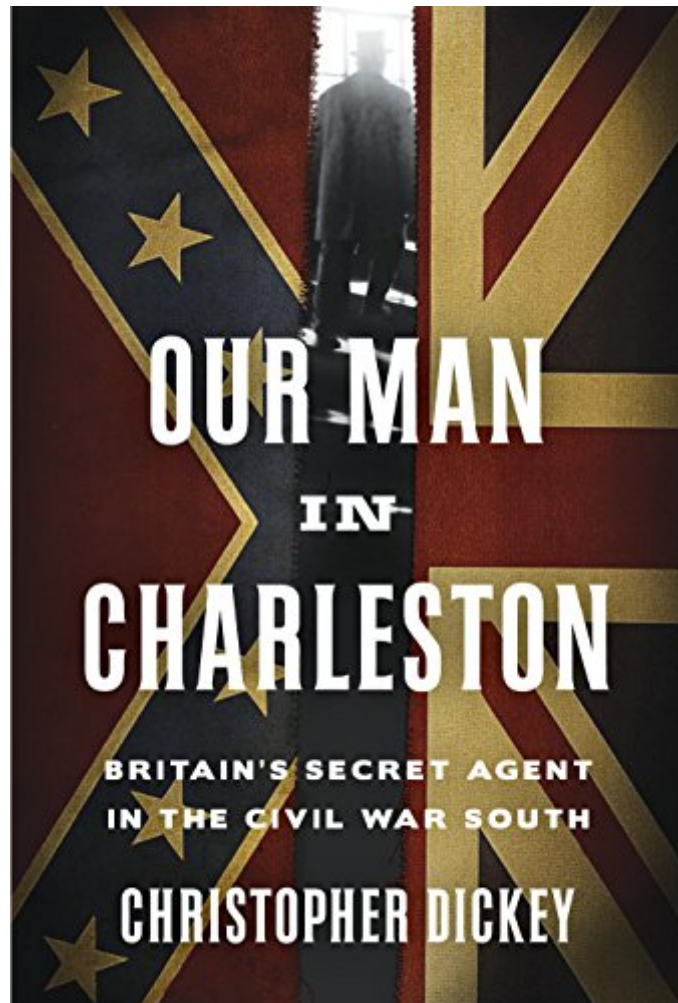




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# Our Man In Charleston: Britain's Secret Agent In The Civil War South



## Synopsis

Between the Confederacy and recognition by Great Britain stood one unlikely Englishman who hated the slave trade. His actions helped determine the fate of a nation. When Robert Bunch arrived in Charleston to take up the post of British consul in 1853, he was young and full of ambition, but even he couldn't have imagined the incredible role he would play in the history-making events to unfold. In an age when diplomats often were spies, Bunch's job included sending intelligence back to the British government in London. Yet as the United States threatened to erupt into Civil War, Bunch found himself plunged into a double life, settling into an amiable routine with his slavery-loving neighbors on the one hand, while working furiously to thwart their plans to achieve a new Confederacy. As secession and war approached, the Southern states found themselves in an impossible position. They knew that recognition from Great Britain would be essential to the survival of the Confederacy, and also that such recognition was likely to be withheld if the South reopened the Atlantic slave trade. But as Bunch meticulously noted from his perch in Charleston, secession's red-hot epicenter, that trade was growing. And as Southern leaders continued to dissemble publicly about their intentions, Bunch sent dispatch after secret dispatch back to the Foreign Office warning of the truth—that economic survival would force the South to import slaves from Africa in massive numbers. When the gears of war finally began to turn, and Bunch was pressed into service on an actual spy mission to make contact with the Confederate government, he found himself in the middle of a fight between the Union and Britain that threatened, in the boast of Secretary of State William Seward, to “wrap the world in flames.” In this masterfully told story, Christopher Dickey introduces Consul Bunch as a key figure in the pitched battle between those who wished to reopen the floodgates of bondage and misery, and those who wished to dam the tide forever. Featuring a remarkable cast of diplomats, journalists, senators, and spies, *Our Man in Charleston* captures the intricate, intense relationship between great powers on the brink of war. From the Hardcover edition.

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## Customer Reviews

I am a little torn on how to rate this book. I read several reviews of it beforehand and was excited to read a fast-paced spy thriller, but that is really not what I got at all. However, I thought it was a fascinating look at secessionists, slaveholders, slave trade advocates, and Britain's role in the U.S. Civil War. I also thought its parallels to modern politics were uncanny, if not altogether terrifying, so it is absolutely a worthwhile read. Re: my first point, this book is not about an official British spy. Robert Bunch was the British consul in Charleston, and held that post more or less officially (his privileges were withdrawn by the union about a year before he left the country) for many years. It is true that he was working tirelessly to inform his superiors of the secessionists' views on slavery and their increasing interest in officially reopening the Middle Passage while simultaneously trying not to reveal his opinions on the matter. In the beginning, withholding his opinions was primarily for diplomatic reasons; that is, it was easier for him to do his job if he was perceived as friendly to the cause. As secession loomed, however, withholding his opinion did become a matter of personal safety, and he started to write his letters to Britain in code. It was definitely fascinating to read, but I did not necessarily find that storyline to be the gripping spy drama I was expecting from the reviews. Bunch did his job so well, in fact, that when he finally left for Britain, the Charlestonians firmly believed he was on their side, and the real threats to his job (but not necessarily his safety) ended up being from northerners convinced of his secessionist sympathies. What I found to be most interesting about this book were the details of the secessionists' obsession with slavery and the reopening of the Middle Passage. I knew some of this going into the book, but Bunch's perspective is unique, and he was one of the few British consuls in the Confederate states who was regularly

sounding the alarm on this topic. Furthermore, I found that some of the rhetoric used by pro-slavery secessionists has some striking parallels to that of some modern politicians. The justifications for slavery and the fears of a slave uprising are not totally unlike modern justifications for mass incarceration or fears of foreigners or racial minorities. For this reason alone, the book is a five-star read. Again, if you are looking for a real spy thriller, this is probably not your book. There are better nonfiction books that will really have you on the edge of your seat, if that is what you want. If you are looking for a thought-provoking book that offers a new perspective on the south from an outsider pretending to be an insider, then this is exactly what you need.

Reads like a great novel from first paragraph through the last page. To understand the Civil War[1861-1865] one must "see" into Charleston and South Carolina where the nation's previous most potent threat of secession had been attempted in 1832. This book is emotionally so engaging that I wished the state had been allowed to secede, the sooner the better. Herein a former state attorney general is quoted: "South Carolina is too small to be a republic and too large for an insane asylum." The star of this biography/history of Charleston was the British Consul there from 1853 to February 1863. I have 100 "flagged" passages in my copy: One of the last is on page 292: "...Bunch's long record of dispatches about the Southerners, their politics, their key personalities and especially their craving for new slaves from Africa had slowed London's march toward recognition of the Confederacy."---To which I almost say "Amen", but, then, I also realize that some USA-Abolitionists were as fanatical as the most fanatic of Charleston's "Fire-Eaters". Which leads me to wonder if--The war was a "close thing"--A Southern victory at, say, Antietam/Sharpsburg, probably bringing in British and French arbitration and Southern independence might have been a lesser evil by saving 100,000s[4000,000?] of lives since the war would have been shortened by 2.5 years. Note that before Jefferson Davis died the last vestige of slavery had been declared ended[in Brazil]. I believe that slavery in the CSA would have ended by that time too. The lesson: Be careful what stories you try to make true. Be true to, at least, a lesser, or better, the least evil if you wish to avoid greater evils.

President of the Confederacy Jefferson F. Davis was convinced that the British people supported the Confederate cause, and securing formal recognition was his top foreign policy objective early in the war. Most of the Southern landed class believed, and were loudly expressive, that withholding cotton exports to England and the economic dislocation that would result would suffice to pressure any recalcitrants in London to support recognition. Recognition would put the Confederacy on the

same level diplomatically as that of a sovereign nation as the United States and would greatly increase its chances for a successful secession. The South came close, and the hotheaded, obstinate, confrontational style of US Secretary of State William Seward vis-à-vis England almost sealed the deal. It eventuated, however, that even Seward's "first folly," so to speak, was not enough to push London, Parliament and Crown alike, past their visceral distaste for slavery in any form. Formal diplomatic recognition by Britain (or by France or any other European state) was never obtained. Nothing new is this summary. What is new and a real treat is the story Christopher Dickey unspools to describe this. He starts with the appointment of one Robert Bunch, a relatively minor official in the British Foreign Office, as a replacement British consul in Charleston, South Carolina in 1853, and follows Bunch's tenure until his eventual reassignment in February 1863. There were 14 British consuls in the United States, including 7 in slave states, all answerable to the British Minister (ambassador, as it were) in Washington, DC. They had a variety of tasks to perform. First and foremost was to facilitate the movement of British goods and people to keep the lines of commerce open and flowing. A close second was to act as London's eyes and ears in the US hinterland, monitoring and reporting back on commercial, cultural, political, military, and economic events that might prove important to British interests. Most of these consuls were part-timers who mixed their private business with their unpaid official duties, but Bunch was one of the few that was a full-time salaried professional. He would also prove himself to be one of the best and most prolific. His reports were comprehensive, detailed, and perceptive. He is an excellent vehicle through which to tell this story. Three things I like about this book: First, it sheds light on a slice of Civil War history that hasn't seen a lot of play in popular histories as the underlying Royal and Parliamentary anti-slavery sentiment, how the British Foreign Office worked, the source network that Bunch (and by interpolation the other consuls) developed, and how Bunch personally had to operate in the Deep South so as to do his job without revealing his personal hatred of the South's "peculiar institution." Second, Christopher Dickey's style. He is a trained and experienced journalist, and already an accomplished author prior to this book. Thus, he knows how to write. This is an easy, smooth read that flows linearly through time with seamless transitions between events, locales, and personalities as not only informative, but a joy to read. One downside is that Mr. Dickey's abhorrence of slavery comes through the text. It doesn't get in the way of the narrative, but it's visible. And then, third, there is the description of the diplomatic motives and

strategies initiated and played out within and between Britain, the Confederacy, and the United States. In what too often can be a dry topic, the maneuverings are not only described with pulse and pace, but their intricacies and backgrounds are well explained. Take, for example, the Negro Seamen Act of 1822 – a South Carolina law that was a thorn in Britain's side. The law required free seamen of African descent working aboard domestic and foreign ships (including British ships) to be jailed while the ship was in any South Carolinian port for fear that if they were allowed free access to local slaves, riots and other unrest might ensue. Moreover, when it was time to leave, the ship's captain had to pay a fine for the release of seaman held captive. You can imagine Britain's reaction. This book is a great read, and I recommend it highly. If you need more convincing, you might check out <http://www.c-span.org/video/?327546-1/christopher-dickey-man-charleston>. Enjoy!

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