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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Losing the Thread: Cotton, Liverpool and the American Civil War* by Jim Powell

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Losing the Thread: Cotton, Liverpool and the American Civil War by Jim Powell. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021. 231 pages.

Jim Powell's *Losing the Thread* is an impeccably researched contribution to literature on the influence of the American Civil War on Britain. While one may think that the topic is overcrowded, Powell convinces the reader that both the raw cotton supply industry in Liverpool, and the role of the city of Liverpool during the Civil War-era deserve close examination.

The author has two core aims with this study. His first is to provide a comprehensive examination of the raw cotton trade in Britain during the Civil War era. The second is to evaluate the effect of the war on Liverpool.

Powell recognizes that Liverpool is often known for its Confederate sympathies. While he does not dispute this, he argues that "the allegation that Liverpool was an uncritical cheerleader for the Confederacy" has been "greatly exaggerated" (1). Powell's focus on Liverpool also includes an analysis of its cotton brokers and the raw cotton supply industry more broadly. Powell, a novelist by trade, declares early on his 'family interest' in the topic (vii). His great-great grandfather William Mayne Neil, and William's brother Henry Montgomery Neill were involved in the cotton industry during this period, and feature throughout the book. The sheer amount of research that has gone into *Losing the Thread* highlights Powell's clear passion for the topic.

The first three chapters of *Losing the Thread* provide important context regarding British reliance on raw cotton supply from the United States, which comprised 80 percent of supply in the pre-war years. While supply continued for a few months after the attack on Fort Sumter in April 1861, by August the "cotton feast turned to cotton famine" (15). Powell sketches out the evolving reaction of the cotton industry to the conflict into three distinct phases. For the first phase, from November 1860 until June 1862, the author argues that most believed that the war would be shortlived, and so too the impact on supply. That belief was sharply altered at the beginning of the next phase in July 1862 when the price of raw cotton increased enormously. Prices remained exorbitantly high until the beginning of the third phase in September 1864 as the war was ending. However, Powell argues that the effects of the war on the industry was

felt for many more years. During these contextual chapters Powell perhaps overstates British commitment to abolitionism—he remarks that “Britain was almost unanimously abolitionist”—but he provides a detailed description of the booming trade before its devastation by the war (59).

The fourth chapter is where Powell begins to make his most valuable contributions. Much of the importance of Powell’s work stems from the fact that he refutes a number of ‘facts’ that have gone unchecked by historians for decades. His largest refutation is that the scholars who have been arguing that there was a massive overproduction of cotton are incorrect. He stresses that an “astonishing citation chain” has led to an “urgent need for revision” on the claim (71–73). Powell’s deep analysis of data from a number of reports and circulars allows him to confidently state that there was no overproduction prior to the outbreak of war.

Liverpool takes center stage for chapters five to seven. Powell provides a nuanced analysis of the cotton trade in Liverpool, which has often been overshadowed by Manchester. He shows that the American conflict impacted the cotton industries of Liverpool and Manchester differently, that “the British cotton trade was not a harmonious single entity” (181). While analyzing the response of the cotton industry in Liverpool to the war, the author ably picks apart the complexities of the varied interests, for example noting that “the interests of selling and buying brokers, and of importers, were not identical” (181). Powell takes specific aim at the Liverpool cotton brokers, who he suggests “enabled a massive distortion” of the industry that resulted in “a rise in price way above the natural consequence of a short supply” (182).

Chapter eight concludes the study with Powell’s ultimate conclusion that the war in itself did not devastate the industry; rather, it “magnified the excesses and irregularities of the Liverpool raw cotton market and made them unsustainable” (178). *Losing the Thread* undoubtedly achieves its two objectives of providing a more detailed analysis of the British cotton industry during the Civil War era and the impact of the war on the trade in Liverpool.

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