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'A World on Fire' highlights neglected story of the Civil War

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By Star-Ledger Entertainment Desk

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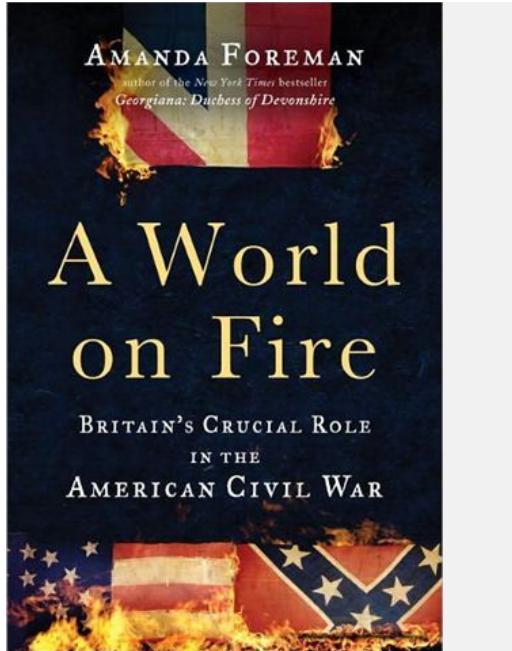
A World on Fire: Britain's Critical Role in the American Civil War
Amanda Foreman
Random House, 956 pp., \$35

Reviewed by Richard Aregood

For all the thousands of Civil War books, one critical subject has been neglected — one that was central to the outcome. **Amanda Foreman** goes a long way toward redressing that lack in her massive "**A World on Fire**."

American politicians then could always get a rise out of an audience by denouncing Mother England. The nations had last fought a war less than 40 years before. Upper-class Englishmen could delude themselves that a gallant South was fighting for self-determination when their sympathies were more driven by empathy for a feudal state without all that disquieting democracy, non-English immigrants and industrialization.

Besides, there were concrete venal reasons for Britain to be torn. Five million Englishmen were dependent on cotton for a living. There was money to be made on shipmaking, especially in Liverpool, where building Confederate commerce raiders became an industry. And British exports and investment were predominantly directed toward the North. Adding to the stew, the Union was a credible threat to Canada.



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Although Foreman peoples her book like a Victorian novel, with hordes of Brits and Confederates almost tripping over one another, the heroes are a pair of diplomats who made the fraught relationship of the two countries work despite what often seems like daily provocations. Lord Richard Lyons, Britain's representative in Washington, and Charles Francis Adams, the son and grandson of American presidents, in London, were on the diplomatic front line, continually dealing with crises like the American interception of the British packet Trent, the impressing of British citizens into both Union and Confederate forces, and the construction of Confederate warships in "neutral" Britain.

The book reminds us of the flaws that practicing politicians often manifest, from Lincoln's political need to soft-pedal slavery as an issue, which blunted the power of the Northern argument in England, to Lord Gladstone's unfortunate remark (which he later said he regretted) that the Confederates had "made a nation." Secretary of State William Seward often seemed more concerned with playing to the Anglophobes in the cheap seats than with making the relationship work.

Prince Albert, as he was dying, provided the diplomatic finesse that relieved a particularly dangerous situation political figures had botched.

Public relations may have begun with the work of Henry Hotze, a Confederate with press contacts that swayed coverage of the war in England. The Times of London was shamefully biased toward the South. Its great war correspondent, William Howard Russell, was considered an enemy by North, South and his own editors for his truthful coverage.

This is an essential book, well-written and almost cinematic in sweep. As the historian Piers Brendon said about it, "if her tome is hard to pick up, it is also hard to put down."

Richard Arehood, retired editorial page editor for The Star-Ledger, is a professor at the University of North Dakota.

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