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U.S. Civil War Found Britons Plotting, Fighting, Changing Uniforms: Books

By Joe Mysak - Jun 28, 2011

Consider Sir Percy Wyndham, a 29-year-old Englishman commanding the First New Jersey Cavalry during the American Civil War.

He possessed a noteworthy moustache and beard and liked to change uniforms. Trained his men to use the saber, much to the consternation of the Confederate Army. Discharged after it was rumored he was plotting to surrender his regiment to the enemy for \$300,000. Started a riding academy for cavalry officers in [New York](#), which failed. Went to [Italy](#) and became a member of Garibaldi's staff for several years.

“Ever the roving adventurer, he moved to [Asia](#) and started a humorous journal in [India](#) ... and a logging business in Mandalay, [Burma](#). He was killed in Mandalay at the age of 49 in 1879 while demonstrating a hot-air balloon of his own design, which exploded in mid-air.”

Welcome to [Amanda Foreman's](#) “[A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War](#),” a fine fat book published in time for the 150th anniversary of the start of the war.

Sir Percy was one of an estimated 50,000 Britons who played a role in the conflict, very few of whom, it seems, could stop writing about it, in letters, diaries, newspaper articles, books and memoirs. There was a British eyewitness to just about everything.

Tour de Force

“A World on Fire” tells their stories, and the stories of the politicians and diplomats on both sides of the Atlantic who maneuvered either to drag the British into the war or keep them out of it. It is a tour de force, a work of extreme virtuosity both in the research and the telling.

Remember the part of “[Gone With the Wind](#)” where the camera pans over the wounded preparing to be evacuated from Atlanta? The scene fills the screen and goes on and on and on. So it is with this book, an astonishing and compelling 958 pages, which begins with a 196-member “Dramatis

Personae,” usually the kind of thing that screams “Don’t read me,” but not here.

Foreman, author of the 1998 “[Georgiana: Duchess of Devonshire](#),” a very good, scholarly biography later made into a somewhat silly vehicle for [Keira Knightley](#), says her inspiration was theatrical, once she decided to construct a narrative featuring “competing points of view within a time frame that encompassed multiple simultaneous events.”

‘Nicholas Nickleby’

“The challenge seemed insurmountable,” Foreman writes in the preface, “until one day I remembered having seen Trevor Nunn’s 1980 ‘Nicholas Nickleby,’ an extraordinary ‘theater-in-the-round’ production that brought together a vast panoply of characters through a combination of three-dimensional staging, shifting scenes and running narratives that created an all-enveloping experience for the audience. This memory became my guide and inspiration.”

This sounds messy, and it is. But it works. And so we have Colonel Sir Percy. And Richard Bickerton Pemell Lyons, 2nd Lord Lyons, Minister at the British legation in [Washington](#), whose soft words turned aside much wrath. And his opposite number, Charles Francis Adams, the fretful U.S. minister in [London](#).

Comic Relief

The appearance of Benjamin Moran, Adams’s resentful, seething, below-stairs assistant secretary, always signals comic relief. Francis Lawley, who wrote dishonest, pro- Southern dispatches for the Times of London, drove Yankees mad. Frank Vizetelly was an artist for the Illustrated London News; his works, many of which are reproduced here, will be familiar to Civil War buffs.

The pages of “A World on Fire” are stuffed with their stories, and more -- and what doesn’t fit on the page is worked into footnotes and 103 pages of endnotes, also not to be missed because they go well beyond simple source references.

If there is a problem with Foreman’s approach, it is that it sacrifices depth for breadth. I didn’t feel like I really knew any of these people, especially the ones who sided with the slave-holding South. But I was very happy to have made all of their acquaintance.

“A World on Fire” is published by [Random House](#) in the U.S. and [Allen Lane](#) in the U.K. (958 pages, \$35, 30 pounds). To buy this book in [North America](#), click [here](#).

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