



A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War

by Foreman, Amanda
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A Deeper Examination of Britain and the American Civil War

Historians like to remind Hollywood viewers that what really happened is much more entertaining than the stories that scriptwriters or fiction writers construct about the past. Yet, sadly, we seldom have the patience or the ability to write books that actually live up to that promise. Amanda Foreman is an exception and *A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War* is a masterful narrative that is as entertaining as it is insightful.

Her biographically-driven history offers nothing less than an overview of the entire war as “seen by Britons in America, and Americans in Britain” (806).

Artfully employing a “theater in the round” approach, Foreman moves readers back and forth across the Atlantic, from the often tense negotiations of diplomats in London and Washington, to the battlefields of Gettysburg, to the mood on board the *C.S.S. Alabama*, and to the streets of Charleston, New Orleans, and Windsor, Canada. She traces the stories of well-known individuals, like Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell and Lord Richard Lyons (the British diplomat tasked with soothing U.S. fears in Washington D.C.), and those less-known, like British enlistees Francis Dawson (who joined the Confederacy) and Robert Livingstone (the adventuresome teenage son of explorer Dr. David Livingstone who fought for the Union and died in a Confederate prison months before the war’s end). The range of people encountered and their stories are too broad to begin to enumerate here, though a list of “Dramatis Personae” at the beginning helps readers keep them straight. They include virtually every diplomat, agent, military man, politician, observer, volunteer, and journalist living abroad who helped define or characterize British-American relationships during the critical years from 1861-1865. Foreman’s ability to take the reader into the emotions and experiences of these individuals is a true gift, showing the complexities of the times and the ways in which individuals experienced and were changed by them.

Readers who want a stronger analytical tone will have to accept something both less and more. Foreman hesitates to tell the reader what they should think about any specific historiographical debate or event, leaving it unclear at times what we should make of it all. Yet, the rich tapestry that she provides allows the reader to deduce for her or himself what a particular anecdote or story might say about the period and the debates academic historians like to construct about it. Woven into the narrative are some interpretive points that historians of the period will find relevant. One is the apparent superiority and relative success of the Confederate public relations campaigns aimed at both British visitors to the South and an eager British public captivated by developments across the Atlantic. Keenly aware that, as Lord Lyons predicted in 1861, slavery would limit the Confederacy’s appeal abroad, Confederate sympathizers like journalist Henry Hotze and the charming spy turned informal agent Rose O’Neil Greenhow, successfully soft-peddled the South’s racial agenda until late in the war, shrewdly cultivating British sympathy on grounds more in touch with elite British political and social perspectives. Here Foreman, a nineteenth-century British historian by training, helps explain, in gripping detail, how a variety of impulses (economic, humanitarian, and British debates over democracy) left Britain with, what Richard Blackett has called, “Divided Hearts.” Confederate propaganda at home appeared even more successful and rare was the Briton who visited the South who did not, in Foreman’s telling, come to embrace “the cause.” Illustrative of that (and in part explaining it) are journalists like *Times* writer Francis Lawley and Frank Vizetelly, correspondent for the *Illustrated London News* whose images pepper the books pages and who we learn “pressed a £50 note into [Jefferson] Davis’s hand,” apparently for passage to England, just days before the Confederate President’s capture (779). Even late into the war there seems to have been a surprising amount of support and confidence in the Confederacy’s long-term aspirations—premised partly on a belief in the right of self-determination, partly on suspicions about democracy, partly on economics, and largely on Britain’s fascination with leaders like Robert E. Lee and sympathy for the sacrifices that white Confederates were enduring. Historians looking for roots to the Lost Cause idea might, after reading this book, add British war-time correspondents to the list.

This begs the central question of the subject: why did the British cabinet resist intervening in the war? The conventional narrative of the intervention question highlights economic concerns, anti-slavery sentiments, fear of war with the United States, or concern about dynamics with the rest of Europe, and Foreman reinforces these arguments. In one of the few places where Foreman directly engages a historiographic debate, however, she stresses William Seward’s role (329-30). After showing that Seward’s early bravado at first alienated a Palmerston and Russell administration not desiring recognition or intervention, she suggests that though Seward’s “bluster and posturing had driven away a potential ally, . . . the message was heard:” any further gestures towards recognition or mediation would likely lead to war (330). Indeed, Foreman—though highly aware of Seward’s flaws—portrays a secretary of state who becomes a loyal Lincolnian and (largely due to Lyon’s calming influence) an effective diplomat capable of applying pressure on Britain to avoid recognition or mediation while eventually backing away just before armed conflict became a reality. In London, a more level-headed Foreign Secretary John Russell and Charles Frances Adams, who contrary to some accounts comes across here as stuffy, frustrated, and never completely comfortable in his position in Britain, also succeed in working through the many problems created by Confederate agents and arms dealers whose stories add to the drama of the situation.

It may be unfair to criticize a book of the scope and scale of this one—especially since it already reaches 800 pages of text and employs an astonishing array of manuscript and printed sources—but there are a few surprising

omissions. First, there is little discussion of the quite controversial role of British consuls in southern port cities. Foreman suggests that the Confederacy simply ignored them, but that did not seem always true, at least for Charleston consul Robert Bunch who generated a huge controversy eventually leading to the U.S. government demanding his removal. Second, Foreman's close attention to politics, diplomacy, and military matters helps keep the threads of a multi-faceted story from unraveling, but perhaps at the expense of some British also important to developments. Though slavery and race's role in the conflict is often central to her story, we gain little sense of how the large number of non-white Britons and Americans who undoubtedly witnessed these events felt about them. These quibbles aside, however, this page-turner is a remarkable achievement and anyone interested in the human stories surrounding the Civil War will find it a worthwhile investment. Foreman's previous work, *Georgiana: Duchess of Devonshire*, was a *New York Times Bestseller* and became a major motion picture. This book also promises to attract a wide audience and has already garnered a contract with BBC and possibly HBO. Lets' hope that any on-screen renditions stays as close to the history as this author has attempted to do.

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