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Saul David

LYONS' SHARE

A World on Fire: An Epic History of Two Nations Divided

By *Amanda Foreman* (Allen Lane/The Penguin Press 814pp £30)

More than a decade has passed since Amanda Foreman burst onto the literary scene with her prize-winning and bestselling debut, *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire*. Since then marriage, children and a move to New York have delayed the follow-up. But it's been worth the wait because *A World on Fire*, charting Britain's pivotal role in the American Civil War, is nothing less than a tour de force.

Born in England and brought up in America, Foreman can see the war from both perspectives and is the ideal guide for this fascinating tale of diplomatic intrigue and skulduggery. While her narrative concentrates on the four chief diplomatists - the Britons Lord John Russell and Lord Lyons, and the Americans William Seward and Charles Adams - it also includes vivid snapshots of political giants like Abraham Lincoln and Lord Palmerston, Generals Robert E Lee and his nemesis Ulysses S Grant, and ordinary Britons who were caught up in the fighting.



The unlikely hero of the piece is undoubtedly Lord Lyons, the British envoy to the US (only France was then important enough to warrant an ambassador), who arrived in Washington in 1859 as relations between the Southern and Northern states were rapidly deteriorating. A shy, middle-ranking diplomat who shunned alcohol, hated displays of emotion and tended to avoid eye-contact with servants and women, Lyons came of age during a war that, but for him, Britain would almost certainly have joined on the Confederate side.

Foreman sets the scene beautifully:

For seventy-five years after the War of Independence, the British approach to dealing with the Americans had boiled down to one simple tactic, to be 'very civil, very firm, and to go our own way' ... It went without saying that the Foreign Office expected Lyons to be on guard against any American chicanery. He would not disappoint.

When war broke out in 1861, after the Southern states had seceded from the Union and formed their own Confederacy (chiefly to prevent the North from abolishing slavery), Britain's instinct was to stay on the sidelines. But two developments made this increasingly unlikely: the federal government's blockade of Southern ports, thus preventing the export of raw cotton to Britain's vital weaving industry in Lancashire; and the Senate's passing of a protectionist bill that placed high import duties on most imported manufacturing goods (the majority of which came from Britain).

Lyons's unequivocal response was to threaten to recognise the Confederacy, thus granting the South the status of a sovereign country, a step towards full independence. This in turn goaded Seward, the bullish Federal Secretary of State, to retaliate: 'Such recognition will mean war! The whole world will be engulfed and revolution will be the harvest.'

Fortunately tempers cooled on this occasion, chiefly because Britain did not

recognise the Confederacy. But there was considerable pressure on its government to do so - particularly from the cotton lobby - and it was not long before Britain had done the next best thing for the South by declaring its neutrality. While this tacitly accepted the legality of the North's blockade, it also gave the South belligerent status and allowed her to employ privateers.

The issue that brought the two countries closest to war, however, was the so-called 'Trent Affair' of late 1861, when a British mail steamer was intercepted by a US warship and forced to hand over two of its passengers, both Confederate commissioners en route to Europe to urge the British and French governments to accord their country nation status. Russell, Britain's Foreign Secretary, was outraged at this violation of Britain's neutrality and threatened war unless the commissioners were released, backing up his threat by dispatching soldiers and ships to Canada. Prince Albert has generally been credited with defusing the situation by redrafting the ultimatum to make it less humiliating for Lincoln's government. But Foreman reveals the true saviour of peace to be Lyons. 'During the whole Trent affair,' wrote one of Seward's deputies, 'Lord Lyon's conduct was discreet, delicate, and generous.' It was he who made the American climbdown possible.

At various points during the war the British government considered intervention, either by mediation or by recognising the South. But each time it pulled back from the brink because, as Foreman explains, Britain had more to lose than to gain:

Economically, it did not make sense to interfere; militarily, it would have meant committing Britain to war with the North and once again risking Canada and possibly the Caribbean for uncertain gains; politically, there was no support from either party or sufficient encouragement from the other Great Powers apart from France; and practically the decision to intervene would have required a majority consensus from the Cabinet which had never agreed on the meaning or significance of the war.

Foreman also gives credit to Seward: 'His bluster and posturing had driven away a potential ally but the message was heard.'

While the focus of the book is the diplomacy, Foreman does not neglect the many Britons who either witnessed or took part in the actual fighting. They included the celebrated war correspondent W H Russell, who was warned by Seward that a war between Britain and the US would 'wrap the world in fire' and that it would not be America which 'would have to lament the results'; Lieutenant-Colonel Garnet Wolseley, a future commander-in-chief of the British Army, who was unimpressed by the amateurism of the Confederate Army but regarded its commander, Lee, as a military genius; and George Herbert, a 25-year-old immigrant who enlisted in the Federal army to stave off destitution.

At 800 pages this is not a short book, yet the pace never flags as Foreman moves the narrative effortlessly from the killing fields of Antietam to the drawing rooms of London. The narrative is at its most gripping, however, when her four main players are on the stage. 'No battle,' observed the author of an eight-volume history of the Civil War, 'not Gettysburg, not the Wilderness, was more important than the contest waged in the diplomatic arena and the forum of public opinion.' And no area of diplomacy, he might have added, was more crucial than Anglo-American relations. By looking at this aspect of the war, and of British involvement in general, Foreman has made a significant contribution to the historiography of one of the most written about wars.

Saul David's books include *Victoria's Wars: The Rise of Empire* and *Zulu: The Heroism and Tragedy of the Zulu War of 1879*, both published by Penguin.