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

Reviewed by Piers Brendon

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The American Civil War (1861-65) was the bloodiest conflict in the country's history. All told it cost the lives of 620,000 combatants, out of a population of 31 million. This is roughly proportionate to the losses sustained by Britain during the Great War, which the slogging match between the northern Union and southern Confederacy anticipated in crucial respects. Their forces fought what was essentially the first modern industrial war, in which railways, tinned food and massed-produced uniforms played as decisive a part as ironclads, artillery and Springfield rifles. They dug trenches, exploded mines, fired machine guns. They also waged a kind of total war, killing 50,000 civilians, destroying towns and ravaging vast tracts of land. General Sheridan, whose Yankee troops turned the fertile Shenandoah Valley into a wilderness, said that "the people must be left nothing but their eyes to weep with over the war".

Fratricidal struggles are notoriously vicious and the war between the states was further embittered by its fundamental cause – slavery. White southerners, prospering thanks to servile labour on the tobacco plantations and in the cotton fields, regarded the "peculiar institution" as the basis of their existence and wanted to extend it across the continent. This was anathema to northerners such as Abraham Lincoln, who stated flatly that "If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong."

As President, Lincoln's priority was to maintain the union. At first he temporised over the question of slavery in order to prevent the secession of border states such as Missouri, Kentucky and Maryland. But his electoral victory in 1860 fed Southern terrors that abolitionists, following the example of John Brown, would try to foment a revolt of four million blacks – recently deemed by the Supreme Court to be no more entitled to citizenship than horses or sheep. Thus the 11 states which declared independence under the Confederate flag did so to preserve a society which The Times's war correspondent William Howard Russell likened to that of Sparta – "an aristocracy resting on helotry".

As Amanda Foreman shows in this vast panorama of the Civil War, the passions generated on American soil flowed across the Atlantic. North and South appealed for European, and especially British, support; but public opinion in the UK was sharply divided. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sold a million copies in Britain – the Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston, who had not opened a novel in 30 years, apparently read it three times. It did much to mobilise opposition to the Confederacy. The South was fighting, wrote John Stuart Mill, for the right to burn "human creatures alive". On the other hand, Lancashire was subject to King Cotton and suffered terribly when its looms were starved. Many British patricians swallowed the myth that the South was a feudal paradise.

The Times reflected this view and, after Russell was driven out for reporting the truth about the Union defeat at Bull Run, it distorted the news shamefully. Even Gladstone, in what he later acknowledged to be an egregious error, said that Jefferson Davis and the other Confederate leaders had "made a nation".

Luckily Gladstone's Liberal superiors, Palmerston and Foreign Secretary Lord John Russell, were united in their resolve to keep Britain out of the war. There were times when they were tempted to intervene. Both North and South interpreted British neutrality as hostility and Lincoln's Secretary of State, William Seward, was particularly provocative. Rash, coarse and drunken, he curried favour with Anglophobic Americans. He thought nothing of expressing designs on Canada and threatening a confrontation with England that would "wrap the world in fire".

In 1861 Seward supported an aggressive Yankee captain who seized two Confederate envoys aboard the British ship *Trent*. This was a blatant violation of international law, no different, as Jefferson Davis said, "from a kidnapping on Piccadilly". Palmerston took stern military measures, but Lord John Russell (counselled by the dying Prince Albert) sent emollient words. His shrewd, modest minister in Washington, Lord Lyons, allowed Seward to back down without losing face.

Lyons, responsible for the large number of Britons in America, is really the hero of Foreman's story. And what a dramatic story it is, seething with intrigue that laid bare the Anglo-American relationship, and punctuated by hideous carnage on the battlefield. The book is graphically illustrated not only with maps and photographs but with Frank Vizetelly's line drawings. It

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is based on much original material. And it is well written. Rich in action, character and anecdote, it moves inexorably towards the twin climax of Lee's surrender and Lincoln's assassination.

Nevertheless, *A World on Fire* is by no means a complete success. It is overweight, too heavy to hold comfortably and too packed with miscellaneous information. The attempt to combine diplomatic and military history is unsatisfactory, not least because there is little new to say about murderous engagements such as Antietam and Gettysburg. Foreman's narrative is light on analysis and sometimes becomes a mere chronicle, one damn thing after another. Scholarly she certainly is, providing over 100 pages of references. But she is not as helpful to other students of the subject as she might be, omitting a bibliography and giving no proper list of primary sources.

Yet if her tome is hard to pick up, it is also hard to put down. It conjures up a lost world, invariably fascinating, frequently harrowing, occasionally cheering. The abolition of slavery apart, perhaps the happiest circumstance was the way in which Uncle Sam and John Bull talked on equal terms – a far cry from the Bush-Blair master-servant relationship.

*Piers Brendon's 'The Decline and Fall of the British Empire' is published by Vintage*

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