people on all sides of the war, give a new understanding of the feelings and the people involved. Fergusson writes with the bias of an upper-class British citizen, but he gives descriptions of the people that he encounters, the politics as he understands them, and his opinions on the question of slavery. This is a welcome work for scholars of Scottish history, Canadian history or the American Civil War.

Emily Herff
Front Range Community College