



## 'World on Fire': British eyes on the United States' Civil War

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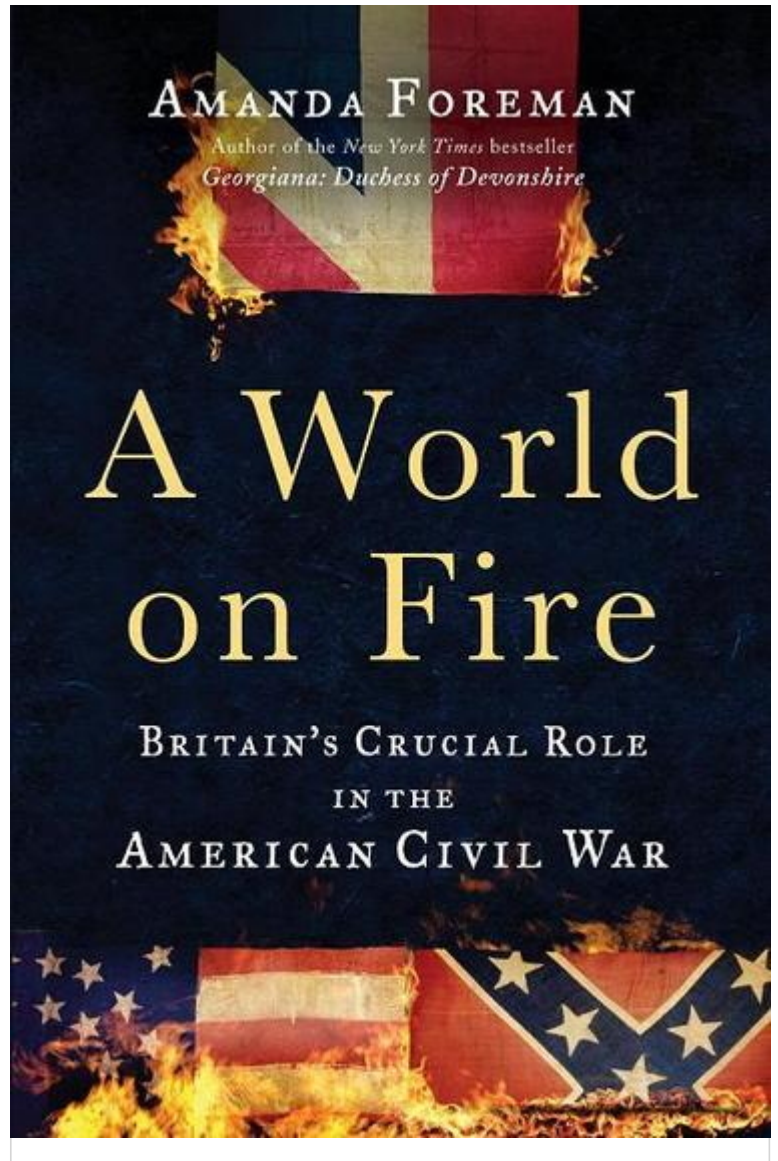
**John Sledge**

By

One hundred and fifty years ago this Thursday, Union and Confederate armies collided in the Civil War's first big Eastern battle near Manassas Junction, Va. Among the witnesses were William Howard Russell, a reporter for The Times of London situated behind Union lines, and Mary Sophia Hill, an Anglo-Irish émigré working as a nurse with the 6th Louisiana Volunteers. As the triumphant rebels scattered the poorly led federals, Russell was caught in the confusion. "The crowd from the front continually increased," he subsequently recalled. "The heat, the uproar, and the dust were beyond description." Writing of her own harried time in a Southern hospital afterwards, Hill declared, "I heard and saw it all, war in its grandeur and war in its meanness."

The Civil War is widely perceived as the defining American experience, but as Russell's and Hill's activities make clear, British subjects were directly caught up in the turmoil as well. Thousands of them, in fact, were on both sides, serving in every capacity imaginable, from sharpshooters to stretcher-bearers to teamsters. And across the Atlantic, their brethren were equally stirred, many sympathizing with the South. British intervention was widely feared by the North, and that it didn't happen constitutes one of the greatest diplomatic dramas in history.

Every aspect of this fascinating story — with scenes played out in muddy Richmond trenches as well as in elegant, wallpapered London drawing rooms — is thoroughly and vividly detailed in "A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War" (Random, \$35) by Amanda Foreman. The result is an 800-page doorstop that includes 100 pages of notes, a glossary and a 39-page index, all weighing in at a staggering three pounds (falling asleep or just losing your grip with this one held over your nose could prove injurious). Exciting as it all is on the page, "A World on Fire" is very much a gamble for the talented and photogenic Foreman — routinely referred to as a "glamour historian." Her first book, a biography of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, was a best seller and the inspiration for the movie "The Duchess" starring Keira Knightley. Whether or not her readers will follow her into this sprawling saga with equal enthusiasm remains to be seen, but if not the loss is theirs.



Foreman is unusually qualified to explore her subject in that she harbors both American and British sympathies. She was mostly raised in Los Angeles but also spent significant time in an English boarding school. "I'm culturally bilingual," she told Publishers Weekly in a recent interview. In short, she appreciates the expansiveness and diversity found among the peoples of these shores, while owning an admirable understanding for exactly how Parliament worked in the 19th century, something that American historians frequently oversimplify. She has a gift for both the big picture and the engaging personal stories of her protagonists, and she delivers her prose in swift and eloquent strokes.

Much of this book's immediacy is due to Foreman's frequent resort to the firsthand accounts of those Britons, like Russell and Hill, who were most directly involved. These are admirably direct and sometimes witty. Before the war began, most English men and women perceived the United States as raw, untamed and dangerous. Numerous British travelers, among them Charles Dickens and Frances Trollop, regaled their countrymen and offended their American friends with lurid portraits of alternately muddy and dusty streets thronged by hogs, hotel carpets stained and squishy with tobacco juice, and rustic inhabitants whose slurred and mangled speech could hardly be classified as English. Unimpressed by the democratic experiment, Dickens quipped, "I infinitely prefer a liberal monarchy."

But the economic ties were profound, and ignoring the American war proved out of the question for the island kingdom. This mostly had to do with cotton, of course, shipped there in massive quantities out of the South and spun in the humming mill towns. The loss of Southern cotton was of enormous consequence to the British — millions were directly or indirectly dependent on the trade — hence their strong Southern prejudices. And though their government never actually joined the shooting war on either side, their crucial support of the South (including construction of the notorious commerce raider C.S.S. Alabama) infuriated the North and led to years of chilly postwar diplomatic relations.

Foreman tells it all, and if any history book can be said to qualify as a beach read this summer, "A World on Fire" would certainly be it.

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