**ALEXANDER COLLIE & COMPANY**

**By Dave Burt**

The heroes and villains of history often occupy the gray areas around the fringes of good and evil. In a story like this one, full of marginal scoundrels, once in a while history provides us with a schemer whose character seems a notch below all the others. One such person was Alexander Collie, a charlatan even by the standards of some of the men masquerading as respectable in the financial houses of Victorian London, like SIC & Co.

As discussed elsewhere in this monograph, William Crenshaw who, along with Major James Ferguson, might rightly be distinguished as the villains of the SIC & Co/Caleb Huse tale, came to London in early 1863 with a scheme to profit from running supplies past the Union blockade. Crenshaw was a private businessman from Richmond, and not a member or a representative of the Confederate Government, though his mission had their support. And as fate would have it, he promptly found his way to the firm of Alexander Collie & Co of Manchester. (1)

Alexander Collie was born in Aberdeen, Scotland in 1823, the son of a merchant. He started business in Manchester in about 1850 and by 1863 had established a warehouse in London. His business was the import and export of cotton in its various forms. His brother William joined him in the venture, running the Manchester part of the business, while Alexander concentrated on the London side of the enterprise. George Collie (Liverpool) was another brother and is not to be confused with the separate businesses of Alexander and William. (2)

Crenshaw pitched the idea of a joint venture with Collie for the creation of a private steamship line, of which half the cargo would be for the CS War Department. In other words, this venture would amount to a virtual monopoly on all Quartermaster and Commissary supplies run through the blockade and a commission on the goods either way, captured or not. Structured as such, it would be difficult to miss the deal, and smelling money, Alexander Collie agreed. He advanced the money for the first steamship *Havana.* The initial appeal to investors was based on the assumption, which proved false, that the Union blockade would not disturb commercial vessels filled with Quartermaster and Commissary goods, which could be classified as non-contraband under international law. In contrast, Ordnance Department supplies were (of course) always classified as contraband and thus subject to seizure as a prize of war. (3) The Union proved not as cooperative as hoped, and did not abide by that minor distinction. Colin McRae had a lack of enthusiasm for the Crenshaw/Collie venture from the start, seeing problems where greedier people saw financial gain. As things developed, Crenshaw and Collie had joint interests in some steam ships and not in others. Collie, for instance, had a side deal going on with the state of North Carolina for proprietary supplies backed by their own cotton, which did not involve supplies for the Government in Richmond. Since states rights was a key provision of the reason behind secession from the Union, state-owned vessels were exempt from the general requirement that half the cargo space on merchant vessels be reserved for the CS Government.

An odd and interesting series of tragedies began to befall Crenshaw and then subsequently, his vessels. First, in mid-May 1863 his Richmond factory burned to the ground, leaving only his steamship enterprise as a source of income. Then over a short period, the Crenshaw steamships began to suffer a disproportionate number of captures compared to those being operated separately by A. Collie & Co. To wit, Crenshaw lost seven steamships in the summer of 1864, all on either their first or second voyage, while Collie & Co enjoyed a much more successful record, including those shipments for the old North state (NC). The *Richmond Examiner* wondered aloud (in mid August 1864) if Collie might be intentionally endangering the ships of a rival line, and questioning the motives of their agent in Wilmington, NC, identified as a Hebrew. (4) Collie shot back a vitriolic response, which oddly failed to address the charges made by the Richmond newspaper.

This much is known, the port of Wilmington, NC was at the time (arguably) the second most important city in the Confederacy after Richmond. Wilmington was running almost three times the volume of cargo of Charleston. However, it was also becoming a notoriously mean place as a result. One officer recalled shortly after the Civil War,

**“*Talk about Yankees worshipping the almighty dollar! You should have seen the adoration paid the Golden Calf at Wilmington during the days of blockade-running.”***

Alexander Collie & Co had a staff of agents from England handling their business interests in Wilmington. The situation was described as follows:

***“Wilmington during that period swarmed with foreigners, Jews and Gentiles. In fact, going down the main street or along the river, you might well imagine you were journeying from Jerusalem to Jericho. As to the falling among thieves we will make no mention… At every turn you “met up,” as our tarheel friends say, with young Englishmen dressed like grooms and jockeys, or with a peculiar coachman-like look, seeming, in a foreign land, away from their mothers, to indulge their fancy for the outré and extravagant in dress to the utmost. These youngsters had money, made money, lived like fighting-cocks, and astonished the natives by their pranks, and the way they flung the Confederate “stuff” about. Of course they were deeply interested in the Confederate cause, and at the same time wanted cotton. The Manchester house of Alexander Collie and Co. had quite a regiment of these youngsters in their employ. Fine-looking fellows, with turned-up noses, blue eyes wide apart, and their fluffy, straw colored, mutton-chop whiskers floating in the wind, to the great admiration of their chèr amiés, the handsome quadroon washer-women, on whose mantle-pieces and in whose albums were frequently to be found photographs strikingly resembling the aforesaid young foreigners. They occupied a large flaring yellow house, like a military hospital, at the upper end of Market Street, and which belonged to a Mr. Wright. There these youngsters kept open house and spent their Company’s money, while it lasted. There they fought cocks on Sundays, until the neighbours remonstrated and threatened prosecution…”*** (5)

Lest you feel sorry for the author’s caricature of the British lads working for Alexander Collie & Co, he continues to say of another disliked contingent, **“*The tribe of Benjamin was also very well represented at Wilmington, as you may imagine, the unctuous and oleaginous Confederate Secretary of State having well provided for “his people.” A great many gentle-men of strongly Jewish physiognomy were to be met with on the streets, in very delicate health, and with papers in their pockets to keep them out of the army from the Secretary of State, but still in hot pursuit of the “monish.” When the conscript officer became very zealous and pressing they fled away to Nassau and Bermuda.”*** (6)

Whatever the case, the fact remains that Collie’s vessels were profitable while the vessels owned by Crenshaw lost the Quartermaster’s Department not only substantial sums of money, but more importantly huge stores of provisions much needed to feed and clothe the Confederate armies in the field. Oddly enough, the Ordnance Department vessels did not suffer the same fate as the Quartermaster’s (Crenshaw/Ferguson) in running the blockade, as they were not carrying supplies in competition with A. Collie, or perhaps they were just luckier. Those doing business with A. Collie & Co seldom met with good fortune. Peter Tait of Limerick partnered with Collie for his woollen material in filling his contract for Confederate uniforms. And further, to supply the Confederacy from Britain or Ireland entailed running the Union blockade. Toward this end, Tait again came into contact with Alexander Collie & Co, owner or part owner of several infamous blockade runners. One recent author quite adamantly contends that Collie & Co. repeatedly cheated Tait by hiding the accounts of profits or sales from him. Whether true or not, at the end of war, Collie & Co presented Tait with a bill for approximately £30,000, his share of their venture’s losses, and Peter Tait had never lost a single shipment to the Union blockade.

In an odd twist of fate or perhaps karmic retribution, all of the duplicitous dealing on the part of Alexander Collie & Co came home to roost about ten years post-bellum in 1875. Collie & Co never quite recovered from the collapse of the Confederacy and the loss of the cotton to confiscation and sale by the Union Treasury Department. (7) The following account summarizes a huge scandal that made the bookkeeping exploits of the Isaacs seem trivial and amateurish by comparison, as in fact, they were:

**“*In the middle of June, 1875, disaster again occurred this time in the Manchester and India trade by the failure of Alexander Collie & Co., of Manchester and Leadenhall Street, London, and in consequence this year became known then, and since, as the "Collie" year. The liabilities of this Firm were estimated at three millions; but Firm after Firm, as a result of the failure of this house, suspended payment, one house having nominal liabilities of two and a-half millions.***

***The firm of Collie & Co consisted of two brothers, Alexander and William Collie. The trustee in bankruptcy was the late Mr. John Young, of Turquand, Young, and the realisation of the Estate proved to be a lingering and disastrous one for the Creditors, the actual amount of dividend paid by this particular estate being disbursed in six instalments, in 1876, 1878, 1880, 1883, 1885, and the final closing of account took place in June, 1889. At meetings of Creditors, and by statements from responsible quarters, it transpired that the debtors had been living in all the prodigality of luxury that between them they had been in the habit of drawing 20,000 a year for their personal expenditure, Mr. Alexander Collie having drawn 123,000 for himself. The lease of Alexander Collie's house in Kensington Palace Gardens sold for 38,500, and the “costly contents” were the subject of five days' sale. (8) It is notorious in connection with that year, that, as a consequence of losses sustained, the leading Joint Stock Banks had to reduce their half-yearly Dividends, in addition to otherwise providing for the losses sustained.***

***A feature of this Firm's transactions was, that they did not accept Bills, and there was not a single acceptance of theirs existent at the date of their failure. They drew upon Houses many of whom were entirely of their own creation, and who were financed by them. On the 2ist July both Partners, whose capital existed only in name, were charged at the Guildhall Police Court for having obtained money by false pretences, in drawing Bills with marks and numbers upon them, indicating that they referred to Cotton and Ledger accounts; but in fact, they were only Accommodation Bills. (9)***

***It was proved that there were no such goods sold, no such accounts in the ledger, and no goods accounts between the acceptors and the guarantors. As a matter of fact, goods to the extent of 100,000 roughly, were all that were represented in millions of Bills in the hands of Banks and other Firms. On the 8th August it was announced that Alexander Collie had absconded. Warrants were granted for his apprehension, but he was not arrested, and it was afterwards ascertained that he was in Spain, between which country and this at that time, no extradition treaty existed. The charge was not proceeded with as against William Collie, and Alexander Collie died in New York on 23rd November, 1895…The effect of this failure was severely felt in the Manchester and India Goods markets.” (10)***

It is difficult to sympathize with the fate of the larcenous British ex patriot Alexander Collie, except to the extent that that he may have served as an antagonist to the *Agents Provocateurs* Crenshaw and Ferguson.

NOTES

1. The *Richmond Examiner* able to size up Mr. Collie quickly enough, referring to him in an April 1864 article as a *pawky* Scotchman. *Pawky* being a period term for cunning or shrewd, but not in a complimentary sense.

2. Waite, John E, *Peter Tait: A Remarkable Story,* Milnford Publications 2005. p. 49.

3. Wilson, Harold, *Confederate Industry: Manufacturers and Quartermasters in the Civil War*, University of Mississippi Press, 2002, p. 172.

4. Ibid, Wilson, p. 173, excerpt from the *Richmond Examiner*, reprinted in the *New York Times* on August 21, 1864.

5. Johns, J. *Wilmington, NC during the Blockade, by a Late Confederate Officer,* Harpers New Monthly Magazine, September 1866.

*6.* Ibid, Johns. The author considers Scotchmen about on par with the Jews in terms of business acumen noting the Wilmington area was settled by, “*Scotchmen, and to this day you find the old Highland names, and see strongly marked Scottish features among the inhabitants. The people still retain many of the traits of their descent, and are shrewd, canny, money-making, and not to be beaten at driving a bargain by any Yankee that we ever saw.”*

*7.* See *Young v United States*, 97 US 39, (1877). Trustees for the Creditors from the Bankruptcy of Collie & Co brought suit to recover cotton the firm claimed as their sole possession, and unsuccessfully made their claim under the Abandoned and Captured Property Act.

*8.* Including his extensive collection of artwork, such as the famous Victorian painting by John Millais, called *Hearts are Trump*. Kensington was where Samuel Isaac lived, too, in a nearby estate liquidated a few years earlier.

*9.* Accommodation Bills are bills of exchange, signed by a guarantor, who pays in the place of the acceptor should he default at maturity. This is also known as kiting and it means commercial paper (supposedly secured by commodities, in this case non-existent) is moved from Bank to Bank one deposit covering the withdrawal from the previous institution. A Banker named Benson suffered in this scam, and opined that if British Banks were not so notoriously secretive and private, Collie could not have gotten by his shenanigans for as long as he did.

10. Woolley, Charles, *Phases of Panic: A Brief Historical Review*, Henry Good & Son Publisher, 1896, p. 37-38.

The *Giraffe* (later the *Robert E Lee*), sold by A Collie & Co to the CS