Telemachus and Minerva.

THE HENRY-CRILLON AFFAIR

As recounted in chapter IX -- subtitled "Madison as Minerva 1812" -- of Henry Adams' *The History of the United States of America during the Administrations of James Madison: 1809-1817.*

Whatever you say about the wisdom or lack of wisdom on the part of the Americans or British in bringing about, or allowing to be brought about, the War of 1812, a study of the origins of that conflict assuredly provides some valuable, and sometimes amusing, lessons in the history of democratic government. While tracing the causes that led up to it is not unlike following the windings of an intricate labyrinth; that begins at least as early as the time of the Jefferson administration, it is a reasonable simplification to say that what prompted the War of 1812, formally speaking, was British interdiction of American neutral shipping, including the seizing and capture of American ships, in an effort to enforce their blockade against Napoleon's empire. And had the British withdrawn their "Orders in Council," at least insofar as it interfered with American trade, the war could easily have been averted. The issue of impressment of American seaman by the Royal Navy, while an outrage on the public level, was of little actual influence on the U.S. government itself in its original war policy; which latter, in addition to a demand that the orders in Council be withdrawn, focused more on the conquest of Canada and Florida and Canada, and the clearing out of British allied Indians for Western settlement -- hence the reason why so many of the "War Hawks" hailed from the new western states. But also, in addition to all this, there was genuine resentment of American pride at being, as they felt, rudely and contemptuously used by the British.

Respecting British interference with trade, the Americans suffered much the same at the hands of Napoleon, who confiscated all American shipping that had either stopped in *any* British port, and or else traded under what he perceived as British control, sponsorship, or influence; such that, by rule of the Emperor's Berlin, Milan, and Bayonne

Decrees, in order to trade with anyone, you could do no trading anywhere in British dominions. Yet among the reasons the Madison administration was more incensed at the British than the French was that the British blockaded and were in a position to blockade, not just European but American ports; and because a far, far greater percentage of American trade was done with Britain and its colonies than with France or anyone else; and as result British interference did much greater harm to American commerce than that caused by the French.

The active American war advocates in late 1811 and early 1812 party sought and gained majority support in Congress, and this included passing bills to raise a new, and yet to be trained, army of 25,000 men.[1] Yet despite the ardor for the measure, few or no one in Congress wanted to have to pay for it. In lieu of taxes, some pro-war leaders wished to lift the Non-Importation Act instead to gain revenue from British payment of American import tariffs -- in order, that is, to fund the prospective war with Britain!

And there were other, in retrospect, risible incidents that arose; including the following proposals submitted by some pro-British Federalists to the British diplomatic minister in Washington, Sir Augustus John Foster, and who reported to his superiors:

"The sum of these suggestions [of the unnamed Federalists] was that we should neither revoke our Orders in Council nor modify them in any manner. They said this Government would, if we conceded, look upon our concessions as being the effect of their own measures, and plume themselves thereon; that they only wanted to get out of their present difficulties, and if we made a partial concession they would make use of it to escape fulfilling their pledge to go to war, still however continuing the restrictory system; whereas if we pushed them to the edge of the precipice by an unbending attitude, that then they must be lost, either by the disgrace of having nearly ruined the trade of the United States and yet failed to reduce Great Britain by their system of commercial restrictions, or else by their incapacity to conduct the government during war. These gentlemen declared they were for war rather than for the continuance of the restrictory system, even if the war should last four years. They thought no expense too great which would lead to the termination of the irritating, fretful feelings which had so long existed between the two countries. They animadverted on the peevish nature of the answers given in the affairs of the 'Chesapeake' [naval incident of 1807] and to my note on the Indians, and whenever any spirit of conciliation was shown by Great Britain, and told me it would ever be so until the people felt the weight of taxes; that nothing would bring them to a right sense of their interests but touching their purses; and that if we did go to war for a time, we should be better friends afterward. In short, they seemed to think that Great Britain could by management bring the United States into any connection with her that she pleased..."[2]

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[1] The British Army at the height of the Napoleonic wars in 1813 had 250,000 -- most of whom were already trained veterans.

[2] *History of the United States of America during the Administrations of James Madison: 1809-1817*, pp. 414-415.

Yet perhaps even more laughable and no less incredible than this is the story of the John Henry-Count Edward de Crillon affair, and which Henry Adams relates with both scholarly skill and comical aplomb in his *The History of the United States of America during the Administrations of James Madison: 1809-1817*; and that easily is worth our reproducing at length here.

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CHAPTER IX: Madison as Minerva 1812.

John Henry, whose reports [as a British spy] from Boston to Sir James Craig at Quebec had been received with favor in 1808 and 1809 both in Canada and in London, not satisfied with such reward as he received from the governor-general, went to England and applied, as was said, for not less than thirty-two thousand pounds, or one hundred and sixty thousand dollars, as the price he thought suitable for his services and his silence.[3] Whatever was the sum he demanded, he failed to obtain it, and left England in ill humor on his return to Canada, carrying his papers with him and an official recommendation to the governor general.

On the same ship was a Frenchman who bore the title of Count Edward de Crillon. His connections, he said, embraced the noblest and highest families of France; among his ancestors was the "brave Crillon," who for centuries had been known to every French child as the Bayard of his time. The Count Edward's father was the Duc de Crillon; by marriage he was closely connected with Bessieres, the Marechal Duc d'Istrie, Napoleon's favorite. Count Edward de Crillon had fallen into disfavor with the Emperor, and for that reason had for a time quitted France, while waiting a restoration to the army. His manners were easy and noble; he wore the decoration of the Legion of Honor, received and showed letters from his family and from the Duc d'Istrie, and talked much of his personal affairs, especially of his estate called St. Martial, "in Lebeur near the Spanish border," and, he took pride in saying, near also to the Chateau de Crillon, the home of his ancestors. He had met John Henry in London society. When he appeared on the Boston packet, a friendship arose between these two men so hardly treated by fortune. Henry confided his troubles to the count, and Crillon gave himself much concern in the affair, urging Henry to have no more to do with an ungrateful government, but to obtain from the United States the money that England refused. The count offered to act as negotiator, and use his influence with [Jean Mattieu Philibert] Serurier, his [i.e., Napoleon's American] minister, to approach the Secretary of State. The count even offered to provide for Henry's subsequent welfare by conveying to him the valuable estate at St. Martial in consideration of the money to be obtained for Henry's documents. At St. Martial, under the protection of the Crillons, John Henry would at last find, together with every charm of climate and scenery, the ease of life and the social refinement so dear to him.

[3] Crillon's evidence; Annals of Congress, 1811-1812, p. 1222.
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Henry entered into a partnership with the Frenchman, and on their arrival at Boston Crillon wrote to Serurier, introducing himself, and narrating the situation of Henry, whose papers, he said, were in his own control.[4] Serurier made no reply; but Crillon came alone to Washington, where he called on the minister, who after hearing his story sent him to [James] Monroe [Madison's Secretary of State], to whom he offered Henry's papers for a consideration of $125,000. Serurier liked Crillon, and after some months of acquaintance liked him still more : —

"His conduct and language during six weeks' residence here have been constantly sustained; the attention shown him by this Government, the repentance he displayed for having incurred the displeasure of his sovereign, the constant enthusiasm with which he spoke of the Emperor, the name he bore, the letters he showed from his sister and from the Marechal Duc d'Istrie, the decoration of the Legion he carried, and finally the persecution he suffered from the British minister and the party hostile to France, — all this could not but win my regard for him."[5]

Yet Crillon did not owe to Serurier his introduction into society, or his success in winning the confidence of Madison and Monroe. Indeed, the French minister could not openly recommend a man who admitted himself to be banished from France by the Emperor's displeasure. On the contrary, the favor that Crillon rapidly won at the White House served rather to establish his credit with his legation. The President and Cabinet ministers were civil to the count, who became a frequent guest at the President's table; and the services he promised to Serurier's great object were so considerable as to make the French minister glad to assist him. No French comedy was suited with a happier situation or with more skilful actors. During several weeks in January and February, 1812, Count Edward de Crillon was the centre of social interest or hostility at the White House, the State Department, and the French and the British Legations.

The negotiation through Serurier was successful. Henry was secretly summoned to Washington, and consented to desist from his demand for $125,000. Secretary Monroe agreed to give him $50,000, and to promise that the papers should not be made public antil Henry himself was actually at sea, while Crillon received the money, delivering to Henry the title-deeds to the estate of St. Martial. The money was paid, February 10, out of the contingent fund for foreign intercourse. Henry left Washington the next day to sail from New York for France in a national shipof-war, but the Count Edward de Crillon remained. March 2 Serurier reported,[6] —

"The Administration has decided to publish Henry's documents. The order has been sent to New York that in case the ship which was to give him passage has not arrived, he is to be embarked on a merchant-vessel; and then all the papers are to be sent to Congress by special message. Much is expected from this exposition. The conduct of M. Crillon since his arrival here has never ceased to be consistent and thoroughly French. It has drawn on him the hatred of the British minister and of all the British party; but he

[4] Les Etate Unis il y a quarante ans; Par Caraman. Revue Contemporaine, 31 Aour, 1852, p. 26.
[5] Serurier to Maret, May 27, 1812; Archives des Aff. Etr. MSS.
[6] Serurier to Maret, March 2, 1811; Archives des Aff. Etr. MSS.

bears up against it with the noblest firmness, and sometimes even with an intrepidity that I am obliged to restrain. He keeps me informed of everything that he thinks of service to the Emperor; and his loyalty of conduct attaches the members of the Administration to him. I have personally every motive to be satisfied with him, and I hope that the service he has just rendered, the sentiments he professes on all occasions, his so enthusiastic admiration for the Emperor, his devotion, his love of his country and his family, will create for him a title to the indulgence of his sovereign and the return of his favor. He will wait for them here, and I pray your Excellency to invoke them on my part."

The President waited only for the news that Henry had sailed, before sending to Congress the evidence of British intrigues and of Federalist treason; but as soon as this news arrived, Saturday, March 7, Monroe sent for Serurier:[7] —

"The Secretary of State asked me to come to his office to inform me of the determination. He asked me if I did not agree with him that it was better not to mention me in the Message, as such mention might injure its effect by giving it a French color. I told Mr. Monroe that I should leave the President entirely free to follow the course he thought best in the matter. He might say that the documents had come into my possession, and that I had at once sent them to him as interesting the Republic exclusively; or he might restrict himself to the communication of the papers without detail as to the route they had followed. That I had taken no credit, as he could remember, in regard to the service I had been so fortunate as to render the Administration; and that I had on my own account no need of newspaper notoriety or of public gratitude."

Monday, March 9, the President sent Henry's papers to Congress, with a message which said nothing as to the manner of acquiring them, but charged the British government with employing a secret agent "in fomenting disaffection to the constituted authorities of the nation, and in intrigues with the disaffected for the purpose of bringing about resistance to the laws, and eventually, in concert with a British force, of destroying the Union and forming the eastern part thereof into a political connection with Great Britain." Serurier reported that the Administration had great hopes through this discovery of deciding the result, inflaming the nation, and throwing it enthusiastically into the war: —

"The American people recalls to me the son of Ulysses [Telemachus] on the rock of Calypso's isle; uncertain, irresolute, he knows not to which of his passions to yield, when Minerva, flinging him into the sea, fixes his fate, leaving him no other choice than to overcome by his courage and strength the terrible elements she gives him for an enemy."

When John Henry's letters were read in Congress, March 9,1812, the Federalists for a moment felt real alarm, for they knew not what Henry might have reported; but a few minutes of examination showed them that, as far as they were concerned, Henry had taken care to report nothing of consequence. That he came to Boston as a British agent was hitherto unknown to the Federalists themselves, and the papers showed that he never

[7] Serurier to Maret, March 2, 1811; Archives des Aff. Etr. MSS.

revealed his secret character to them. His letters were hardly more compromising than letters, essays, and leading articles, sermons, orations, and addresses that had been printed again and again in every Federalist paper in Boston and New York. Here and there they contained rows of mysterious asterisks, but no other sign of acquaintance with facts worth concealing. The Federalists naturally suspected, what is evident on comparison of the papers bought by Madison with the originals in the Record Office at London, that Henry intended to sell as little as possible at the highest price he could exact. His revelations told nothing of his first visit to Boston in 1808, nor was one of the letters published which had been written in that year, although his documents incidentally alluded to information then sent; but what was more singular and fatal to his credit, the letters which he sold as his own were not copies but paraphrases of the originals; the mysterious asterisks were introduced merely to excite curiosity; and except the original instructions of Sir James Craig and the recent letter from Lord Liverpool's secretary, showing that in view of an expected war Henry had been employed as a secret agent to obtain political information by the governor-general, and that his reports had been sent to the Colonial Office, nothing in these papers compromised any one except Henry himself. As for the British government, since war was to be waged with it in any case for other reasons, these papers distracted attention from the true issue.

After a night's reflection the Federalists returned to the Capitol convinced that the President had done a foolish act in throwing away fifty thousand dollars for papers that proved the Federalist party to be ignorant of British intrigues that never existed. Fifty thousand dollars was a large sum; and having been spent without authority from Congress, it seemed to the Federalists chiefly their own money which had been unlawfully used by Madison for the purpose of publishing a spiteful libel on themselves. With every sign of passion they took up the President's personal challenge. A committee of investigation was ordered by the House, and found that Henry, with the Government's privity, had already sailed for Europe. Nothing remained but to examine Crillon, who gave evidence tending to prove only such facts as he thought it best that Congress should believe. In the Senate, March 10, Lloyd of Massachusetts moved a Resolution calling on the President for the names of any persons "who have in any way or manner whatever entered into, or most remotely countenanced," the projects of Sir James Craig. Monroe could only reply that, as John Henry had mentioned no names, the Department was not possessed of the information required. The reply made the Federalists only more angry; they were eager for revenge, and fortune did not wholly refuse it. They never learned that Henry's disclosure was the result of French intrigue, but they learned enough to make them suspect and exult over some mortification of the President.

Soon after Count Edward de Crillon gave his evidence to the investigating committee, news arrived that France was about to make war with Russia, and although Crillon had decided to wait in Washington for his recall to the Emperor's favor, he became suddenly earnest to depart. March 22, Serurier wrote:[8] —

"At the news of a possible rupture with Russia, the blood of M. de Crillon, always so boiling, has become hotter than ever, and he has decided to return to France without

[8] Serurier to Maret, March 22, 1811; Archives des Aff. Etr. MSS.

waiting an answer from your Excellency; he wants to throw himself at the Emperor's feet, tell him what he has done, invoke pardon for his errors, and go to expiate them in the advance guard of his armies."

April 1 Crillon left Washington bearing despatches from Monroe to [Joel] Barlow [U.S. ambassador to France], and from Serurier to [Duc de] Bassano [Napoleon's chief Minster of Foreign Affairs]. Neither he nor John Henry is known to have ever again visited the United States, and their names would have been forgotten had not stories soon arrived that caused the Federalists great amusement, and made President Madison very uncomfortable. Barlow wrote to the President that Count Edward de .Crillon was an impostor; that no such person was known to the Crillon family or to the French service. Private letters confirmed the report, and added that the estate of St. Martial had no existence, and that Crillon's draughts in Henry's favor were drawn on a person who had been five years dead.

"The President, with whom he has often dined," continued Serurier,[9] "and all the secretaries, whose reception, joined with the political considerations known to your Excellency, decided his admittance to my house, are a little ashamed of the eagerness (empressement) they showed him, and all the money they gave him. For my own part, Monseigneur, I have little to regret. I have constantly refused to connect myself with his affairs; I sent him to the Secretary of State for his documents; the papers have been published, and have produced an effect injurious to England without my having bought this good fortune by a single denier from the Imperial treasury; and I have escaped at the cost of some civilities, preceded by those of the President, the motive of which I declared from the first to be the services which the Administration told me had been rendered it by this traveller."

Serurier continued to declare that he had honestly believed Crillon to be "something like what he represented himself;" but he could not reasonably expect the world to accept these protestations. He had aided this person to obtain fifty thousand dollars from the United States Treasury for papers not his own, and instead of warning the President against an adventurer whose true character he admitted himself to have suspected, the French minister abetted the impostor. Although he afterwards asserted, and possibly believed, that Crillon was an agent of Napoleon's secret police, he was equally unwilling to admit that he had himself been either dupe or accomplice.[10]

That the President should be mortified was natural, but still more natural that he should be angry. He could not resent the introduction of a foreign impostor to his confidence, since he was himself chiefly responsible for the social success of the Count Edward de Crillon; but deception was a part of the French system, and Madison felt the Crillon affair sink into insignificance beside the other deceptions practised upon him by the government of France. He was as nearly furious as his temperament allowed, at the

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[9] Serurier to Maret, May 27,1812; Archives des Aff. fitr. MSS.

[10] Caraman. Revue Contemporaine, 31 aoflt, 1852. Count Edward de Crillon, *American Historical Review*, October, 1895, pp. 51-69.

manner in which the Emperor treated him. Before Crillon appeared on the scene, Madison used language to Serurier that betrayed his extreme dissatisfaction at being paraded before the public as a dupe or tool of France. At Savannah a riot took place between French privateersmen and American or English sailors; several men on both sides were killed; the privateers were burned; and Serurier complained in language such as Napoleon might be supposed to expect from his minister in regard to a violent outrage on the French flag. At the White House on New Year's day, 1812, the French minister renewed his complaints, and the President lost patience.

"The President," wrote Serurier,[11] "answered me with vivacity, that doubtless such indignities were subject for much regret; but it was not less distressing to learn what was passing every day in the Baltic and on the routes from America to England, where some American ships were burned, while others were captured and taken into European ports under French influence and condemned; that such proceedings were in his eyes hostilities as pronounced as were those of England, against whom the Republic was at that moment taking up arms. . . . Mr. Madison ended by telling me that he wished always to flatter himself that Mr. Barlow would send immediate explanation of these strange measures, and notice that they had ceased; but that for the moment, very certainly, matters could not be in a worse situation."

Disconcerted by this sharp rebuff from the President, Serurier went to Monroe, who was usually good-humored when Madison was irritable, and irritable when Madison became mild. This process of alternate coaxing and scolding seemed to affect Serurier more than it affected his master. Monroe made no reproaches, but defended the President's position by an argument which the Republican party did not use in public: —

"He urged that the captures of these ships, though perhaps inconsiderable in themselves, had the unfortunate effect of giving arms to the English party, which obstinately maintains that the repeal of the Berlin and Milan Decrees has not taken place; 'that repeal,' he added, 'on which nevertheless the whole actual system of the Administration is founded, and which, if it be not really absolute, would render the war we are undertaking with England very imprudent and without reasonable object.'"

This admission, although made in private, seemed humiliating enough; but as weeks passed, Monroe's complaints became stronger. March 2 Serurier reported him as avowing that he considered Barlow's mission fruitless;[12] —

"After delays that have lasted three months beyond what we feared, we have as yet received only projects of arrangements, but nothing finished that we can publish. . . . You are witness to our embarrassment. Our position is painful. We will treat with England on no other ground than that of withdrawing the Orders in Council, and nothing promises this withdrawal. We are then decided for war. You see us every day making our preparations. If these meet with obstacles, if they suffer some delay, if Congress seems to

[11] Serurier to Maret, Jan. 2,1612; Archives des Aff. Etr. MSS.
[12] Serurier to Maret, March 2,1812; Archives des Aft. Etr. MSS.

grow weak and to hesitate, this slackening is due to the fact that we come to no conclusion with France."

Ships were still captured on their way to England. "If your decrees are in fact repealed," asked Monroe, "why this sequestration?" Serurier strove in vain to satisfy Monroe that the decrees, though repealed in principle, might be still enforced in fact. He failed to calm the secretary or the President, whose temper became worse as he saw more clearly that he had been overreached by Napoleon, and that his word as President of the United States had been made a means of deceiving Congress and the people.

Had the British government at that moment offered the single concession asked of it, no war could have taken place, unless it were a war with France; but the British government had not yet recovered its reason. Foster came to Washington with instructions to yield nothing, yet to maintain peace; to threaten, but still conciliate. This mixture of policy, half Canning and half Fox, feeble and mischievous as it was, could not be altered by Foster; his instructions were positive. "Nor can we ever deem the repeal of the French hostile decrees to be effectual," wrote [Marquess Richard] Wellesley [brother of Arthur, and British Foreign Secretary in London] in April, 1811, "until neutral commerce shall be restored to the condition in which it stood previously to the commencement of the French system of commercial warfare." Wellesley hinted that the Decrees of Berlin and Milan were no longer important; they were in effect superseded by Napoleon's tariff of prohibitions and prohibitive duties; and until this system of war was abandoned, and neutral rights of trade were respected, Great Britain could not withdraw her blockades. In obedience to these instructions, Foster was obliged to tell Monroe in July, and again in October, 1811, that even if the repeal of the decrees were genuine, it would not satisfy the British government. Not the decrees, but their principle, roused British retaliation…[13]

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[13] [*Editor's Note*. The Orders in Council were finally revoked by Britain on June 17, 1812. However, by that time it was too late; for on June 18 the next day, the United States had formally declared war.]