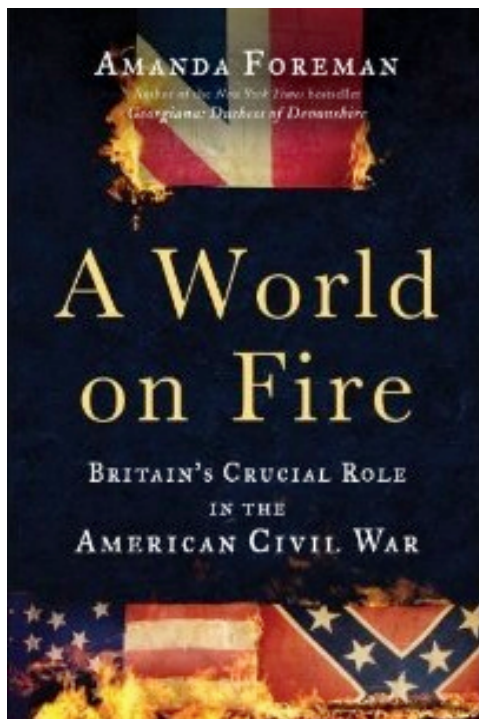




A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War, by Amanda Foreman

It's called the American Civil War, but it was much more British than most people think

By Carmela Ciuraru / August 4, 2011



When Amanda Foreman’s first book, “Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire,” was published in 1998, the biography became an international bestseller and was adapted into a movie starring Keira Knightley and Ralph Fiennes.

Now, more than a decade later, comes **A World on Fire**, weighing in at a few pounds and nearly a thousand pages. It’s sprawling, but never boring. Once again, Foreman displays her exceptional gift for storytelling and for making history both fascinating and relevant.

Never mind how many other books have been written on the Civil War. Foreman offers her own enlightening perspective as an author born in London to an English mother and an American father. (She now lives in New York, but holds dual US and UK citizenship.) Her focus is the significant role that the British played in the war, and although it’s hardly a secret, it remains a neglected element in history books.

The Civil War is a quintessentially American event, a bloody, four-year battle that tore apart the nation and resulted in the deaths of more than 600,000 soldiers. But Foreman calls attention to the tens of thousands of Britons who served as soldiers, doctors, nurses, reporters, and more. “Though united by language and a shared heritage, the Britons in America were nevertheless strangers who happened to find themselves, for a variety of reasons, in the midst of great events,” she writes.

The impact on the British public was considerable – and deeply polarizing. The whole country “had divided over the merits of the Civil War and whether abolition, democracy, the Union, or the right to self-determination had been the real principle at stake,” she writes, quoting a notable essayist who once explained that expressions such as “I am a Northerner,” and “I am a Southerner,” were “as common on Englishmen’s lips as ‘I am a Liberal’ or ‘a Conservative.’”

Interestingly, Foreman writes that one of the “driving obsessions” behind her book was puzzling out the unlikely allegiances that were stirred in Britain. For complicated reasons, many who deemed themselves “liberal” or “progressive” believed that the Confederacy held a moral advantage in demanding independence and felt aligned with them, rather than with the anti-slavery North. Some were unsure which side to take, or why secession was even an issue.

“I don’t mind your thinking me dense or ignorant,” wrote the novelist Elizabeth Gaskell in a letter to Charles Eliot Norton, a future president of Harvard. “But I should have thought ... that separating yourselves from the South was like getting rid of a diseased member.”

“A World on Fire” brilliantly examines Anglo-American relations of the era, and the politics behind the Civil War, yet it also depicts devastating scenes of battle. The book is filled with first-person accounts, many of them from previously unpublished journals and letters.

“I was lying on my back,” one soldier at Antietam wrote, “watching the shells explode and speculating as to how long I could hold up my finger before it would be shot off, for the very air seemed full of bullets.” Another reported that “the whole landscape for an instant turned slightly red.”

As Foreman writes, some British residents in the South were forced into “volunteering” for the war by being kidnapped, chained to wagons and dragged through towns, and hung upside down and repeatedly dunked in water.

The United States was viewed as hypocritical, having not supported Britain in any war, and ignoring “the contradiction in demanding British aid once the situation was reversed.” But 20 years after the war ended, in 1885, Anglo-American turmoil had subsided. Ulysses S. Grant wrote in his memoirs that “England and the United States are natural allies, and should be the best of friends.” (It’s a sentiment still held today, of course, though one that’s been sorely tested since September 11th and the war in Iraq.)

“A World on Fire” is so expansive in its scope, and so well written, that to call it a masterpiece somehow doesn’t seem to do it justice. Foreman has boldly tackled one of the most familiar and important chapters in American history, yet she has brought the Civil War alive as if this story were being told for the first time.

Carmela Ciuraru is a Monitor contributor.