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A DECADE OF BRITISH OPPOSITION TO THE
SUEZ CANAL PROJECT, 1854-1864

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
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BY
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A DECADE OF BRITISH OPPOSITION TO THE
SUEZ CANAL PROJECT, 1854-1864

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CHAPTER I

The Suez Canal constitutes a paradox in British history. On the one hand, its value to Britain is uncontested as a short cut to the East and the consequent implications for empire.¹ On the other hand, and not as obvious, Ferdinand De Lesseps excavated the canal despite intense and prolonged British opposition. Her Majesty's Foreign Office energetically contested the project diplomatically. Politicians hostile to the scheme exerted their influence within and without parliament to convince Britons the prospective waterway threatened national security. Robert Stephenson, son of

¹John Bartholomew, Philip's Chart of the Suez Canal from Admiralty and French Surveys With Descriptive Notes (London: George Philip and Son, 1876), pp. 5-6, early published figures which indicated that British trade increased as a result of the canal. He attributed the increase to merchant vigor and organization and to advanced techniques in ship construction.

Edward Dicey, The Story of the Khedivate (London: Macmillan, 1902), pp. 28-29, was a noticeable exception. He charged the canal with diverting maritime traffic from England and contributing to England's relative economic decline in the late nineteenth century. Max Ellis Fletcher, "Suez and Britain, an Historical Study of the Effects of the Suez Canal on the British Economy" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1957), thoroughly refuted Dicey.

Britain's greatest railroad builder and spokesman for the Institution of Civil Engineers, the country's most prestigious body for such matters, pronounced the canal a technical and commercial impossibility.² Travellers, private citizens, and clergymen, knowledgeable and otherwise, denounced the project in pamphlet and press. Occasionally, condemnations included richly imaginative alternative projects. One alternative project, for example, advanced the novel idea of ferrying ships across the isthmus by railway.³ The Admiralty, a department ostensibly abreast of maritime advances, sponsored two publications to convince England and Europe that cutting the isthmus was purposeless and impractical. Finally, The Times opposed the project.⁴ Indeed, to an impressive array of forces the Suez Canal project proved unpopular.

²The Institution of Civil Engineers continues to operate on Great George Street in Westminster. It maintains offices, meeting rooms, exhibitions, and a well-stocked library. The Institution's library, rarely visited by historians, is a mine of pamphlet sources.

³See below, chapter four.

⁴The Times's prestige and circulation, almost twice that of all other morning dailies, was so great that in 1854 it commanded advertising rates forty to fifty per cent higher than the rates of competing newspapers. See James Grant, The Newspaper Press: Its Origin, Progress and Present Position (2 vols.; London: Tinsley Brothers, 1871), II, 20 and 26. The Tradition Established, 1841-1884, Vol. II of The History of the Times (4 vols.; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1939), 58-59, 92.

For additional insights by contemporaries into The Times's paramount position see Walter Bagehot, The English Constitution, the World's Classics edition (rev. ed.; London: Oxford University Press, 1928), p. 20. For an earlier period, see Brougham, Lord, Life and Times (3 vols.; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1872), III, 106.

This study will consider the extent of British hostility to the Suez Canal during its formative years. It will seek to account for that hostility and to explain why that hostility abruptly softened after a decade even though the canal was far from completion. Moreover, this study will also disprove the notion that British commercial opinion actually favored the project but was thwarted in expression by an unresponsive British government.⁵

British attitudes toward the Suez Canal developed over a period of years. Initially, some Victorians responded with a moderate interest in an old idea served them afresh by M. Ferdinand De Lesseps in 1854. The British press at that time, however, was more interested in printing war correspondent reports from the Crimea than visionary notions of driving a canal through the isthmus of Suez. Termination of the Crimean War coupled with Lesseps's bold determination to bring his idea directly to the British commercial community resulted in 1857 in an ambitious, month-long promotional tour. Lesseps and his lieutenants visited every important English, Scottish, and Irish port city, cities which reasonably might be expected to favor a stimulus to international

⁵As we shall see, Lesseps was convinced he had the commercial community's support. Historians have sometimes assumed incorrectly that he was right: see Hugh J. Schonfield, The Suez Canal in Peace and War, 1859-1969 (rev. ed.; Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1969), p. 27; Lt.-Col. Sir Arnold T. Wilson, The Suez Canal Its Past, Present, and Future (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 19.

trade. On tour, Lesseps introduced his scheme to local bankers and merchants who, in turn, had their reactions to the project recorded in the local press.⁶ Examination of that local press suggests mercantile enthusiasm was a great deal less than Lesseps had expected.

Lesseps's promotional tour created a considerable amount of commercial and political interest in his idea and

⁶Close students of British journalism are slightly perplexed as to exactly what the Victorian press did. Did it mold public opinion or did it reflect public opinion? There is no simple answer. At different times and in different places the press did different things. Until the early nineteenth century newspapers served merely as advertising agents because their editors were printers rather than writers. As the fourth estate matured, and particularly after the Newspaper Stamp Duty was removed in 1855, the provincial press flourished and took on a character of its own. Thereafter it depended for existence upon advertising. Donald Read was probably correct when he wrote that newspapers circulated within interest groups and had their impact within the particular group: merchants advertised in and read merchant newspapers. Within the group, newspapers "seemed to follow while in reality they lead." Donald Read, Press and People 1790-1850: Opinion in Three English Cities (London: Edward Arnold, Ltd., 1961), p. 205. See also p. 169, pp. 61-63. Information relevant to this topic is also found in: A. Aspinall, Politics and the Press c. 1780-1850 (London: Home & Van Thal Ltd., 1949), p. 350; Francis Williams, Dangerous Estate: The Anatomy of Newspapers (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1958), pp. 95-96, p. 101, p. 144, p. 34; Grant, The Newspaper Press..., II, 445; H.R.G. Whates, The Birmingham Post 1857-1957, A Centenary Retrospect (Birmingham: The Birmingham Post and Mail Limited, 1957), p. v, p. 7.

For a perceptive essay on the power and character of the Victorian press by a man intimately associated with it, see Charles Mitchell, The Newspaper Press Directory and Advertiser's Guide (London: Charles Mitchell, revised and published annually, 1846-- ?), 1856, p. 2. This publication was crucial to potential advertisers because it reviewed all the newspapers in Britain and specifically noted the individual newspaper's circulation, politics, and clientele.

A former editor of the Daily Herald sadly concluded that the Victorian press gradually forfeited its political education influence in a quest for advertisers. The result, he wrote, was the popular but overly commercialized press. Francis Williams, Press, Parliament and People (London: William Heineman Ltd., 1946), pp. 162-163.

in 1858 the canal question came before parliament. In a quite real sense, the canal question's arrival in parliament provided a test for Lesseps's promotional tour. He went to the provinces soliciting political support for his scheme. Debate and division, however, disappointed him, for it exposed a wide spectrum of hostility. It also provided an example of the political giants in action and how they aligned on the issue. Gladstone, Lord John Russell, and Milner-Gibson, to name only three, defended the canal and the free trade ideology. Palmerston, Disraeli, and Stephenson, among others, attacked the canal on a variety of diplomatic, commercial, humanitarian, and technical grounds.

Chapter Three of this study is a detailed examination of the 1858 division. With an authority on historical quantitative analysis as a guide, this chapter utilizes descriptive statistics to put parliament's negative reaction to the canal into clear perspective.⁷ The division demonstrated that Lesseps's promotional tour, as a strategem to attract political endorsements, failed dismally.

Friends of the canal suffered a bruising setback in the political arena in 1858, but Lesseps and company were persistent and they continued to agitate in the hopes of converting a hostile British opinion. A vigorous controversy raged between 1858 and 1863 as the canal's enemies (and

⁷William O. Aydelotte, Quantification in History, Addison-Wesley Series in History (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1971).

there were many) obstinately refused to accept the project as a viable endeavor. Public and private enemies of the canal at this late date redoubled their efforts to convince their countrymen that the project was nothing more than a piece of French speculation.

An important milestone was reached in 1863 as opposition collapsed. Until 1863 the government, press, and public opinion generally agreed that the project was either immoral, politically inexpedient, commercially inadvisable, or technically impractical. In that year, Sir John Hawkshaw, the highest technical authority in the land, routed all arguments which had been brought against the canal. Secondly, Her Majesty's Foreign Office failed in its attempt to coerce the new Viceroy of Egypt (Saïd Pasha, the project's progenitor, had died) into denouncing the canal. The new Pasha was not susceptible to pressure from London and he announced his determination to complete the work of his predecessor. And finally, outstanding political problems between Egypt, Turkey, and the canal company, problems which Her Majesty's Government heretofore had exploited, were resolved. Thereafter, Britain's diplomatic nuisance value withered, the pace of work in the isthmus increased, and in late 1869 the canal opened.

This topic becomes particularly significant when one recalls the subsequent course of Anglo-Egyptian relations. From its opening, and for a hundred years, the maritime canal at Suez served as England's commercial and military lifeline to empire. From the beginning, at least seventy-

five per cent of the canal's annual traffic was British. Disraeli's stock purchase in 1875, English repression of the Egyptian nationalist rising in 1882 and the establishment of a protectorate, Gordon's unhappy Sudan campaign, military operations in two world wars, and finally the 1956 invasion testify to Britain's longstanding determination to protect its Suez interests. The completed canal proved vital to Britain, and it is difficult to imagine a time when the British might have opposed it. Yet, examination of the crucial 1854 to 1864 period reveals that British opponents of the canal employed every conceivable argument in an unsuccessful attempt to prevent its construction. This study should place later British policy toward Egypt into sharper focus, and it should highlight the Suez Canal as a paradox in British history.

.....

Joining the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea at the Suez isthmus was not a new idea. In fact, the Egyptian Pharoah Sesostris, two thousand years before Christ, committed resources to this project, but unlike the pyramids, early canals were impermanent. They silted up and were abandoned by pharoahs who, for one reason or another, re-directed their energies. After Egypt became a satrap of her stronger neighbors, all ideas of direct water travel through the isthmus were forgotten. Alexandria, located where the Nile River emptied into the Mediterranean, became

a major entrepôt[^] for Eastern and Western trade. European trade goods were deposited in Alexandria and later exchanged for caravan goods coming from the East, across the desert, or for goods coming down the Nile. For centuries thereafter the canal idea lay dormant. European merchants then discovered the Cape route to Asia and international trade patterns adjusted proportionately. Alexandria and Egypt suffered. Fanatical Moslem sheiks likewise discouraged Egyptian trade as they closed the Red Sea to non-believers in a successful effort to keep Mecca secluded.

Hoping to funnel trade into French ports, Napoleon revived the idea of direct water travel between the Mediterranean and Red Sea. His scientists, however, pronounced the idea insane, for their calculations revealed that the Red Sea was thirty feet higher than the Mediterranean Sea, and cutting the isthmus would flood Egypt. Consequently, the canal idea again fell into neglect.

During the 1820's nobody seriously considered the concept of East-West travel through Egypt. One pamphleteer explained that travellers followed the longer Cape route explicitly to avoid Egypt, a country notoriously infested with wild desert bandits. Worse than bandits, Egypt's climate represented a nightmare for Europeans who considered that area the historical home for plagues and fevers. Only the boldest European travellers selected the overland route through Egypt and their contemporaries thought them

foolhardy: "if by some miracle some of them survived, where were they to go? What country would receive their tainted bodies?" If overland travellers safely eluded bandits and disease, they still faced the perilous Red Sea and the Straits of Babel Mandeb, opposite present day Aden, which were thought impassable.⁸ Responsible European travellers in the early nineteenth century used the Cape Route.

Prosper Enfantin and the Saint Simonians in the early 1830's were the first organized group seriously to consider the isthmus a penetrable natural barrier. The group's bizarre religious beliefs complemented their visionary notions of transportation. They visualized the Suez isthmus as a geographical hymen destined for perforation by a canal, thus culturally impregnating the Eastern mother by the Western father. But complicated Ottoman politics and the Saint Simonians's failure to attract influential support discarded the canal idea onto the intellectual ash heap.

In the late 1830's the overland route became fashionable due to the energies of Thomas Waghorn, one of the most colorful Victorians.⁹ Waghorn, a British officer in India

⁸Charles Lamb Kenney, The Gates of the East: Ten Chapters on the Isthmus of Suez Canal (London: Ward, 1857), p. 9.

⁹For treatment of this energetic individual see Halford L. Hoskins, British Routes to India (New York: Longmans, 1928), or see Waghorn's own Egypt as It is in 1837 (London: Smith, 1837) and The Acceleration of Mails (Once a Fortnight) between England and the East Indies and Vice Versa (London: Smith, 1843).

turned entrepreneur, in 1836 contracted to carry the mails between Alexandria and Suez. He bribed the bandits, established a network of rest stations, and provided camels which transported mails and, soon thereafter, travellers across the Egyptian desert.¹⁰ Something of a legend in his own time, Waghorn was praised by travellers who preferred an overland break in the journey to India in preference to a tedious, three month sea voyage around the Cape.¹¹

The English railroad boom of the 1840's, a progressive Egyptian Viceroy, Ali Pasha, a growing desire for better contact with India, and the realization by Europeans that Egyptian travel was bearable contributed to a re-examination of Waghorn's overland route. In 1846 Ali Pasha financed an ad hoc group of international engineers, the Société d'études de Canal de Suez, to consider improving transit through his country. This body included engineers from Germany, France, Austria, and England's Robert Stephenson, the son of a famous engineering father. The group reported, with one important dissenting vote, that they could see no technical

¹⁰D. A. Farnie, East and West of Suez: The Suez Canal in History, 1854-1956 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 12. Perfection of Waghorn's logistical arrangements followed his 1830 record trial run from Bombay to London in forty traveling days. See also Schonfield, The Suez Canal in Peace and War, 1869-1969, p. 15.

¹¹See William Makepiece Thackeray, "Journal From Cornhill to Cairo," Vol. VIII of The Works of William Makepiece Thackeray (8 vols.; New York: Peter Fenelon Collier, n.d.), VIII, 79-80, for an amusing description of Waghorn's accomplishments.

reason for not digging a canal through the isthmus of Suez. In the process of their studies, the group corrected the Napoleonic calculation which showed a difference between the level of the two seas. This discovery prompted Stephenson to dissent from the group opinion on the viability of a canal. Because the seas were virtually level, he reasoned, the proposed canal would have no current, and it would become a stagnant "stinking ditch" unsuitable for maritime traffic and incapable of being maintained.¹² The international group presented its report to Ali Pasha and disbanded. No action was taken.

Powerful factors worked against the canal idea for the next several years. Waghorn, British merchants in Alexandria, and the new Viceroy, Abbas Pasha (reigned 1848 to 1854) opposed a canal through the isthmus because it would bypass Alexandria and disrupt their lucrative entrepôt arrangement.¹³ This set of circumstances did not mean that Waghorn and friends were disinterested in better transportation across Egypt. It did mean that Waghorn and friends preferred a trans-Egyptian railroad from Alexandria to Suez through Cairo in preference to a canal through a desolate isthmus. In November, 1851, Abbas Pasha allowed a British company to build that railroad. Thus, a quicker, more comfortable, and

¹²Lt.-Col. Sir Arnold T. Wilson, The Suez Canal, Its Past, Present, and Future (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 9.

¹³This fear was justified as events proved. Alexandria did suffer commercially when the canal was completed.

(ostensibly) less temperamental mode of transportation would replace Waghorn's string of camels. Robert Stephenson, dissident member of the 1846 study group, emphasized his earlier position by negotiating a handsome £55,000 fee to serve as the railroad's chief engineer.¹⁴

The canal again was forgotten. No one was interested in it--no one except Ferdinand De Lesseps, an unimportant, retired French diplomat with an amateurish interest in the concept, an interest he had acquired earlier while posted to Alexandria. As mid-century advanced, the isthmus was as solid as during the time there was thought a dangerous disparity between the level of the two seas. Abbas Pasha happily wasted himself in riotous living. Progressive Egyptians and British merchants happily watched the railway unfold toward Cairo. The Porte, legal overlord over Egypt, faced a host of domestic and foreign problems and was completely disinterested in an additional developmental project for Egypt.

Turbulent Egyptian politics soon upset this scene. A palace intrigue occurred which forced Said, one of Abbas Pasha's many sons, to scurry into a Parisian exile. In Paris, young Said renewed contact with Lesseps, a man he had known in Alexandria, and the exile and the former diplomat became close friends. These two men clung together as partners in adversity; both men were out of favor with their

¹⁴The Times, July 30, 1851, cited in Hoskins, British Routes to India, p. 302. The two hundred and four mile Alexandria to Suez railway was completed in December, 1858. Henceforth a traveller crossed Egypt nonstop in twenty-four hours.

respective governments: in 1848 Lesseps, after distinguished diplomatic service in Egypt and Spain, had resigned his post in Rome because he thought his government was acting too timidly during the sensitive Italian situation; Said was dangerously close to a conspiracy against his father. For two years Said and Lesseps met frequently, and, to read the latter's account of that relationship, one gets the impression that Lesseps took the role of patron for his younger friend.¹⁵ Fortune soon would reverse the roles.

The key year in the modern Suez Canal's history was 1854: on July 10th Abbas Pasha was assassinated, and Said succeeded him. Lesseps was overjoyed at his friend's good fortune and immediately wrote his congratulations. Fortunately for Lesseps and for his scheme, Said Pasha responded with an invitation for Lesseps to visit Egypt. Arriving in Egypt on November 7th, Lesseps noticed that Said's advisors were suspicious of him. Lesseps in later life immensely enjoyed describing how his skill with rifle and horse won their admiration and confidence. Once accepted as a respected member of Said's coterie, Lesseps presented the new Pasha with his proposal for executing the Suez Canal. Impressed with the scheme's grandeur, and yet its conceptual simplicity, Said assented. On November 30, 1854, Said Pasha signed a concession which granted Lesseps exclusive

¹⁵Ferdinand de Lesseps, The History of the Suez Canal, A Personal Narrative, translated by Sir Henry Drummond Wolff (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1876), p. 10.

right to form an international company and dig a canal from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea.¹⁶ Thereafter Lesseps scoured Egypt and Europe for financial and political support for his project. With its maritime preponderance, potentiality as a customer, and sources of investment capital, England immediately became a primary target.

Said's succession to the Egyptian Viceroyalty coincided with the horrible winter siege of Sebastopol, a low point in the allied Crimean war effort.¹⁷ Stalemate in the Crimea confounded the reception of Lesseps's project. In a positive sense, the British, French, and Turkish allies tended to eliminate friction over extraneous matters. As the war wore on, so did the nerves of the allies, and conflict repeatedly surfaced. In a negative sense for the canal, war provided the Porte with a good excuse for withholding a firman, or official consent, pending the war's conclusion.¹⁸ As a

¹⁶The details of that month and the concession are given by Lesseps in his Recollections of Forty Years, translated by C. B. Pitman (2 vols.; London: Chapman and Hall, 1887), I, 281-283.

¹⁷War was declared in March, 1854, and the crucial period for the Franco-English expeditionary force was the mismanaged nine month (November, 1854 to September, 1855) siege of Sebastopol. Sebastopol fell on September 9, 1855, but peace was not concluded until March, 1856.

¹⁸Schonfield, The Suez Canal in Peace and War, p. 25. A good example of The Times's ambivalent attitude may be observed by comparing an article from Alexandria (December 18, 1854) and one from London (June 13, 1855). The former is negative, the latter applauds Lesseps for his desire not to alienate any foreign power. The latter article even mentions Lesseps's "friendly" intercourse with Redcliffe.

result of the divergent influences which the Crimean conflict presented, Lesseps's project received less initial publicity than it would receive later when the public's attention shifted from the Crimea.

After ceremoniously informing the foreign diplomatic community of his concession, Lesseps launched one of the most industrious promotional campaigns which Britain would experience. He wrote letters to influential people, he commissioned propaganda literature, he visited London several times, he made an intensive month-long tour of all major British port cities, and he worked behind the scenes to bring the question before parliament. Exploiting England's proud claim to be a free trade nation, he first asked Richard Cobden for support.¹⁹ Two years later, as a wide range of canal opposition developed, Lesseps desperately made a second, more emotional appeal to Cobden. On this occasion, he reminded Cobden that Robert Peel had considered Cobden the mainspring behind free trade and specifically the architect of the repeal of the Corn Laws. He implored Cobden to once more defend the principle of free trade and international goodwill by leading the canal faction when the issue reached parliament.²⁰ Cobden's failure to respond

¹⁹Letter from Lesseps to Cobden, dated December 3, 1854, cited in Lesseps, The Suez Canal: Letters and Documents Descriptive of Its Rise and Progress in 1854-1856, translated by N. D'Anvers (London: Henry S. King and Co., 1876), pp. 36-38.

²⁰Ibid., pp. 307-311, letter from Lesseps to Cobden, dated November 22, 1856. There is another copy of this letter in Lesseps, Recollections of Forty Years, pp. 308-313, but this copy contains mistakes.

would be one among many disappointments Lesseps would suffer. Cobden's defeat in the 1858 general election eliminated him as potential parliamentary support. For another thing, Cobden was committed, as we shall see, to a different goal. Apparently, Cobden was more interested in negotiating a commercial treaty with France than he was in working for a canal through the isthmus of Suez and there is no record, published or otherwise, that Cobden responded to Lesseps's letters.²¹

The British public's introduction to the project quickly followed as The Times's correspondent reported Lesseps's receipt of the concession. In addition to the technical details of the project, details which were examined fully, the correspondent judged the eventual success of the project extremely problematical. He thought the venture unlikely to succeed because shallow seas on both ends of the isthmus prevented deep water shipping, because the isthmus was an impossible place to work, and because adequate investment was unlikely to come forth while Europe was at war. This correspondent predicted the project would suffer the same dismal fate as similar quixotic projects which, from time to time, had visited Egypt. Said Pasha, he wrote, had

²¹ Lesseps eventually published all correspondence relevant to his crusade, but he does not have any Cobden letters. Examination of Cobden's papers in the British Museum does not reveal any correspondence with Lesseps. It could be, however, that Lesseps contacted Cobden on one of his trips to London, but, again, research does not reveal such contact.

granted his friend the concession only because he was not committed to support it financially and because he thought it a harmless gesture. The Pasha realized, unlike Lesseps, the project had no chance of being completed.²²

If Lesseps read this first public evaluation of his scheme, he did not allow it to dull his enthusiasm. In February of the following year he began pursuit of the elusive firman from the Porte, Said Pasha's suzerain. Formal application encouraged the Porte to act fairly and to consider the project on its commercial merit and on the benefits it would bring the empire. In a thinly disguised reference to Stratford de Redcliffe, Britain's powerful Ambassador at Constantinople, and a man known to oppose anything which improved Egypt, Lesseps asked the Porte to make his decision independently of "an agent who by his overbearing conduct really outraged the dignity of the Sultan himself."²³ The Sultan's reply was unsatisfactory; no firman was granted as Constantinople plead wartime exigency. Without a firman the canal project would enjoy no legal protection under Turkish law.

Since Constantinople did not cooperate, Lesseps tried a different approach: he wrote directly to Redcliffe.

²²The Times, December 18, 1854, p. 8.

²³Letter from Lesseps to the Sultan, dated February, 1855, cited in Percy Heatherington Fitzgerald, The Great Canal at Suez: With an Account of the Struggle of its Projector F. de Lesseps (2 vols.; London: Tinsley Brothers, 1876), I, 37.

Egypt was the only spot on earth, he wrote, where British and French diplomatic interests neatly coincided. Britain, understandably, was interested in Egypt as her highway to India. France had longstanding interests in the Mediterranean in general and in northern Africa specifically. If no positive action were taken to coordinate their Egyptian interests, he warned, Egypt might become the focal point for Anglo-French conflict. But Britain and France could prevent this undesirable circumstance by converting Egypt from a potential source of conflict into a bond of friendship by working together on the canal project.²⁴ Reading Redcliffe's mind, Lesseps attempted to assuage the Ambassador's political fears by pointing out that the invasion route to India stretched overland through Central Asia and a canal would not threaten Britain's Indian interests.²⁵

Redcliffe replied evasively to Lesseps's overture, but Lesseps correctly suspected that Redcliffe opposed the project and would employ his immense influence at Constantinople in future to prevent the Sultan from granting a firman.

During the war Redcliffe's position vis à vis the canal was a delicate one. British officialdom did not like the project, but, at the same time, the Foreign Office did not

²⁴ Letter from Lesseps to Redcliffe, dated February 28, 1855, cited in Lesseps, The Isthmus of Suez Question (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1855), p. 12.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 19. Redcliffe needed no one to remind him about Central Asia and the implied Russian threat to India.

want to attack Lesseps or his project for fear of offending their French ally. Redcliffe, in the cockpit at Constantinople, adeptly worked around the sensitive issue but even Redcliffe had limits. In March he requested instructions and a clarification of policy regarding the canal. The Foreign Office replied that "Her Majesty's Government were of the opinion that it would not be expedient to make any official protest..." to the project at that time.²⁶ The war came first, but once it was over, and the French alliance's value decreased, Her Majesty's Government made its position toward the canal unmistakably clear.

In those early days as Lesseps frantically sought a hearing, his letters revealed optimism, enthusiasm, and imagination. To an influential Parisian banker he wrote that his project would yield immense social and political benefits because it would serve a safety-valve function for European tensions. Unemployed workers, rather than revolting as they had done in 1848, would spend their energies profitably employed in the isthmus.²⁷ To his brother, a high ranking official in the French department of finance, he wrote that the Pasha was excited about the canal and

²⁶FO 78/1489, Suez Canal, vol. 5, confidential letter to Redcliffe, dated March 9, 1855, cited in Charles W. Hallberg, The Suez Canal, Its History and Diplomatic Importance, Studies in History, Economics and Public Law (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), p. 127.

²⁷Lesseps, The Suez Canal: Letters and Documents..., p. 105. Lesseps had good reason to remember 1848: the convulsions of that year cost him his diplomatic career.

what it would do for his country. Moreover, Lesseps wrote, the Pasha had promised to secure the firman from the Porte by threatening to withhold Egyptian soldiers from the war.²⁸ To a female Parisian acquaintance, Lesseps wrote assuredly that Napoleon III eventually would support him. Indeed Napoleon III in 1846, while a prisoner in Ham, had been interested in leading an expedition to cut the Panamanian isthmus, and only the political turbulence of 1848 diverted him. The Emperor, Lesseps wrote, was fascinated with the canal concept.²⁹

Lesseps did not restrict his early promotional activities to letter writing. In the spring of 1855 he made his first trip to London where he thought he established important contacts. He dined with Matthew Arnold and on two separate occasions he was the house guest of James Wilson, member of parliament and editor of The Economist. Wilson's daughter vividly remembered Lesseps's entertaining family and friends with fascinating stories of Egypt. Unfortunately, Lesseps more favorably impressed the daughter than he did the father.³⁰ Wilson could have been an influential ally, but when he faced

²⁸Ibid., p. 113. Said despatched 42,000 soldiers, or two-thirds of his army, and his entire fleet to the Crimea where they performed well. Ibid., p. 148. In action, Egyptian casualties were proportionally higher than Turkish casualties. See The Times, September 24, 1855, p. 6.

²⁹Lesseps, The Suez Canal: Letters and Documents..., p. 24.

³⁰Emilie I. Barrington, The Servant of All: Pages from the Family, Social and Political Life of my Father James Wilson, Twenty Years of Mid-Victorian Life (2 vols.; London: Longmans, Green & Co. Ltd., 1927), I, 275.

the opportunity to support Lesseps with his vote, he abstained. He did not support Lesseps politically and his journal paid the project only superficial and negative attention. As late as 1863 The Economist questioned the canal's economic feasibility. Lesseps was a charming dinner guest, but his ability to entertain companions with exotic stories did not ensure him of their support.

Writing from London to a personal friend, Lesseps confided alarm and surprise at the opposition he had uncovered. He attributed this opposition to "a mistaken appreciation of the affair," and singled out Robert Stephenson as the chief culprit:

I must not fail to tell you that the reports and speeches of Mr. Robert Stephenson, a member of the company formed for studying the question in 1847 [sic.] ...in no small degree [created] erroneous impressions in the public mind, and [made] some people believe that the 31 piercing of the isthmus is an impossibility....

Stephenson's biographers took less notice than Lesseps did of their subject's intransigence toward the canal even though, or because, it formed an important if ignoble aspect of his life. His active canal opposition was crucially important because it lent credibility and technical weight to the notion that the canal was an engineering impossibility. Time and again in the future we will see the results which Stephenson's professional opinions produced on potential

³¹Letter from Lesseps to Baron de Bruck, Minister of Finance at Vienna, dated June 28, 1855, cited in Lesseps, Recollection of Forty Years, II, p. 274-275.

canal supporters. With Stephenson's credentials in mind, what Briton was likely to invest in such an impractical proposition? None did.

The puzzling issue is why he opposed the project so strenuously. Up to now, efforts to answer this question have concentrated on one feature of his behavior. Biographers heretofore have concluded that he earnestly considered the technical problems insoluble, the project doomed, and investors certain to lose their money. One who accepts this premise can then point to his role in the upcoming Roebuck debate. In that instance Stephenson publicly declared it his duty to protect potential British investors from such an ill-advised scheme. Tightfisted and shrewd as a manager of his own fortune, he never invested in speculations, wrote one who knew him well.³² This premise certainly contains considerable truth; moreover, until now it has been all we have had to work with.³³

³² Samuel Smiles, Lives of the Engineers With an Account of their Principle Works, Vol. III: George and Robert Stephenson (London: John Murray, 1868), p. 533.

³³ The closest examination of Stephenson's private papers unfortunately tells us little more. He did not do historians the courtesy of recording exactly why he opposed the project and whatever can be added to the traditional explanation must be done cautiously through inference. My sincere thanks for invaluable help in tracking down and examining Stephenson's scattered papers go to Mrs. Patricia Gill, County Archivist, West Sussex; Miss Coates, Borough Librarian and Curator, Darlington; and Miss Janet Smith, Liverpool Record Office.

Perhaps now, thanks in part to publication of G. R. Hawke's admirable book on railways, another explanation for Stephenson's implacable canal opposition can be offered.³⁴ Robert Stephenson, unlike many of his engineering colleagues, was not an unqualified believer in science. He spent his entire life around railroad yards and his famous father, George Stephenson, was affectionately known as "father of the British railroads." To the son, railroad development was the source from which sprang all family wealth and prestige and he did not as a matter of course look favorably on other engineering projects. Inland canals, for example, essentially opposed nature. They might freeze in winter or go dry in summer. Railroads, on the other hand, were not subject to the whims of nature, because "whatever barriers Nature opposed, Science has entirely surmounted."³⁵ It might be well to keep this quotation in mind. Stephenson had supreme confidence in science but only when it was applied to railroads. Or to cite one more example of his selective confidence in science, one month before his

³⁴G. R. Hawke, Railways and Economic Growth in England and Wales 1840-1870 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970). This is the most detailed work on the topic. The author has meticulously compiled comprehensive investment charts which break down railroad investment into capital works, purchase of rolling stock, repair, and renewal. The following statistical data were taken from p. 200.

³⁵Robert Stephenson, Address on His Election as President of the Institution of Civil Engineers, Session 1855-1856 (London: William Clowis and Sons, 1856), p. 32.

death in 1859 he told Milner-Gibson that given the "present knowledge on the subject it would be unjustifiable to lay a cable across the ocean in deep water."³⁶ Thus his violent attacks on the Suez Canal for technical reasons are not out of character. He sincerely believed the project impossible.

Yet another reason existed for his longstanding animosity towards the canal. It was a reason that cut much deeper because it was grounded in a threat to his beloved railroads in general and specifically to his last railroad enterprise, Egypt. In a speech before the prestigious Institution of Civil Engineers in 1856, Stephenson looked hard at the railroad industry and came to some sombre conclusions. Since the period of major expansion during the 1840's, men were alarmed to discover railroad equipment less durable than first projected. Maintenance costs for repair and renewal had reached shocking proportions. Citing one example, Stephenson noted that existing railway lines, "what with decay from wet and other causes" consumed more than two million wooden sleepers annually and their replacement required 300,000 trees.³⁷ Higher maintenance expenses did not threaten to eliminate railroads, of course, but without question the situation would concern someone so closely associated with railroad development for his entire life. A railroad man naturally would prefer to channel investment

³⁶British Museum, Gladstone MSS., p. 184. Letter from Milner-Gibson to Gladstone, dated September 14, 1859.

³⁷Stephenson, Address on His Election..., p. 8.

capital into railroad research, development, and maintenance rather than have it look for other outlets. In this respect, as Hawke's new research reveals, Stephenson's concern for the well being of the railroad industry was entirely justified. Maintenance costs were sharply rising while annual investment remained constant at an all-time low of £8,500,000. In fact, maintenance expenses between 1856 and 1859 absorbed forty per cent of the total financial input. It peaked at forty-one per cent in 1860 but thereafter declined as the industry experienced another expansion. This figure becomes more striking when compared to earlier years of railroad development. During the 1840's and early 1850's, with equipment still new, maintenance costs rarely exceeded six per cent of total annual railroad investment.³⁸ An increase from six per cent to forty per cent justified a sombre look at the railroad industry.

One more factor also raises questions about Stephenson's objections on technical grounds. Since 1846 he maintained that the canal would degenerate into a useless "stinking ditch." Yet, as champion of the canal opposition, in the last year of his life he changed his grounds for opposition. During a debate at the Institution of Civil Engineers on April 11, 1859, he adopted a new argument, one which we shall consider in a future chapter, which said that Pelusium

³⁸Hawke, Railways and Economic Growth..., p. 200.

would become a mud trap because of its proximity to the Nile River. Stephenson claimed that no large harbor in the world existed on the lee side of a major river and to think that mankind could arrest the deposits of Nile silt would be "the most extraordinary thing in the world."³⁹ There was no mention of his previous calculations. The abandonment of his earlier position is disturbing, and one is tempted to interpellate his lack of consistency. Did he alter his argument for the sake of novelty? Had he changed his mind about the solidness of his previous objection? Or was he simply utilizing new material? These are provocative but answerless speculations. He was dead within six months, and, barring the discovery of more Stephenson papers we are unlikely to ever know more.

Stephenson's opposition to the canal undoubtedly played an important role in molding British opinion.⁴⁰ His last appearance before the Institution of Civil Engineers was devoted to surveying railroad development and the problems that had been overcome. Ironically, he dealt at length with the early opposition to railroads and delighted in repeating alarmist arguments that passengers on trains would be dashed to pieces, scalded by bursting boilers, or, at least,

³⁹Smiles, Lives of the Engineers..., III, 519.

⁴⁰The press consistently recognized Stephenson as Britain's greatest living engineer. See, for instance, Manchester Guardian, June 3, 1858.

made sick by the lurching motion.⁴¹ Mercifully, perhaps, he would not live to see his own once respected arguments against the canal fall into the same category as these he laughed at. In the fall of 1859, while yachting in the North Sea, he contracted a fatal illness and died on October 12, 1859. His countrymen considered his death a national loss, and they entombed him in Westminster Abbey as a gesture of esteem.

Between 1854 and 1859 Stephenson's opposition frustrated Lesseps's bid to attract an important following. In press, parliament, and private conversation, Stephenson spoke negatively about the canal. At one point, Lesseps, frustrated beyond endurance, took personal offense at a malicious comment of Stephenson's about the canal, and challenged him to a duel. Apparently treating this absurd gesture lightly, Stephenson reaffirmed his professional hostility to the project but apologetically disavowed any personal insult to the promoter. The duel did not take place.⁴²

While confiding to a friend serious alarm at what seemed to be happening in England, Lesseps put up a bold front in a letter to the French Emperor. He reported that he was making tremendous progress in his solicitations for support. Influential society people, some (unnamed) newspaper men,

⁴¹Stephenson, Address on His Election...., p. 27.

⁴²See John Marlowe, The Making of the Suez Canal (London: Cresset Press, 1924), p. 127, note 28, for more details of this ludicrous event.

and members of parliament had offered "promises of support." As in the case of James Wilson, however, Lesseps misread courtesy for something else. For example, he singled out Edward Ellice and Sir Richard Gardner as members of parliament who had promised to help him; yet, when the time came, Ellice and Gardner voted against the Suez Canal.⁴³ Assessing for Napoleon III his first sortie to London, Lesseps audaciously concluded that

The favour with which the question was being received by public opinion...cannot fail to bring over those members of the English Cabinet whose opposition might, a short time ago, have justified the idea of an energetic resistance on their part, which there seems no longer any reason to apprehend.⁴⁴

Lesseps conveniently neglected to tell the French Emperor about his private audiences with Prime Minister Palmerston and Lord Clarendon, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. The cordial but bluntly candid Palmerston thought the canal would permit Mediterranean countries to cut into England's maritime supremacy with the East. He also objected for political reasons. While disclaiming any suspicion of Napoleon III's political motives--France and England after all still were allies--Palmerston nevertheless professed fear that an isthmian canal would endanger future Anglo-Franco relations. Emphasizing his good feelings for

⁴³Letter from Lesseps to His Majesty the Emperor, dated July 4, 1855, cited in Lesseps, Recollection of Forty Years, II, 279-281.

⁴⁴Ibid.

Napoleon III, Palmerston said:

Of course we have every confidence in the loyalty and sincerity of the Emperor but who can answer for those who will come after him.⁴⁵

Clarendon, Lesseps judged, though obviously not enthusiastic, at least had "no preconceived hostility to the project like Lord Palmerston."⁴⁶

Lesseps's first London trip completed, he departed England for Paris to lay the groundwork for additional engineering preparations. English attention remained riveted on the Crimean War, the first war systematically covered by newspapermen. But if one read the press closely one noticed that The Times, carefully avoiding insults to the French ally, drew the attention of its readers to the relationship between the project and the war. One leader-writer congratulated Said Pasha for his generous contribution to the war effort, but, in the next line, warned him against becoming diverted during the present crisis. This writer candidly reminded Said Pasha that he held his position only at the pleasure of the Porte and the Porte's allies.⁴⁷

⁴⁵Fitzgerald, The Great Canal at Suez..., I, 53. Palmerston might have added that the death of the Pasha also would complicate matters. As we will see, the death of Said Pasha in 1863 provided Her Majesty's Government with what it hoped might be an opportunity to kill the project.

⁴⁶Lesseps, Recollections of Forty Years, II, 275.

⁴⁷The Egyptian Viceroyalty, or Pashalik, was not strictly hereditary although in practice it happened that way. Since the settlement with Ali Pasha in 1840 there was a recognized Egyptian ruling family, but a new Pasha still had to be confirmed by his overlord at Constantinople.

Egypt's proper course, this writer thought, lay in diligent obedience to the Porte and abstinence from intrigues.⁴⁸

Over the months, English attention stayed focused on the Crimea, but for people interested in Egypt, The Times's correspondent kept a close watch on the canal project. Reporting a rumor, and one which would surface often in the future, The Times contentedly announced that the Pasha had undergone a change of heart and had cancelled his contract with Lesseps. And with the canal project dead, all Egyptian attention turned solely to the railway, nearing completion, and no one spoke of the isthmus.⁴⁹ Or, somewhat later, a more scathing report arrived from Alexandria.⁵⁰ The correspondent wrote that discussions with Lesseps were futile because Lesseps constantly modified estimates of cost, amount of probable traffic, and number of workmen required. Moreover, Lesseps had calculated construction expense on the assumption that excavation would be only in very light sand; his men had taken no borings. This correspondent cautioned his readers not to be fooled in the future by Lesseps's shrewd promotional activities. People interested in the project as an investment possibility would need to keep a sharp eye to prevent themselves from being swindled. And

⁴⁸The Times, September 24, 1855, p. 6.

⁴⁹The Times, February 14, 1855, p. 7.

⁵⁰As we shall see, the correspondent might have had personal reasons to denigrate the canal. Oddly enough, until 1863, when The Times's correspondent first visited the canal, all his reports were based on hearsay.

finally, this reporter asked, in the unlikely event that the project could be completed, how much time would it save a ship sailing to India? He thought the time saved would be very little, certainly not enough to justify tolls. Sailing ships, he wrote, routinely made the England to Bombay or Calcutta voyage in one hundred and fifteen days. Using the canal, a ship would reach Bombay in one hundred and ten days, and the voyage to Calcutta via the canal would require much longer.⁵¹

Interest in Egypt increased as interest in the Crimea dwindled, and one important gentleman travelled to Egypt to examine the project for himself. Nassau Senior, a guest of Lesseps's, was impressed by several things that he saw in Egypt.⁵² He noted particularly that all Englishmen in Egypt feared the canal for commercial and political reasons. He also noted that friends of the canal were horrified at the

⁵¹The Times, October 25, 1855, p. 6. British merchants in Bombay were interested in the Suez Canal while those in Calcutta were less interested. Calcutta men were afraid the canal would funnel trade into Bombay. For indications of British overseas reaction to the canal, see Hoskins, British Routes to India, p. 315 and Marlowe, The Making of the Suez Canal, pp. 34-36.

How much time the canal would or would not save continued to be debatable for several years. In 1870 in a public lecture, Lesseps recounted how an English steam vessel carrying 4,000 tons of cotton left Bombay, passed the canal, and unloaded the cargo at Liverpool. The cargo was sent to Manchester mills and returned to the ship as cloth in nine days, and the ship returned to India--all in the incredible space of seventy days! See Lesseps, History of the Suez Canal, p. 24.

⁵²Lesseps repaid the visit in June and July, 1857. See L. Leon Levy, Nassau W. Senior 1790-1864 (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1970, p. 177.

prospect of offending The Times which had an almost exclusive power to make their project appear ridiculous to England.

The Times's Egyptian correspondent, unknown to his employers in London, traditionally had received a pension of £80 per year from the Egyptian government. Said Pasha rashly revoked this practice, and friends of the canal helplessly felt that their project was receiving prejudicial treatment.⁵³

Consulting with Britain's representative at Alexandria, Mr. Bruce, Senior noticed the same pronounced hostility when their conversation turned to activity in the isthmus. A confessed opponent of the canal, Bruce nevertheless said that an official British anti-canal policy would be inappropriate. He thought diplomatic attempts to frustrate the project would be impractical, and her Majesty's Government would succeed only in tying itself into a knot and forfeiting maneuverability. Bruce guessed exactly right.⁵⁴

Discussing the canal at length with its promoter, Senior

⁵³Nassau Senior, Conversations and Journals in Egypt and Malta, ed. by M.C.M. Simpson (2 vols.; London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, 1882), I, 144. The following year Senior's semi-private journal was circulated in London and when news of the correspondent's receiving a pension reached offices of The Times, he was promptly dismissed. See Senior, II, 311 and The History of The Times: The Tradition Established 1841-1884 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1939), II, 274.

⁵⁴Levy, Nassau Senior..., p. 177. K. Bell, "British Policy Towards the Construction of the Suez Canal, 1859-1865," Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 5th ser., Vol. XV (1965), 126-127 is less charitable in his estimation of what happened at the Foreign Office. During the rearguard (see below, chapter four) phase of the canal, Bell thought "muddleheadedness" best described Britain's policy.

recognized Lesseps's tremendous imaginative powers as the Frenchman excitedly described his project. Disregarding the absence of a firman, Lesseps tried to convince Senior that the Sultan actually favored the project and only awaited termination of the war to grant his support openly. The canal, Lesseps said, would enable the Sultan to protect the pilgrimage road to Mecca, and it would ameliorate Egypt, his most valuable and loyal province.⁵⁵ Lesseps attributed the Sultan's current hesitancy to politics and to Redcliffe's influence, problems he hoped would sort themselves out.

While Lesseps talked camels and canals with Nassau Senior, the British press increased its interest in the project. An article in the Edinburgh Review pronounced the canal commercially impractical but not, as some people were starting to think, a threat to British security. The author, a Mr. Fergusson, dismissed the notion that the canal would threaten the integrity of the Ottoman Empire and hence weaken the Turkish bulwark in Central Asia. Anything, he said, which would strengthen any part of the decrepit Ottoman Empire would add stability to the Mediterranean area and in the long run secure Britain's Indian interests.⁵⁶ Fergusson regarded as nonsensical the fear that a canal built by a Frenchman would provide France the excuse for occupying

⁵⁵ Journal entry dated November 26, 1855, cited in Senior, Conversations and Journals..., p. 100.

⁵⁶ [James Fergusson], "The Suez Canal," Edinburgh Review, Vol. 103 (January 1856), 265. This argument would be spelled out in more detail later.

Egypt. He wrote that France, if unopposed by England, could occupy Egypt at anytime, and the mere existence of an isthmian waterway would not make one whit of difference.⁵⁷ The argument that a canal would enable France to assume a larger share of the world's mercantile trade at England's expense he considered equally fallacious. Fergusson thought if France earnestly wanted to expand commercially she need only reduce her tariffs, and England would give her all the business she wanted. Fergusson also disagreed with people who somehow saw the canal as a military threat: he thought it too fragile and too easily blocked to serve any useful military purpose.⁵⁸

Friends of the canal, so far, would have enjoyed what Fergusson wrote, because he summarily dispensed with some objections to their project. In the pages that followed, he became considerably less charitable as he critically analyzed the canal idea. His objections centered on the impression that the canal, technical and financial considerations aside (and he admitted doubts here), was without utility. Recalling the canal's ancient heritage, Fergusson asked why, if the idea were such a good one, previous canals always fell into disuse. Answering his own question, he said the reason for impermanent canals through the isthmus of Suez was that a significant amount of shipping, enough to make such a venture profitable, refused to use the Red Sea, a treacherous sea

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 264.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 265.

whipped by swirling winds, and possessing dangerous coral reefs which dropped off so sharply that "a vessel's stern post may be grinding against the rocks under the lee, whilst she has 100 or 200 fathoms of water under her bow."⁵⁹ Producing statistics to illustrate this point, he wrote that Lloyds of London insured coals from Newcastle to Aden, a voyage of 12,000 miles via the Cape, for about six per cent, but Lloyds added an additional four per cent for the next 1,400 miles if the same coals went beyond Aden, through the Red Sea, to Suez. This increase became even more noteworthy when one realized that merchants who transported coals always paid a higher rate in the initial stages of the voyage because of a higher risk of ignition.⁶⁰ Adding additional support to this theory, Fergusson said an Indiaman would not venture into the Red Sea for less "than double of what it would charge on the same cargo to Aden."⁶¹

Reluctance to sail the Red Sea was an established fact, and Fergusson doubted whether a canal at one end of it would make a difference. He pointed out that Britain, with her Australian colony and her Indian interests, was the only European country with a powerful stimulus for additional

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 251.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 253.

⁶¹Ibid., pp. 253-254. Another reason for reluctance to go into the Red Sea was the absence of return cargo. Fergusson's somewhat crippled logic failed to recognize that merchants avoided the Red Sea because it was a box. A canal at one end would open that box to the Mediterranean and beyond.

Eastern contact. Sailing ships going to Australia would continue to follow the Cape route because they could drop below Africa and pick up trade winds. Currently, he wrote, nine-tenths of the world's cargo was carried by sail, and sail, he estimated, would continue to carry the bulk of that cargo "for a long time."⁶²

Another prominent question for Fergusson was whether the canal could save money for merchants. He thought not. In the first place, freight charges normally amounted to no more than ten per cent of a cargo's value, and canal tolls quickly would swallow that.⁶³ Would the time saved by a shorter route be important? Again he thought not. Improved postal arrangements enabled merchants to consider goods in shipment as goods in stock, and they did not care whether the cargo was ashore, in a warehouse, or in transit. Indeed, he wrote, many merchants intentionally limited their stocks. If the market were brisk, a cargo in transit readily sold. If the market were slack, it was better to have the cargo at sea than to have it ashore where the merchant would incur warehouse and insurance expenses.⁶⁴

Fergusson reminded his readers that Britons had much experience with canals and, in fact, they had constructed the Caledonian Canal in Scotland, the largest ship canal then in

⁶²Ibid., p. 254, pp. 257-258.

⁶³Ibid., p. 259.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 260.

existence. They had built that one in the expectation that it would attract heavy Baltic traffic. Unfortunately, it had been a disappointment; the only vessels using it were occasional fishing smacks and small boats to "accommodate tourists."⁶⁵ Fergusson's lengthy article in the Edinburgh Review asked some penetrating questions. It was moderate and clearly argued, and after reading this article, many people, if not most, must have questioned the canal's utility.

While Fergusson was poignantly skeptical, Mr. Weiss was intemperately critical in Hunt's Merchant's Magazine and Commercial Review. To him, the canal represented an attempt by Napoleon III, through his agent Lesseps, to encroach in Egypt. France, Weiss wrote, was active in North Africa and probably planned to threaten Gibraltar in the future.⁶⁶ And even if the canal were not some sort of French political intrigue, it was at best a tragically unwise commercial proposition. As far as Weiss could see, the canal idea, as it unfolded before the British public, did not contain one shred of promise. Projected construction costs had reckoned on the basis of not hitting stone, winds and tricky tides rendered the Red Sea an undesirable place to sail, and the project was supervised by a dilettante and a handful of Egyptian in-

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 242.

⁶⁶E. Weiss, "France and the Suez Canal," Hunt's Merchant's Magazine and Commercial Review, Vol. 35 (July, 1856), 39-40.

competents.⁶⁷ From a distance of one hundred years one can hear Weiss snigger at the whole idea.

As the project attracted some journal attention and spasmodic notices in the press, Lesseps became busier than ever. At one time he visited Pelusium, the project's northern terminus, to supervise harbor studies.⁶⁸ This activity, incidentally, gained attention not only from the press but from the British Admiralty. When Lesseps reported that Pelusium was a possible harbor, the Admiralty quietly dispatched the corvette Tartarus to take its own soundings--soundings which confirmed Lesseps's claim.⁶⁹ Although canal preparations dominated his schedule, Lesseps found time to plead successfully the case for a British cable between Alexandria and Suez. His intention in this matter was to neutralize British suspicion of him.⁷⁰ And if Lesseps were not plumbing the Mediterranean for a port, or if he were not negotiating with the Pasha's secretaries for an English telegraph company, he was in London for the second time, being feted by some important people of that city. Victoria and Albert, the Geographical Society of London, and at least one member of

⁶⁷Ibid., pp. 42-46.

⁶⁸The Times, January 4, 1856, p. 10.

⁶⁹Hoskins, British Routes to India, p. 346.

⁷⁰Letter from Lesseps to his brother, Comte De Lesseps in Paris, dated February 10, 1856, cited in Lesseps, The Suez Canal..., p. 239.

parliament, Henry Fitzroy, entertained the Frenchman. Reflecting on his second London trip, he confidently wrote a friend in Alexandria that "my campaign in England will bear fruit."⁷¹ Again, however, things were not as they seemed to Lesseps; actually, the second tour resembled the first. It produced dinners and toasts, but it did not produce significant political support: when the time came, the Honourable Henry Fitzroy, like hosts on the previous trip, voted against the canal.

Promotional activity also took the form of pamphlets, and Lesseps commissioned Charles Lamb Kenney's The Gates of the East: Ten Chapters on the Isthmus of Suez Canal as a rebuttal to Fergusson and Stephenson. Projecting the canal as the keystone to future Egyptian prosperity, and consequently to that of the Ottoman Empire, Kenney wrote that both Porte and Pasha were devoted to the project, and that the only opposition came from the British Foreign Office. The Porte had a logical interest in the canal, Kenney surmised. Constantinople realized that an economically strong vassal state was more useful than one which made financial demands on the imperial treasury.⁷²

Hoping to rouse men who agreed with Fergusson that future trade with the East would continue to use the Cape route, Kenney announced that the British government was

⁷¹Letter from Lesseps in Paris to M. Ruyssenaers in Alexandria, dated May 6, 1856, cited in Lesseps, Recollections of Forty Years, II, 297-299.

⁷²Kenney, Gates of the East..., p. 48.

quietly but steadily showing an interest in the shorter route. The Egyptian telegraph, for example, had been encouraged by official Britain. Or, and more relevant to the canal case, Kenney wrote that the new Australian Steam Navigation Company which operated to Suez was being subsidized by the government to the amount of £185,000 per year. The canal, he deduced, would facilitate better communication and transportation with India and Australia, and it would ensure that the British taxpayer received more efficiency for his money.⁷³ Continuing his appeal specifically to the taxpayer, Kenney cautioned him against a rival scheme soon to appear publicly, the Euphrates Railway project, which theoretically would connect London with India via the Euphrates region by a vastly complex system of railroads, deep water sailing, and river barge.⁷⁴ This project, he wrote, was cumbersome, impractical, and would cost at least £12,000,000, part of which its supporters were planning to get from Her Majesty's Government.⁷⁵

⁷³Ibid., p. 38. Kenney could have added that in February, 1857, the East India Company occupied the island of Perim, a tiny but strategically located rock at the mouth of the Red Sea in the Straits of Babel Mandeb. Perim effectively commanded the southern entrance to the Red Sea. See Farnie, East and West of Suez, p. 42 and the Newcastle Chronicle, May 29, 1857, p. 2.

Curiously, The Times went out of its way to emphasize that Perim was inadequate as a military installation. Downplaying the importance of Perim shifted the area of contention to the Suez isthmus. See The Times, April 7, 1858, p. 8 and (Edinburgh) Daily Express, June 3, 1858, p. 3.

⁷⁴ See below, pp. 88-90.

⁷⁵ Kenney, Gates to the East..., p. 64.

Directly confronting potential investors, Kenney presented a detailed look at the project's financial prospectus. Canal investors would profit not only from the income generated by tolls, he wrote, but they would also share profits from the canal's other resources. For example, the canal company owned 60,000 acres of prime land along the track of a sweet water canal being dug from the Nile eastward to the ship canal. This sweet water canal would provide water for workers as well as for irrigation, and a company profit of £4 per acre in agricultural produce from their right-of-way was a conservative estimate. Canal plans called for the construction of an inland harbor and repair facilities in Lake Timsah, and the company's management of this operation would return another £30,000 per year. Assuming then, for the sake of argument, that in the beginning the canal attracted only a moderate amount of traffic, it still would generate enough income to pay interest on the capital investment.⁷⁶ In other words, the Suez Canal offered an attractive financial opportunity, according to Kenney.

Focusing on those critics (like Fergusson) who thought the Red Sea unlikely to ever attract a significant amount of traffic, Kenney reminded his readers that until recently the same things were said about the Black Sea. The Crimean War forced tremendous amounts of new traffic into the Black Sea, and as seamen became familiar with the Black Sea all mis-

⁷⁶Ibid., pp. 38-40.

conceptions disappeared. Citing an even more ancient example, Kenney informed his readers that St. Paul and St. Jerome had testified to the unalterable naval dangers of the Mediterranean. Kenney was convinced that Red Sea navigational dangers had been stretched out of proportion by native sailors who overloaded their primitive crafts, ignored charts, and for safety relied upon magic charms.⁷⁷

Surveying the project in its entirety, Kenney wrote that Britain was bound to be the chief beneficiary of a shorter route to the East. She was the world's leading shipper and custodian of empire. From a strategical point of view, a shorter trip to India would facilitate a reduction in the military budget because she would need fewer troops. Moreover, once troops arrived in India via the canal they would be fresher, and less time would be wasted in convalescence than when they took the longer Cape route.⁷⁸

Kenney challenged those who doubted that the canal would save time. He noticed that opponents of the canal often calculated time by comparing the swiftest clipper ships sailing around the Cape to leaky colliers plying from Newcastle to Mediterranean ports. Using these standards of comparison he "proved" that the quickest way to Hull from London was via Hamburg. He said the London to Hamburg to Hull voyage, albeit roundabout, required ten days. On the

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 60.

⁷⁸Ibid., pp. 50-56. The Indian Mutiny soon would cause a re-examination of the canal and its role in India's defense requirements.

other hand, the direct route, by inferior vessel took longer:

...the Jack Braq, collier, loaded to the water's edge, and manned by a drunken mate, a man, and a boy, may possibly be three weeks or a month on her voyage from London to Hull.⁷⁹

Victorian England had received an old idea served them afresh by Lesseps. Initial response was difficult to detect because British attention through most of this three-year period, between 1854 and 1857, focused on the Crimea. Press opinion on the canal had been ambivalent, but Lesseps himself admitted that he encountered a surprising amount of negativism. The Times implied the project's eventual success problematical, but, as yet, this most powerful organ of public opinion had not adopted a firm position. The Edinburgh Review and Hunt's Merchant's Magazine... had carried articles which did not win friends for the canal, and Lesseps's personal overtures had floundered, but he could not know that yet. In March, 1857, after a third trip to London, he confidently wrote the Pasha that his propaganda campaign was repairing the damage done by Stephenson, Fergusson, and others. He wrote: "I found that the Suez Canal question had, in the course of the last few months, made extraordinary progress." He also said that London bankers and merchants had presented him letters of introduction to their colleagues in the provinces.⁸⁰ With these letters in

⁷⁹Ibid., pp. 63-64.

⁸⁰Letter from Lesseps to His Highness the Viceroy, dated March 31, 1857, cited in Lesseps, Recollections of Forty Years,

hand, Lesseps prepared to present his scheme to the port cities of the realm. Lesseps intended to confront the British commercial community in its various cities. Lesseps's fourth, and most important, promotional visit to England and the provincial sentiment his visit attracted are the subjects of the next chapter.

II, 47. A question to ponder is whether Lesseps genuinely misread the situation--which he certainly did--or whether he intentionally tried to mislead the Viceroy into thinking he was being successful.

CHAPTER II

Thus far Lesseps had confined his promotional activities to London. In the spring of 1857, however, he took his canal idea to provincial Britain. Lesseps had three objectives for extending his promotional activities to the provinces. First, he hoped to attract enough local political support to force a policy reversal from the Government.¹ Second, driving a long canal through the Egyptian desert was going to be very, very expensive. Lesseps hoped to sell his idea to Britain's investment community so that, when the time came, people with money would open their purses and finance his venture. Third, Lesseps went to the provinces soliciting future canal traffic. British merchants had the lion's share of international trade and, hence, appeared to Lesseps as crucially important customers. Without British traffic, the Suez Canal would fail. His itinerary included every significant British port, places

¹There is ample proof that Lesseps was politically motivated. See Chapter Two, pp. 62, 71, 76, 80-81, 85. During the course of his provincial tour, Lesseps encouraged men to pressure their members of parliament and the Board of Trade. Note also that Lesseps dedicated his published report of his promotional tour to the House of Commons.

where he was likely to encounter those potential customers.²

Lesseps had a clearly defined method of operation. Before arriving in a particular city, he contacted business associations, such as the Society of Merchant Venturers in Bristol,³ or the Chamber of Commerce, and arranged a public meeting. In addition, prior to his arrival in a particular city, he announced in that city's press that at a specific time and place he would present his scheme and answer all questions pertaining to it. Merchants, bankers, manufacturers, and sea captains, men who should have been interested in hearing Lesseps, were informed of his impending arrival, and encouraged to attend his public meeting. Many did.

Lesseps's sortie into the provinces warrants close attention as the most vigorous promotional effort since the Anti-Corn Law agitation. The proposed Suez Canal was not wholly unfamiliar to provincial Britain before 1857, but Lesseps's personal presentation of the concept, in every corner of the land, undeniably stimulated canal controversy. He squarely confronted the mercantile community with his idea. The mercantile community then responded with its own ideas on the question and the discussions which transpired revealed a latitude of interesting popular opinion toward the canal;

²Lesseps visited such far away ports as Aberdeen, Belfast, and Cork, but he did not visit Sheffield or Leeds, inland cities.

³Bristol's Merchant Society of Venturers had sponsored Cabot in the sixteenth century. They proudly claimed to be in the forefront of commercial progress.

thus, accompanying Lesseps on his tour, we will see that Britons received the canal concept with less than wild acclaim.⁴ But saying that anticipates the results of Lesseps's promotional tour, an event to which we now turn.

Slightly infatuated perhaps with his London success, Lesseps embarked upon the prodigious task of convincing provincial England that an Egyptian canal was a good idea. William E. Gladstone, Edward Ellice, and friends of the canal feted Lesseps at Goldsmith's Hall in London prior to his departure for Liverpool, his first scheduled stop. They praised the canal concept, presented him with letters of introduction to prominent people, and fortified him with their best wishes. Oddly enough, the Goldsmith Hall send-off reflected a curious irony and demonstrated a situation which repeated itself too often for Lesseps's comfort. Edward Ellice, co-host of the farewell party, and member from St. Andrew's, voted against the Suez Canal when that issue came to parliament.

Lesseps, accompanied by Charles Kenney, his chief pam-

⁴This study seeks the commercial community's response to Lesseps's proposition so newspapers which concentrated upon commercial matters were singled out. Charles Mitchell's, The Newspaper Press Directory and Advertiser's Guide (revised annually; London: Charles Mitchell, 1856-1859), is the fullest guide to such sources. Mitchell catalogued every newspaper's circulation, political affiliation, and patronization.

Lesseps's rather eccentric appeal to the commercial community, and the chance that he might have been successful, prompted the Admiralty to publish its own anti-canal treatise. See below, pp. 95-97.

phleteer, and Daniel Lange, his translator, arrived in Liverpool in April.⁵ The president of the Underwriters' Association introduced his visitors and turned the first provincial meeting over to Lange who opened the propaganda campaign, emphasizing first the canal's international characteristics. He pointed out, for instance, that Lesseps was actively recruiting engineers from all over Europe. Hoping to put his audience at ease, he stressed that the canal was not a French enterprise just because its promoter was a Frenchman and he said an international company would manage the completed canal for international benefits.⁶

Focusing on some of the proposed canal's engineering aspects, Lange challenged three of the most common misconceptions. Some critics claimed that the proposed Mediterranean port at Pelusium was impractical because no building materials existed nearby. In reply, Lange announced that Cyprus and Rhodes possessed marvelous stone quarries. Other

⁵Kenney wrote The Gates of the East... (London: Ward, 1857), see above, pp. 39-41.

⁶See Ferdinand De Lesseps, Inquiry into the Opinions of the Commercial Classes of Great Britain on the Suez Ship Canal (London: John Weale, 1857), p. 10. Lesseps later compiled accounts of his visits from local press sources and published them in this book, which henceforth will be cited as Lesseps, Inquiry.... Future references to this source will include the original newspaper citation, e.g. Lesseps selected the Liverpool Daily Post's April 30, 1857, version of his meeting with that city's commercial community.

critics simply were overwhelmed with the project's immensity. Lange answered that, yes, an unprecedented amount of earth would be removed, but the digging would be easy. Still other critics thought sand would fill in the canal, to which Lange said that in the Suez area

there was no moving sand at all. On the contrary, on one side of the canal the shrubs were so thick that camels with difficulty pass through them, and on the other side was gravel. Only one spot was shifting, and it would be necessary to lay it with seed plots, as in Holland.⁷

Concluding his formal presentation on a rather challenging note, Lange said they had visited Liverpool not to raise money but to ascertain the climate of opinion towards the project. Indeed, continental money markets had assured them of ample investment, but, in keeping with the project's international aspects, and to insure everyone an opportunity of participating, developers would reserve a block of shares for each country. British investors would have the option of buying £1,500,000 worth of canal shares, but in the event that British investors were uninterested, their shares would be redistributed among other countries, and the project would be funded easily enough.⁸

Questions followed as one gentleman asked how much traf-

⁷Ibid., p. 11. Blowing sand at times troubled navigation and as late as March, 1956, vessels in transit were forced to stop during sand storms. See Schonfield, The Suez Canal in Peace and War, p. 167.

⁸Lesseps, Inquiry..., p. 11.

fic they expected. The canal would operate profitably, Lange said, if it attracted only two ships of 2,500 tons per day.⁹ No more was said about traffic even though merchants who figured this count must have thought Lange's calculations somewhat sour. To attract 5,000 tons per day the canal would have to allure more total tonnage than passed the Cape in the previous year.¹⁰

Merchant Sandbach stifled further questions by declaring that Liverpool men were familiar with the scheme and already held opinions on it. If doubts still existed, he said, this was not the time nor the place to discuss them. Therefore, he asked the meeting to pass the following resolution:

It is hereby Resolved--That we, the Bankers, Merchants, and Manufacturers of Liverpool, consider that the execution of this great enterprise would be productive of the greatest advantages to the commercial and shipping interests of England, as of all other nations, and earnestly desire that the enterprise may attain, without any impediment, a speedy and successful realization.¹¹

The motion carried, the assembled businessmen thanked Lesseps for discussing his project, and the meeting adjourned. Following the account of this first session in several newspapers, one suspects that Liverpool men were being politely tolerant of their guests. Mr. Sandbach's ambivalent state-

⁹Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁰Answering another question, Lange said the Cape passed a total of 1,177,000 tons of shipping in 1856.

¹¹Lesseps, Inquiry..., p. 13.

ment that Liverpool men already had ideas regarding the project was loaded with double meaning. He might or might not have meant they accepted the project.

Before leaving Liverpool, the promoters presented their case to the Chamber of Commerce which, like the previous assembly of bankers and merchants, reacted mildly. The Chamber of Commerce's resolution was curiously worded:

without expressing an opinion as to the practicability or cost [italics mine] of the projected Ship Canal...this Council considers that the completion...of such a canal would be of great benefits to the commercial interests of this country.¹²

This was not the hearty endorsement which Lesseps sought.

The Liverpool press responded modestly to its foreign visitor. The Courier, Liverpool's oldest newspaper, and one which boasted a circulation of 141,000, very nearly ignored the visit.¹³ The Daily Post, a new press, treated the issue fairly but unemotionally.¹⁴ The Liverpool Mail,¹⁵ favored by wealthy and middle class alike, and claiming an impressive circulation, and the Liverpool Mercury,¹⁶ a newspaper noted for its agitation against the Corn Laws, mildly accepted

¹²Ibid., p. 12.

¹³Courier (Liverpool), May 6, 1857, p. 209, gave the meeting a skimpy six lines. Future newspaper citations, and there will be many, will include the city of publication in parenthesis in cases where to do otherwise might lead to confusion.

¹⁴Liverpool Daily Post, April 30, 1857, p. 4.

¹⁵Liverpool Mail, May 2, 1857, p. 6.

¹⁶Liverpool Mercury, May 1, 1857, p. 6.

Lesseps's idea. Liverpool was not antagonistic toward the project, just disinterested.

Lesseps's second provincial reception, at Manchester, was not as congenial as it might have been at an earlier time. As Donald Read, an authority on the English provinces has written, the liberal Manchester school in 1857 was in severe decline. Middle class sentiment had turned from water-tight liberalism to the "aristocratic ministries of Lords John Russell, Aberdeen, and Palmerston."¹⁷ The Crimean War intensified the division between Anti-Corn Law spirit and provincial patriotism, climaxing in the general election of 1857 in which the liberals, Bright and Milner-Gibson, were turned out for more conservative parliamentary representation. Read called 1857

a turning point in provincial history. Now provincial leadership returned to Birmingham [because of the way its small scale industry was organized] with its greater social unity and its deeper Radical spirit.¹⁸

As if the chilly Manchester atmosphere were not enough, a coinciding article in The Times added frost. Describing the post-Crimean War period as chaotic, The Times's correspondent reported that Constantinople was becoming an El Dorado for swindlers. Unscrupulous men almost daily presented the Porte with some developmental scheme, only to defraud the government of exploratory funds.¹⁹

¹⁷Read, The English Provinces c. 1760-1960: A Study in Influence, p. 151.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 153.

¹⁹The Times, May 8, 1857, p. 10.

Despite the less than favorable setting, Lesseps and his team attempted to beard the lion in his own den. They met first with the Manchester Commercial Association whose president, Aspinall Turner, was also Manchester's Conservative member of parliament.²⁰ In addition to presenting a technical sketch of the canal, Lange applied what he recently had learned at the Liverpool shipyards. Previously, he said, ships in the 3,000 ton class drew at least twenty-seven feet of water, but modern vessels of the same class and larger were constructed now to draw no more than twenty-four feet of water.²¹ This was an important improvement because it would enable larger vessels to work shallow waters just as it would mean that the canal's projected depth of twenty-six feet would prove adequate for large modern vessels.

After inconsequential discussion, Chairman Turner grew tired of canal talk and abruptly declared that Manchester men were cognizant of the scheme, and further discussion was unnecessary. He adjourned the proceedings, and the Commercial Association withdrew to consider the resolution they would draft. Later in the day, Chairman Turner presented Lesseps with one of the most equivocal resolutions that he received during his tour. The resolution merits complete reproduction:

²⁰From the political standpoint, a more hostile chairman would have been hard to find. Turner co-sponsored the Euphrates Valley project and voted against the Suez Canal in 1858.

²¹Lesseps, Inquiry..., account taken from the Manchester Guardian, May 8, 1857, p. 4.

That this Association, being desirous of encouraging every movement having for its object the promotion of commerce throughout the world, has heard with much interest the statements with which the board has been favoured by M. de Lesseps, relative to a Ship Canal to connect the Mediterranean and Red Seas; and provided that effectual means be taken to secure the neutrality of such canal, as well as a moderate rate of charge, such as shall give every possible encouragement to the transit of merchant vessels, will view with much satisfaction the realisation of so important an undertaking [*italics mine*].²²

Manchester's resolution was a masterpiece of ambiguity and must have satisfied Turner immensely. First of all, it implied doubt as to whether the canal would benefit international commerce. Moreover, the resolution included references to unsettled political and fiscal implications. At the same time, if Lesseps worked at it, he could discern a degree of polite interest. A disinterested observer could justifiably question whether Lesseps's visit had made an impact on Manchester's commercial community. The Manchester press reflects only a slight dent. The Manchester Examiner, noted specifically for its accurate coverage of meetings, considered Lesseps's presentation very bland.²³ The Manchester Courier,²⁴ patronized by businessmen, and the Manchester Guardian²⁵ likewise were unimpressed.

²²Ibid., p. 19.

²³Manchester Examiner, May 4, 1857, p. 3.

²⁴Manchester Courier, May 9, 1857, p. 5.

²⁵Manchester Guardian, May 8, 1857, p. 4.

If Manchester had been chilly, Dublin was even worse, and the canal promoters quickly ran into trouble. After formalities, Lange announced the purpose of their visit, but was assaulted by a flurry of questions from the floor. One gentleman voiced a common concern when he said, "Perhaps you will allow me to state that in the Red Sea the growth of coral renders navigation very uncertain." Lange admitted that the Red Sea abounded with coral, but, he said, it concentrated along the shores. A deep center channel fifty miles wide allowed ample room for maneuverability. Using this question as a springboard, Lange turned the discussion towards the supposedly dangerous Red Sea winds. He acknowledged the presence of strong winds in the Red Sea, but, he said, they normally blow from the side which "facilitated the sailing up or down of the Red Sea."²⁶

Another questioner challenged Lange's announcement that tolls on 5,000 tons of shipping per day would operate and pay for the canal. Showing more concern than his Manchester counterpart did, the gentleman asked why anyone thought the canal would attract such a tremendous amount of shipping. Lange replied that British foreign shipping annually increased by 100,000 tons, but in the previous year (1856), it had increased more than three times that amount. Recognizing that

²⁶Lesseps, Inquiry..., p. 25, account taken from the Dublin Evening Post, May 12, 1857, p. 4. Lange was confused about Red Sea winds and later reversed his thinking on them.

all this traffic did not go to the East, Lange nevertheless claimed that the Eastern trade was thriving and that many port facilities were rapidly becoming inadequate.²⁷

Another gentleman admitted that the canal would save distance. But, he asked, was savings in distance always a savings in time? His question referred to the fact that, depending upon the season, once a sailing vessel cleared the Cape, favorable winds sped it along. Lange answered affirmatively. Caught slightly off guard perhaps by this very important point, Lange concluded in general terms that the savings must be proportional in time and distance.²⁸

The president of the Chamber of Commerce then asked the status of the canal during wartime. If it were neutral in peacetime, how would its utility to all customers be guaranteed during conflict? Lange was at a loss for a convincing answer to this perplexing issue and replied that neutrality would be maintained according to provisions in the concession. To this reply, a gentleman quipped:

You must be aware that the fact of British merchants having stock in an undertaking of this kind by no means obliges the Government to neutrality, or to look upon it as a neutral canal in case of war.²⁹

Or, as it seemed to hardened businessmen, there was not an

²⁷Ibid., p. 26.

²⁸Ibid., p. 27. This was a weak answer. Saving distance did not always save time for a sailing ship, as everyone knew.

²⁹Ibid., p. 28.

effective method to guarantee the canal's neutrality.

The flood of complex questions continued, and Lange must have thought canal promotion a difficult business. Another gentleman asked, "Has the British Government manifested any opposition to the project?" Lange lied, "The British Government has not shown any overt act of opposition...it is simply a commercial speculation, with which Governments have nothing to do." This answer hardly sufficed, and Lesseps, making a rare comment in English, guided discussion back to neutrality. Speaking from a legalistic but certainly not from a tactical standpoint, he said that only the Egyptian Pasha could alter the canal's neutral status, and the Pasha had pledged that the canal would remain neutral. Putting an end to this line of questioning, the president said it was apparent that canal promoters and the Pasha desired canal neutrality. But in the final analysis, he warned, it remained "for all other Governments to agree that it shall be so," and nothing more could be said.³⁰

Following several desultory questions, the Chamber of Commerce excused itself to debate privately its resolution. The final product, with few modifications, sounded like the one expressed by Manchester. It was vague, and the only elements that stood out were concern for neutrality and the rate of tolls.

³⁰Ibid.

Dublin's press split interestingly over the canal question. The Dublin Mercantile Advertiser, voice of the commercial community, strongly opposed the project and playfully reported an exchange between Lange and one of his tormentors. At one point it was suggested that the British Government had shown a certain "coldness" to the project. What, Lange's adversary asked, was the reason for Government's attitude if the canal were all its promoters claimed? In pique, Lange replied that

it is a matter of indifference to the promoters whether Governments have looked cold or hot upon it--it is merely a private speculation.³¹

This hasty response was, of course, singularly untrue. The chief purpose of the tour was to "heat up" Government's attitude toward the canal via pressure from the commercial community.

Dublin's largest daily, on the other hand, tried to soften the commercial community's treatment of the canal delegation. Whereas other newspapers gave only summary treatment to Lesseps's visit,³² the Daily Express carried one of the few leaders which supported the project. The proposition was termed one of the "greatest steps in human progress..." overshadowed only by the printing press, steam engine, and electric telegraph. The same article confidently, but incorrectly

³¹Dublin Mercantile Advertiser, May 15, 1857, p. 4.

³²See for example the files of the Dublin Advocate, or the Dublin Evening Post for May and June, 1857.

as it turned out, predicted that British investors would subscribe the shares reserved for them. The Daily Express, however, was out of touch with its commercial community, and its report was riddled with inaccuracies. It missed some canal details, and it also said that Europe, Egypt, and the United States had already purchased shares. At that time, no one had purchased shares.³³ These examples of impreciseness are not crucially important by themselves, but they may help explain why Dublin merchants patronized another journal. Intelligent business decisions required, at the very least, reliable reporting.

Lesseps, Lange and Kenney probably were glad to reach Cork, where they received better treatment. Cork men had only a rudimentary knowledge of the project, so Lange was given free rein to elaborate upon all canal aspects. During the discussion, two noteworthy points arose. First, when asked about adverse Red Sea winds, Lange reversed his Dublin position and replied that from April to September the wind blew in one direction, from north to south; sailing vessels therefore could traverse the Red Sea only during half the year, but this was not a serious disadvantage, he said. Sailing vessels could use the canal half the year and return by the Cape route.³⁴

³³Daily Express (Dublin), May 12, 1857, p. 2.

³⁴Lesseps, Inquiry..., p. 33, account taken from the Southern Reporter (Cork), May 17, 1857, which Lesseps erroneously transcribed as the Daily Cork Reporter.

Secondly, a merchant set off some fireworks when he recalled Stephenson's judgement against the isthmian canal. Kenney, attempting a delicate piece of footwork, replied that European engineers currently were refuting Stephenson's position.³⁵ At least one man took exception to the charge that Stephenson had been incorrect, concluded that the canal was unnecessary, and said, "The interests of this country would be better served by the [Alexandria to Suez] railroad than canal." A brief controversy ensued as the promoters gamely tried to sell their idea without compromising the British-built railroad.³⁶

The promoters' next meeting, with Belfast's Chamber of Commerce, proved noteworthy for several reasons: Lange introduced two new elements, cotton and China; political considerations appeared; and the Belfast Chamber of Commerce recorded its secret debate prior to issuing its resolution, action which provides insights into the collective mercantile mind. After sketching the project, Lange announced that Mr. Smith, member of parliament from Stockport, recently suggested that the province of Candeish, on India's west coast, could produce more cotton than the American South could. Development of Candeish, in conjunction with the canal, added Lange, would revise the cotton trade and eliminate British reliance upon the American South. New areas of production coupled

³⁵Ibid., p. 34.

³⁶Cork Examiner, May 15, 1857, p. 4.

with a new transportation route, he argued, would then remove Britain's indirect subsidy of American slavery.³⁷

Broadening his approach, Lange said China "must become one of our largest buyers" as that unsettled situation was resolved to England's benefit.³⁸ In this instance he was partly correct. China was then (May, 1857) about to be opened as a result of the Opium War; China never did, however, become a major purchaser of anything except opium. Lange concluded his formal presentation magnanimously with the statement that,

I have given you a short outline of the commercial advantages likely to result from the undertaking, and it is for you to form your own judgement upon it, because I feel that I am surrounded by men who understand all these matters far better than ourselves [*italics mine*].³⁹

Political considerations emerged when Mr. Thompson applauded Kenney's pamphlet, The Gates of the East.... Thompson considered the project admirable, but the Government's attitude baffled him. Why, he asked, had the Government "thrown difficulties in the way?" Before the visitors could answer, one of Thompson's neighbors, a man of different persuasion, curtly retorted that the canal's complex political aspects were better left to private discussion. Kenney,

³⁷The American South was threatened by neither proposition. Indian cotton was inferior. Enjoying a seller's market, American cotton had ready markets in Europe if England stopped buying.

³⁸Lesseps, Inquiry..., p. 39, account taken from the Northern Whig (Belfast), May 19, 1857, p. 4.

³⁹Ibid., p. 40.

unwilling to see the crucial point so neatly avoided, described the Government's attitude as understandable. He surmised that Government had remained aloof from the project because it was unaware of the commercial community's feelings toward it. Once Government became aware of genuine mercantile sentiment, it would support the project, and if the resolutions they had received were any indication of mercantile sentiment, favorable Government action could not be far away.⁴⁰ At that, Lesseps, Lange, and Kenney retired to an adjoining room while the Council remained to discuss privately their resolution. Fortunately this discussion was recorded, and the innermost ideas of these Belfast businessmen toward the canal came to light. In all probability, some of the following sentiment was felt, if not expressed, all over Britain.

The first speaker observed that England had a tradition of free trade, and, he predicted, agreeing with Kenney, that resolutions would prompt Government to support the venture. Mr. Ferguson was of a different mind. He believed the Council should not declare itself on issues which obviously bore hidden political considerations. The discussion continued as

⁴⁰The power of petitions was much discussed by groups in England. The London Corresponding Society as early as 1793 recognized they produced no reforms by themselves. Petitions' only power, said the London Corresponding Society, was reaching the press and becoming a topic of conversation which, in turn, led to debate in Commons. From the attitude of the press, popular discussion, and Commons, the London Corresponding Society thought they would "ultimately gain ground." Read, The English Provinces..., p. 45. Lesseps took this road.

several men spoke their thoughts. Mr. Bristow said the project's commercial advantages simply were too obvious to miss, so Government must base its objections on dark issues of which private citizens "knew nothing." Mr. Hamilton agreed, and suggested that perhaps Government opposed the project because the French Government sponsored it.⁴¹ Another gentleman added that all municipal bodies, including their own, had an important responsibility to restrain themselves from action which might embarrass Government. Ferguson spoke again, expressing doubts about the canal's utility, a point sustained by Mr. Lemon who said the canal would not tremendously shorten the trip to India. His own ships, he said, regularly made the voyage in ninety days, and he estimated that the canal would reduce the voyage, at best, by ten days. In his opinion the project was much ado about nothing.⁴² Mr. Ferguson spoke for a third time and reckoned too many imponderables existed to justify a resolution. Discussion ended on that negative note. Ferguson did not get the question tabled, but neither did Lesseps gain complete satisfaction. The Council passed two resolutions: one thanked Lesseps for visiting with them;⁴³ the second one read, in part, that the Council deemed the project

⁴¹Lesseps, Inquiry..., pp. 40-41. This was an erroneous, but understandable, supposition.

⁴²Belfast Newsletter, May 19, 1857, p. 2.

⁴³Lesseps, Inquiry..., p. 43.

a most important one to the interests of commerce generally...provided it can be carried out with a sufficient guarantee for the complete neutrality of passage... at moderate rates.⁴⁴

Lesseps received his resolutions, such as they were, but a Belfast merchant added one last sensitive question: was the canal, he asked, dependent upon the Sultan's confirmation? One need not speculate how the promoters felt when they heard that. To date this issue had remained unresolved. Yes, Kenney replied, the project depended upon the Sultan's approval, but, he quickly added, promoters were taking steps to get that approval. To what effect? probed the gentleman. Kenney could say only that currently the Sultan's firman was being "held in suspension."⁴⁵ Ferguson and other Belfast men who rejected the project must have chuckled at this exchange. Legally, the canal resembled that of a contractor who wished to build a road but had no right of way.

Before Lesseps left town he received a further blast from the (Belfast) Mercantile Journal warning the Council and the city that the project involved more than commercial considerations. The editor wrote that such important decisions should be left to Government. This leader recognized the canal's potential commercial value but cautioned that its de facto control by a weak Egypt only invited intervention by a stronger European power, and intervention by one European

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 42.

⁴⁵Belfast Newsletter, May 19, 1857, p. 2. To Lesseps's chagrin, the firman remained in "suspension" for another seven years.

power would threaten the security of others. The editor did not totally discount the future possibility of adequate safeguards, but for the immediate present he was skeptical:

it may be that sufficient guarantees [of security] can be offered [in the future]. What these should be, we are not at present in a position to define.⁴⁶

Moving on, the promoters found not much relief in Scotland. The Glasgow meeting was poorly attended, perhaps because that city's economic condition in the summer of 1857 was starting to slip. The Director of the Chamber of Commerce, and of the Merchant's House, lamented in his diary that four local banks failed in 1857, which cast "an aspect of peculiar gloom to the city." He wrote that there was an "utter destruction of confidence for the time being...and a fear of tomorrow."⁴⁷ If this meant anything, it meant that merchants likely were thinking of financial retrenchment, not speculation.

Speaking to a small audience, Lange amplified his earlier

⁴⁶Mercantile Journal (Belfast), May 19, 1857, p. 4. The other relevant newspaper, the Belfast Daily Mercury, May 21, 1857, p. 3, reported the meeting in hostile terms.

⁴⁷John C. Gibson, ed., Diary of Sir Michael Connal (Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, 1895), p. 108. The years 1857 through 1860 were a period of economic uncertainty. For more detail, see Robert C. Binkley, Realism and Nationalism 1852-1871, The Rise of Modern Europe (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), pp. 107-110; W. O. Henderson, The Lancashire Cotton Famine 1861-1865 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1934) pp. 9-12; John Morley, Life of Richard Cobden (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1906) p. 715, for indications that France also was feeling the economic pinch.

statements about Candeish and spoke as though India's cotton potential already had been realized and massive prosperity awaited only the canal.⁴⁸ In fact, Indian cotton cultivation suffered from inferior seed, absence of inland transportation, absence of quality controls, as well as hostility of the East India Company. Lange, again, dealt in wishful thinking. India never successfully replaced the American South in cotton production.⁴⁹ A lethargic discussion period followed, and Glasgow's resolution was politely affirmative.⁵⁰

Appearing before the Council of the Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce, six days later, Lange differed his approach and focused on the canal's effect on Mediterranean ports, but, he said, this eventuality should not alarm British merchants.

⁴⁸Lesseps, Inquiry..., p. 45, account taken from Glasgow Saturday Post, May 23, 1857, p. 6, but for a better account see the Glasgow Courier, May 23, 1857, p. 4.

⁴⁹Ibid. For a cogent discussion of India as a cotton producer see Shipping and Mercantile Gazette (London), June 22, 1857, p. 2. Another good treatment of India's disappointing cotton production is Max Ellis Fletcher's unpublished Ph.D. dissertation entitled "Suez and Britain, an Historical Study of the Effects of the Suez Canal on the British Economy" (University of Wisconsin, 1957), pp. 70-71 and p. 202. Fletcher's work includes some relevant source pamphlets.

A standard work on cotton shortage problems during the American Civil War is Henderson, The Lancashire Cotton Famine 1861-1865. Indian cotton was purchased only when American supplies were unavailable, and during the Civil War British imports of Indian cotton tripled, but once the Civil War ended, British manufacturers eagerly returned to their traditional suppliers.

⁵⁰The Glasgow Herald, May 25, 1857, p. 4, was alone in its acceptance of the scheme. All other newspapers were disinterested. See, for example, Glasgow Saturday Post, the important Glasgow Mercantile Advertiser, and the Glasgow Examiner.

Commenting on the preponderance of British shipping, even in those waters, Lange cited the following statistics: during March, of seventy-six vessels sailing from Alexandria to various Mediterranean ports, forty-two were British owned. He termed it unreasonable to suppose that British mercantile supremacy in that area would suffer proportionally from an isthmian canal. At any rate, he said, merchants from other cities had not expressed concern over this possibility.⁵¹

Repeating what was by now a favorite argument, Lange talked in rosy terms about Candeish and how the canal would fulfill this new source of cotton. After brief comments, the Council thanked its visitors and presented them with a resolution not dissimilar to those already received.

Edinburgh newspapers responded quite differently to their visitors. Commercial journals either completely ignored them,⁵² or reported the meeting in placid terms.⁵³

Aberdeen presented the promoters a problem because it had no direct interest in a short-cut to Asia as it confined its trade almost exclusively to northern Europe. Lange therefore attempted to define the issue in sweeping terms. He implored the public meeting to think not in terms of individual

⁵¹ Lesseps, Inquiry..., p. 49, account taken from The Daily Scotsman, May 26, 1857, p. 4. Incidentally, Cork had expressed concern on this point.

⁵² Examine, for example, the Edinburgh Witness.

⁵³ See the Edinburgh Advertiser, May 29, 1857, p. 1. The voice of Academe, on the other hand, responded more favorably. The Daily Express, May 27, 1857, p. 2, thought the extant

interest but in terms of general commerce. He implied that what was good for the world was good for Aberdeen.⁵⁴

The most important comment came from Mr. Thompson, Aberdeen's past member of parliament, who doubted whether the canal would influence the Eastern trade. His own ships, he asserted, canal or no canal, would continue to run the well-beaten Cape route. He went further and suggested that a more worthwhile project than a canal across the isthmus of Suez would be one across Panama which would open the west coast of America as well as reduce the voyage to China.⁵⁵ Thompson's neighbors applauded his comments, the initiative deserted Lange, and no talk of Candeish would convince Aberdeeners that the Suez Canal was a splendid idea.

At Newcastle, Lange concentrated on two new features. First, he tied the canal to increased steam ship construction which, in turn, benefitted Newcastle's coal industry. He said the canal would promote steam sailing, and specifications included an inland harbor and huge coaling station at Timsah, midway through the canal.⁵⁶

Secondly, and fortunately for Lange, the equation of

trans-Egyptian railway not credible to nineteenth century enterprise. It required passengers to change from ship to rail at Alexandria, and from rail back to ship at Suez.

⁵⁴Lesseps, Inquiry..., p. 53, account taken from the Aberdeen Journal, May 27, 1857.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 54.

⁵⁶Lesseps, Inquiry..., p. 59, account taken from the Newcastle Journal, May 30, 1857, p. 4.

Indian cotton and canal strengthened as he approached Newcastle. Manchester and Liverpool made the timely announcement that they would work together to solve a common problem: a deficiency in cotton inventory which threatened the entire industry.⁵⁷ This alliance resulted from a growing apprehension that the cloth industry was almost totally dependent upon the American South: five-sixths of the 43,000 bales which the industry consumed weekly came from America.⁵⁸ Hoping to remedy this imbalance, the two cities' most important businessmen formed the Cotton Supply Association to consider methods of reversing the shortage of supply caused by recurring poor crops in the South, increased consumption in America, and increased continental demand. Anxiety ran rampant and men involved in the cotton cloth industry suddenly saw potential catastrophe in the possibilities of a total Southern crop failure, disruptive war, or slave insurrection.⁵⁹ Lange told Newcastle men that one founder of the Cotton Supply Association considered the stakes no less than the existence of Manchester and Liverpool. Financed by contributions levied upon producers, the Cotton Supply Association's goal was

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 61.

⁵⁸ The Times, February 7, 1857, p. 9.

⁵⁹ See leaders in The Times, January 30, 1857; February 7, 1857; February 11, 1857; October 12, 1857. The importance of cotton is further highlighted by French response to the Indian Mutiny: French newspapermen were concerned primarily with whether the Mutiny would disrupt the Cotton Supply Association's activities. See The Times, October 12, 1857, p. 9.

to encourage cotton production everywhere, particularly in India.⁶⁰

Lange thought he saw in the Cotton Supply Association an organization with interests similar to his own. He told his audience that the future Indian cotton trade, and perhaps the cloth industry itself, depended in no small degree on the canal.⁶¹

So far, Lange had presented Newcastle's a cogent argument: he had shown them (to his satisfaction, at least) how the project would benefit their primary industry and he had related the canal to what seemed an important new movement. The discussion period, however, might have been somewhat unsettling: a gentleman asked whether tolls would be computed by value or weight. It requires no imagination to sense Lange's regret as he replied, "I am sorry to say that Newcastle ships which go through laden with coals would have to pay the same tonnage as other ships with more valuable cargoes." He quickly added that the projected toll of ten francs

⁶⁰Manchester Courier, April 25, 1857, p. 9.

⁶¹Failure of ad hoc organizations and pressure groups contrasts with the Anti-Corn Law League of an earlier time. Historians probably are correct when they attribute later failures partly to their misappreciation of Anti-Corn Law League tactics of speakers and rallies, tactics which were less successful than contemporaries thought.

Lesseps's attempt to link the cotton trade and his canal in the minds of politicians was unsuccessful, and of the five members of parliament who co-sponsored the Cotton Supply Association, only one supported the canal with his vote.

per ton, which would have amounted to £450 for a medium-sized vessel, represented a maximum figure and might be revised if it pressed too heavily.⁶²

A gentleman familiar with winds engaged Lange in a clever tête à tête as he suggested that sailing vessels would never utilize the canal while they had westerlies and currents on the Cape route. Moreover, he said, vessels plying the Mediterranean quite often were detained behind Gibraltar by adverse winds. Lange acknowledged that problem, but predicted enterprising men would eliminate it by forming a towage company to clear sailing ships through the Mediterranean's narrow neck.⁶³

Newcastle's resolution was quite favorable toward the project, and the Lord Mayor directed that copies be presented to borough members, influential people, and the Board of Trade.⁶⁴ Lesseps and Lange were ecstatic at the Newcastle meeting, and they seem to have weathered the thorny question of tolls by weight. No other city had expressed its support so clearly. It was in hopes of this response that Lesseps had embarked upon his promotional tour in the first place.

As the promoters moved to Hull, the Newcastle press prolonged the enthusiasm which Lesseps's visit had generated for the project. The Newcastle Guardian, one of that city's

⁶²Lesseps, Inquiry..., p. 63.

⁶³Ibid., p. 64.

⁶⁴Ibid., pp. 67-68.

largest journals, recorded that Lange told Newcastle's:

they would readily understand that Newcastle would not be omitted when the time came for making the necessary coal contracts for Timsah.⁶⁵

The Newcastle Chronicle, voice of constitutional and commercial reform, also supported the project. Its leader-writer emphasized the benefits to Newcastle from coal contracts at Timsah and Suez. Even without a vested local interest, however, this newspaper would have endorsed the project, claiming that canal opposition was tantamount to protection whereas British prosperity depended on free trade.⁶⁶ The most widely read newspaper in northern England, and the one patronized by mining and shipping interests, the Newcastle Courant, also supported Lesseps's project fully.⁶⁷

Except for one penetrating question, Hull's interest in the project was not perceptive for Hull men dwelt on specifications such as canal dimensions, rather than the broader question of the idea's validity.⁶⁸ One gentleman did inquire about the Admiralty's attitude toward the project. Lange answered that, as yet, they had not contacted the Admiralty, but he believed the navy would quickly recognize the canal's

⁶⁵ Newcastle Guardian, May 30, 1857, p. 4.

⁶⁶ Newcastle Chronicle, May 29, 1857, p. 4.

⁶⁷ Newcastle Courant, May 29, 1857, p. 5.

⁶⁸ See, for example, Hull Packet, June 5, 1857, p. 6; Hull News, June 6, 1857, p. 7; Hull Advertiser, June 6, 1857, p. 7, the source Lesseps selected.

advantages.⁶⁹ Unknown to the promoters, as we shall see, the Admiralty at that moment was assessing the project, and a forthcoming report would leave no question regarding its attitude toward the canal.

Before following Lesseps to Birmingham, it might be worthwhile to note another example of Lesseps's inability to successfully graft his project onto another, and better known, movement. Just prior to the promoters' arrival in Hull, Charles Hindley, member of parliament, chaired a gigantic meeting of the Peace Society, a meeting characterized by speeches calling for international friendship, reduction of armaments, and free trade.⁷⁰ Interestingly, as in the case of the Cotton Supply Association, canal promoters were unable to attract broad support for their scheme, a scheme which, after all, claimed the same benefits as the Peace Society did. Hindley adamantly preached international good will, free trade, and cooperation, but later he voted against the Suez Canal.

Lesseps struck inland for Birmingham, seat of the iron industry, and found that city in a mood to listen. Three days earlier, the local press reported Birmingham's economy in excellent condition, and prosperity did not discourage

⁶⁹Hull Packet, June 5, 1857, p. 6. This question was deleted when Lesseps published accounts of his visits in book form. Perhaps he did not want to call attention to the relationship that existed between Admiralty and canal.

⁷⁰Hull News, May 23, 1857, p. 2.

men from thinking about speculation.⁷¹ The local press's interest specifically in the canal was not damaging either. On June 3rd, the same day of the meeting, the Birmingham Daily Press, recognized as a champion of all sound reform, announced that the project was "perhaps of as much importance to the business of this country as any undertaking now before the world." The same leader credited it with an "almost indescribable value." Reminding its readers that the isthmian canal was an established concept, this leader attributed its past failures to its magnitude which had always overwhelmed modern man's predecessors. In 1857, however, the time was ripe for man had

now arrived at a period in the world's history when magnitude is to be regarded⁷² as a quality of secondary consideration.

Before the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, Lange said the Cape had never been a route of choice but of necessity to avoid Arab monopoly of the Eastern trade. During the steam age, he said, it lacked everything which steam vessels required. In fact, he said, serious defects in the Cape route had inspired a well-known English engineer, Mr. Brunel, to design the Great Eastern, the largest vessel afloat.⁷³

⁷¹See Birmingham Journal and Birmingham Daily Press, May 30, 1857.

⁷²Birmingham Daily Press, June 3, 1857, p. 2.

⁷³The Great Eastern proved a major disappointment after her story began with fanfare on May 30, 1854, when her keel was laid. The vessel was magnificent but controversial in

Not wishing to condemn the naval marvel of the age, but wishing to call attention to the great ship's relation to the canal, Lange said if she proved successful the canal could be deepened to handle vessels of her size. But if she were successful, he warned, most shippers would be unable to afford such an expensive vessel, and their commercial salvation lay with the canal and regular coaling stations at Gibraltar, Malta, Said, Timsah, Suez, and Aden. Otherwise, the "ordinary class of shipping" would lie at the mercy of this "monopolizing monster."⁷⁴

The cotton trade, China, and the growth of steam vessel construction were dealt with in due course before the meeting was opened to discussion. An early question reflected Newcastle's concern: whether cargo was to be tolled by value or weight. The gentleman who asked this question said that

conception and plagued by bad luck and mechanical failures. Three times larger than any vessel afloat, she was powered by a paddlewheel, screw propellers, carried 6,500 square yards of sail and six thousand tons of coal, enough to sail non-stop from England to Australia. Designed to carry 4,000 passengers (or 10,000 troops), her designer thought she could make the trip to Australia in only thirty days. The Great Eastern, renamed Leviathan, ingloriously ended her unsuccessful sea-going days anchored at Liverpool as a tourist attraction and topic for a one-penny pamphlet.

⁷⁴Lesseps, Inquiry..., p. 80, account taken from the Birmingham Journal, June 6, 1857, p. 4. The Birmingham Journal was one of the most successful provincial newspapers. It became financially solid during the railroad boom of the 1840's and by the 1850's it was fiercely independent and boasted an annual circulation of 519,000 copies. See H. R. G. Whates, The Birmingham Post 1857: 1957, A Century Retrospect (Birmingham: Post & Mail, Ltd., 1957), p. 36.

Birmingham iron was a low profit article which shippers often purchased as ballast for the outward trip. A toll of 10 francs per ton either would discourage this trade or permanently secure the Cape route. Lange replied nebulously to this delicate question. He gave Birmingham the Newcastle answer: canal projectors intended to devise equitable tolls, and tolls would be reduced if they were driving specific trades away.⁷⁵

Exhibiting a political awareness not found elsewhere, a Birmingham man asked for an explanation of Lord Stratford de Redcliffe's attitude. In view of England's strategic occupation of Malta and Aden, this man was unable to understand why Britain's Ambassador at Constantinople opposed the scheme. Was Redcliffe, he asked, afraid of something unknown to the public? Or, was Redcliffe somehow connected with the rumored plan to drive a British railway through Central Asia?⁷⁶ Answering this question, Lange acknowledged Redcliffe's opposition to the project but denied knowing the exact reason for his intransigence. If Birmingham could visualize advantages accruing from the project, said Lange,

you could not render the cause a greater service than by pressing upon your own members the necessity of bringing these matters before the Board of Trade, and asking why the Sultan... was so influenced by Lord Stratford de Redcliffe.⁷⁷

⁷⁵Lesseps, Inquiry..., p. 84.

⁷⁶The Euphrates Valley scheme was only weeks from being publicized.

⁷⁷Lesseps, Inquiry..., p. 87.

Birmingham's Chamber of Commerce voted Lesseps a very favorable resolution, action which the area's most important newspaper praised. The Birmingham Journal thought the project perhaps more important to Birmingham than to coastal cities. Located inland, she depended upon the harbor facilities of others, which did not come cheap: the leader-writer calculated that in addition to routine port charges, Birmingham exporters subsidized Liverpool streets with "town dues" of £ 6,000 per year.⁷⁸ Anything that cut shipping costs would benefit Birmingham.⁷⁹

On June 18th, the Society of Merchant Venturers in Bristol entertained Lesseps. Opening the meeting, the chairman favorably compared the canal to the Great Western Railway which connected Bristol and London. Initially, he recalled, his neighbors foolishly had been reluctant to invest in a venture which eventually made their city prosperous. He hoped they had learned a lesson from that experience and would appreciate the ideas about to be presented to them.⁸⁰ Lange was among friends in Bristol, and he treated them to the most comprehensive presentation that he was to make on the entire tour.

⁷⁸ Town dues were analogous to the octroi, a municipal tax levied on certain goods coming into the municipality for resale within its jurisdiction.

⁷⁹ Birmingham Journal, June 6, 1857, p. 5.

⁸⁰ Lesseps, Inquiry..., p. 91, account taken from the shorthand notes of Mr. Austin, dated June 18, 1857.

He spoke of the connection between the canal and Indian cotton and expectations of increased trade with China.⁸¹

After covering much customary ground, he dwelt on the canal's additional benefits. For one thing, the canal would facilitate trade with Arabia, Abyssinia, and the Red Sea islands. Lange understood that some Bristol firms were venturing into the guano trade, and he encouraged them in that direction because the Red Sea islands were extremely rich in guano deposits.⁸² The Red Sea area also abounded with fish, sponge, coffee, ivory, sulphur, salt, hides, livestock, and poultry. Touching a religious nerve, he said opening the African coast also would provide an opportunity to civilize and Christianize the heathen who lived there.⁸³

From Lesseps's viewpoint, the most rewarding aspect of the favorable Bristol resolution was the circumstance in which it was proposed. Mr. Richard Poole King, an African merchant, disclosed that he attended the meeting only from curiosity, for he disapproved of the project. In the first place, he confessed to harboring serious doubts regarding the technical feasibility of the project, but Mr. Lange had effectively

⁸¹Ibid., pp. 95-96.

⁸² Prospective hunters of this unsavory but valuable substance did well to accept this advice cautiously. Exploratory trips to the Red Sea in 1844, 1853, and early 1857 revealed that Red Sea guano was inferior in quantity and quality. See the Dublin Mercantile Advertiser, May 15, 1857, p. 2, and the Hull Packet, May 29, 1857.

⁸³ Lesseps, Inquiry..., pp. 98-99.

answered all his questions on this point. Secondly, he had been cynical toward the canal because, he said, "Bristol [was] not much interested in the question...because Bristol did not carry on much trade with the East Indies...." But after hearing Lange's elaborate description of the project's indirect benefits, King announced his conversion.⁸⁴

Evidence suggests that Mr. King was not the only one who came away from the meeting inclined to accept the canal. All major Bristol newspapers carried leaders praising it. The Bristol Advertiser, long noted for its bold leadership in commercial enterprises, suggested that the Government realized the canal's potential and had taken steps to secure the area by occupying Aden and Perim.⁸⁵ The Bristol Times, another leader in commercial affairs, hoped that members of parliament "would exert themselves to promote the project, and especially to get rid of the objections of the Government, if they existed."⁸⁶ A third commercially-oriented journal, the Bristol Mirror, devoted a full column to an enthusiastic endorsement. Putting the canal idea in a form that must have dazzled even Lesseps, it said:

A possession common to all, as the Suez Canal will be, must create good feelings common to all. A brotherhood of commerce will create a brotherhood of nations.⁸⁷

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 101.

⁸⁵Bristol Advertiser, June 20, 1857, p. 5.

⁸⁶Bristol Times, June 20, 1857, p. 5.

⁸⁷Bristol Mirror, June 20, 1857, p. 5.

Armed with their provincial resolutions, Lesseps and company advanced on London where Sir James Duke, London's member of parliament, presided over their forum at the London Tavern.⁸⁸ London, commercial and political heart of England, would prove difficult because immense and diverse powers lived there, powers not easily impressed by petitions from Cork or Hull. Following introductions, Lesseps, speaking for the first time, briefly surveyed his activities of the past three years and said that currently only Redcliffe was hindering the project. And even Redcliffe, Lesseps suspected, opposed the project only temporarily while awaiting events at home. Lesseps, a former diplomat himself, said he did not begrudge Redcliffe's position if Government were waiting for a clear mandate from its own commercial community. In that case, he claimed, the delay was over. The resolutions which he held in his hand constituted that mandate. In conclusion, he said:

⁸⁸ Later Lange claimed that Palmerston prevented the Lord Mayor of London from chairing the meeting at the last minute. One of Lange's contemporaries repeated this charge, but noted there was a lack of evidence. See Percy Heatherington Fitzgerald, The Great Canal at Suez: With an Account of the Struggles of its Projector F. de Lesseps (2 vols; London: Tinsley Brothers, 1876), I, 86-87.

A thorough examination of the press uncovered evidence which cleared Palmerston of this charge. The (London) Morning Post advertised the upcoming public meeting on June 18th, June 22nd, and June 23rd, and announced that Sir James Duke, one of London's members of parliament, would chair the meeting. These advertisements were placed while Lesseps was still in Bristol, suggesting that Lesseps expected Duke, not the Lord Mayor, to chair the meeting.

To you, now I appeal for the same moral support, and I trust it will not be refused me in the metropolis of free trade.⁸⁹

Lange followed his leader and presented their argument in the strongest possible terms. He employed all the points they had developed in the provinces and added that more Eastern trade would stimulate industrial expansion, profits, and full-employment for the working class.⁹⁰ Concluding his well-polished presentation, Lange opened the meeting to questions.

The first question concerned the British-built Egyptian railroad and whether the canal would divert traffic from it. The gentleman who asked this question believed that competition between railroad and canal would disadvantage both, thus, for the time being, the railroad fulfilled all needs. Lange replied with a gem of extemporaneous sagacity: the canal actually would help the railroad because, he said, traffic created traffic. He said Said Pasha recognized this fact, and that was why he sponsored both projects.⁹¹

Mr. Fowler, a merchant with Egyptian experience, stunned the promoters with his concern for how the work was to be done and its effect on the Egyptian people. Mr. Fowler noted

⁸⁹Lesseps, Inquiry..., p. 107, account taken from the shorthand notes of Mr. Strang, June 24, 1857.

⁹⁰This argument became a favorite of Cecil Rhodes's later in the century.

⁹¹Lesseps, Inquiry..., p. 113. This point needed qualification. Although the railroad netted Said Pasha an income, it was sponsored and initiated by his predecessor, Abbas Pasha.

that Said Pasha was responsible for providing labor which meant the corvée.⁹² Picture the misery, he said, of the poor wretches forced from their homes to work in the scorching desert. When viewed in these terms, Mr. Fowler thought the project not unlike a pharoanic undertaking. Ironically, he commented, Britain recently had paid £ 20,000,000 to eliminate slavery in the West Indies, but now, British investors were asking to uphold the same institution in Egypt.⁹³ Correctly forecasting the future, but perhaps not the reasons, he said:

I do think it is an undertaking which the commercial world of London will never lend its sanction to, inasmuch as it is an undertaking proposed to be accomplished by slave labor.⁹⁴

This attack troubled the promoters because heretofore they held all the humanitarian cards with their argument that the canal would foster Indian cotton and, hence, strike at slavery in America. Those cards had been trumped, but Lange fought back and declared that Egypt of 1857 was not Egypt of the pharoahs. Said Pasha wanted to improve his country. He had lowered taxes, removed corrupt officials, and appointed five new governors, one a Christian. Lange

⁹²At that time, between 500 and 1,500 fellahin were engaged in stockpiling tools and bricks. See letter from Lesseps to the Viceroy, dated March 9, 1857, cited in Lesseps, Recollection of Forty Years, II, 46-47.

⁹³He referred to the 1833 subsidy the Government paid British slaveholders in the West Indies, a payment which culminated a long drive to eliminate slavery from all British territory.

⁹⁴Lesseps, Inquiry..., p. 116.

assured Londoners that the fellahin would be paid for their labor. Indeed, he said, they would receive a franc per day, more than three times their usual wages, and they would welcome the opportunity to supplement their incomes.⁹⁵ Lange said that everyone connected with the canal was concerned for the fellahin's welfare, and the fellahin would be paid regularly and treated kindly. Summoning every shred of emotion to repudiate Fowler, Lange said:

Good Heavens! gentlemen--I put it to you, as the representatives of the largest commercial city in the world, is that an argument to advance against this great international enterprise, in this age of science, civilisation, and progression?⁹⁶

An observer's shorthand notes reveal that Lange's answer was well received as Londoners were not terribly concerned about the fellahin. Discussion continued and another gentleman characterized Fowler's concern for the fellahin a "novel point of view." This speaker praised the civilizing work that railroads and canals had accomplished in Egypt and asked "why should Egypt not be made [*italics mine*] to participate in its advantages?"⁹⁷

Fowler refused to break off the attack and challenged

⁹⁵This statement credited the population of a backward country with more initiative than is warranted. A modern reader cannot help but find its application to nineteenth century Egypt humorous. Notice also that Lange did not include the mode of recruitment.

⁹⁶Lesseps, Inquiry..., pp. 116-118.

⁹⁷Ibid., pp. 118-119.

the proposition that the canal would be a great civilizer for Egypt. Notice, he said, that the proposed canal tract lay eighty miles east of any Egyptian settlement. Who would benefit from that? The railroad, on the other hand, ran through the heart of the country.⁹⁸

Lesseps could not dispute the canal's location, but he could attest to Said Pasha's character and sensitivity toward the fellahin. He said that laborers on the Mahmoudieh Canal, an extensive irrigation project in the northwest, had been well treated. He did not mention how those laborers were recruited--they were forced--or how much they had been paid, but he did say that Said Pasha frequently visited the work site, and that the directing engineers had been most humane. In short, Lesseps viewed the project clinically, and, regardless of how labor was recruited, he thought it a smoothly executed piece of work.

Lange closed the discussion with an observation which reflected his difference with Fowler:

Mr. Fowler has said, that this Canal will not be as beneficial to Egypt as a Railway; but it is not the benefit the undertaking is likely to be to that country that we are discussing here today; what we are considering is the benefit the undertaking is likely to be to England. It may or may not be of benefit to Egypt, but that is a question for the Viceroy to dispose of, and he knows best how to manage his own affairs.⁹⁹

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 120.

⁹⁹Ibid.

On this note the London meeting terminated. Lange described their receptions in the realm's commercial cities and said that every town had presented them with a resolution of support. In addition, he exaggerated, many towns specifically had requested their members to expedite the project.¹⁰⁰ All that remained, Lange concluded, was for London to "complete the general opinion already expressed by this country...." The assembled gentlemen complied and voted a moderately worded resolution, but significantly, London gave no instructions to its members or to the Board of Trade.¹⁰¹

The canal question furnished London newspapermen with fresh grist. The Shipping and Mercantile Gazette was impressed with Lesseps's tour and advised Government not to ignore commercial sentiment.¹⁰² The Morning Advertiser, a stout supporter of free trade, politely but equivocally reported the London Tavern meeting.¹⁰³ The Daily News, reformist and destined to outsell The Times, accepted the concept but registered serious doubts about the canal's financial aspects. It said that during the current period of high interest rates, or during a time when "the golden age of credit has passed away like a

¹⁰⁰The adjective many was loosely used. Of twelve towns, only three attached a rider to their resolution requesting action from their member of parliament.

¹⁰¹Lesseps, Inquiry..., p. 123.

¹⁰²Shipping and Mercantile Gazette (London), June 23, 1857, p. 3.

¹⁰³Morning Advertiser (London), June 25, 1857, p. 2.

dream..." it was unlikely that Lesseps could attract sufficient private capital. He then would have to rely upon a subsidy from the French Government, which would jeopardize the canal's neutrality. Excluding finance, the Daily News saw no outstanding technical or political problem, and until political objections were openly produced, the Daily News contentedly doubted their existence. In its colorful and popular style, the journal said:

Till the faded red tapes be untied and the long gathered dust dispersed, and the grand diplomatic objections to this Suez Canal project brought forth from the forgotten protocol boxes where they are piously believed to slumber, we shall take leave not only to doubt their validity but their existence.¹⁰⁴

The Morning Star, reformist, anti-Palmerstonian, and edited by John Bright, responded characteristically in favor of the canal.¹⁰⁵ Acceptance was not universal, however, and the Morning Post, aggressively Palmerstonian, thought the canal "a sure means of French military aggrandisement on the basis of English sovereigns." Expanding this hostile theme, the journal resented the foreigner who had taken it upon himself to teach Britons about trade with India and China. In an unmistakable reference to Lesseps, the Morning Post said, "he takes our cause in hand for us, and is to make us all

¹⁰⁴Daily News (London), June 23, 1857, p. 5.

¹⁰⁵Morning Star (London), June 26, 1857, p. 2.

rich, increase our trade, and perform wonders...."¹⁰⁶ Palmerston could not have said it better himself. The Times was preoccupied with other issues in the summer of 1857. It reported the London Tavern meeting, but reserved its powerful editorial opinion for a later time.¹⁰⁷

The most extensive promotional campaign of the Victorian period ended on an uncertain note. Lesseps could not have known what, if anything, he accomplished in the provinces. He had presented his proposal in fourteen cities. Merchants and bankers in those cities had given him polite documents which (ostensibly) reflected a favorable sentiment on the issue. But the documents often were ambiguous, and, peering beyond them, the observer readily sees that only Newcastle, Birmingham, and Bristol accepted the idea of an Egyptian canal. Liverpool, Cork, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, and Hull remained somnolently disinterested while Manchester, Dublin, and Belfast proved hostile. London presented Lesseps with a mildly favorable resolution, but, as Fowler and dissident newspaper articles proved, strong divergent attitudes existed. Did Lesseps attract the political and financial support he wanted? Did he convince shippers to reroute their vessels from the Cape to the canal? In the summer of 1857,

¹⁰⁶Morning Post (London), June 26, 1857, p. 4.

¹⁰⁷The Times, June 25, 1857, p. 7. The Times turned irretrievably belligerent towards the project later in the year as Palmerston and Delane drew closer together. See The Tradition Established 1841-1884, p. 334.

these questions remained without answers because, as yet, circumstances had not presented the opportunity to answer them. Time would tell, and within one year parliament would debate the canal issue. When that happened, the efficacy of Lesseps's political efforts to pressure the Government into a policy reversal would undergo testing. Within two years, Lesseps established the international Suez Canal Company and put its stock up for sale. When that happened, the efficacy of his financial motives also would undergo testing. Whether or not British merchants would use the canal, once it was built, would have to wait somewhat longer. Meanwhile, squarely before the country for the first time, the canal controversy became quite heated as canal supporters and opponents traded broadsides in press and pamphlet.

While Lesseps anxiously waited for his promotive efforts to ignite meaningful support, an alternative scheme briefly captured the public's attention. Merchants and members of parliament publicly requested Government's support for their own project, the long-awaited railway and barge system to link India with the Mediterranean Sea via the Euphrates Valley. Although more complex and expensive than the canal, this project attracted much serious consideration and was debated in Commons.¹⁰⁸ Lord Clarendon, the Foreign Secretary, and Queen

¹⁰⁸ Great Britain, Parliament, Hansard's Parliamentary Debates, 3d ser., Vol. 147 (August 14, 1857), pp. 1652-1682. Future references to this source will follow the accepted short form of Hansard, volume, date, and page. Forty-one members petitioned the Government on behalf of the Euphrates Valley scheme.

Victoria, for example, were interested in the Euphrates project and lent it prestige which the Suez Canal could not equal. Palmerston remained uncommitted but hinted that he also favored it.¹⁰⁹

W. P. Andrew, the project's sponsor, exploited to capacity the public limelight which his scheme enjoyed. He explained that his project formed a perfectly direct route to India and would trim 3,700 miles from the Egyptian route. Making his own bid for the cloth industry's support, he wrote that the Euphrates Valley was a prolific cotton producer, and, at that very moment, he claimed, "there were hundreds of thousands of camel-loads of this valuable commodity rotting on the ground from want of the means of transport." The area was excellently suited also for grain cultivation and with proper care might become the breadbasket for Europe, he said.¹¹⁰

Andrew did not fight alone. The Liverpool Albion, a large and well-established journal, thought the Euphrates project superior to the canal because the latter route would be expensive and tedious for travellers.¹¹¹ For another thing,

¹⁰⁹Hoskins, British Routes to India, p. 333.

¹¹⁰W. P. Andrew, Letter to Viscount Palmerston on the Political Importance of the Euphrates Valley Railway, and the Necessity of the Financial Support of Her Majesty's Government (London: William H. Allen, 1857), pp. 4-6, and The Daily News (London), June 23, 1857, p. 5.

¹¹¹Leader from the Liverpool Albion, July 20, 1857, published in pamphlet form as The Euphrates Route to India (London: Effingham Wilson, 1857), p. 4. When finished, the canal was quite inexpensive compared to previous routes to India. The overland route in 1843 cost £140, the fare via the Egyptian

the Euphrates project would stimulate an extant cotton and grain trade whereas the canal route traversed an area devoid of all economic activity.¹¹² The Times supported the Euphrates project as a device to bring India closer to England.¹¹³ The Times ignored the fact that the canal would accomplish the same thing with half the capital investment, and without the necessity of breaking voyage as it steadily became a standard bearer for the anti-canal faction.

The canal lay under siege, but it found allies of its own in 1857, and they did not ignore the propaganda campaign of Andrew and friends. A counterblast, published anonymously by "Two Travelers," critically analyzed the Euphrates project and concluded on a whimsically cogent note. The canal, Andrew had charged, would make the trip to India a tedious bore because it would amount to one long sea voyage, not unlike the Cape route. Andrew's route, "Two Travelers" admitted, if nothing else, would not be boring. The journey from London to Karachi via the Euphrates Valley required no less than seven changes! A traveller would go from: (1) London to Dover by rail, (2) Dover to Calais by steamship, (3) Calais to Trieste by rail, (4) Trieste to Seleucia by steamship,

railway in 1866 was slightly less than £100, and in 1875 one could travel from London to India via the canal for £68. See Hoskins, British Routes to India, p. 370.

¹¹²Ibid., p. 7.

¹¹³Leader from The Times, July 21, 1857, published in pamphlet form as The Euphrates Railway, the Shortest Route to India (London: Effingham Wilson, 1857), p. 6.

(5) Seleucia to Jaber Castle by rail, (6) Jaber Castle to Bessorah by steam, (7) and finally, from Bessorah to Karachi by steam.¹¹⁴ Another traveller, the authors implied, would board a comfortable steamship in London and disembark in Karachi with all his belongings intact.¹¹⁵ His counterpart, no doubt, would arrive in Karachi frazzled from physical exhaustion and lack of sleep. And luggage? The man who braved the Euphrates route quite probably discovered that his bags had been scattered across France and half of Asia, a result of thieves, honest but careless freight handlers, and unavoidable transportation exigencies.

Henry Layard, an expert on Central Asia, added his opinion to that of those who preferred the canal to the Euphrates route. He admitted doubts regarding canal finance but, on balance, judged that project infinitely more feasible than its counterpart. Among other things, he exposed several serious under-calculations regarding distance and cost in Andrew's plan.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴"Two Travellers," The Euphrates Valley Route to India, an Examination of the Memoir Published by Mr. W. P. Andrew (London: Railway Times Office, 1857), p. 20.

¹¹⁵ Travellers disputed the comfort of early steamships. See, for example, Gordon Waterfield, ed., Letters from Egypt 1862-1869 by Lady Duff Gordon (re-edited; New York: Praeger, 1969), p. 40; Trollope, The West Indies and the Spanish Main, p. 359; William Howard Russell, A Diary in the East During the Tour of the Prince and Princes of Wales (2 vols.; London: George Routledge And Sons, 1869), I, 144.

¹¹⁶[Layard] "Suez and Euphrates Routes, " Quarterly Review, vol. 102 (October, 1857), 370.

Secondly, he said the Euphrates Valley was not, and could not become, the agricultural producer which Andrew portrayed. Parched for centuries, the area was incapable even of supporting a permanent population.¹¹⁷ And regarding the non-permanent population, Layard wrote that the area's nomadic tribes would entertain themselves by destroying the Euphrates Company's installations.¹¹⁸

Layard's authoritative denunciation of the Euphrates scheme inspired a lame response from a member of the Athenaeum Club, writing as "A Barrister." "A Barrister" did not comment upon Euphrates's topography, but he disagreed with Layard on the extent of possible nomadic vandalism. He wrote that Euphrates Valley Bedouins believed telegraph poles contained spirits which were better left undisturbed. He cited the Northwest Frontier of India as an example of a related point: savage tribes quickly realized that wanton vandalism did not justify the expenditure of energy required to uproot a telegraph pole or bend a rail.¹¹⁹

Through the summer of 1857, the Euphrates project acquired momentum at the expense of the canal project. But Indian Sepoys, who did not like to bite greased cartridges, inadvertently killed that momentum. April, May, and June increasingly

¹¹⁷Ibid., p. 372.

¹¹⁸Ibid., p. 388.

¹¹⁹"A Barrister," Euphrates Versus Suez or Which is the Shortest: Being a Reply to a Quarterly Reviewer of "The Suez and Euphrates Routes to India (London: Effingham Wilson, 1857), p. 27.

brought bad news from India as the Mutiny spread. Even so, as late as August, four months after Mutineers had taken Meerut and Delhi, the governing body of the East India Company in London and Lord Palmerston refused to despatch reinforcements in any way other than the slowest: by sailing vessel around the Cape.¹²⁰ Critics meanwhile howled that reinforcements should travel the quickest possible way, overland through Egypt.

The Indian Mutiny assisted the canal idea in two quite significant ways. First, it dealt a body blow to the Euphrates project. Andrew had requested Government's financial help, and there was good reason to think Government might comply. But Palmerston's August decision to re-route troops through Egypt changed everything. The quickest way to India ran through France by rail, across the Mediterranean, and again by rail through Egypt to a troop ship waiting at Suez. Paris, however, was displeased with talk of a British-built railroad through the heart of Central Asia: it smacked of political intrigue and increased British influence in a sensitive zone. As it happened, on August 14, 1857, Napoleon III was visiting Victoria, and after a conference between the French Emperor and Palmerston, Palmerston disavowed any Government support for the Euphrates project as Napoleon III

¹²⁰Mr. Vernon Smith, President of the Board of Control, supported Palmerston's sending reinforcements around the Cape and even after Palmerston re-routed troops through Egypt, Smith refused to see the need for a canal. In 1858 he voted against the canal. See Hoskins, British Routes to India, p. 401.

magnanimously offered British reinforcements complete use of France's rail system. Without Government support, public interest in the Euphrates project withered and died. The idea of a complex steamship-railroad-barge network to India became, as one scholar wrote, "a wandering spirit, often seen and heard but never quite able to materialize."¹²¹

The Mutiny helped the canal in a second way. As supplies for India lumbered around the Cape, the public reacted violently. The (London) Daily News printed a letter representative of public opinion which said the Government refused to send reinforcements through Egypt because such action would, "furnish the promoters of the Suez Canal with an argument the more."¹²² The decision made, by September, British troops for India were going through Egypt.¹²³

The last months of 1857 were optimistic times for friends

¹²¹Hoskins, British Routes to India, p. 407. Hoskins, pp. 339-342 and pp. 400-407 as well as Farnie, East and West of Suez, pp. 45-46 are authoritative and documented accounts of this episode. Interestingly, the Euphrates "spirit" was revived in 1859 as work on the canal started (Farnie, p. 57); in 1862 as steamers came into their own (The Times, November 29, 1862, p. 8); in 1868 as the Mont Cenis Summit Railway opened and Brindisi in Italy became an alternate route to Marseilles (Farnie, p. 75); and again in 1869 when the Suez Canal's opening stirred interest in all routes to India (Farnie, p. 90).

¹²²Cited in Lesseps, Recollections of Forty Years, II, 73-74 and Schonfield, The Suez Canal in Peace and War, p. 33.

¹²³Even so, of the 40,000 troops sent to India from Britain, only 5,500, or thirteen per cent, took the overland route. The vast majority used the Cape, taking eighty days by steam or one hundred and ten days by sail. See Farnie, East and West of Suez, p. 46.

of the canal, and it appeared their project was gaining ground. The Mutiny underwrote the need for a quicker route to India, and although troops were using the railroad, for the time, it was easy to see how the canal would improve logistically upon the railroad. Palmerston, as it seemed to Lesseps and his colleagues, moved deeper into an untenable and unpopular political position of obstinance.¹²⁴ Moreover, Redcliffe, one of the canal's oldest enemies, retired from his post at Constantinople. Factors at work seemed to be pointing toward happier days for the project: popular and political acceptance, and British gold might have seemed just around the corner.

But a pamphlet appeared in the first month of the new year which deflated canal optimism. The British Admiralty, quiet on the subject until then, published a report by its chief hydrographer, Captain Thomas Spratt, which sharply challenged one of the canal's most basic engineering precepts.¹²⁵

¹²⁴See, for example, letters from Lesseps to the Viceroy, dated September 10, 1857; to Darby Griffith, dated September 15, 1857; to the Viceroy, dated September 28, 1857; to his brother, dated December 25, 1857. These letters are reproduced in Lesseps, Recollections of Forty Years, II, 74-85.

¹²⁵Captain T. Spratt, An Inquiry into the Soundness of M. De Lesseps' Reasonings and Arguments on the Practicability of the Suez Canal (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode for H. M. Stationary Office, 1858).

Thomas Abel Bremage Spratt's (1811-1888) family had a long naval tradition. Commissioned in 1837, he served in the Crimean War. Following the war he surveyed the Mediterranean area where he, incidentally, gained fame as an archeologist. His studies were sought and published by the Admiralty and by academe. Publications in chronological order include Inscriptiones Sprattianae (1855), a scholarly commentary on six Greek

Lesseps believed that rivers entering oceans rarely contributed to the formation of shoreline sandbars. He wrote that particles suspended by river currents, i.e. silt, were almost always too heavy to be carried for any significant distance. Sandbars, he theorized, were created not by silt deposits but by the detergent action of ocean tides.¹²⁶

Captain Spratt took an opposite position. His Danube studies proved unequivocally that river deposits had extended the mouth of that river one-third of a mile in only twenty years.¹²⁷ Spratt now turned his attention to another great river, the Nile, and instigated a controversy which bore serious implications for the canal. If rivers did carry silt great distances, the port planned for Pelusium, lying only twenty-five miles east of the Nile, might be in great danger. Spratt noted that the sea west of Alexandria was deep while east of Alexandria it was shallow, a condition (he thought) caused by one thing: strong west-to-east wave and current action which carried Nile silt toward Pelusium.¹²⁸

-inscriptions he found in the Levant; An Investigation of the Movements of Teignmouth Bar (1856); An Inquiry... (1858); Delta of the Nile..., A Dissertation on the True Position of Pelusium... (1859).

Mr. Charles Alison, Redcliffe's replacement at Constantinople, immediately recognized the importance of Spratt's report and urgently requested a copy. He realized it would be useful in his dealings with the Porte. See FO/78/1421, Suez Canal, vol. 4, letter from Alison to the Foreign Office, dated January 8, 1858.

¹²⁶ Spratt, An Inquiry..., pp. 4-5.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 13.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 9. Spratt had no sooner finished this

Canal publicity and the fear that Lesseps's promotional activities were making headway prompted the Admiralty to publish Spratt's theory prematurely. At the time, his ideas seemed sound enough but more impressive data remained eighteen months in the future. Spratt published in early 1858, he said, "in the interest of these communities who are desirous of speculating upon a great project founded upon such [in-correct] arguments."¹²⁹

This pamphlet, one would think, wielded a significant impact on public opinion. After all, a British naval officer with twenty years hydrographical experience wrote it. Moreover the Admiralty sponsored the pamphlet and who, a Briton might have asked, knew more about sea matters than the Admiralty? Spratt's thesis also fit nicely into conventional wisdom. The whole idea of tides and silt reassured opponents of the project because every schoolboy knew that the Nile carried silt from the Egyptian interior to the delta. Much of this silt quite possibly remained in suspension until deposited at sea. The technical question for those who leaned toward Spratt was whether silt piled up at the Nile's mouth or was carried somewhere by currents. Conclusive proof was not available in 1858, but Captain Spratt remained in the

paper when the Admiralty assigned him additional duty in the Mediterranean. Having alleged that Nile deposits would ruin the prospective canal, the Admiralty expected him to prove his theory.

¹²⁹Ibid., p. 10.

Mediterranean working on the question of where Nile silt eventually came to rest.

While interested people appraised the various canal arguments, canal supporters in parliament annoyed the new Derby Government with their favorite issue. Darby Griffith, for example, in early 1858 interrupted a debate on India with the casual reminder that a canal would greatly simplify transportation to India by eliminating the necessity for breaking voyage at Alexandria.¹³⁰

The interval between Lesseps's tour in 1857 and the issue finally reaching parliament in 1858 represented both gain and loss for canal projectors. The Euphrates scheme appeared briefly as a direct competitor, but, happily for Lesseps, Palmerston (albeit reluctantly) killed it out of deference to France. The pamphlet war gave the question a public hearing, but not always a favorable one, and Spratt's work was particularly damaging.¹³¹ Enemies of the canal during this interval recruited a powerful ally when The Times

¹³⁰Hansard, vol. 149 (March 26, 1858), 848. Berkely had acted similarly earlier, see Hansard, vol. 146, 1043.

¹³¹It might be instructive to know circulation figures for the various pamphlets. Personal inquiries by the researcher at the British Museum and at Eyre and Spottiswoode publishers, a firm which did a great deal of work for the Stationary Office during the nineteenth century, reveal that circulation figures no longer exist because they were destroyed during World War II. One can assume that relevant pamphlets circulated quickly within commercial and political circles and their influence, like that of newspapers, went beyond a flat circulation as they were passed from hand to hand.

irretrievably came to their side, a position it adopted as a result of the personal and philosophical relationship between Palmerston and its editor, J. T. Delane.¹³² Making its posture undeniably clear for the first time, The Times in May, having dropped the Euphrates scheme, praised the overland route and dismissed the canal idea as a "visionary project." The Egyptian railroad, it said, proved its value daily by transporting fresh troops from Alexandria to Suez. This procedure was efficient and there was no need for an isthmian canal. Further defending the overland route, The Times claimed that a break in the voyage actually was preferable to a direct canal route for soldiers because the dusty train ride from Alexandria to Suez exposed them to an uncomfortable desert climate similar to that of India. Closing with a remarkable degree of fatalism, The Times advised letting

the world leave things to their natural course. Commerce and communication cannot be brought into existence by declamation or by the essays on the fraternity of nations.¹³³

Lesseps and his colleagues agreed in the spring of 1858 that time finally was ripe to test their parliamentary strength.¹³⁴ Until then Lesseps had refused to commit his

¹³²The Tradition Established, p. 334.

¹³³The Times, May 26, 1858, p. 8.

¹³⁴See the letter from Lesseps to M. de Negrelli, Lesseps's Austrian contact, dated April 24, 1858, in Lesseps, Recollections of Forty Years, II, 103.

English political forces. Indeed, he had been displeased with the canal's scattered parliamentary forces sniping at Government through 1857. Writing to an associate, he said that full scale debate in 1857 would have been disastrous to their cause because Palmerston had been too strong. In a political fight over important policy the

majority would, in order to keep him in office, have voted against us, which as matters stand, it has not done, thus leaving Lord Palmerston alone responsible, in the eyes of Europe, for a policy which is generally condemned, even in England.¹³⁵

More than once since his promotional tour Lesseps had cautioned his friends in parliament against untimely attempts to bring their project to a showdown.¹³⁶ The 1858 session, however, offered an appropriate opportunity because the Mutiny had favorably highlighted their issue, and Palmerston had suffered defeat. On April 28, 1858, while in Constantinople, Lesseps received the fateful telegram; Roebuck and his parliamentary allies would raise the issue in early June. The canal's political forces in England were mustering as Lesseps prepared to ship for London to be on hand for the upcoming debate and division.¹³⁷

¹³⁵Ibid., II, 69.

¹³⁶See letters from Lesseps to Darby Griffith, dated September 15, 1857; Lesseps to Lange, dated April 15, 1858, in Lesseps, Recollections of Forty Years, II, 75-77, Ibid., II, 96.

¹³⁷Ibid., II, 104-105.

CHAPTER III

It was necessary to describe in the last chapter Lesseps's promotional tour and the events which followed in order to portray the climate of opinion as the canal question appeared before parliament. Lesseps had courted the provinces and, he thought, elevated his idea from a mere speculation to a solid investment. The only thing that remained was for Lesseps's parliamentary allies to bring their cause célèbre forward.

Timing was important. As argued earlier,¹ Lesseps was adamant against committing his project to political battle against the powerful and popular Government of Lord Palmerston. In early 1858, however, Palmerston was decisively beaten and forced to resign office over the Conspiracy to Murder Bill. More importantly, Palmerston's position on the Conspiracy to Murder Bill appeared at odds, for once, with public opinion. With Palmerston's popular and political stock declining, and his age advancing--he was seventy-two years old in February, 1858, older than any previous politician who exercised such power--canal supporters reasonably thought his Eastern policy

¹See above, pp. 99-100.

ripe for re-examination.

In the spring of 1858, one problem remained: the Orsini Plot and ensuing Conspiracy to Murder Bill, although unseating Palmerston and thus benefitting the canal's friends, touched off a brief but heated French publicity campaign against England. Count Persigny, France's Ambassador to England, stormed the British Foreign Office and, we are told, belligerently drew his little ceremonial sword, shouting, "C'est la guerre!"² The French and British press over reacted and generated another war scare. Needless to say, this was no time to bring up in the British House of Commons the subject of a Frenchman's Egyptian canal.

Moderate heads prevailed in the aftermath of the controversial Conspiracy to Murder Bill. Lord Derby selected Lord Malmesbury as Foreign Secretary, an admirable choice. Lord Malmesbury was well suited to rescue relations with France. He was young enough not to remember Napoleon III's uncle, and, moreover, he personally had befriended Napoleon III during the latter's exile in England in 1848.³

Napoleon III also did his part. He quickly replaced the

²Roger L. Williams, The World of Napoleon III, 1851-1870 (New York: The Free Press, 1965), pp. 35-36.

³Ibid., p. 31. Malmesbury wrote Cowley, England's Ambassador to Paris, on March 4, 1858, and directed him to apologize to his French colleagues for any misunderstanding which resulted from the Conspiracy to Murder Bill. Cowley did so and the results were satisfactory. The letter is reproduced in The Annual Register, vol. 100 (1858), in the Public Documents section, pp. 205-207.

bellicose Persigny with the Duc de Malakhoff, a hero of the Crimean War and an old friend of England's. The Duc de Malakhoff was not only personally acceptable to the English, he had a charming Spanish wife who subsequently took London society by storm. Queen Victoria, for one, greatly approved Malakhoff's appointment and thought it a positive step toward Anglo-French friendship.⁴

It was time for Lesseps's parliamentary forces to attack Britain's traditional Eastern policy. Palmerston had been replaced by Derby and, hopefully, the former's foreign policies had gone out of favor. The Mutiny had eliminated a serious contender, the Euphrates Valley project, while highlighting the necessity of quicker transportation to India. Malmesbury and Malakhoff steadily worked to get Anglo-Franco relations on the right track and keep them there after the furor of the Orsini Plot and Conspiracy to Murder Bill.

Indeed, some sources thought a straightforward examination of the canal question past due. The Glasgow Herald wanted

at least one member...in the new Parliament of sufficient patriotism, earnestness, and independence, to urge this matter, and extort a statement of [heretofore hidden] motives [for the Government's unexplained opposition] which is not an insult to the understanding of engineers and merchants.⁵

⁴J. M. Thompson, Louis Napoleon and the Second Empire (New York: Norton, 1955) p. 183.

⁵Glasgow Herald, May 20, 1857, p. 2, reprint of an 1856 article from (Glasgow) Daily News.

John Arthur Roebuck opened the full-dress debate, following his announcement to do so the night before, with a patriotic appeal. Britain, he said, in the past had been misguided by politicians who had reduced her to the ignominious role of cat's paw for Constantinople. The Porte, too weak and corrupt to maintain itself, had shrewdly maneuvered British statesmen into an awkward position of being responsible for its integrity. And over the years, Turkish support had become an accepted tenet of British foreign policy until, Roebuck said, opposition to the canal followed pro forma and not, he lamented, as a rational response to Britain's own best interests.⁶

Roebuck wanted parliament to consider two questions. First, did world trade and communication benefit mankind? Second, if it were true and if the canal would promote trade and communication, would England also not benefit? Nothing more, he said, concerned parliament. Involvement with the project's commercial or physical considerations, elements relevant only to potential investors, would misdirect parliament's energy and would exceed its authority.⁷

Roebuck then presented the issue in a religious form. The project at hand, he said, provided civilized man a glorious and unprecedented opportunity to reflect divine inspiration. How better, he asked, could modern civilization exhibit divinely inspired talents than by transforming nature for the

⁶Hansard, vol. 150, p. 1360.

⁷Ibid., p. 1361.

benefit of God's children.⁸

National pride, he continued, had done the project much unnecessary harm. Some British circles based their antagonism on the incorrect view that the project would benefit France to the detriment of England. This was an erroneous and dangerous assumption for Britons to make, Roebuck concluded. Such myopic vision caused France and the rest of the world to think of the British as "in insolent, an insular, a grasping, and a selfish people." And looking at Government's attitude toward the issue, Roebuck regretted that the French reaction probably was justified.⁹

Hitting hard at Palmerston's foreign policy, Roebuck encouraged his colleagues to consider objectively the issue before them. He invited the Commons to resume its watchdog role and demonstrate to Europe that Britain would not hinder a project beneficial to everyone. Not content with merely putting Britain's foreign policy in a harsh European light, Roebuck also said that his countrymen could benefit in this instance from the example of Said Pasha, who had written

⁸ Ibid., p. 1362.

⁹ Ibid. John Stuart Mill in his autobiography said the same thing and singled out Palmerston's opposition to the Suez Canal project as the worst example of English selfishness. See Max Lerner, ed., Essential Works of John Stuart Mill (New York: Bantam Books, 1965), p. 153.

Seymour Fitzgerald, Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs in Derby's Government, took a different view. He grandelocquently retorted that he was selfish when that word meant maintaining "the prosperity and greatness of this country." See Hansard, vol. 150, p. 1372.

My country stands in such a way that it is an obstacle in the facility of transport from one part of the earth's surface to another. I will, to the utmost of my power, lend my aid in order to get rid of this difficulty. I will not consider my own private interests. I am prepared, for the benefit of mankind, to give the nations of the earth means of transportation across my country.¹⁰

Roebuck's tactic in this instance implied a stinging reversal of roles: Britain, led by Palmerston, acted as the barbarian because of its selfish attitude. Its prolonged opposition to the canal appeared mean and shabby. Hoping to reverse Britain's heretofore obstructive position, Roebuck proposed:

That the power and influence of England ought not to be employed in order to induce the Sultan to withhold his consent from the formation of a canal across the Isthmus of Suez.¹¹

Darby Griffith, a man largely responsible for defeating Palmerston's first Government,¹² said a viable commercial argument against the project did not exist. England, with her naval and mercantile superiority, definitely would become the chief beneficiary.¹³ Grafting the canal issue onto the broader question of empire, Griffith said the Mutiny, virtually over by June 1858, underscored the desperate need

¹⁰Hansard, vol. 150, p. 1365.

¹¹Ibid., p. 1364.

¹²See Bagehot, The English Constitution, p. 160.

¹³Hansard, vol. 150, p. 1367.

for better Indian communications.¹⁴ Touching an exposed nerve, he asked his colleagues to consider the time and suffering which a canal might have saved.¹⁵ People concerned for the safety of family of friends (and there were many) would have seen much substance in Griffith's demand for better communication with India.

Griffith next challenged a basic Palmerstonian position: he said the canal would not sever Egypt's link with the Ottoman empire. On the contrary, he thought the canal would strengthen Turkish control over the Red Sea and upper Egypt, always independent and troublesome areas, by putting them within range of Turkish warships.¹⁶

Robert Stephenson, exhibiting an uncommon vitality--he never took the floor in Commons and only rarely attended divisions--led the counter-attack.¹⁷ He said that Roebuck had spoken in generalities, but had not provided Commons with a single piece of hard evidence that the projected canal was a

¹⁴Delhi was recaptured in September, 1857, and the Mutiny collapsed. Thereafter British units scoured the countryside, breaking the last pocket of resistance in January, 1859.

¹⁵Hansard, vol. 150, p. 1368. W. L. Burn, Age of Equipoise (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1964), pp. 83-84, emphasized the traumatic impact which the Mutiny had on Britain.

¹⁶Hansard, vol. 150, p. 1369. Whether Griffith's listeners appreciated it or not, this was a cogent point. Fore-runners of the modern Suez Canal had been constructed, in part, as measures to prevent rebellions in Upper Egypt.

¹⁷All references to members of parliament and their voting records are based on examination of the Division Lists located in Victoria Tower, the House of Lords' Record Office.

good idea. No one denied that "it was very desirable to facilitate the intercourse between one portion of the globe and another," but, he asked, would the canal in question achieve that goal? Moreover, putting the general question aside momentarily, serious doubts existed whether the canal would ever be completed. Claiming more awareness of the project than most people, Stephenson hammered away at some of the canal's technical problems: lack of water and supplies for workers, blowing sand, shallow seas at both ends. Why attempt the project, Stephenson asked, when no one needed it? Egypt had a perfectly good railroad (the one he built) which answered all demands for travellers and light goods. Appraising Commons' responsibility differently than Roebuck, he announced that his professional integrity absolutely precluded any action which could be interpreted as allowing the project. He declared he could not acquiesce to a project which he felt would "prove to be an abortive scheme, ruinous to its constructors."¹⁸ Stephenson could not have made his views on parliamentary responsibility clearer. He would do anything to protect British investors from a foolish risk, a risk which he thought implied a misapplication of investment capital.

Stephenson, as unaccustomed to debating as he was, pressed the counterattack. Assuming, only for the sake of argument, that the project someday might be finished, he admitted that

¹⁸Hansard, vol. 150, p. 1372.

it might benefit Mediterranean merchants. By the same token, was it not likely, he suggested, that complications arising from the canal would eventually lead to an European war?¹⁹ He reminded Commons that the French were in Algeria, and if they succeeded in establishing an Egyptian bridgehead, under the guise of an international canal company, they could disrupt British land communication with India. Or, posing a second potential political problem, Stephenson discussed Britain's delicate relations with the Porte. So long as Britain supported the Porte, Britain could rely upon Turkish pressure at Alexandria to insure the inviolability of the overland route. The danger, he said, was that an autonomous Egypt would not willingly serve as Britain's highway to India. He need not remind people that, in the past, Egypt had experienced flashes of vitality, and the possibility of another Ali Pasha was not a pleasant thought to British statesmen.

Stephenson concluded his attack, returning to his allegation that a trans-Egyptian canal was commercially unimportant. Ironically, he said, the world's leading commercial power had remained aloof from the Frenchman's project. Did this mean, he asked, that British merchants needed someone else to show them what was good for them? He cautioned Commons against precipitate action or the reversal of a pragmatic policy "which this country had for a considerable time adopted."²⁰

¹⁹Ibid., p. 1375.

²⁰Ibid., p. 1377.

A traditionalist in Commons would have appreciated Stephenson's case. Past policy seemed moderately successful; why should it be changed when a reversal could possibly lead to difficulties?

Milner-Gibson, one of Palmerston's adversaries, followed Stephenson²¹ and assailed the Government's present policy, focusing first on Seymour Fitzgerald, Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs. He criticized Fitzgerald for mechanically adopting a policy he found lying in the pigeon-holes of the Foreign Office. Because of Fitzgerald's thoughtless adherence to traditional policy, the House of Commons needed to examine relevant foreign correspondence. The time had come, Milner-Gibson challenged, for a complete re-evaluation of England's Mediterranean policy. As he saw it, the question was no less than whether the Foreign Office currently was following a path "really consistent with the true interests and welfare of England."²²

Milner-Gibson had barbs enough for everyone. He chided Stephenson for trying to intimidate Commons with his professional reputation. He conceded Stephenson's pronouncements against the canal would "have great weight" with some im-

²¹There was a considerable amount of animosity between Palmerston and Milner-Gibson. See Ashley, The Life of Henry John Temple, Viscount Palmerston, II, 145, and Jasper Ridley, Lord Palmerston (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company Inc., 1971), p. 481. Ridley wrote that during debate on the Conspiracy to Murder Bill in 1857, Palmerston got so enraged at Milner-Gibson that he shook his fist at him.

²²Hansard, vol. 150, p. 1377. Later in the debate, Gladstone also demanded that Government expose the record.

pressionable members, but, at the same time, he implored the rest of his colleagues to remember that Stephenson's opinions were relevant only to a potential investor. He asked Commons to notice that Stephenson's canal objections were irrelevant to the stated issue. Moreover, he said, a prestigious reputation should not obscure the fact that engineers were frequently deceived when dealing "with questions which were both new and difficult." Nimble illustrating this point, he cited Stephenson's mistaken opinion regarding the Niagara River bridge in America.²³

Deviating somewhat from the free trade school, Milner-Gibson declared himself friendly to the Ottoman empire, and a supporter of England's traditional Eastern policy, a policy which he thought was backfiring.²⁴ Sustained British support, rather than strengthening him, had weakened the Porte. Too much British interference at Constantinople had wrecked Turkish integrity and resolve, and Milner-Gibson thought the only way to reverse this failing situation was for Government to cease meddling and allow the Porte to solve his own internal problems.²⁵

²³Ibid., p. 1378. There was no need to recall specifics for his audience because everyone remembered Stephenson's incorrect notions about that project. Briefly, Stephenson mistakenly had believed that an 850 foot long suspension bridge over the Niagara River impossible to build. He was wrong and the bridge opened in 1850.

²⁴Milner-Gibson had an interesting personal relationship with the Porte. He was a famous yachtsman and was the only amateur sailor allowed to sail Turkish waters without a passport.

²⁵Hansard, vol. 150, p. 1378.

In conclusion, Milner-Gibson scoffed at the notion of the canal as a divisive moat. He said it was as likely to separate Egypt from Turkey as the Caledonian Canal was likely to separate England from Scotland. Speaking as an apologist for the Ottoman empire, he thought the desert between Egypt and Turkey a more formidable barrier. The canal would create an oasis which, by turns would bring civilization, cultivation, and stronger bonds between Turkey and Egypt. Closing, he reminded his colleagues that Roebuck's motion did not ask them to approve the canal: it simply asked Government to cease interference and allow Turkey and Egypt to grapple with the problem themselves.²⁶

Palmerston, architect of the policy which canal men abhorred, spoke next and pretended he was glad to finally see the canal question in the open. Precisely delimiting his two-fold objections, he first thought the canal could be excavated only with a great investment of money and lives. Secondly, he objected to it because it obviously was "the greatest bubble which was ever imposed upon the credulity and simplicity of the people of this country."²⁷

Palmerston's opening argument demands immediate attention because of its glaring weakness. Neither of his enumerated objections remotely related to Roebuck's motion, and his

²⁶ Ibid., p. 1379.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 1380.

humanitarianism was an obvious gesture to the press.²⁸ At earlier times, when the canal question had briefly appeared before parliament, Palmerston had ignored the fellahin. On this occasion it formed the main topic before Commons, certain to get full press coverage; thus Palmerston adopted the role of the defender of the weak.

Referring to Lesseps's propaganda tour, he also sought to correct any misconception that meetings with provincial commercial bodies had been spontaneous. He described them as affairs which had been "got up by foreign projectors for their own purposes," another gross misrepresentation of the situation.²⁹ Lesseps's provincial appearances, as everyone knew, were preceded by extensive advertising, and no one claimed spontaneity for the meetings. Palmerston attempted to portray Lesseps's tour as a conspiracy. As we will see next, he would go even farther in his crusade against the canal.

Taking a leaf from Stephenson, Palmerston spoke at length on the canal's technical problems, including the incredible notion that seasonal winds would make sailing through

²⁸This was a typical Palmerstonian device. For a thorough treatment of his manipulation of the press and public opinion see Kingsley Martin, The Triumph of Lord Palmerston: A Study of Public Opinion in England Before the Crimean War (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1924).

²⁹Hansard, vol. 150, p. 1380.

the canal at certain times of the year "inconceivably slow,"³⁰ a point which warrants special attention because of its uniqueness to Lord Palmerston. At no time did anyone consider sailing through the projected waterway. Even non-seamen would disregard immediately such a suggestion. The canal, narrow and shallow, would lack room for maneuverability and, from the beginning, plans required sailing ships to be towed through the canal by steam tug. This aspect of Palmerston's speech leaves one bewildered. Was he actually unaware of how the project was designed to function? Not likely, for a plethora of canal literature was in circulation; moreover, Lesseps had provided him canal specifics by letter and in person. Barring a mistake in the transcription of the debate, one must conclude that Palmerston would go to near perjurious lengths to thwart the project.³¹

Commenting on the project's political aspects, Palmerston committed himself to additional serious contradiction. He denied that England had "been exercising a moral constraint upon the Sultan of Turkey to prevent him giving his sanction to this scheme." He admitted that Her Majesty's Government had exerted at the outset slight diplomatic pressure on the Porte to withhold his consent for the project. Thereafter, Palmerston lied, the Porte steadily had opposed the project

³⁰Ibid., p. 1381.

³¹A misquote in Hansard and in the press is unlikely. This debate was transcribed at length in the press and a misquote would have brought letters and a retraction. No such thing happened.

on his own, and continued political tutoring had been unnecessary. The Porte's prolonged suspicion of the project, said Palmerston, stemmed from his acute assessment of Eastern politics. The Porte sought, above all else, to retain the integrity and unity of his empire, and an Egyptian example of independence would encourage other parts of the empire to seek autonomy.³²

An additional insight into Government's intransigence reveals itself if Palmerston is interpellated again. Examination of the documents disproves the Palmerstonian claim that Britain's political pressure on the Porte had been shortlived. Within the past year, replying to a question in Commons, Palmerston unequivocally answered that Government would not encourage the Sultan to grant a firman because for the last fifteen years Government "have used all the influence they possess at Constantinople and in Egypt to prevent that scheme from being carried into execution."³³ This substantial evidence of prolonged official British opposition was available to Palmerston's contemporaries, but for the historian, the Foreign Office folios contain even more evidence. Foreign Office correspondence dated March 13, 1858, March 24, 1858, and March 31, 1858--i.e. correspondence barely two months old as Palmerston spoke--proves that Government continued to fight

³²Hansard, vol. 150, pp. 1381-1382.

³³Ibid., vol. 146, pp. 1043-1044.

the project at Constantinople.

Lord Palmerston next discussed the canal's military implications for British security.³⁵ Implanting the idea that Government knew much more than parliament, he said people generally were unaware of "what has been taking place in the Mediterranean frontier of Egypt in late years." He revealed that Mohammed Ali and his successors had vastly improved the once-porous Egyptian coastal defenses. Always appreciative of Western technology, Mohammed Ali systematically had employed foreign engineers, working with the most advanced fortification concepts, and fresh British intelligence reports estimated that 20,000 men and three thousand guns had been permanently deployed. In fact, Palmerston said, Egypt's Mediterranean coast should be considered impregnable. Working from this assumption, Palmerston nimbly leaped to the isthmus' new strategical importance. If Egypt blocked Britain's overland route, a punitive expeditionary force, in view of the superbly fortified coast, would have to invade Egypt from the east. If such an emergency occurred, the pros-

³⁴See FO 78/1421, Suez Canal, vol. 4, letters dated March 13, 1858; March 24, 1858; and March 31, 1858.

³⁵Palmerston often used this technique. Throughout his political life he had the sometime near fanatical fear that England was about to be struck down by enemies named and unnamed. Contemporaries and biographers often made the point that Palmerston was a master of the war-scare to manipulate politicians and the public. For examples of imaginary plots against England which only Palmerston saw, see Ashley, The Life of Henry John Temple..., II, 166-169.

pect of a water barrier three hundred feet wide and thirty feet deep, bristling with forts and patrolled by gunboats, was not reassuring.³⁶

In conclusion, Palmerston made two additional points, one correct, one incorrect. First, despite Lesseps's claims, there was no authentic enthusiasm for the project. Correctly gauging genuine commercial sentiment, Palmerston said "this scheme has practically been scouted by the wiser commercial men of this country."³⁷ Secondly, regardless of the alleged benefits for mankind, the project was not, he said, in England's longterm interest. An Egyptian canal would complicate European stability by giving all Britain's enemies a possible source of advantage. Palmerston admired a sense of mission, but when it came to hard politics his priorities were clear. In calling for defeat of Roebuck's motion, he said:

I do not think that we ought, to the danger of the interests of the country, to indulge in philanthropic reveries, or be led away by a too generous wish to promote the prosperity of the human race.³⁸

³⁶Hansard, vol. 150, pp. 1382-1383. There was nothing to Egypt's impregnable coast, as the invasion of 1882 showed. There was something, however, to the canal as a defensive line, but for Britain. During World War I, the canal was Britain's defensive line against the Turks.

³⁷Hansard, vol. 150, p. 1383. This was true, as we shall see, but it was irrelevant to the issue before Commons.

³⁸Ibid. Donald Southgate, author of The Most English Minister, the Policies and Politics of Palmerston (London: Macmillan, 1966), chose well the title of his book.

Gladstone replied that his respected colleague had evaded the issue at hand. The current debate dealt only with a motion which, if passed, would "put an end to the vicious system" of intervention in Turkish affairs.³⁹ Speaking in somber tones, Gladstone warned the Commons that continued opposition placed Britain in a dangerously isolated political position. Moreover, and quite correctly as subsequent events proved, Gladstone said Britain's resistance was bound to fail. The canal was obviously beneficial and Lesseps would complete it with or without British support; hence resistance was not only politically dangerous, but pointless. Translating Roebuck's motion into simple terms, Gladstone said:

the question is, whether the House of Commons, being now challenged on the point, shall make itself responsible for that which it has never yet done--namely, for countenancing the opposition to this project, which has been conducted from time to time by the executive Government without the sanction and without the approval of this House.⁴⁰

³⁹Ibid., pp. 1385-1386. Gladstone avoided discussion of the canal's commercial advantages because he did not believe it was a viable enterprise. His objections were political and only in 1882 did he admit that the canal was tremendously important to the British Empire. See D. C. M. Platt, Finance, Trade, and Politics in British Foreign Policy 1815-1914 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 172.

⁴⁰Hansard, vol. 150, p. 1386. This statement sounds like Lesseps and the researcher would like to be able to produce correspondence linking Lesseps closer to Gladstone, but examination of Gladstone MSS. in the British Museum did not reveal any correspondence with Lesseps. Lesseps's publications also contain no Gladstone correspondence. The two men, however, did meet on occasions.

Changing directions, Gladstone tried to undermine canal opposition by exposing its lack of substance.⁴¹ For example, he recalled that early advocates of quicker transportation through Egypt had viewed the British-built railroad as the answer to their problem. The railroad, they had argued, would fulfill all requirements for rapid passenger transit. They were correct. The Egyptian railway sped travellers and light goods from Alexandria to Suez in only eight hours. In 1858, however, some railway people feared a waterway would enable a hostile power to quickly move troops through Egypt and invade India. These people ignored the fact that the railway could be pressed into the same service.⁴² Or, on the reverse side of the contradiction, railway people were caught in the unpleasant realization that everything their railway could do, the canal could do better.

Concurring with Milner-Gibson, Gladstone disbelieved that the Ottoman empire rested solely upon the Porte's ability to enforce conformity. Striking a sensitive spot in Britain's conventional Turkish policy, Gladstone declared the Porte incapable of forcibly keeping Egypt subjugated, and continued repression of Egypt, and the Principalities for that matter, would be self-defeating. Gladstone said force was increasing-

⁴¹Kenneth Bell, "British Policy Towards the Construction of the Suez Canal, 1859-1865," Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 5th ser., vol. 15 (1965), p. 128, saw this and called it "official wooliness."

⁴²Hansard, vol. 150, pp. 1386-1387.

ly counter-productive, and if the empire were to survive intact, Constantinople needed to pay more attention to unifying factors such as religion and commerce.⁴³

Disraeli, Derby's Chancellor of the Exchequer, agreed with Palmerston that the canal would be deleterious to England's political interests. He was not unappreciative of its possible benefits, he admitted, but he considered those benefits speculative.⁴⁴ Political considerations, on the other hand, were impending and obvious to everyone, Conservative or Liberal. The Commons' response to the issue required utmost caution, he said, because passage of Roebuck's motion implied British acquiescence to the project. In effect, passage would drive Turkey to shipwreck and invite further divisions within the empire.⁴⁵ Europe could not remain idle under such conditions, and dissolution of the Ottoman empire inevitably would lead to increased political tensions and the need for larger military budgets. Speaking as Chancellor of the Exchequer, Disraeli wondered how England could afford larger military budgets. Neatly interlocking the canal with political complications, increased military budgets, and higher taxes, Disraeli ended his rebuttal. He dovetailed smoothly with Palmerston and Stephenson and questioned the wisdom of

⁴³Hansard, vol. 150, pp. 1388-1389. In 1878 Gladstone would have a great deal more to say about the Porte's use of force in Bulgaria.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 1396.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 1393.

altering "a policy that ...[Britain had] long pursued, and which has been sanctioned by high authority."⁴⁶

Lord John Russell, the last important speaker to defend the resolution, delivered a devastating rebuttal. If it were true, he asked, as Palmerston, Stephenson, and Disraeli had said, that the project was no more than a bubble, faced by overwhelming technical barriers, in addition to a determined Turkish resistance, why was England involved? Surely, he thought, a combination of such formidable obstacles would kill the project. Why, then, did Government needlessly dissipate its energy on a problem which did not exist. The wise course, he implied, if the anti-canal faction believed its own case, was to pass Roebuck's motion as a gesture of international good will, then stand back and watch the project collapse. Foolhardy investors could throw their money away, England would cease being an international villain, and the isthmus would remain unchanged.⁴⁷

In peacetime, he continued, others would gain from it, but he was convinced that Britain's overwhelming commercial dominance would prevent late-starters from cutting into British profits. In wartime, some argued, the canal would enable a foreign power to strike swiftly at India. Agreeing with Gladstone, Lord John contested this theory: an enemy

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 1396.

⁴⁷Ibid., pp. 1396-1397.

fleet might pass the canal, but it would face British naval stations in the Red Sea. Thus, by any way one viewed it, the project would benefit the world's greatest maritime power more than anyone else. For Lord John, nothing more needed to be said: French political escapades, encroachments in Egypt, war scares and larger military budgets were humbug.⁴⁸

After a final plea from Roebuck to consider his resolution on its own merit, the division was held and the resolution was beaten. To the question: "would Her Majesty's Government refrain from using its influence against the canal?" the 1858 answer was "no." June 1, 1858 might have been, but failed to be, a positive landmark in Britain's relationship to the Suez Canal.

Contrary to Lesseps's plans, he did not attend the debate, because his ship broke down enroute, reaching London a week late. The division pained him less than might have been expected, and he judged it only a temporary setback. Drawing his own conclusions from the division, he believed it disclosed a solid body of partisans who would promote his project at every opportunity while the ministerial majority would come apart as individuals became more familiar with the project. After all, Gladstone, Lord John Russell, and Milner-Gibson pointedly had consoled him upon his arrival and had

⁴⁸Ibid., pp. 1397-1398. Keep Lord John Russell's defense of Roebuck's motion in mind. Within one year, he would quite drastically change his mind.

promised not to give up the fight. They pledged to "come to an arrangement for enlightening the House."⁴⁹ Lesseps's political trial balloon had burst, but with Gladstone, Russell, and Milner-Gibson pledged, others surely would come over.

Without seriously damaging the chronological pattern of my study, it may be advantageous at this point to analyze the debate and subsequent division. The question might be asked whether the preceding rather lengthy debate recitations are justified? Would the study have suffered immeasurably from deleting the speeches of Milner-Gibson, Gladstone, Lord John Russell, in defense of the canal, Stephenson, Disraeli, and Palmerston in opposition to the canal? I think the study would have suffered with such deletions. The debate revealed two features which are quite significant to this study. First, it exposed the political giants at their best and how they aligned on the canal issue in 1858. The erstwhile Liberal Palmerston, architect of the Eastern policy, joined the Conservatives, Disraeli and Stephenson, in repelling the assault by Milner-Gibson, Gladstone, and Russell. The political denouement of 1859, however, drastically changed this alignment as Palmerston and Russell created the unified Liberal party and took office together, bringing Gladstone and Milner-Gibson with them. When that happened, Russell, Milner-Gibson, and Gladstone conveniently forgot their promise to "enlighten

⁴⁹Lesseps, Recollections of Forty Years, II, 107-108.

the house."

Second, quite apart from the canal's political aspects, the debate shed considerable additional light on how the canal idea was being received. As one of the most eminent parliamentary scholars has noted, "it is in the House that the currents of opinion are most obvious."⁵⁰ The debate did to the canal in the political arena what Lesseps's tour did to it in the popular arena: it proved that the canal's political and technical enemies could be richly imaginative in denouncing the concept of a water short-cut through Egypt. Lesseps may have thought he encountered everything on his promotional tour, but the canal's parliamentary enemies, if anything, were growing more tenacious in their attempt to kill the idea. Stephenson, normally a chronic parliamentary truant, lent his enormous prestige and vigorously denounced the canal from a technical standpoint. Palmerston's attack ranged from absurd to desperate.⁵¹ And Disraeli neatly equated the project with increased defense spending and higher taxes for Britons, thus bringing the issue much closer to home.

In the Roebuck division we find five significant features.⁵²

⁵⁰Sir William Ivor Jennings, Parliament (2nd ed.; Cambridge: University Press, 1961), p. 143.

⁵¹I have in mind his statement regarding ships sailing through the canal and his conspiratorial fantasies.

⁵²One of the leading historical quantitative analysts, William Aydelotte, would applaud a statistical description of this specific division. Aydelotte's Quantification in History (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1971), pp. 26, 39, 49, 53, 110, 150, and 174, acknowledged the value

First, examination of the canal question inspired a good numerical response: 352 members voted. This exceptional parliamentary turnout reflected the Government's desire to prevent the loss of a division because of short attendance.⁵³ It also reflected a pronounced interest in the topic as a whole. On the night before Roebuck raised the question, he announced that he would do so. Apparently many members were anxious to hear the discussion.

Second, the size of Palmerston's victory strikes one: 290 members voted against the canal, 62 voted for it. This represented a crushing numerical defeat, but, interestingly, the opposition's size also impressed participants. Sixty-two votes did not signal an immediate threat to Derby, but it did indicate a potentially troublesome core of opposition.

of division lists, a much neglected historical source. I might add, the Keeper of the Rolls (Victoria Tower, House of Lords) in February, 1972, told me that this valuable historical source was in very slight demand. Aydelotte is probably correct that researchers avoid work in division lists because collecting raw data can be tiresome.

G. Kitson Clark, The Making of Victorian England (4th ed.; New York: Atheneum, 1972), p. 14, has a pithy statement regarding historical quantification. He wrote, "do not guess, try to count, and if you cannot count, admit that you are guessing."

⁵³Aydelotte, Quantification in History, p. 117, notes that during this time period a division involving three hundred members occurred less than ten per cent of the time.

Earlier in the evening, Government supporters, caught napping, had been beaten on Captain Vivian's motion to integrate command of the military forces. The vote on that division had been 104 in support of Vivian, 104 voting for the Government. Roebuck's announcement on the previous night put Government on notice that opponents of Palmerston's foreign policy were preparing a fight.

As Milner-Gibson observed, members of parliament were reluctant to vote in a minority when it mustered fewer than sixty pledged votes.⁵⁴ Members considered an issue frivolous if it attracted fewer than sixty votes. All representative bodies have informal guidelines which successful politicians prefer to remain within whenever possible, and a too-frequent deviation suggests that the individual is either flippant or seriously out-of-step. Sixty votes apparently constituted one of parliament's informal guidelines; thus Lesseps--if only because he could not see into the future--perhaps was justified in June, 1858, when he expected his pledged votes to multiply.

Since Roebuck's motion attracted a not insignificant support, one should, third, ask the source of that support. On the face, it looks like a feeble attempt by opposition Liberals to unseat Derby's Conservative Government. Of the Roebuck motion's sixty-two supporting votes, Dod recognized only five Conservatives. The remaining fifty-five⁵⁵ members consistently voted in the Liberal interest. But there is more to it than that and Wood's description of the period as

⁵⁴British Museum, Gladstone MSS., 44395, p. 52, letter from Milner-Gibson to Gladstone, dated January 12, 1860, and p. 81, letter from Milner-Gibson to Gladstone, dated January 20, 1861. Bagehot, The English Constitution, pp. 117-118, and John Stuart Mill in Lerner's Essential Works of John Stuart Mill, p. 177, agreed that small minorities could be encouraging. See also Marlowe, The Making of the Suez Canal, p. 127, footnote number forty-one, and Jennings, Parliament, p. 140.

⁵⁵Two members had unclear general political affiliations, thus accounting for the awkward mathematics.

one of an anarchy of political alignments appears valid.⁵⁶

The Liberals were splintered into Palmerstonians, Whigs, and Radicals. For our purposes this general group can be refined somewhat. Forty-eight of the fifty-five Liberals who supported Roebuck were Radicals, men who consistently voted for domestic reform and against Palmerston's lead in foreign affairs. For instance, they voted to relax the Oaths Bill, reform the army, and institute the Ballot.⁵⁷ In foreign affairs they did not turn out quite so decisively, but they did vote overwhelmingly against Palmerston's Conspiracy to Murder Bill.⁵⁸ They also supported Gladstone's unsuccessful motion to give the people of Wallachia and Moldavia more voice in their own affairs.⁵⁹ In the absence of firm party lines, it is questionable how much more specific one should be. We can definitely say, however, that this group of forty-eight members--call them Radicals--exhibited a conspicuous degree of solidarity in their voting patterns, consistently supporting domestic reform while voting against Palmerston in foreign affairs.⁶⁰

⁵⁶Wood, Nineteenth Century Britain, p. 182.

⁵⁷Forty-three of these forty-eight members voted to relax the Oaths Bill, forty supported Captain Vivian's motion for army reform, forty supported the Ballot.

⁵⁸Twenty-eight voted against the Conspiracy to Murder Bill, seven for, thirteen abstained.

⁵⁹Figures for the Danubian Principalities Motion, expressed by Gladstone and opposed by Palmerston, were: twenty-six for, nine against, with thirteen abstentions.

⁶⁰The entire question of the independent member, and how independent he actually was, recently has undergone revision. G. Kitson Clark, D. C. Moore, and D. E. E. Beale have decided

What, then, were friends of the Suez Canal hoping to accomplish? Were they merely trying to embarrass Derby? What was the purpose of confronting the new Conservative Government with a policy not of its own making? The answer to these questions goes to the heart of the parliamentary system as it functioned in the period before effective party discipline. Roebuck and his colleagues were not trying to embarrass or unseat Derby.⁶¹ They realized that Derby's minority Government was extremely vulnerable to the type of pressure that a sizeable minority could bring to bear, perhaps a pressure capable of wringing a policy reversal from a weak Government. Sir Ivor Jennings, author of a standard book on parliament, was cognizant of the important role that minorities, even small ones, played in determining policy.⁶² John P. Mackintosh, a university professor and member of parliament,

that parties, or better perhaps, voting groups, were forming earlier than Norman Gash thought. See Robert Robson, ed., Ideas and Institutions of Victorian England (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1967), pp. 4, 7, 14.

In the same collection of essays, D. C. Moore, "Social Structure, Political Structure, and Public Opinion in Mid-Victorian England," p. 48, noted that Lord John Russell in 1854 recognized voting groups based on land or trade. Curiously, support for the Roebuck motion came from the land voting group, not trade.

⁶¹If Roebuck had been trying to catch Government asleep, he would not have announced the day before that he was going to challenge the Eastern policy. Until 1882 debate could arise spontaneously and, hence, was frequently used to embarrass Government. Roebuck was trying to educate the House into a policy reversal. See Jennings, Parliament, p. 99.

⁶²Jennings, Parliament, p. 140.

a man admirably qualified to analyze the view from the back benches, thought the 1857-1859 session represented the "Golden Age" for political minorities. Prior to the Palmerston-Russell alliance, parliamentary minorities could (and did) sack ministers, extract information from the executive, and influence the Foreign Office.⁶³

Roebuck's support accounted for, a fourth question needs to be asked: how did the twenty-six members, representing the thirteen commercial centers on Lesseps's promotional tour, vote? Or, asked in another way, how numerically successful was Lesseps in soliciting political support? Actually, Lesseps was singularly unsuccessful. Roebuck's motion captured only four votes from among the twenty-six along the promotional route. Only Lord John Russell and Sir James Duke, members from London, Robert Dalglish, from Glasgow, and William Scholefield, of Birmingham, voted for the canal, and all four members were in the forefront of reform; i.e., they probably would have voted for Roebuck's motion without Lesseps's promotional tour.

One final question presents itself for scrutiny: how did the votes of the various members along Lesseps's tour correspond with their constituents' sentiment toward the canal; i.e., what was the genuine opinion toward the canal along the

⁶³John P. Mackintosh, "Parliament Now and a Hundred Years Ago," in The Backbencher and Parliament, A Reader, ed. by Dick Leonard and Valentine Herman (London: Macmillan, 1972) pp. 245-247.

promotional route and was the individual member's vote compatible with that opinion? This question is significant because Lesseps claimed that he had the commercial community's support, but Government was unresponsive. Notice this question does not attempt to assess the individual member's motive for voting as he did. As Aydelotte painfully recognized, we do not, and probably cannot, know why a member voted as he did.⁶⁴ This necessary realization is unsettling, but it does not mean that we can say nothing about constituent sentiment and voting response. We can draw the conclusion that in almost all instances the city's member responded--for whatever reason--in a manner consistent with his constituents' wishes.⁶⁵

For instance, both Liverpool members, paralleling local opinion, voted against Roebuck's motion. Clearing a quarter of England's total foreign trade, Liverpool was the second port in the United Kingdom, but Liverpool merchants had very little contact with the Far East. Ninety-six per cent of Liverpool's trade went to areas which would not benefit from the canal; e.g. the United States, Canada, Brazil, and the Mediterranean.⁶⁶ Following the division, an important Liver-

⁶⁴Aydelotte, Quantification in History, p. 30, p. 40.

⁶⁵Aydelotte's most recent work, as yet an unpublished article entitled "Constituency Influence on the British House of Commons, 1841-47," ably confirms this point. My thanks to Professor Aydelotte for sharing this forty-three page article with me prior to its publication.

⁶⁶Francis E. Hyde, Liverpool and the Mersey: The Development of a Port 1700-1970, The Ports of the British Isles Series (Bristol: David and Charles, 1971), pp. 48-49. This is a new series and other volumes are pending.

pool journal derisively commented on the Egyptian Government's general incompetence. It gloated that the canal, if ever completed, would suffer a fate similar to the Egyptian Navy, which was steadily disintegrating because of mismanagement.⁶⁷

Manchester members likewise resisted the canal. Aspinall Turner, a devoted Palmerstonian in foreign affairs, voted no and his co-member, Sir John Potter, abstained. Turner and Potter championed the anti-Manchester School philosophy, and, as an indication of the changing Manchester temperament, they soundly defeated the Liberals, Bright and Milner-Gibson, in the 1857 general election.⁶⁸

The Manchester press expressed no more interest than Potter and Turner in the canal. While most provincial presses at least commented upon the Roebuck decision, the Manchester press devoted its columns almost entirely to the Mutiny. The fact that Commons even considered other issues seemed a waste to the Manchester Examiner, which described the June 1st session as a "buffeting of wind bags." An indignant leader-writer advised Commons to deal with priorities. He wrote:

if the House of Commons is not bent upon
destroying what remains of its reputation,
it will insist upon the decency of defer-

⁶⁷ Courier (Liverpool), June 12, 1858, p. 372.

⁶⁸ Bright, incidentally, did not take defeat easily, and his journal entry for March 30, 1857, described Turner as "a man of energy in business, is supposed to be rich, is apparently purse-proud, pompous, and vulgar." R. A. J. Walling, ed., The Diaries of John Bright (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1931), p. 225.

ring these factious encounters [i.e.]
Vivian motion, Roebuck motion till we
have no India Bill to pass and no muti-
nies to subdue.⁶⁹

Belfast's press disliked the project in 1858 just as it had in 1857, and the city's members' one negative vote and one abstention accorded with constituent persuasions. While Manchester attention focused on India, Belfast's attention focused on its religious riots. Only the Northern Whig, by far the area's most important newspaper, allowed space for the canal, and it applauded Government's five to one majority. A stinging leader went farther and described the entire canal affair as nothing but a "collapsed windbag." Vividly reflecting Stephenson and Palmerston's influence, this journal charged that a project of such magnitude would have produced untold complications for misguided investors and for the Egyptian people. Fortunately for all concerned, the Northern Whig declared, in a gem of incorrect prophecy, the project's enormous cost made it "quite certain it never will be realized."⁷⁰

Edinburgh's commercial community appreciated the way Commons despatched Roebuck's motion, and approved its members' negative vote and abstention.⁷¹ The Edinburgh Witness, noted

⁶⁹Manchester Examiner, June 2, 1858, p. 2.

⁷⁰Northern Whig (Belfast), June 11, 1858, p. 2. This newspaper was the second oldest area newspaper and had a circulation of slightly under 1,500 copies per day, or twice that of its nearest rival, the Belfast Newsletter.

⁷¹Daily Express (Edinburgh), June 10, 1858, p. 2, showed more prescience than its competitors. The voice of academic circles, it clearly saw that the canal would be built. Money

for its attention to commercial topics, speaking for the first time on the subject (it had completely ignored Lesseps's visit the previous year), scorned Gladstone, Roebuck, and Milner-Gibson as men "with the honour of England forever on their lips." It agreed with Palmerston that the project would destroy the Ottoman empire. It also agreed with Stephenson, "an engineer of such high eminence," that the project was a technical nightmare.⁷²

Edinburgh's second major commercial journal also considered the rout of Roebuck's motion a good thing. In a long leader, the Edinburgh Advertiser described the project as an undesirable political complication and (incorrectly) assumed that killing the motion killed the project. Napoleon III, it said, could hardly afford his relatives and certainly could not afford to finance the canal; hence, "without the help of British capital the canal cannot be made."⁷³

Because it traded exclusively with the Baltic, Aberdeen, styled capitol of the North, was another city without direct interest in the East. The Aberdeen Free Press, advertised as the voice of free trade, calmly accepted its member's vote

had to come from somewhere and if Her Majesty's Government discouraged private investment, money would have to come from the French Emperor. And if the canal came under the aegis of Napoleon III, which this journal (correctly) thought likely, British foreign policy makers would be made to look like fools.

⁷²Witness (Edinburgh), June 5, 1858, p. 2.

⁷³Edinburgh Advertiser, June 4, 1858, p. 2.

against Roebuck's motion as being in step with the rest of the country. The Aberdeen Free Press recognized that "the overwhelming majority against the motion shows that the House is dead set against the scheme."⁷⁴

London, the home of one hundred thirty-seven newspapers, held the most diverse opinions on the subject. The Shipping and Mercantile Gazette, the Daily News, Bright's Morning Star, and the Morning Chronicle expressed disappointment that Commons disapproved Roebuck's motion. The Shipping and Mercantile Gazette, perhaps anticipating political maneuvers to formalize a Liberal Party, thought that Lord John Russell's supporting vote accurately reflected the true liberal spirit while Palmerston strayed from the political philosophy he sought to champion.⁷⁵

The Daily News, free trade and reformist, concurred with the Shipping and Mercantile Gazette and venomously rebuked Commons for perpetuating a policy of "irritating intervention" in Turkish affairs. Systematically criticizing everyone who spoke against the canal, the Daily News regretted that so many members found "it easier to vote than to think." The Daily News consoled itself with the hope that a future general election would return men more aware of Britain's true interest.⁷⁶

⁷⁴Aberdeen Free Press, June 4, 1858, p. 2.

⁷⁵Shipping and Mercantile Gazette (London), June 7, 1858, p. 2.

⁷⁶Daily News (London), June 3, 1858, p. 4. Palmerston was on the verge of his greatest political victory and twenty-four

The Manchester School's Morning Star was disappointed, but not surprised, at the outcome. In spite of the fact that Government had presented incomprehensibly weak arguments, this newspaper said, Palmerston saw the issue as a vital aspect of his foreign policy and had taken precautions to insure its defeat. Commenting upon Palmerston's determination to kill the project, the Morning Star said, "did a ditch in a desert ever before call forth such luxuriant versatility of talent?" Bright and company, with sagging spirits, only hoped the project would somehow survive "the heaviest blow and greatest discouragement which it has yet received."⁷⁷

The Morning Post, the Morning Advertiser, and The Times, on the other hand, enthusiastically recorded the Roebuck motion's defeat as a calendar event. Satisfied that the project had received its just reward, the Morning Post smugly applied its columns to a detailed criticism of French companies which had failed in Egypt.⁷⁸

of the twenty-six members along Lesseps's promotional tour were returned; the other two died.

⁷⁷Morning Star (London), June 3, 1858, p. 2.

⁷⁸Morning Post (London), June 2, 1858, p. 6. It referred, for instance, to the Medjidie Steam Company, a company inspired the year before by Lesseps to carry pilgrims from Suez to Mecca in a premature effort to stimulate pilgrim traffic. Of the six vessels hired to do the work, three were unfit for service, and, the Morning Post twittered, a fourth sunk as she rode at anchor. The implication was unmistakable: Franco-Egyptian enterprises were doomed.

The Morning Advertiser, second only to The Times in circulation, and noted for its extensive interest in commercial affairs, was relieved that the resolution had been turned back. It thought the Mediterranean area saturated with intrigue, and it believed the canal's alleged commercial advantages negated by the political havoc that would follow the Ottoman empire's collapse.⁷⁹

The Times, in its strongest statement yet, described Roebuck's motion as a foolish "attempt to blow out again that collapsed windbag, the Suez Canal." Citing Palmerston and Stephenson, The Times attested to the canal's lack of utility, and was horrified at Lesseps's plan to build a Mediterranean port "in that oozy and shifting bottom to which the Nile contributed silt every year."⁸⁰

Londoners, the London press, and the members from that city projected a rainbow of opinions regarding the canal. Sir James Duke, in a near unprecedented step, abandoned Palmerston's lead in foreign affairs and voted with Roebuck. R. W. Crawford, normally one of Palmerston's opponents, crossed over and voted against the canal. Lord John Russell voted with the minority.

Glasgow's most prominent journal, the Glasgow Saturday Post, graphically described the debate and division, and concluded that Parliament had vindicated its own views. Agreeing

⁷⁹Morning Advertiser (London), June 4, 1858, p. 4.

⁸⁰The Times, June 3, 1858, p. 8. Spratt's argument was finding its way into the arsenal of those who opposed the canal.

totally with Stephenson, the Glasgow Saturday Post declared that the "utility and advantages of the canal were extremely problematical," and excavation problems were sufficient "to account for the cold reception the project has met with in this country."⁸¹

The Glasgow Examiner, a free trade journal, agreed with the Glasgow Saturday Post, and its editor criticized Roebuck for suggesting that Government was deeply involved in thwarting the project.⁸²

The city's maritime gazette fell into line, but added a different twist: merchants who expected the canal to transform Asia into an El Dorado were in for an unpleasant surprise. Recent events in China, it said, proved that Orientals hated Britons. This journal thought amicable and profitable commerce impossible with such a spiteful people, a people so base that they broke solemn treaties.⁸³

Glasgow resembled London in its diversity of opinion, but on a lesser scale. Boasting a population of over 324,000 (in 1851), Glasgow published twenty-three newspapers which expressed a variety of ideas and found a steady market. Everyone did not agree with the Glasgow Saturday Post, Glasgow

⁸¹ Glasgow Saturday Post, June 5, 1858, p. 6.

⁸² Glasgow Examiner, June 5, 1858, p. 4.

⁸³ Glasgow Courier, June 8, 1858, p. 2. For the Western man, China committed an unforgivable breach of protocol by promptly ignoring the treaty terms of the First Opium War. The Second Opium War followed.

Examiner, and Glasgow Courier. For example, the Glasgow Herald, the city's second largest newspaper, regretted the Roebuck motion's defeat and warned its 3,000 subscribers that canal opponents were trying to return England to protection, a dated and ineffective policy.⁸⁴ Protection was not only an inexpeditious policy, but also it was unworthy of England whose

strength [was] not to be preserved if...
trusted to the accident of a natural
dyke, which any living engineer could
cut through if allowed.

Better by far, the Glasgow Herald continued, to "throw open the route" and guide Europe into a period of great prosperity and international goodwill.⁸⁵ Glasgow's members may or may not have read different newspapers, but they did vote differently: Mr. Robert Dalglish supported Roebuck; Mr. Walter Buchanan voted for the Government.

William Scholefield, member of parliament from Birmingham, supported Roebuck's motion, a gesture harmonious with his city's opinion. All Birmingham newspapers espoused the project, favorably reported Lesseps's visit, and directed Scholefield to

⁸⁴A word needs to be said about newspaper circulation. The Glasgow Herald published three times per week and sold 469,000 copies per year. This means each press run produced about 3,000 newspapers, ranking it in the upper ten per cent among provincial newspapers. A circulation of 3,000 per edition sounds exiguous by modern standards, but a single newspaper was read by as many as thirty people.

⁸⁵Glasgow Herald, June 2, 1858, p. 3.

expedite the canal with his vote.

One would like to find a definitive nexus between provincial commercial opinion, as expressed in newspapers, and the political response, expressed in parliament by their member's vote. For instance, one would like to say: "William Scholefield voted yes on Roebuck's motion on orders from important Birmingham newspapers," or, "Walter Buchanan voted no because Glasgow newspapers and merchants did not like the idea of the Suez Canal." Unfortunately, this desirable, if simplistic, equation is not valid for in the absence of solid documentation one is confronted by that elusive creature, motive. It is not too much to say, however, avoiding motive, that seventy per cent of the members representing cities along Lesseps's promotional tour voted consistently with constituent sentiment, and that most of that sentiment was negative.⁸⁶

In three instances, members apparently voted against their constituents' wishes. Bristollers, for example, heartily accepted the project, yet one of their members voted no and the other one abstained. Richard Poole King may have recognized one reason for this discrepancy when he noted that Bristol had no real interest in the Far East. In this case, the gap between constituent sentiment and parliamentary vote narrowed.

Hull provided the second instance in which parliamentary

⁸⁶Liverpool, Manchester, Dublin, Belfast, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Birmingham, London, Glasgow.

action and public sentiment appeared at variance. Lesseps's 1857 meeting was well attended by influential people, and the press requested political support from their members, but on June 1, 1858, both Hull members voted no. A closer examination of Hull commercial patterns and parliamentary representation suggests two reasons for this apparent dissonance. First, Hull, like Bristol, had no commercial reason to support a project which would benefit the Eastern trade. Hull based its economy on traffic between the midlands' manufacturing centers and German and Baltic ports; thus Hull's reception of Lesseps may have been merely excessive politeness. Second, Hull's two negative votes may have represented the whims of its members. Lord Hotham and Arthur Duncombe were as conservative as anyone sitting at Westminster in 1858. They voted against every reform question and consistently followed Lord Palmerston in foreign affairs.

Newcastle provides the third instance containing some surprise at the way its members voted. Local sentiment and continued press activity suggest canal acceptance, but Newcastle's members voted no. In this case, reasons for the divergence between public sentiment and political action are not readily ascertainable. Neither an examination of the city's commercial interests nor a review of the city's parliamentary representation supplies a viable explanation. Newcastle prosperity depended upon its coal mines, and prospectively the canal would benefit the coal industry by encourag-

ing steam ship construction as well as by providing contracts at Timsah and Suez. Newcastle members practiced such checked voting habits that it is impossible to establish a pattern of political affiliation.⁸⁷

Thus far we have followed the Suez Canal's fortune from its inception, through an extensive promotional tour, and finally to the floor of Commons. People who opposed the project could have taken heart because to date British opposition to the project had carried the day. Yet those who watched events spin themselves out saw clearly that allies of the traditional Eastern policy were not relinquishing their campaign against the canal. Palmerston remained in command politically, but there existed a tenacious body of men who continued to agitate for the canal in press and pamphlet. Moreover, Lesseps owned the pledged support of some important politicians. As reports reached England that work was underway in the isthmus, Palmerston and his allies had no choice but to build higher their propaganda walls. As we shall see, the position of canal opponents became less tenable as the years rolled by, but, for the time, they convincingly maintained the project was useless,

⁸⁷Relevant evidence for George Ridley is lacking. He is one of Aydelotte's characters who served quietly (1856 to 1860) in the House of Commons and then quietly passed away. Thomas Emerson Headlam (1813-1875) is better known. He represented Newcastle in Commons from 1847 to 1874. Unlike the case of his colleague, there is a clue, however slight, to his vote on June 1, 1858. Headlam shared views with Palmerston and in 1859 Palmerston appointed him Judge-Advocate-General and Privy Counselor, positions he held until Palmerston's death. See his obituary notice in The Times, December 9, 1875.

technically impractical, and impossible without British money. In this, the last stages of the fight, Palmerston lost an important ally when Stephenson died. Canal opposition needed new champions and new irrefutable technical arguments to prevent British gold from rescuing the project. The rearguard action of those new champions provides the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER IV

Through the remainder of 1858, Lesseps busied himself organizing the Suez Canal Company and selling its stock. By September he had assembled pledges totalling £3,000,000 from French and Egyptian investors.¹ Noticeably, however, he had not enlisted a single British penny. Unfavorable canal publicity was taking its toll as British investors held aloof. Establishing the Suez Canal Company did nothing to heat up British enthusiasm for the idea, and Lesseps realized correctly that the company's initial fund raising success in France and Egypt only irritated British opponents of the canal.² Opponents remained convinced that the canal was impossible without British money, and they confidently thought that a firm British stance would discourage others from investing. Having defeated the project to their satisfaction in Parliament, opponents redoubled their efforts on the propaganda front.

Stephenson relentlessly criticized the canal idea and delivered a crackling indictment against it in The Engineer,

¹Lesseps, Recollections of Forty Years, I, 118.

²Ibid., p. 119.

a prestigious technical journal. He wrote that

Nothing can be effected, even by the most unlimited expenditure of time, and life, and money, beyond the formation of a stagnant ditch between two almost tideless seas, unapproachable by large ships under any circumstances and only capable of being used by small vessels when the prevailing winds permit their exit and their entrance.³

Doubtlessly winning the sympathy of his countrymen, Stephenson utilized the press to blast a foreign critic who had "vindictively and scurrilously" assaulted his integrity and technical competency. He also alerted Britons to Captain Spratt's recently published theory which predicted that the Mediterranean's easterly current would fill the canal's northern terminus with Nile mud. Endorsing Spratt's first report, Stephenson theorized that Alexander the Great had located his famous Egyptian port city west of the Nile's mouth for the best possible reason: to do otherwise and plant his city east of the Nile would have invited the onslaught of Nile silt deposits. Like Alexander the Great, Lesseps, Stephenson said, should heed the warnings of people who lived on Egypt's coast, people who appreciated from experience the Nile's influence.⁴ Sadly, Stephenson did not live to see Spratt's second report, one which seemed to validate conclusively his earlier speculations on Mediterranean wave action.

The Times, firmly committed to opposition by now, played

³The Engineer (August 3, 1858), pp. 94-95.

⁴The Times, August 3, 1858, p. 7.

Nemesis throughout this period and churned out article after article damning the project. Every setback, every hint of bad news received thorough coverage in this newspaper, and during late 1858 canal men found very little solace in its pages. For instance, The Times's Austrian correspondent reported the Vienna money market cold to the canal.⁵ Its Egyptian correspondent noted that many wealthy Egyptians were reluctant to invest in a project contingent upon the Sultan's firman until the Sultan had granted that firman. Without the firman, investors had no guarantee that the project would progress beyond accumulation of capital.⁶ The news from Italy likewise discouraged supporters as the Progresso di Egitto, an Alexandrian based newspaper, advised investors to avoid the project. It cited an Egyptian official who declared that Said Pasha was entertaining serious second thoughts about the scheme. Said Pasha allegedly was cooling toward the project for good reasons. First, by granting the Suez Canal Company large tracts of land for developmental purposes,

⁵The Times, November 20, 1858, p. 10. The Austrian Government angrily criticized Lesseps for misrepresenting Austrian opinion. Lesseps repeatedly cited M. Nigrelli as the spokesman for Austrian technical and commercial sentiment when, in fact, Nigrelli was held in low repute by his countrymen and his government. Nigrelli, a onetime Austrian civil servant, had been removed from his position in 1855 because he supported the Sardinian entrance into the Crimean War, an impolitic position for an Austrian civil servant. Since 1855 he remained very much out of political favor. See Farnie, East and West of Suez, p. 52.

⁶The Times, November 20, 1858, p. 10.

he unwittingly allowed these tracts to escape his control.⁷ Second, Egyptians realized that a project of such magnitude could be completed only by using the corvee, which would entail a hardship for the fellahin, thereby putting Egypt in a bad light and draining Egypt's manpower resources.⁸

While foreign reports eroded confidence in the project, The Times unmercifully kept up its attack, and a lengthy editorial cautioned potential investors against deception by canal propaganda. Without a firman, the project could collapse at any time, and collapse meant that people who had unwisely invested would be lost. Or, in its own words, ruin awaited the investors when "the gay bubble burst and proved itself to be but dirty soap and water." The wise course for English investors was to let Frenchmen "bury their savings in the mud at the mouth of the Nile or in the sands of the Egyptian desert."⁹ Delivering what surely must rank as one of the most interesting mis-predictions of all times, The Times proclaimed to the world:

We would have the few persons who may have been so inconsiderate as to entertain this project for a moment to reflect that now, and probably in all time to come, five-sixths of the heavy goods known to commerce will be transported in sailing ships. There

⁷ In Lesseps's canal concession, Said Pasha was not required to support the project with cash, but Said did grant Lesseps 60,000 acres of land to develop.

⁸The Times, November 26, 1858, p. 7.

⁹The Times, November 27, 1858, p. 8.

is no object to be gained by rapid transport, and a heavily-laden ship will never meddle with a ship canal through the Isthmus of Suez.¹⁰

The London Globe, usually not interested in commercial questions, chimed in with a snipe at the Frenchmen who were enthusiastically buying canal shares. After computing the number of investors and the amount of capital obtained, this journal calculated that the average investor held nine shares valued at £180. The Globe identified these investors as simple grocers' assistants who had been duped by clever advertisement.¹¹

In late 1858, Leeds Mercury, friendly to the canal, soberly assessed the situation and lamented that such a worthwhile project faced doom. Its leader-writer sadly attributed the project's inevitable demise to the absence of British capital. Unfortunately for mankind, he wrote, British investors placed too much confidence in British engineers, and they had pronounced against the project.¹²

A gentleman traveller criticized the project in a pamphlet which emphasized the economic backwardness of the Suez area and the absence of adequate port facilities in the Red Sea. Aiming his pamphlet at the American money market, the author warned potential investors that even small vessels of three

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹London Globe, November 30, 1858, p. 4. The London Globe correctly assessed the size of many shareholders; many Frenchmen invested in the project strictly from a sense of nationalism.

¹²Leeds Mercury, December 2, 1858, p. 4.

or four hundred tons would find it necessary to off-load their cargo to shallow draft native craft for the last three miles to Suez.¹³ He also expressed concern that potential investors incorrectly thought the Suez area a dormant commercial giant which the canal would awaken. Nothing could be farther from the true condition, he said. The northern Red Sea was commercially dead and likely to stay that way. The nearest thing to activity was the annual Red Sea spice market at Geddeh, 650 miles south of Suez on the African coast. This author hoped that merchants who dreamed of an active Red Sea trade had been forewarned.¹⁴

A noted European Anglophobe added his voice to those who portrayed the project as an oriental fantasy. M. Frederic de Coninck, a prosperous Havre merchant and financier, wrote an anti-canal pamphlet which The Times's Paris correspondent immediately dispatched to London for publication. M. Coninck's negative reaction to the project gained importance because he professed no friendship for England. Making his personal

¹³G. F. Dassy, Notes on Sueis and its trade With the ports of the Red Sea, etc. (Constantinople: Herald Levant Printing, 1859), pp. 4-5. Dassy dedicated this pamphlet to America, he said, because he was afraid American investors were in danger of being victimized. Russell, A Diary in the East..., I, 106, noticed that American travellers were outnumbered only by the British and the French.

The American press was not terribly interested in the project, but one New Orleans commercial journal approved the canal. J. D. B. De Bow, "Effects of the Suez Canal on Commerce," De Bow's Commercial Review, Vol. 21 (December, 1856), 644-648.

¹⁴Dassy, Notes on Sueis..., p. 14.

position quite clear, M. Coninck admitted that idealistically he approved what Lesseps was trying to do in the Egyptian desert. Emotionally he accepted the idea, he said, if only "to teach the English government [sic.] that in our day great things may be accomplished without it, and, if needs be, in spite of it."¹⁵ Unfortunately, M. Coninck believed all the good will in the world would not make the project feasible. Lesseps had underestimated costs and technical problems, and the canal, if ever completed--which he doubted--would never return its investors a profit.¹⁶ This important international businessman's opinion formed an important asset to canal opposition. Even though he liked the canal concept, M. Coninck could only advise his clients against squandering their money on a worthwhile but impractical proposition.

The Times missed no legitimate opportunity to place the project in a bad light, and when no such opportunity presented itself, it was not above publishing rumors. In March it reported that Said Pasha had cancelled the project, work had slowed, and the chief engineer had resigned.¹⁷ Two months later, it reported Said Pasha had disavowed Lesseps and ordered the work to stop.¹⁸ In July, it triumphantly announced

¹⁵The Times, January 8, 1859, p. 10.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷The Times, March 28, 1859, p. 5. Lange fought back in a letter to the editor and contradicted The Times's attempt to "mislead the public...." Lange said work had started and the Pasha had not reversed his support. See The Times, April 5, 1859, p. 10.

¹⁸The Times, June 21, 1859, p. 5.

that its Constantinople correspondent thought that the "Suez Canal project has entered on the last phase of its existence." Citing sources close to the Porte, the correspondent reported that Lesseps's hopes for a firman were doomed and potential investors, waiting for the firman, should look elsewhere for financial opportunities. This correspondent said, "To such an end are the most magnificent projects in the East apt to come."¹⁹

But for a project undergoing death throes, the canal clung tenaciously to life, and months after The Times started reporting disaster, work continued. The canal had no firman, and circulating rumors included stories of political tension between Constantinople and Alexandria, and personal tension between Lesseps and Said Pasha, yet work continued. Realizing that it had miscalculated, The Times retreated slightly and suggested that because of the fanfare, which attended ground-breaking ceremonies in 1859, Said Pasha had decided to let the project die a quiet death, thus offending as few people as possible.²⁰

Throughout 1859 canal men received no respite. Anthony Trollope, one of the Victorian age's most prolific writers, recorded that fashionable Britain, snug in its drawing room, scoffed at the project. For one, he presumed to

¹⁹The Times, July 25, 1859, p. 10.

²⁰The Times, August 6, 1859, p. 10.

have a very strong opinion that such a canal will not and cannot be made; that all the strength of the arguments adduced in the matter are hostile to it; and that steam navigation by land will and ought to be the means of transit through Egypt.²¹

The Saturday Review, referring to Stephenson and Palmerston for authority, considered the canal an ingenious French political gambit to gain a toehold in Egypt and destroy the Ottoman Empire. Frenchmen might enter Egypt as engineers to dig a canal, but, once there, they would become soldiers and build forts. The whole canal idea was absurd, and for practicability the Saturday Review compared it to a venture in space:

But for the hope of thwarting England or dismembering Turkey, M. Lesseps would as likely to project a railway to the Moon as a canal between Pelusium and Suez.²²

A week later the same journal, exhibiting an immodest and perverse satisfaction, concluded that "unfortunately for M. De Lesseps...a canal such as he has projected is absolutely impossible."²³

Certainly the domestic political convulsions of that year did little to encourage Britons who accepted the canal. Gladstone, Lord John Russell, and Milner Gibson, men who only

²¹Anthony Trollope, The West Indies and the Spanish Main (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1860), p. 331. Trollope, pp. 340-341, was "sick of the grandiloquence of French progress."

²²"The Suez Canal," Saturday Review (December 24, 1859), p. 764. There was no substance to the alleged French plot. The company was a private venture; Napoleon III wanted friendship with England as well as maintenance of the Ottoman Empire.

²³"The Suez Question," Saturday Review (December 31, 1859), p. 802.

a few months previously had defended the project in parliament and promised to enlighten the House, had now joined Palmerston's second administration. In the future no important politicians would come forward to defend the project. In a single political stroke, Palmerston eliminated Lesseps's parliamentary base. Henceforth distracted at the Exchequer, Gladstone thought no more about canals. Milner-Gibson, President of the Board of Trade, concerned himself chiefly with the cotton shortage and the prospects of a French commercial treaty. Lord John Russell made the most abrupt volte face. As Foreign Secretary, he became impeccably orthodox and vigilantly sustained Great Britain's traditional Eastern policy. Kenneth Bell has suggested that the Foreign Office after 1859 could have saved itself grief by listening more closely to Henry Bulwer, Britain's Ambassador to Constantinople, and by abandoning a tired policy, one bound to fail.²⁴

The international scene likewise discouraged canal supporters as friendship between England and France approached the vanishing point. Plombieres produced an alliance between France and Piedmont and, in May, a war with Austria. Simultaneously the French Government launched Europe's first iron-clad warship, action which terrified England and prompt-

²⁴Kenneth Bell, "British Policy Towards the Construction of the Suez Canal," pp. 36-37. Jasper Ridley's Lord Palmerston (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1971), p. 489 has a good, concise account of this event.

ed Palmerston to strengthen the local militias and commission a British iron-clad.²⁵

While Napoleon III's prestige following Villafranca went up, Lesseps's prestige dwindled, and The Times's dire predictions nearly were fulfilled. In October, Lesseps wrote a pitiful letter to the Empress Eugenie. Requesting patronage, he wrote that without quick help he would have to abandon his project. The Emperor's intervention, he wrote, had "become for us a condition of our continued existence." Adding a touch of genius, Lesseps informed the Empress that for its first general meeting, the Suez Canal Company had selected November 15th, festival of Sainte Eugenie.²⁶ Palmerston and Stephenson would have enjoyed reading this letter because Lesseps's every whimper to the French Empress testified to the effectiveness of their rear guard activities.

Palmerston and Stephenson's influence might deter British investors, but it did not extend to Paris, and in October Lesseps received the help he so sorely needed. On October 23rd, Napoleon III embraced the project and informed Lesseps that henceforth the French Government would succor it with national prestige and diplomatic offices. As a gesture of good faith, Napoleon III replaced his consul at Alexandria with a gentleman ordered to resist vigorously British diplomacy in Egypt.²⁷

²⁵Farnie, East and West of Suez, p. 56.

²⁶John Marlowe, The Making of the Suez Canal (London: Cresset Press, 1964), p. 41.

²⁷Ibid., p. 142. Although Anglo-Franco relations were getting better, the Foreign Office remained adamant against

Britain's Foreign Office meanwhile applied continuous pressure on Constantinople. Bulwer confidently reported to Lord John Russell that intense diplomacy had solidified Britain and Turkey's respective objections to the canal. Bulwer wrote that the Porte had agreed to withhold his firman until Lesseps had altered a specific set of circumstances. First, he would grant no firman until they abandoned the corvee. In 1859 this stipulation alone appeared an adequate safeguard against the canal because everyone, including Lesseps and Said Pasha, realized that the project depended upon forced labor. Second, the Porte promised to oppose the project so long as foreign--i.e. company--settlements existed in Egypt. Third, Turkish soldiers would occupy all military installations associated with the project (even though such plans never existed). Fourth, the Porte recommended postponement of the project until such time as promoters could undergird it with better technical plans and more substantial financing. And lastly, the Porte reaffirmed his intention to make Britain's acceptance the sine qua non for a canal across the isthmus of Suez.²⁸ Bulwer rightfully was proud of this understanding. It included Britain's major objections to the canal, it reinforced the Porte's resolve to continue on the same obstruction-

the canal and Russell told Cowley, Britain's Ambassador to Paris, as much. Letter from Russell to Cowley, dated October 11, 1859, FO 78/1489, cited in Marlowe, The Making of the Suez Canal, p. 148.

²⁸Letter from Bulwer to Russell, dated December 12, 1859, FO 78/1489.

ist path, and it appeared formidable enough to stand. It considered everything except Lesseps's determination to build the canal, with or without a firman.

Captain Spratt's second, and more definitive, technical report on Mediterranean currents nicely complemented Bulwer's secret diplomatic report to the Foreign Office. Captain Spratt began his perceptively critical indictment of the canal with a detailed description of the sand which washed down the Nile and into the Mediterranean Sea in such tremendous quantities. This sand, described as quartzose, common in the Nile Valley, was easily recognizable because the individual grain was as large as a mustard seed, much larger, for instance, than sand carried by the Danube into the Mediterranean. Having traced this quartzose sand down the Nile and into the Mediterranean, Spratt reported that tides carried it easterly all the way to Syria. Interestingly, quartzose deposits did not exist west of Alexandria. Impressing laymen with his thoroughness, Spratt reported also that he found this unique sand in limited quantities directly off the Nile. But as he travelled eastward, along the coast, the sand became abundant, and in one location he found it layered to a depth of thirty feet which, he concluded, indicated that it had deposited there over a prolonged time period.²⁹

²⁹Captain Spratt, An Investigation of the Effect of the Prevailing Wave Influence on the Nile's Deposits (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1859), pp. 2-4.

Depicting the quartzose sand as a double threat, Spratt wrote that it would attack the canal by air as well as by sea. That which washed onto the shore dried quickly under the Egyptian sun, was picked up by the wind, and carried eastward by the prevailing winds, eastward into the canal.

Pursuing his theory that Nile deposits would strangle the project, Spratt disclosed that the Mediterranean's currents were strong enough to carry pottery and broken bricks from the Nile all the way to Syria.³⁰ Furnishing his readers with evidence of the Mediterranean's strong easterly currents, Spratt described how he deposited two tons of ashes at the high-tide mark near Said, the proposed Mediterranean port site. Returning twelve days later, he discovered that currents had scattered the ashes a remarkable distance to the east. In fact, currents had transported his debris more than 1,500 yards, and they had carried one particularly large clinker, weighing three and one-half pounds, more than two hundred yards. And, Spratt quickly added, Said's weather had been calm with no gales.³¹ Spratt's testimony was powerful stuff. Future pamphleteers and the press repeatedly cited him as the foremost authority on Mediterranean currents, forces which critics thought would create insurmountable problems for the proposed port at Said.

³⁰Ibid., p. 7.

³¹Ibid., p. 11.

Spratt was not the only engineer determined to scuttle the canal. His pamphlet had only caught the public's attention when two members of the Institution of Civil Engineers contributed to Lesseps's discomfort with their own pamphlet. Brunlees and Webb commended Her Majesty's Government for steadfastly maintaining diplomatic obstructions before the project. They thought the project's delay beneficial because it had forced the investing public and competent engineers to reconsider, and now the conclusion must be, the authors wrote, that the venture under consideration was grossly impractical.³² Such a project, they wrote, might have proven viable in Trajan's time when vessels were smaller and kings enjoyed an unlimited supply of slave labor. Modern technology had provided modern man with a permanent replacement for canals in the railroad.³³ Cheaper to construct than canals, and, unlike the project under consideration, railroads did not require the investment of three or four generations of Egyptian workmen.³⁴

This did not mean that a short-cut for sea-going vessels through the isthmus was not a good idea. Brunlees and Webb clearly recognized the desirability of a shorter route to Asia, but they sought to reconcile this realization with their belief that the railroad age had replaced the canal age.

³²J. Brunlees and E. B. Webb, Proposed Ship-Railway Across the Isthmus of Suez (London: Reed, 1859), p. 1.

³³Ibid., pp. 4-5.

³⁴Ibid., p. 6.

Their thinking was influenced also by the realization that the existing Alexandria to Suez railroad could never function effectively as a medium for heavy goods. The costly process of transferring a ship's cargo at Alexandria to the existing railroad, then reloading that same cargo at Suez onto another ship would "counterbalance the advantage which the saving of time in the voyage might otherwise present."³⁵

Brunlees and Webb's dilemma was a challenging one: they recognized the need for an isthmian short-cut, but they refused to accept the obvious solution, the Suez Canal. Plunging adroitly forward, they suggested a daring new solution. They proposed "to carry the ships of all nations across the Isthmus" by rail.³⁶ They envisioned a specially-constructed rail line between Said and Suez to carry ocean going vessels and their cargo. Hydraulic lifts, they continued, would be installed at both ends to lift ships from the water and place them on specially cushioned trucks for the overland journey.

Describing their plan in detail, Brunlees and Webb lifted the curtain to reveal what they considered a practical and inexpensive scheme. The Suez isthmus was flat, perfect for laying track, and they estimated their idea could become operative for less than £5,000,000, or one-seventh what they thought a canal through the same area would cost. Financial and technical considerations aside, their ship-railway would possess

³⁵Ibid., p. 11.

³⁶Ibid., p. 7.

additional, and perhaps overlooked, advantages. For instance, merchants who sent their ships overland through Egypt would benefit by being able to examine and repair damaged hulls as their vessels were hoisted from the sea. The ship-railway also would be much quicker than a canal. Once lifted onto railroad trucks, sailing vessels, if the wind were right, could break out sail and "sail" across the isthmus. Brunlees and Webb calculated that by combining power from steam engines and sail, ships could whisk across the desert at speeds of twenty miles per hour, or, expressed another way, sixteen hours after leaving the Mediterranean, ships could re-enter the water at Suez.³⁷

Attempting to integrate confidence in railroads with the obvious benefits of a short-cut through Egypt, Brunlees and Webb produced one of the most bizarre ideas of their time. It is noteworthy that Brunlees and Webb, members of the most prestigious engineering society in the land, and regardless of whether it sounds more than slightly absurd to moderns, proposed their idea in good faith as a serious alternative to the canal. Its very appearance speaks volumes to the fact that, for whatever reasons, many Britons were not ready in 1859 to accept the canal as a viable endeavor.

While diplomats and engineers closed ranks, the press also remained unsatisfied with the canal. The Saturday Review scornfully noted that four hundred and eighty Roman Catholic

³⁷Ibid., pp. 7-11.

priests had blessed Lesseps's scheme.³⁸ The Times's leader-writer justified Britain's hostility to the canal on grounds that France was seeking territorial compensation from Piedmont during the sensitive Austrian predicament.³⁹ A few days later, it reported that the Viennese Ost Deutsche Post thought the canal controversy quite serious and had predicted that "the British Government would rather go to war than permit the project of Lesseps's to be realized."⁴⁰ The Economist concluded that hints of British diplomatic pressure against the canal were unfounded. It based this conclusion on the theory that the Foreign Office would not jeopardize the important and delicate French commercial negotiations by covertly resisting the canal, a less important issue. This journal underestimated Britain's position vis à vis the French negotiations and warned that England could expect to successfully negotiate a French commercial treaty only if she were "held quite guiltless of any selfish and egotistic aims."⁴¹ What The Economist could not have known was that Napoleon III needed the commercial treaty which the two countries ratified on

³⁸Saturday Review, December 31, 1859, p. 802.

³⁹The Times, December 20, 1859, p. 6.

⁴⁰The Times, December 24, 1859, p. 8. The Ost Deutsche Post exaggerated the extent of British hostility toward the project, but The Times reproduced the quotation probably to intimidate France.

⁴¹The Economist, Vol. 17 (December 17, 1859), p. 1399.

January 23, 1860.⁴² Although initially unpopular in France, the treaty improved Napoleon III's image on the other side of the channel. No less an observer than Greville noted that:

For the last three weeks [January 1--January 22, 1860] the sayings and doings of the Emperor Napoleon have occupied all thoughts in every part of Europe, and he has well nigh recovered in this country the confidence and popularity which he had exchanged[after Plombieres] for distrust, suspicion, and alarm.⁴³

Anglo-Franco relations mended and weathered France's annexation of Savoy as Bright, more than the Tory opposition, correctly assessed Britain's position in his "perish Savoy" speech of March 2, 1860. Britons complained when Napoleon III annexed Savoy, but Savoy did not prevent them from moving quickly into the French market. Cobden, for example, back in France to hammer out the treaty's details, wrote the Board of Trade that many English businessmen, at great personal expense and inconvenience, had swarmed to Paris to witness the negotiations. He consulted with his countrymen daily and he found their advice on the financial intricacies of international trade invaluable. Indeed, Cobden declared himself "quite helpless unless with the aid of these practical men."⁴⁴ This

⁴²For details, consult Arthur Louis Dunham, The Anglo-French Treaty of Commerce of 1860 and the Progress of the Industrial Revolution in France (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1930).

⁴³Charles C. F. Greville, The Greville Memoirs, (3 vols.; New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1887), III, 518.

⁴⁴I am indebted to Mrs. Patricia Gill, County Archivist, West Sussex County Council, for this long and detailed letter from Cobden (in Paris) to Milner-Gibson at the Board of Trade, dated September 29, 1860.

represented the sort of attention that Lesseps wanted but could not get. British businessmen were interested in something other than a canal through the Egyptian desert.

The attention which Lesseps's project did attract through 1860 continued to be unfavorable. The Reverend Blakesley, a seasoned Egyptian traveller, added his voice to those who thought the canal all wrong. In a polished attack, Blakesley satirically congratulated the fortunate fellahin who would be "employed" to work on the project. He wrote:

The Fellahs of Assouan may well envy their lucky brethren of the Delta. The Suez Canal sheds a rosy hue over all who are fortunate enough to come into any relation with it.⁴⁵

Satisfied that the Foreign Office had no reason to object to the project, Blakesley challenged it on technical grounds. Blakesley did not enjoy Spratt's technical credentials, but he added to the mounting volume of anti-canal literature. He thought the proposed harbor in Lake Timsah impossible because it would be shallow, salty, and likely to go dry as its water evaporated under a hot Egyptian sun.⁴⁶

He completely agreed with Spratt regarding the Mediterranean's strong easterly currents, and, adding his own contribution, wrote that prevailing easterly winds enhanced the destructiveness of easterly Mediterranean currents. Indeed, he wrote, easterly winds grew particularly tempestuous as the

⁴⁵Rev. J. W. Blakesley, "M. De Lesseps and the Suez Canal," Macmillian's Magazine (April, 1860), p. 413.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 409.

Nile crested in July. They blew so strongly that flat-bottomed barges regularly made the trip upriver from Alexandria more rapidly than usual. Supporting this notion with a slice of history, he added that the ancients attributed the Nile's annual rise to these easterly winds which appeared to "pen the water back." Making the argument for easterly winds that Spratt made for easterly currents, Blakesley expected the canal to be choked by wind blown sand.⁴⁷

Blakesley wrote that the canal's engineers badly underestimated the obstructiveness of easterly wind and wave, and he thought their plan to counter these natural forces with a long pier inadequate. The nearest stone for pier construction would have to be quarried in Cyprus. Stone was heavy and would require deep-draft ships to transport it to the proposed pier site, yet the proposed pier site was shallow; so, he stumped laymen with the question: how could builders transport the stone into shallow water? And in the unlikely event that canal engineers could build the pier, he thought it would not effectively protect the harbor from onrushing Nile sand. Blakesley asked his readers to recall their last visit to any English beach. Illustrating what inevitably would happen to the pier, he asked his readers to recount the network of posts which extended at right angles to the beach. These posts, called groynes, standard fixtures on any beach, were implanted to protect it from the scouring action of waves. But after

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 413.

one night of moderate wind they became "covered to a height of many feet on the windward side with the sand and shingle which has been cast up."⁴⁸ Lesseps's pier, like the groynes, would get buried, and the harbor which it was intended to protect would quickly fill in. Blakesley thought the project a swindle and warned the French Emperor against identifying with a scheme which the future might know as "Napoleon's Folly."⁴⁹

The American presidential election of 1860 pushed the canal farther into the background as the potential cotton shortage distracted press, parliament, and the commercial community. Parliamentary references to the issue were infrequent and inconsequential.⁵⁰ The Times remained Lesseps's most persistent critic, and even though it directed its main energies elsewhere, it missed no opportunity to snipe at the project. In May, The Times covered a Parisian meeting of canal stockholders and caustically noted that Lesseps's address dwelt largely on the project's rosy future while Lesseps

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 414. For technical specifics on the two piers, see Fitzgerald, The Great Canal at Suez..., p. 166, and Farnie, East and West of Suez, p. 70, and for an eyewitness account see Eaton, "The Suez Canal," p. 84.

⁴⁹Blakesley, p. 416. Blakesley could not have been more wrong. The canal is often seen as one of the few positive accomplishments of Napoleon III's reign, and, even then, his direct support was negligible.

⁵⁰Hansard, vol. 156 (February 20, 1860), p. 1354. Grant Duff, for example, asked Lord John Russell if there were any new diplomatic developments. Russell replied, "no."

said nothing about current progress.⁵¹ In August, it reported that the Egyptian desert was taking its toll: Lesseps, supervising the work, had contracted jaundice, a development which prophets of doom no doubt appreciated.⁵²

Appearing once again before parliament, Danby Seymour requested confirmation of the latest canal rumor. He asked whether it were true that Lesseps had persuaded Said Pasha to purchase £3,500,000 worth of Suez Canal stock because it was unmarketable elsewhere. Palmerston replied affirmatively and added that the stock purchase had strained Said Pasha's finances. In fact, he told parliament, Said Pasha had mortgaged his personal estates.⁵³ Seymour also was interested in whether a connection existed between the canal and the recent commercial treaty with France. Specifically, he asked whether Cobden had secret instructions to include revisions in Britain's canal policy in return for economic concessions. Palmerston answered an emphatic "no."⁵⁴ Government, similar

⁵¹The Times, May 24, 1860, p. 8.

⁵²The Times, August 16, 1860, p. 11.

⁵³Hansard, vol. 160 (August 23, 1860), pp. 1723-1724. Lesseps tried to counter Palmerston's statement. In a letter to The Times (September 8, 1860), he wrote that Egyptian revenues amply covered Said Pasha's stock purchase.

This was an important turn of events because eventually it led to Disraeli's famous stock purchase in 1875. Moreover, it emphasized canal opponents' continuing success. In lieu of British money, Lesseps was forced to call on Napoleon III, then Said Pasha.

⁵⁴Hansard, vol. 160 (August 23, 1860), pp. 1723-1724.

to British businessmen who were at the time advising Cobden in Paris, could quite ably separate the two questions.

British canal hostility intensified as the American situation grew more confusing. As Americans elected Abraham Lincoln president and Southern states seceded from the Union, British textile manufacturers uneasily surveyed the South's ability to continue supplying them with cotton. Spokesmen for the cloth industry were concerned that the canal diverted Egyptian peasants from their traditional occupation of growing cotton.⁵⁵ The future cotton supply for British factories was not then an imminent problem, but concerned people already were exploring every alternative. Lord A. S. Churchill, for instance, Chairman of the African Aid Society, industriously, but unsuccessfully, worked to promote cotton cultivation in western Africa. Lord Churchill's organization transported freed American slaves to Africa and provided them with seed and tools, hoping to solve the problems which confronted cotton cultivation outside the American South by coordinating seed, tools, and skilled labor.⁵⁶

Meanwhile, the Manchester Cotton Supply Association, the first entrant into international cotton procurement, was floundering and meeting with less than complete success in its attempts to introduce cotton cultivation into new areas.

⁵⁵See, for example, The Times, August 17, 1861, p. 8, and July 25, 1862, p. 10.

⁵⁶The Times, December 29, 1860, p. 7. The Times correctly saw that the African Aid Society would die for lack of funds.

To its dismay, seed, tools, and pamphlets failed to motivate peasants in Turkey and elsewhere.⁵⁷

Failure by the Manchester Cotton Supply Association and the African Aid Society did not make Milner-Gibson's job as President of the Board of Trade any easier, and in January he wrote Gladstone of his growing apprehension. As new areas of cotton cultivation failed to meet expectations, he feared that India and Egypt, traditional but unsatisfactory suppliers, would not be able to prevent the approaching disaster, colossal disaster, to Britain's cloth industry.⁵⁸ Milner-Gibson was not the only worried person in Government. Palmerston, requesting the Board of Trade's emergency contingency plans (of which none existed), held private ad hoc bodies in low esteem and realized that Government would have to take the lead in case of a severe cotton shortage. If the situation degenerated, as Milner-Gibson and others feared, Palmerston thought the country's manufacturers and their organizations useless. Businessmen, he wrote Milner-Gibson, "are some of the most helpless and shortsighted of men. They are like the people who held out their dishes and prayed that it might rain plum puddings."⁵⁹

⁵⁷The Times, January 15, 1861, p. 8.

⁵⁸Letter from Milner-Gibson to Gladstone, dated January 12, 1861, Gladstone MSS, 44395, 53.

⁵⁹Letter from Palmerston to Milner-Gibson, dated June 7, 1861, cited in Ashley, The Life of Henry John Temple..., II, 211.

Much to Milner-Gibson's relief, the cotton famine proved less damaging than alarmists had expected, and Britain's economy quickly righted itself. Initially some dislocations occurred within the cloth industry, and the total amount of finished cotton exports decreased by thirty-five per cent during the first year of the Civil War. Even with this decline, however, the 1860's were prosperous years for Britain: total exports increased, profits and individual savings increased, Government reduced the income tax as well as duties on tea and sugar. The cloth industry compensated for the absence of Southern cotton by relying upon poorer quality Indian and Egyptian fiber and by shifting investment and manpower to Yorkshire's woolen industry and Ireland's linen industry.⁶⁰ By January, 1862, Milner-Gibson had recovered his composure enough to accept calmly the North's imminent capture of New Orleans. Writing Gladstone again, he predicted New Orleans's fall, but added that Britain's cloth industry would survive. Egypt and India, he wrote, appeared able to provide interim supplies. He noted also that British manufacturers had unexpected reserve stocks.⁶¹

As Confederates and Federals shot one another to pieces, British merchants grew perturbed that Egyptian fellahin were being pressed into work on the useless ditch. If they read The Times, they were relieved to find out that Egypt's labor

⁶⁰Henderson, The Lancashire Cotton Famine 1861-1865, pp. 8-12.

⁶¹Letter from Milner-Gibson to Gladstone, dated January 26, 1862, Gladstone MSS, 44398, 70.

shortage stood on the verge of solving itself as the canal project moved ever nearer to disaster. The Times's correspondent reported that Egypt's investment community, at one time enthusiastic toward the project, currently refused to honor previous pledges, and Lesseps was out of money.⁶² This correspondent repeatedly assured his readers that the canal would fail and the fellahin soon would return to their cotton fields. At one time the fellahin rioted among themselves, bringing work to a close.⁶³ At another time, a storm obliterated the Mediterranean pier, washing away several months of expensive dike work.⁶⁴ Generally, work continued as "unpromising as ever," and The Times told its readers that even Frenchmen were beginning to consider the project a mistake. This reporter informed Britons that the bubble was about to burst and that he hoped Said Pasha would be able to weather the impending crisis.⁶⁵

One Briton, unconvinced that the canal was doomed, personally inspected the work site in late 1861. George Percy Badger tramped the desert from Said to Suez before reporting to the British public. Profusely complimenting his French hosts for their cooperation, Badger reluctantly concluded that

⁶²The Times, December 16, 1860, p. 7.

⁶³The Times, December 29, 1860, p. 8.

⁶⁴The Times, May 14, 1861, p. 12.

⁶⁵The Times, February 17, 1862, p. 12.

all the critical things which Palmerston, Stephenson, Spratt, Blakesley, and others had said appeared justified.⁶⁶ And after examining the work for himself, he found it necessary to add some negative criticism of his own. For instance, he regrettably testified that Captain Spratt and Reverend Blakesley had been absolutely correct when they had forecast that wind and waves would prevail against attempts to build a harbor at Said. He had observed sections of the stone pier being knocked down by strong waves and covered up by silt deposits from the Nile. He also had noticed that the pier itself added an unsuspected maritime hazard: easterly currents swirled around its end and converted the harbor into a gigantic whirlpool. Standing on the beach, on a relatively calm day, Badger watched new currents--currents which natives told him had not been present before the pier's construction--founder and sink a coalier.⁶⁷ Admitting an idealistic attachment to the canal idea, Badger nevertheless concluded that the project was hopeless and that only Sisyphus could have dreamed up the notion that continuous dredging would keep up with silt deposits from the east and windblown sand.⁶⁸

The remainder of 1862 proved equally disheartening for friends of the canal. The Times doggedly pressed the attack,⁶⁹

⁶⁶George Percy Badger, A visit to the Isthmus of the Suez Canal Works (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1862), pp. 70-71.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 46.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 31.

⁶⁹See, for instance, The Times, July 24, 1862, p. 9; July 25, 1862, p. 10.

but in May its Egyptian correspondent reluctantly admitted that the Suez Canal Company was committing massive quantities of manpower and supplies to the project.⁷⁰ Toward the end of the year, The Times editorially reported canal progress and reasserted its well-known position, but added a different twist. Disbelieving rumors that excavation crews had penetrated south as far as Lake Tamsah, halfway to the Red Sea, it sermonized that from time immemorial Egypt had, and always would have, two prominent and permanent natural features: the Nile and the Isthmus of Suez. Since the beginning of civilization, man had tried to control the Nile and the isthmus but always had failed. In The Times's opinion, antiquity provided the isthmus an almost religious sanction to remain inviolate. Reminding its readers, as if they had been allowed to forget, that Britain was the world's mercantile arbiter, The Times said that if the canal possessed any positive features, Britain would have seen them and sponsored the project herself. Asserting that the canal age was past, The Times, in another grand misprediction, proclaimed that

The sea is no longer the surest highway.
In these days it is a principle of locomotion that a steamer should be exchanged for a railroad at the first practicable opportunity.

⁷⁰The Times, May 12, 1862, p. 6. This report unconsciously heralded what a later observer described as "an activity and energy of which the people in England had no idea." See Eaton, "The Suez Canal," p. 82.

If another route to the East were needed, The Times favored re-examining the Euphrates Valley scheme.⁷¹

For four years diplomatic pressure at Constantinople, pamphlets, scattered questions in parliament, and the important press had generated an imposing amount of hostility and ridicule toward the canal. The fellahin and Lesseps's engineers worked sporadically in the isthmus, but Britons, expecting the project to collapse at any moment, withheld their support. British rear guard opposition to the project from 1858 through 1862 had been successful, but a rapid alteration of attitudes lay just around the corner.⁷² Practically overnight the private sector started modifying its opinions, and the Government, albeit reluctantly, recognized that it had been mistaken.

⁷¹The Times, November 29, 1862, p. 8.

⁷²The intellectual climate between 1859 and 1863 was particularly turbulent as a variety of controversial notions pounded Britons. While some people pondered the advisability of a canal, everyone pondered evolutionism as the scientific world fought its own rear guard against Darwin and Huxley. See William Irvine, Apes, Angels and Victorians (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1972), p. 135, p. 142.

CHAPTER V

Britain's rearguard opposition was a casualty to compound misfortune and began collapsing in 1863 as technical and political considerations started favoring the canal. In the technical sphere, the most respected living British engineer broke with his predecessors and pronounced in favor of the canal. Simultaneously, Said Pasha died. His successor, Ismail Pasha, to the Foreign Office's surprise, then chagrin, revealed his intention to complete the project.

In November Said Pasha commissioned John Hawkshaw, President of Britain's Institution of Civil Engineers, to inspect the canal and report the feasibility of continuing the work in view of the obstacles which Her Majesty's Government and the unfriendly press continued to maintain. Hawkshaw was the logical candidate for this commission. He was the most prestigious engineer in Great Britain and his decision would be influential: a positive judgement would temper British opposition, while, on the other hand, a negative judgement would provide Said Pasha, nearing the end of his tether, with an excuse for abandoning the project. Said Pasha was physically ill and he would die within two months. Meanwhile, he was emotionally incapable of coping with Lesseps's incessant demands, and prolonged canal politics were wearing him down.¹

¹For an eyewitness account of Said Pasha's failing physi-

Hawkshaw thoroughly scrutinized every technical and financial aspect before he published his formal report. The Times, meanwhile, incorrectly anticipating Hawkshaw, predicted that the canal concept was about to receive the coup de gr^âce. Hawkshaw certainly would discover "nothing to alter the existing impressions of the public on the project."² J. T. Delane, editor of The Times, expecting nothing new, must have winced when he finally read Hawkshaw's assessment of the canal's chances.

The Times was dead wrong again. Far from being nothing new, Hawkshaw's report was a thunderbolt. Although Lesseps had completed less than one-half of the work, Hawkshaw saw no problems capable of preventing the canal's completion.³ There were some slight engineering difficulties which would require attention, he said, but nothing insoluble. He recommended, for example, that Lesseps's men pitch the canal's sides with stone in certain places to eliminate the possibility of erosion.⁴

Turning from the general to the specific, Hawkshaw dealt with the most serious objections which critics had heretofore

cal and emotional health see the letter from Colquhoun, Britain's Consul at Alexandria, to Russell, dated March 23, 1863, FO/78/1755.

²The Times, December 19, 1862, p. 7.

³John Hawkshaw, Suez Canal: Report to the Egyptian Government 3rd February 1863 (London: John Lane, 1863), p. 9.

⁴Ibid., p. 15.

raised against the canal. He decisively amended Stephenson's claim that the canal would be no more than a stinking ditch. Hawkshaw wrote that his onetime colleague, and predecessor as President of the Institution, had miscalculated. Preliminary excavation revealed that a slight current would run through the canal and would accomplish the useful, but not necessary, function of scouring it.⁵ This current would keep the canal free from debris, but it would not flow swiftly enough to endanger navigation. And should this current provide inadequate maintenance, and the canal show signs of "filling up," as some critics expected, Hawkshaw expected Lesseps to employ systematic dredging.⁶

Hawkshaw defused similar canal objections promptly, precisely: the Bitter Lakes would not, à la Blakesley, fill in with salt as their waters evaporated. Evaporation would be slight, shallow spots would continuously refill as water sought its own level, and the aforementioned current would suspend salt deposits until they reached the sea.⁷

Hawkshaw turned in greater detail to Captain Spratt's theory that Mediterranean conditions would render the proposed harbor at Pelusium grossly impractical.⁸ Hawkshaw admitted

⁵Ibid., p. 17.

⁶Ibid., pp. 18-21. This was the eventual solution.

⁷Ibid., p. 21.

⁸There might be some confusion regarding the canal's northernmost terminus. Lesseps initially elected the ancient city of Pelusium as the proposed port. He eventually located

that Pelusium was unsheltered and hence subject to several storms per year. But, he added, the expanded application of steam ships in the near future simply would eliminate many of the traditional problems, such as irregular winds and storms, which plagued sailing vessels.

Hawkshaw scoffed at Spratt's detailed but incorrect theory that quartzose sand washed down the Nile, then easterly along Egypt's coast, and eventually reached Syria. Hawkshaw said his chemist found Nile sand to be more calcareous than quartzose, and quite different from the sand at Pelusium. He did not deny that Nile deposits reached the Mediterranean, but, he alertly said, at flood stage the Nile lost velocity as it fanned-out through the Delta and the heaviest particles settled out of suspension before they reached the Mediterranean. Some of the lighter silt remained suspended and possibly the Mediterranean's easterly currents carried it, but the amount was insignificant and, Hawkshaw thought, would pose no serious problem for a Pelusium harbor.

Turning slightly caustic, Hawkshaw deplored Spratt's reliance upon testimony of natives regarding the strength of the Mediterranean's easterly currents. Pottery and broken bricks carried from the Nile to Syria indeed! Hawkshaw told his readers that bits of pottery covered the entire isthmus because travellers had littered the area for thousands of years.⁹

the port a short distance west of Pelusium and named it Said, for Said Pasha.

⁹Hawkshaw, Suez Canal..., pp. 23-26.

Such was the opinion of England's most eminent engineer and if it accounted for anything, skeptics were forced to re-appraise their attitudes.

As Hawkshaw drafted his devastating technical report for popular Britain, official Britain was rocked from another direction. Sir Henry Bulwer, Her Majesty's Ambassador to the Porte, visited Egypt and the canal work site. Back in Constantinople, and physically rested from his holiday, Bulwer calmly reported to Lord John Russell at the Foreign Office that Lesseps would complete the canal. Moreover, Bulwer strongly suggested that the Foreign Office should re-examine its current position and perhaps adopt a realistic one. He feared that past British opposition had been artificially induced by a hostile press which consistently had focused on the canal's negative aspects as workers and engineers learned their tasks. Currently, he testified, skillful professional engineers directed the work which steadily progressed.¹⁰ Projecting the same judgement which Lord John Russell and the reading public soon would see in Hawkshaw's pamphlet, Bulwer concluded that the project was not only feasible, it was imminent. He saw only one problem, finance, and he estimated that Lesseps's projected canal cost of £ 8,000,000 was too low.¹¹

¹⁰Letter from Bulwer to Russell, dated January 3, 1863, FO/78/1755. Another observer noted, for instance, that Arab workmen initially were not accustomed to shovels. In the early construction days they used them not to dig with, but as a cooking utensil for roasting coffee. See Eaton, "The Suez Canal," pp. 91-92.

¹¹Bulwer was correct. The canal's construction cost £18,144,000.

This did not mean that Lesseps would run out of money and stop work. It meant, Bulwer wrote, that Lesseps would be forced into alternatives. He could reduce excavation costs by slightly reducing the canal's dimensions, or he could issue more canal stock. In the final analysis, Bulwer wrote, and despite the fondest hopes of some people, Lesseps would complete the canal. Continued British obstructionism only would entangle more deeply, and dangerously, the French Government.¹² Bulwer had a good working insight into canal dynamics and he guessed right--in fact he guessed right three times. Before Lesseps finished the canal, he was forced to reduce slightly its width, issue more canal stock, and appeal again to Napoleon III.

Bulwer's canal assessment disturbed the Foreign Office. But it had no more than reached London when a major event transpired which further complicated Britain's official position vis à vis the Suez Canal: Said Pasha, promoter and political inspiration behind the project, suddenly died. Legal ramifications thrust themselves forward and the Foreign Office buzzed with activity. Lord John Russell immediately cabled Mr. Colquhoun, Britain's Consul at Alexandria. Was this not an opening? Was this not the opportunity, perhaps the last opportunity, to undermine the project? Russell ordered Colquhoun to advise the new Viceroy, Ismail Pasha, "not to

¹²Letter from Bulwer to Russell, dated January 3, 1863, FO/78/1755.

commit himself about the Suez Canal till the whole subject has been investigated afresh."¹³

Said Pasha's death provided the Foreign Office with its last reasonable excuse to review its canal position. On the one hand, the Foreign Office might have benefited from the death of Said Pasha, a man obviously controlled by Lesseps, by seeking an accommodation with his successor. This step entailed a policy reversal for Britain, but in view of Bulwer's and Hawkshaw's judgements, in retrospect, it would have proved a timely switch. Eschewing this strategy, the Foreign Office responded to Said Pasha's death as an opportunity to reinforce its traditional position. Russell completely disagreed with Bulwer that the canal had a chance. He still thought financial and technical problems would cripple it. In the meantime, however, Said Pasha's demise reassured Russell that the Foreign Office's traditional policy remained tenable. He wrote Bulwer that:

The death of the Viceroy, who may have considered his reputation to be involved in carrying out the work, makes an important change at this time, and his Successor will care little for the fame of Said Pasha.¹⁴

A few days after Said Pasha's death, Russell received good news from Alexandria and his hopes appeared justified.

¹³Letter from Russell to Colquhoun, dated January 20, 1863, FO/78/1755.

¹⁴Letter from Russell to Bulwer, dated January 20, 1863, FO/78/1755.

Colquhoun had had an audience with the new Viceroy and Ismail Pasha seemed disinterested in the project. Ismail Pasha publicly announced that he would leave the "Canal question exactly where he found it." But privately to Colquhoun he sang a different song, confiding a violent hostility to the scheme and a hope that somehow it would quietly expire.¹⁵

The Foreign Office would have done well not to put too much stock in Ismail Pasha's private assurances to Colquhoun because to do so invited disappointment. Ismail Pasha no sooner consolidated his hold on the Egyptian state than he embarked upon a developmental program and announced that he would complete the Suez Canal.¹⁶

The Foreign Office missed an opportunity with Said Pasha's death. Lord John Russell and Palmerston were incapable of seeing the situation in any perspective except traditional support for the Ottoman Empire and perhaps reliving their diplomatic victories of 1840.¹⁷ The Foreign Office played its hand consistently, but badly, and continued to oppose the project.¹⁸

While Ismail Pasha's succession excited the Foreign Office,

¹⁵Letter from Colquhoun to Russell, dated January 24, 1863, FO/78/1755.

¹⁶Ismail Pasha was a thorough progressive and adorned his palaces with Arabic translations of Smiles's Self-Help.

¹⁷See Bell, "British Policy Towards Construction of the Suez Canal," p. 125 and p. 137.

¹⁸Letter from Russell to Bulwer, dated February 2, 1863, FO/78/1755. Bell noted that the Foreign Office's continuation of its policy cost it diplomatic leverage at Alexandria and Constantinople.

it also briefly stirred parliament. Darby Griffith repeated a rumor that the new Viceroy opposed the canal primarily because it relied upon the corvée which drained manpower from more useful work. Darby Griffith suggested that Her Majesty's Government encourage Ismail Pasha to revoke Lesseps's charter and then protect the new Viceroy from possible recriminations by Napoleon III, the canal's European patron. Lord Palmerston applauded Griffith's concern for the fellahin. He encouraged thoughtful and compassionate Britons to object to the detestable project and the harm it was doing to Egypt, but he replied that Government had no intention of becoming involved politically.¹⁹

Ismail Pasha's attitude, for the time, remained ambivalent as opponents of the canal waited for him to express definite displeasure with the Suez Canal Company. The only news from Egypt, however, came from The Times's correspondent who announced that Ismail Pasha adhered to Britain's position and awaited only a propitious opportunity to stop the project once and for all. The Times, sensing the same opening as the Foreign Office, urged Ismail Pasha not to waste his meager resources on a canal which would do nothing for his country. Instead of going down the path toward "eternal monuments of misdirected industry," The Times advised Ismail to direct his country into beneficial ventures,

¹⁹Hansard, vol. 169 (February 20, 1863), 577-578.

such as increased cotton cultivation.²⁰

The Suez Canal reached an important milestone in 1863 as the Porte, seeing more clearly than London, realized that Lesseps would have his canal. Hawkshaw had pronounced the project technically feasible, Bulwer, the ranking British official to visit the canal, concurred, and Ismail Pasha showed absolutely no sign of stopping the work. The Porte tired of the troublesome situation and charted a new course. In April he informed his Ambassador in London that withholding the firman had been clumsily ineffective. He announced that he would open substantive negotiations with Britain, France, co-signers of the Hatti Shariff of 1840, Egypt, and the Suez Canal Company and resolve the canal question.²¹ The Porte's preconditions included abolition of the corvee and revision of Lesseps's charter to prohibit alienation of Egyptian lands to a foreign company. The Porte also asked all factions to cooperate in establishing machinery to guarantee the canal's neutrality.²²

The Porte's 1863 decision to settle the canal's political question recognized that Lesseps would complete it despite

²⁰The Times, March 17, 1863, p. 9.

²¹The Hatti Shariff of 1840 formally guaranteed the Egyptian Viceroyalty to Mehemet Ali's family in return for his loyalty to the Porte and, more immediately, his withdrawal from Syria. England and France underwrote this agreement between the Ottoman Empire and Egypt.

²²Sessional Papers, vol. 84 (1863), 401-402.

British intransigence. As a first step, Porte and Pasha jointly announced abolition of the corvée, an announcement parliament received with satisfaction.²³ Lesseps, for his part, loudly complained that his charter promised sufficient labor, but his objection was more gambit than anything else. From early 1863 until the summer of 1864 Lesseps did not need many workers: his company was impoverished, work languished, and he worked behind the scenes to raise money.²⁴ By August, 1863, Sultan, Pasha, and Lesseps had negotiated their differences.²⁵ The canal company agreed to pay higher wages, negating the most onerous corvée aspects, and to surrender its Egyptian lands.²⁶ In these negotiations Lesseps made substantial concessions, concessions which Ismail Pasha paid for. Lesseps gave up land and the corvée in return for a cash settlement which was to be assessed by an arbiter, Napoleon III. Thus the major political problems associated with the canal were consigned to legal review, and on July 6, 1864, the French Emperor awarded the Suez Canal Company the generous settlement of £3,360,000.²⁷

²³Hansard, vol. 170 (May 15, 1863), 1770.

²⁴See Bell, "British Policy Towards the Construction of the Suez Canal," and David S. Landes, Bankers and Pashas: International Finance and Imperialism in Egypt (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 181.

²⁵The Times, August 4, 1863, p. 8.

²⁶The money settlement worked to Lesseps's advantage. Fellahin did enough hand labor to enable the company to employ more efficient, floating, steam dredges.

²⁷Farnie, East and West of Suez, p. 68.

The Times's publicity campaign against the canal began to crumble. In March, 1863, its Alexandrian correspondent visited the works and, although still harboring doubts, admired "the perserverance and energy displayed by the gentleman entrusted with a work of such magnitude." A detail which maximizes the impact of this statement was that this correspondent's canal visit was his first. He had based his previous negative reports on rumor.²⁸

A few months later, as Lesseps and Ismail Pasha put the finishing touches on the new canal contract, this newspaper grudgingly admitted that an isthmian canal would do much "to civilize the regions which border the Red Sea," an idea Lesseps previously had been unsuccessful in selling to the British public. Still unwilling to endorse the project, its leader-writer painfully admitted that Mr. Hawkshaw's study had "reversed...the judgement of Robert Stephenson."²⁹

The Economist also noticed that Britons were starting to view the project with a "sudden favour...a favour the more remarkable because of the previous contempt expressed for that great project."³⁰ The Economist concluded that Britons suddenly were taking the project seriously because of two important new developments. Hawkshaw's judgement carried sufficient clout to overturn previous technical reservations. The com-

²⁸The Times, March 16, 1863, p. 6.

²⁹The Times, August 4, 1863, p. 8.

³⁰The Economist, vol. 21 (August 8, 1863), 870.

promise which Ismail Pasha and Lesseps negotiated also contributed to the changing climate of opinion because it broke the political logjam. This writer readily accepted the canal's eventual completion, but, for him, the question of profit remained unanswered. He asked: "Will a sufficient number of ships go through the canal to make it pay its builders?" Weighing the traditional financial arguments which critics raised against the canal, he answered:

The canal, therefore, seems to us, even under its present exceptionally favourable circumstances, to contain most of the elements which make a mercantile speculation hazardous or unsafe.³¹

The Saturday Review agreed with The Economist that Hawkshaw's report was a thorough and objective examination of an important issue, an issue which heretofore had attracted mainly partisan support. Hawkshaw, as befitting the President of the Institution of Civil Engineers, made sense of the question and obliterated all grounds for technical objection. But The Saturday Review, like The Economist, remained unconvinced that the canal was a viable financial endeavor. The Saturday Review's writer badly underestimated the impact that steam would have on the carrying trade. He thought that:

at present such a result [common goods being transported by steam rather than sail] is so far removed from actual ex-

³¹Ibid., p. 871. This writer thought dredging would be prohibitively expensive and the canal would not attract enough traffic. He also thought the canal unsafe: a minor collision might disrupt traffic for a long time.

perience, that the canal might probably be postponed for a century without serious injury to those for whose benefit it is supposed to be designed.³²

A working man's newspaper noticed the project for the first time. The Beehive, making an interesting point regarding the canal's strategical value, was not afraid that it would enable France to threaten India. On the contrary, The Beehive poignantly noted that the reverse was probably more correct. In wartime the canal would enable Britain to quickly draw upon its huge regular and native armies stationed in India.³³

Provincial newspapers as far away as Dublin, Edinburgh, and Belfast reflected the changing outlook toward the canal. The Dublin Evening Post, one of the project's most implacable enemies, anxiously noted as early as December, 1862, that Hawkshaw was examining the question afresh and would report to the nation at a later date.³⁴ When the report came in, coupled as it was with the political compromise, this newspaper graciously announced that the "Suez Canal difficulty has been solved."³⁵ The Edinburgh Witness, another persistent critic, acknowledged that Hawkshaw's report had destroyed

³²"The Suez Canal," The Saturday Review, August 1, 1863, pp. 150-151.

³³"The Suez Canal Scheme," The Beehive, August 15, 1863, p. 6.

³⁴Dublin Evening Post, December 20, 1862, p. 4.

³⁵Dublin Evening Post, August 4, 1863, p. 3. The Dublin Mercantile Advertiser carried the same article three days later.

technical canal opposition and had caused people to re-evaluate the project.³⁶ Belfast's Northern Whig, a newspaper which had loudly applauded parliament's destruction of Roebuck's motion, grudgingly admitted that the project was a serious proposition and that opposition was subsiding.³⁷

The Times turned the important corner in late 1863 as it joined the onetime hostile press and admitted, for the first time, that it appeared Lesseps would complete his canal. Signifying a decisive break with its past position, The Times announced that the canal question appeared resolved and henceforth it would "have very little concern in the matter."³⁸ True to its promise, The Times's interest in the canal tapered sharply. For the next six years, during which time Lesseps did most of the work, the press merely tabulated progress with an occasional comment when something extraordinary happened. At times the work encountered engineering difficulties.³⁹ At times the canal workers rioted among themselves or fought with Egyptian soldiers.⁴⁰ At still another time, Lesseps ran out of money again and he was forced to issue more canal stock.⁴¹

³⁶Edinburgh Witness, August 4, 1863, p. 4.

³⁷Northern Whig (Belfast), January 31, 1863, p. 2; February 7, 1863, p. 2.

³⁸The Times, August 15, 1863, p. 6.

³⁹The Times, January 1, 1864, p. 10.

⁴⁰The Times, April 17, 1865, p. 12.

⁴¹The Times, October 10, 1867, p. 6. Lesseps's new issue of canal stock did not sell well until Napoleon III came to the

The canal was a certainty during this final stage, after 1863, but sail men still harbored doubts about its impact on the carrying trade. It obviously would cater to steam traffic, and Lesseps admitted this from the beginning, but this did not mean that steam necessarily would replace sailing vessels. In fact, during 1867-1868 sailing vessels set records for speed, efficiency, and profit. Thermopylae sailed from Gravesend to Australia in only sixty-three days and die-hard sail men smugly thought the canal a waste of time.⁴²

While graceful clipper ships ran their final races around the Cape, excavation inexorably continued. In November, 1869, Empress Eugenie opened the canal amidst all the pomp Egypt could muster. Dignitaries, the press, merchants, and society people from all over Europe attended to help Lesseps celebrate the high point of his life.⁴³

Britain stoically accepted the day of reckoning. Foreign Office personnel and a delegation from the Admiralty attended the opening ceremony and were not surprised to hear Lesseps exclude the name of Great Britain from those countries which

rescue again. The French Emperor coupled the stock with a national lottery which enabled Lesseps to raise £ 4,000,000.

⁴²Farnie, East and West of Suez, p. 76. The normal sailing time to India was about one hundred and five days.

⁴³Ismail Pasha invited all the monarchs of Europe to attend the canal's opening, but none came. They stayed home out of deference to Sultan Abdul Aziz, who was piqued at Ismail Pasha at the time, but they did send official representatives. Farnie, East and West of Suez, p. 81, p. 84.

had assisted the canal.⁴⁴ Relieved, no doubt, that Lesseps spared them further humiliation, Victoria's representatives took their seats on the reviewing stand to watch the processional sail from the Mediterranean into the canal. Lesseps may have dealt leniently with his uncomfortable British guests, but the gods did otherwise. In full view of everyone, H.M.S. Royal Oak and H.M.S. Prince Consort ingloriously ran aground. Her Majesty's subjects then suffered the final indignity of watching French, Italian, and Russian ships puff confidently past Consort and Royal Oak and into the canal.⁴⁵ From the distance of one hundred years one can see the Admiralty's men gnashing their teeth. The British Navy was not accustomed to being outmaneuvered by its less imposing neighbors.

Long faces and naval misfortune notwithstanding, Britain's response toward the Suez Canal's opening generally was good-natured. The Saturday Review, one of the canal's most ancient opponents, frankly stated that Lesseps's success made Britons

⁴⁴William Hamby, "Egypt and the Story of the Suez Canal," Blackwood's Magazine, vol. 107 (January, 1870), p. 90 and p. 95. Lesseps was shrewd enough to limit his insults to this one omission. He still needed British traffic to make the canal a success.

Hamby witnessed the opening festivities and described them with great, and quite amusing, completeness, including an account of Egyptian beggars and pickpockets working over the European tourists.

⁴⁵Ibid., vol. 107, p. 86. The vessels finally freed themselves in time to participate in the procession which Hamby thought a "comfort." Hamby would have been comforted also to know that the first French sailing ship through the canal wrecked only eighty-six miles south of Suez. See Fletcher, "Suez and Britain....," p. 126.

"eat crow." In a lighthearted, yet poignant statement, it said:

The Queen of England has opened the Holborn Viaduct, and the Empress of the French [has opened] the Suez Canal.⁴⁶

Perhaps William Howard Russell, the famous newspaperman, best described Britain's position. As one member of an impressive party to the canal, a party which included the Prince and Princess of Wales, he observed that at first his fellow travellers secretly harbored doubts and were intent upon "finding out some weak point in the Canal."⁴⁷ After seeing it, however, he and his companions admitted that the canal

had attained a development for which they were not prepared...and...there was a natural regret that from various causes, our countrymen had been led to look on the enterprise with a feeling stronger than coolness, and that to France, or at least to Frenchmen, would belong the great renown which must follow from the completion of the Canal that promises to do so much for the civilized world.⁴⁸

Within a decade of its opening, the Suez Canal dominated east-west trade. But for the present, and into the 1870's, the bulk of maritime traffic continued to use the Cape and two anti-canal arguments proved valid. Sailing vessels did avoid the canal. In its first six years of operation, only four per cent of the 5,236 vessels which went through it were sailing

⁴⁶The Saturday Review, November 13, 1869, p. 636.

⁴⁷Russell, A Diary in the East..., I, 73.

⁴⁸Ibid., I, 96.

vessels. And, as some people had predicted, Egypt did not benefit appreciably from having the canal cut through her eastern frontier. The Suez Canal Company's towns (Said, Suez, and Ismaila) flourished but the economies of Alexandria and Cairo suffered as the canal destroyed the overland transit trade.⁴⁹

Thereafter one does not find correct predictions by those who opposed the canal. France did not gain an advantage in India. The Ottoman Empire did not collapse. The canal did not fill up with wind-blown sand or Mediterranean silt. Great Britain's proportional share of international shipping did not decrease. Indeed, in the first full year of operation, two-thirds of the ships traversing the canal were registered in Britain; thereafter Britain owned three-quarters of all canal traffic and eventually, when an opportunity presented itself, Britain gained control of the canal itself.

R. F. Delderfield, a novelist writing about England in the early 1860's has Sam Rawlinson, a textile manufacturer, discussing the Suez Canal with Adam Swann, a teamster and potential partner.

Sam: You'll have heard o' that canal they're about, no doubt?

Adam: The Suez? Well, naturally, who hasn't? But what the devil has it got to do with any haulage you head my way?

Sam: More than you think, lad! Or any other man

⁴⁹Fletcher, "Suez and Britain...", p. 126.

thinks, so far as I can tell by asking around.... T'passage to India'll be halved and have you ever thowt what that could mean to spinners? Even if they haven't bought shares in it, as I have?

Adam: You've put money into the Suez Canal Company? Good God, man, they say it'll be another ten years in the making. You'll be nearly seventy before a rowing boat sails through it, if one ever does!
[italics mine] 50

Although fiction, England was filled with Adam Swanns and they were unconvinced that the Suez Canal was a good idea. Britons willing to invest money in the Suez Canal were in short supply. Although Lange and a handfull of adventurous souls had purchased Suez Canal stock by 1869, the total British investment in the project remained negligible. The Suez Canal Company had issued 400,000 shares of stock. Britons owned 5,000 shares, or less than two per cent of the total, an insignificant amount compared to their French, Austrian, Egyptian and Russian neighbors.⁵¹

There were four general reasons why Britons slowly accepted the Suez Canal as a viable endeavor. First, and probably most important, at least until Hawkshaw's 1863 report, Britons thought the canal technically impossible. Time and time again, the press, popular and professional journals, and individuals cited emminent British engineers, particularly

⁵⁰R. F. Delderfield, God is an Englishman (6th ed.; New York: Pocket Books, 1972), p. 565.

⁵¹France bought 207,111 shares, Egypt bought 96,517 shares, Austria bought 51,246 shares, Russia bought 24,174 shares, and even the United States bought 5,000 shares. For a complete list of stock purchases by nationality, see F. A. Eaton, "The Suez Canal," p. 82.

Stephenson and Spratt, who pronounced against a canal across the Suez Isthmus.⁵² Britons had confidence in their engineers and all of Lesseps's torturous attempts to peddle his idea to the investment community came to naught in the face of formidable technical opposition.

Second, if Britons believed the canal technically possible, the question of its eventual profitability still existed. As The Economist recognized, technical and political implications completely aside, potential investors had to answer the "true consideration--will a sufficient number of ships go through the canal to pay its builders?" Stephenson, The Times, The Economist, The Saturday Review and the thousands of Adam Swanns thought not. Perhaps British merchants had dominated maritime commerce for too long. Perhaps they were too comfortable in the established trade patterns to appreciate fully the impact that steam and a short-cut through Egypt soon would make. This sentiment certainly was obvious in Belfast and Aberdeen where Mr. Lemon and Mr. Thompson openly declared that they would continue to send their ships around the Cape, canal or no canal. Lemon and Thompson said it, but it is legitimate to assert that many others thought it.

Politics coupled with a strong national pride contributed

⁵²Friends and enemies of the canal repeatedly recognized how harmful Stephenson's pronouncements against the canal were. See, for instance, Lesseps himself, Recollections of Forty Years, I, 107; Milner-Gibson and Gladstone during the debate on June 1, 1858; Cork men during Lesseps's visit to their city; and then comments in the press on pp. 144 and 151.

a third negative factor. Many Britons had a pathological distrust of France and did not want to see any French involvement in Egypt. Andrew's Euphrates Valley project and Brunlees and Webb's ship-railway across Egypt may have appealed to the futurist side of railway mentality, but essentially their schemes were wildly impractical. No matter: they were offered and seriously considered as viable alternatives to the canal. Britons could not forget that merchants had laid the foundation for their own empire in India and they did not want to risk French engineers doing the same thing in Egypt, England's highway to India. The Foreign Office, under Palmerston, Clarendon, Malmesbury, and Russell alike, perceived this a particularly acute threat and steadfastly opposed the canal until the denouement of 1864 which removed all grounds for opposition.⁵³

Politicians, of course, were more sensitive than private citizens to the canal's possible political implications. France might encroach in Egypt thus blocking the overland route to India. The canal might precipitate division and perhaps destruction of the Ottoman Empire thus defaulting control of the Straits and Central Asia to Russia. Private citizens did not lose much sleep over such issues, that was Government's responsibility. At the same time, Lesseps's tour revealed that men in Dublin, Belfast, Birmingham, and

⁵³Her Majesty's Government officially accepted the project in March, 1865. See Bell, "British Policy Towards the Construction of the Suez Canal," p. 123.

London intuitively feared that the canal somehow would work to England's political disadvantage.⁵⁴

Humanitarians provided a final, but thin, argument against the Suez Canal. Mr. Fowler during the London public meeting, The Times, and an occasional parliamentary outburst from Darby Griffith and Lord Palmerston reminded their countrymen that Lesseps was digging the canal with forced labor. British displeasure with the Egyptian corvée was not exclusively a humanitarian concern, however, and one encounters substantial criticism of the corvée only after onset of the American Civil War. Britons preferred Egyptian fellahin to work at growing cotton rather than digging Lesseps's ditch.

British opponents of the Suez Canal project from 1854 to 1864 could select from a variety of hostile arguments. Thereafter significant opposition subsided, leaving a small pool of residual displeasure which steadily evaporated as Britons came to realize that the Suez Canal concept was a good idea, particularly for Britons. Lesseps dug his canal in spite of British opposition, an opposition partly directed by Her Majesty's Government and its allies, enhanced by short-sighted individuals. But when the canal proved its worth, the Conservative Disraeli in 1875, then the Liberal Gladstone in 1882, moved decisively to insure Britain's control over it.

⁵⁴See, for example, pp. 56, 57, 58, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 76.

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