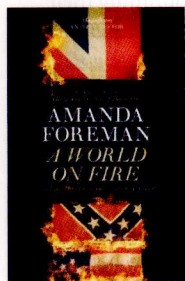




Abe Lincoln plays the symbolic black card in a card game with a southern soldier, *Punch* 1862

Atlantic drama

Richard Carwardine enjoys a narrative of Britain's involvement in the American Civil War, told through the voices of the 1860s



A World on Fire
by Amanda Foreman
Allen Lane, 704 pages, RRP £30

THE CIVIL WAR in America, the crux of the nation's history, touched the world at large.

Historians have subsequently uncovered the complex wartime diplomacy between the Disunited States and other nations; asked why the conflict did not drag in the great European powers; and shown how the clash between a slave-holding Confederacy and a consolidationist Union fed the ideological appetites of the Old World's contending radical and conservative forces.

Britain – as master of the seas and the 'mother country' – stands at the heart of that global story. Abraham Lincoln's statement at the outset that the war was not about slavery (a necessary reassurance to the loyal slave states) dismayed British progressives and encouraged some liberals to equate the Confederacy's pursuit of independence with the European nationalist uprisings of 1848. Conservatives for their part celebrated the crash of a foolish

republican experiment. The Lancashire cotton famine (caused by an interruption in the cotton supply from the southern states) prompted support for the South among the thousands of unemployed, and so fractured the voice of democratic workingmen.

Britain's policy of non-intervention – which would prove one of the keys to Union victory – survived a succession of crises, notably the Trent Affair (caused by a US naval vessel's seizure of two Europe-bound Confederate commissioners from a British mail-packet) and the devastating attacks on Yankee ships of Liverpool-built raiders smuggled into Confederate service.

To this familiar tale Foreman brings a formidable talent in the writing of grand narrative. Her title derives from the words of William Henry Seward, Lincoln's tactically truculent secretary of state, that "a contest between Great

"A cross-section of British society served on both sides"

Britain and the United States would wrap the world in fire". Seward is one of four key foreign policy players who drive her story of international war narrowly avoided; completing the quartet are the discreet British minister to Washington, Lord Lyons ("worn out", he said, "with the never ending labour of keeping things smooth"), his shrewd

and reserved opposite number in London, Charles Francis Adams, and Lord Palmerston's often abrasive foreign secretary, Lord John Russell.

But Foreman's cast of characters extends far beyond the political elite, to embrace representatives of the thousands of British people who were caught up in the conflict, north and south. These included journalists, propagandists, observers, nurses, surgeons, peace campaigners, spies and, above all – despite a Foreign Enlistment Act that forbade British subjects to volunteer for a foreign cause – soldiers and seamen. A cross-section of British society served on both sides as officers, privates, and common sailors. Among them was Henry Morton Stanley, whose dreadful experience in a Union prisoner of war camp led him to forsake the Confederacy. Using the letters and journals of these Britons who fought or simply travelled with the armies, Foreman enterprisingly delivers a running British commentary on the military and political episodes of the war.

The number and range of its voices are what sets the book apart from other studies of the war's international dimensions. This approach comes at a price, however, for the multiple perspectives and immersion in the detailed progress of the conflict militate against analytical sharpness and a clear sense of an overall argument. Missing, too, is a keen sense of the ideological purpose and excitement which led democrats and progressives in Britain to see the war as a historic test of popular government and enlist with enthusiasm in Lincoln's armies. Moreover, some of the most significant voices are absent. Bankers scarcely feature among the dramatis personae, yet North and South were desperate for European loans, and London-based financiers played a critical role as intermediaries in Anglo-American relations. Both Baring Brothers and George Peabody were staunchly for the Union and campaigned for British neutrality. Britain's economic links to the northern states shaped policy as much as did the cotton trade with the south.

Nonetheless, this is an absorbing and enjoyable book. Widely researched, artfully constructed, compellingly written, and colourfully textured, it is an epic realisation of an epic history. **H**

Richard Carwardine is the author of *Lincoln: Profiles in Power* (Longman, 2003)

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