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Review of "The North Star: Canada and the Civil War Plots against Lincoln" by Julian Sher

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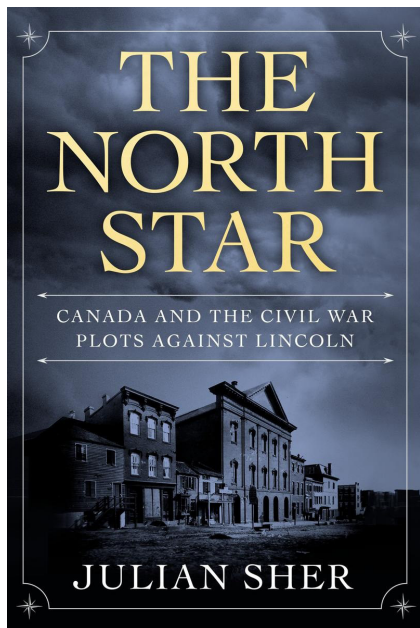
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Julian Sher. *The North Star: Canada and the Civil War Plots against Lincoln*. Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2023. Pp. 352.

“The Canadian people have given shelter and friendship to men who have robbed and murdered Americans citizens,” accused the *New York Times* in late 1864 during the American Civil War (p. 189). This American fury was rightly directed against the British subjects to the north of the 49th parallel who had not always been good neighbours during the bloody civil war between the Unionist North and the secessionist South. The newspaper’s accusation was especially warranted in December 1864 as a sensational trial was held in British North America (as the separate colonies were known before confederation to form Canada in 1867) to try a number of rebels who had launched a raid from Canadian soil on St. Albans, Vermont.

These raiders, who the South depicted as soldiers and who the North saw as terrorists, rode hard from the Canadian colonies on the small town of St. Albans, where they robbed several banks at gunpoint on 19 October 1864, before fleeing back to the safety of Montreal (nicely described by Sher as akin to Second World War Casablanca, with multiple spies and plotters). In the process they murdered a man and stirred up a hornet’s nest that resulted in some American papers, politicians and soldiers calling for the invasion of BNA. The *Montreal Gazette* informed its readers that the widespread anger had to be carefully managed or “we shall find ourselves dragged into war ... and the country on both sides of the line red with murders” (p. 189). This was a prescient warning. However, through a gross misreading of the danger and, it would appear, Confederate agents bribing key authorities in the trial, the southerners were set free. To gross insult was added considerable injury when the magistrate also gave the raiders back the stolen money. This was unwise, to the say the least, and the Canadians indeed prepared to face the wrath of a disgusted and vengeful Lincoln administration in Washington.

This and other crises are presented in Julian Sher’s finely written and well researched *The North Star*. Sher is an accomplished journalist who was drawn to the subject after encountering the story of Confederate President Jefferson Davis living in Montreal after his imprisonment and release at the end of the war. How and why the president of the defeated Confederate States of America came to be sheltered in exile convinced Sher to launch into the study of



how Canadians assisted the South during the Civil War. While much of this history has already been raised in historical texts about Canada and the Civil War, *The North Star* is a deep dive into Southern sympathies in the colonies that adds new details and knowledge to the fantastic and often failed Confederate plots that were launched from north of the border to harass the Union war effort.

These schemes and operations are the focus of the book that is strongly driven by historical characters. Most prominent is John Wilkes Booth, a famous stage actor who would assassinate President Lincoln in April 1865. With pockets of support for the Confederate cause in Montreal, Booth spent some time there, dazzling the locals with his star power, talking openly of hating the president and defending slavery. Sher is particularly good in depicting Booth and other plotters like him, although he is far less able in setting the stage for the larger currents of the war and barely tries his hand at portraying the war's battles. The odious issue of slavery also receives too curt treatment, especially in how it was viewed in Canada. Instead, the story touches briefly on some Canadians who served in the Unionist armies, among the astonishing 40,000 or so who are thought to have crossed the border to serve in the war against southern states – but then moves rapidly to the sensational schemes to undermine the North from the relatively safe bases in BNA.

And sensational they were. In addition to the St. Alban's raid, there were Confederate agents in BNA with hundreds of thousands of dollars attempting to buy influence and weapons. Others turned to terrorist actions such as the diabolical of plot from Luke Blackburn, a doctor in Bermuda, who sought to use bloodied and puss-smearred clothing and blankets from yellow fever victims in the British colony to engage in biological warfare. Blackburn smuggled the soiled clothing into the US in the hope of starting a pandemic, but it failed because yellow fever cannot be spread from person to person via clothing

(typically, only by mosquitos). Another act of terrorism involved a handful of Confederate agents who attempted to burn down New York City. The arsonists slunk into the US from BNA and eventually started a number of coordinated fires in hotels. The conflagration never took hold, although it caused some fear in the fire-prone city. Another scheme involved a series of prison breaks to free Confederate prisoners close to the border. All of this and more is recounted here, along with the general amateurishness of the plotters who had little in common other than talking publicly of their plans (which alerted Unionist spies throughout BNA) and, often, a faltering of will, as a good many of these patriots backed out of these operations – most launched in 1864 – at the last moment.

Sher writes with flair and has researched deeply into the published memoirs of the period and newspapers, whose journalists offered scathing attacks on the North and South. A number of key trials and investigations, especially around the St. Alban's raid and the hunt for Lincoln's killer, are also used effectively to delve into the stories and motivations of these historical actors. And yet despite some very fine storytelling in places that reads like a novel, Sher has overplayed his hand. After reading this flawed book, one would come away thinking all Canadians supported the South in its successionist dreams. That is absurd. There are countless examples of Canadian support of the Union, not the least being some 40,000 who served in the ranks. As a group, they receive barely a mention, although individuals like Sarah Edmondson, the well-known story of the woman who disguised herself as a man to serve in the infantry and then, perhaps, as a spy, is retold here. Bizarrely absent from this history is John A. Macdonald, father of Confederation, and Governor General Charles Monck, both of whom played key roles in the delicate dance of keeping the Canada safe from being dragged into the war. Their inexplicable absence suggests that Sher was afraid to give Macdonald full credit for his key role in safeguarding Canada, something that does not currently align with the misguided thinking around Canada's first prime minister as only a genocidal monster through his support of residential schools, at least as presented by some current activists.

Even though Sher has offered some wonderful stories about the desperate Confederate plots that emerged from Canada, the overall thesis is a misreading of Canadian sensibilities. There was no overwhelming support of the South or of slavery. Sher has fallen into the trap of looking for evidence for his thesis and, it would seem,

disregarding all that does not fit. That said, Sher has moved the historical needle so that scholars and readers will understand that there was more sympathy in Canada than previously believed for the successionist cause.

One Canadian doctor, Anderson Abbott, a Black Canadian who served with the Union forces, wrote that he put himself in harm's way because it was "a struggle between [a] beautiful right and ugly wrong." The war would determine "whether civilization or barbarism would rule, whether freedom or slavery should prevail upon this continent" (p. 89). Some 40,000 Canadians serving on the side of "freedom" would have echoed such sentiments, as would many others across the British Empire.

TIM COOK, *CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM*