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Guide to the Sir Edward Thornton Correspondence with the British Foreign Office

GEN MSS 864



by Beinecke Staff

2012

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Table of Contents

Collection Overview	3
Requesting Instructions	3
Administrative Information	4
Immediate Source of Acquisition	4
Conditions Governing Access	4
Conditions Governing Use	4
Preferred Citation	4
Processing Information	4
Sir Edward Thornton (1817-1906)	4
Scope and Contents	4
Arrangement	5
Collection Contents	6
Series I: Correspondence from the British Foreign Office, 1870-1875	6
Series II: Official Correspondence to the British Foreign Office, 1868-1874	7
Series III: Private Correspondence to the British Foreign Office, 1868-1875	8
Selected Search Terms	9

Collection Overview

REPOSITORY: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library
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CALL NUMBER: GEN MSS 864

CREATOR: Thornton, Edward, Sir, 1817-1906

TITLE: Sir Edward Thornton correspondence with the British Foreign Office

DATES: 1868-1875

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: 1.5 linear feet (6 boxes)

LANGUAGE: English

SUMMARY: The papers are comprised of more than 2,500 original autograph manuscript letters and dispatches received by Sir Edward Thornton, and manuscript copies of Thornton's outgoing official and private correspondence and dispatches, in the period following the American Civil War. Thornton's correspondence was with several important figures in British foreign policy including foreign secretaries Edward Henry Stanley, George William Frederick Villiers, and George Leveson-Gower. Hundreds of other letters are from or to the under-secretaries of state for foreign affairs Edmund Hammond and Charles Stuart Aubrey Abbott. Topics discussed include issues such as the Alabama Claims, the boundary between the United States and Canada in the Pacific Northwest, fishing rights in Newfoundland, American efforts to secure land in Colombia for a trans-Isthmian canal, American encouragement of the independence movement in Cuba against Spain, questions over naturalization and citizenship, and raids by Irish-American Fenians against Canada. In his confidential letters to the foreign secretaries, Thornton discussed American politics and the personalities of American politicians, including presidents Andrew Johnson and Ulysses S. Grant, secretaries of state William Seward and Hamilton Fish, and the American ambassadors to Great Britain Reverdy Johnson and John Lothrop Motley.

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Requesting Instructions

To request items from this collection for use in the Beinecke Library reading room, please use the request links in the HTML version of this finding aid, available at <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/beinecke.thornton>.

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Key to the container abbreviations used in the PDF finding aid:

b. box

Administrative Information

Immediate Source of Acquisition

Purchased from William Reese Co. on the Edwin J. Beinecke Book Fund and the James Marshall and Marie-Louise Osborn Collection Fund, 2011.

Conditions Governing Access

The materials are open for research.

Conditions Governing Use

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Preferred Citation

Sir Edward Thornton Correspondence with the British Foreign Office. General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

Processing Information

Information included in the Description of Papers note and Collection Contents section is drawn from material supplied by the vendor.

Sir Edward Thornton (1817-1906)

A career diplomat, Sir Edward Thornton was born in London on July 13, 1817, the son of diplomat Sir Edward Thornton (1766-1852). He was educated at King's College, London, and at Pembroke College, Cambridge, before serving the British government in Turin, Mexico City, and several countries in South America. In September 1867 he was appointed as British envoy to Brazil, but the death of Frederick Bruce, the British ambassador to the United States, sent Thornton to Washington instead; he arrived there in early 1868 and remained in the position through 1881. Thornton was knighted in 1870, and made a privy councillor the next year, when he was also named one of the British commissioners to the tribunal created by the Treaty of Washington to arbitrate outstanding Anglo-American grievances, including the Alabama Claims. In 1881 Thornton was made ambassador to St. Petersburg, and a year later ambassador to Constantinople. He held the latter post for three years until he retired and returned to London, where he died on January 26, 1906.

Scope and Contents

The Sir Edward Thornton Correspondence with the British Foreign Office is comprised of more than 2,500 original manuscript letters and dispatches received by Thornton between 1870 and 1875, along with manuscript copies of Thornton's outgoing official and private letters sent from 1868 to 1875. They are contained in six bound volumes of contemporary three quarter sheep and pebbled cloth, two of the

volumes large folio, two folio, and two quarto. The correspondence is between Thornton and the most important figures in British foreign policy from the period, including Lord Edward Henry Stanley, later Earl of Derby (1826-1893), who was the British foreign secretary from July 1866 through December 1868 and February 1874 through April 1878; George William Frederick Villiers, Earl of Clarendon (1800-1870), who succeeded Stanley when the Liberals returned to office in December 1868 and who served as foreign secretary until his death in June 1870; and George Leveson-Gower, the second Earl Granville (1815-1891), who was foreign secretary from July 1870 to February 1874. Hundreds of other letters are to of from the two men who were the under-secretaries of state for foreign affairs, Edmund Hammond (1802-1890), who held the post from 1854 to 1873, and Charles Stuart Aubrey Abbott, Baron Tenterden (1834-1882), who succeeded Hammond. Thornton's incoming correspondence is complete for the period 1870-1875, but his outgoing correspondence is missing letters from the year 1871.

This official and confidential correspondence between Thornton and the British Foreign Office covers a whole range of issues affecting the relationship between American and Great Britain at the conclusion of the American Civil War, including the disputed boundary between the United States and the Dominion of Canada in the straits of San Juan de Fuca in the Pacific Northwest, and the question of fishing rights off Newfoundland. Other discussed issues grew out of Great Britain's neutrality in the Civil War and, in particular, the "Alabama Claims" rising from British ships having been supplied to the Confederacy, which were then outfitted as military vessels. These ships, among them the *Alabama*, the *Alexandra*, and the *Florida*, were used to destroy Union merchant ships, resulting in postwar financial compensation claims by the United States against Great Britain.

Other issues discussed were American efforts to secure land in Colombia for a trans-Isthmian canal, American encouragement of the independence movement in Cuba against Spain, questions over naturalization and citizenship, and raids by Irish-American Fenians against Canada. There is also much discussion of American politics and the personalities of American politicians, including correspondence about presidents Andrew Johnson and Ulysses S. Grant and secretaries of state William Seward and Hamilton Fish, and the activities and qualities of American ambassadors to Great Britain, Reverdy Johnson and John Lothrop Motley.

The letters in this collection are divided into three categories that define the series arrangement described below: original manuscript letters sent to Thornton from the British Foreign Office; manuscript copies of Thornton's official correspondence to the British foreign secretaries and the Foreign Office; and manuscript copies of Thornton's private correspondence to the foreign secretaries. Each of the three categories is divided into two volumes, for a total of six volumes of bound manuscripts in the collection. The volume numbers listed below in the Collection Contents were assigned by the library, and not by Thornton or his office.

Arrangement

Organized into three series: I. Correspondence from the British Foreign Office, 1870-1875. II. Official Correspondence to the British Foreign Office, 1868-1874. III. Private Correspondence to the British Foreign Office, 1868-1875.

Collection Contents

Series I: Correspondence from the British Foreign Office, 1870-1875

2 volumes

Volume 1 contains 166 letters from George Leveson-Gower, the second Earl Granville, Edmund Hammond, and others to Thornton in Washington dated July 1870 to December 1872. The overriding issue of this period was the continuing dispute over the Alabama Claims and the signing of the Treaty of Washington (May 1871), which created a tribunal to consider the claims, as well as an arbitration framework to address the question of the boundary in the straits of San Juan de Fuca. The second volume holds 156 letters, dated January 1873 through December 1875, which are mostly from the under-secretaries Hammond and Abbott, or from foreign secretaries Lord Granville and Lord Edward Henry Stanley. A wide variety of topics are covered, including all aspects of Anglo-American relations, but also British and American politics, as well as affairs in the Caribbean, Europe, and Asia.

b.1	Volume 1	1870-1872
b.2	Volume 2	1873-1875

Series II: Official Correspondence to the British Foreign Office, 1868-1874

2 volumes

The series consists of two volumes holding copies of Thornton's official correspondence to the British Foreign Office and the foreign secretaries. The first volume contains more than 800 individual communications, and the second contains nearly 1,300; both volumes have manuscript indexes in front. The main recipients of the letters copied into the first volume are the two foreign secretaries of the period 1868-1870, Lord Edward Henry Stanley and George William Frederick Villiers, Earl of Clarendon. Thornton's dispatches contain a wealth of information on American politics and policy of the era, giving his reports on his interactions with members of the State Department, the executive and legislative branches, his observations of foreign policy issues in the media, and more. The second volume covers the period April 1872 through December 1874. The first part of this volume contains much on the ongoing arbitration over the Alabama Claims, but as in the preceding volume a huge variety of topics are discussed, touching on all aspects of Anglo-American relations, as well as American politics and public opinion. For example, the ongoing fisheries dispute with the United States is the subject of several communications, and the Cuban insurrection remained a contentious issue in this period, with many of Thornton's dispatches related to American policy on the matter.

b. 3	Volume 3	1868-1870
b. 4	Volume 4	1872-1874

Series III: Private Correspondence to the British Foreign Office, 1868-1875

2 volumes

The series contains two volumes holding manuscript copies of Thornton's private outgoing correspondence to the British foreign secretaries. The first volume covers the years 1868 and 1869, with 100 letters to Lord Edward Henry Stanley and George William Frederick Villiers, Earl of Clarendon. The letters in this and the following volume are of a different tone than those in Thornton's official correspondence. They deal much more with Thornton's private conversations with William Seward, Hamilton Fish, and other American officials, and offer Thornton's own thoughts and advice on the British positions, negotiations, and strategy. The tone is much more candid, and the letters are very revealing of Thornton's own thoughts, and his assessments of American policy and policy makers. The earliest letters are indicative of the poor state of affairs between the two nations, while those in the second volume show the views of a man who has been in his post for several years, and who has developed a rapport with Hamilton Fish and other American officials.

The second volume holds 136 of Thornton's private outgoing letter to the two British foreign secretaries for the years 1873 to 1875, George Leveson-Gower, the second Earl Granville, and Lord Stanley, as well as to the under-secretaries of state for foreign affairs, Edmund Hammond and Charles Stuart Aubrey Abbott. Several issues recur throughout these letters, including the negotiation of a commercial reciprocity treaty between the United States and Canada, the Alabama Claims convention, the meeting of the fisheries commission, and American politics. The Cuban revolution and the related "Virginus affair," in which an American vessel delivering contraband to insurrectionaries was captured by a Spanish ship and more than fifty of its crew executed by Spanish authorities, are also a major topic of the volume.

b. 5	Volume 5	1868-1869
b. 6	Volume 6	1873-1875

Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the Library's online catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically therein.

Subjects

Alabama claims
Diplomats, British -- United States
Fenians
Fisheries -- Newfoundland and Labrador

Tenterden, Charles Stuart Aubrey Abbott,
Baron, 1834-1882
Thornton, Edward, Sir, 1817-1906

Corporate Body

Virginus (Steamer)

Geographic Names

Canada -- Boundaries -- United States
Canada -- Foreign relations -- United States
Canada -- History -- Fenian Invasions,
1866-1870
Cuba -- History -- Insurrection, 1868-1878
Great Britain -- Foreign relations -- United
States
Great Britain -- Politics and government --
1837-1901
Panama Canal (Panama)
United States -- Boundaries -- Canada
United States -- Foreign relations -- Canada
United States -- Foreign relations -- Great
Britain

Genres / Formats

Letter books -- Great Britain -- 19th century

Occupations

Diplomats, British

Names

Clarendon, George William Frederick Villiers,
Earl of, 1800-1870
Derby, Edward Henry Stanley, Earl of, 1826-1893
Fish, Hamilton, 1808-1893
Grant, Ulysses S. (Ulysses Simpson), 1822-1885
Granville, Granville George Leveson-Gower,
Earl, 1815-1891
Hammond, Edmund, 1802-1890
Johnson, Andrew, 1808-1875
Johnson, Reverdy, 1796-1876
Motley, John Lothrop, 1814-1877
Seward, William H. (William Henry), 1801-1872