

## A World on Fire: An Epic History of Two Nations Divided, By Amanda Foreman

History unfolds like a cavalry charge

Reviewed by David Evans

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"Though with the North we sympathise It must not be forgotten

That with the South we've stronger ties Which are composed of cotton."

Thus, in 1861, the satirical magazine *Punch* summed up London's ambivalent stance on the American Civil War; while Abraham Lincoln held the moral high ground, the Confederacy had the makings of a lucrative trading partner.

But although Lord Palmerston's government held a self-interested neutrality throughout, Britain did influence the conflict. Amanda Foreman's fascinating study documents the tangled web of relationships that implicated this country in the battle over the Atlantic: British arms at Shiloh and Gettysburg; British-built ships in the Confederate navy; and British doctors, nurses and soldiers volunteering in their thousands for both sides.

The author argues that the "simultaneous involvement and detachment" of these participants provides us with a "special perspective", and she focuses on their stories. This is the book's strength, and its principal weakness; while Foreman includes many evocative eyewitness accounts – such as the *Times* correspondent William Howard Russell's vigorous description of "the heat, the uproar and the dust" at Bull Run – her tight focus means we tend to lose sight of the bigger picture.

Nevertheless, Foreman's scholarship is impressive, and her narrative unfolds with the irresistible momentum of a cavalry charge. A richly compelling history.