



Amanda Foreman's 'A World on Fire' ignites the British stakes in the U.S. Civil War

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Plain Dealer guest writer

By



During the Civil War, British magazine and newspaper cartoons frequently depicted a hulking John Bull warning diminutive Yanks not to try Britain's patience. From Punch, Dec. 7, 1861.

By Alan Cate

Don't hate **Amanda Foreman** because she's beautiful. Don't revile her for the **fawning piece in the June Vogue**, featuring her and her five adorable children. And don't scoff because newspapers in England call her "glam."

After all, she earned a doctorate from Oxford University and won prizes for her best-selling biography, "**Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire.**" The woman is a serious historian and a wonderful writer, and "A World on Fire" is an absorbing account of the oft-neglected British dimension of the American Civil War.

Foreman offers here what she calls "history-in-the-round," borrowing the theatrical technique of multiple characters and rapidly changing scenes. Like a sprawling Victorian novel, the book follows some 200 British and American "dramatis personae" -- politicians, diplomats, soldiers, journalists and ordinary people -- on both sides of the Atlantic.

With consummate artistry Foreman immerses us in "the British-American world of the Civil War."

Conditioned by a "special relationship" forged in two 20th-century world wars, we forget how hostile Anglo-

American relations were. The United States fought its first two major wars against England, disputed John Bull over control of the Great Lakes and Oregon Territory, repeatedly evinced designs on British Canada, and contained a large Irish immigrant population that despised Great Britain.

That perceptive French observer of antebellum America, Alexis de Tocqueville, "never encountered hatred more poisonous than that which Americans felt for England." Most Britons reciprocated, regarding Yankees "as too vulgar, violent, and vainglorious."

Yet the two nations were powerfully entwined. Besides ties of blood and language, Britain received 80 percent of its cotton -- crucial to the textile industry that employed 5 million -- from the American South. Forty percent of her export trade was with the United States. And in 1860, 2.5 million British expatriates were living in the United States.

When the war came, the South desperately sought recognition from England. Instead, Her Majesty's government proclaimed neutrality. It invoked legislation that made it a crime for subjects to fight for North or South, and for British firms to sell warships to either side.

Individual Britons, however, were deeply divided. Since the British had abolished slavery in 1833, Southerners courting Great Britain soft-pedaled the peculiar institution and emphasized their fight for independence. Southern supporters in England argued that the real moral issue was how to end the carnage in America and the suffering in Lancashire, where the "cotton famine" created by the Union blockade exacted tremendous hardship.

Abraham Lincoln's momentous decision to transform the war into a contest for emancipation shifted the moral calculus. And by 1863, cotton from India and Egypt was making up for the American shortfall.

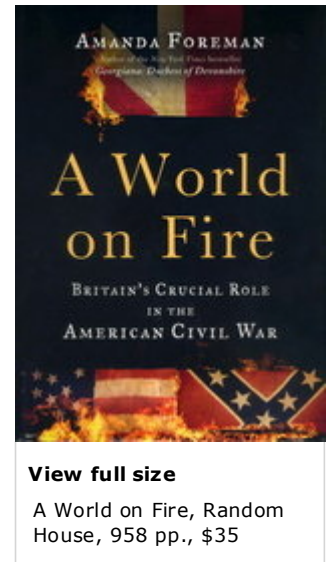
Foreman expertly explains the diplomatic struggle. And for someone who described herself to the Sunday Times of London as "the girliest war historian you'll ever meet," she offers a gripping and incisive narrative of combat. Writing about the battle of Gettysburg, she quotes a British observer who noted that General Lee had repeatedly whipped his Northern opponents despite numerous disadvantages. "But," she adds trenchantly, "never before had the disadvantage been one of terrain or information."

But the book's real pleasure resides in its vivid characters. Despite legal impediments, tens of thousands of Britons volunteered for the Union or the Confederacy out of idealism or a spirit of adventure. At least one fought for both sides. Henry Morton Stanley (later of "Dr. Livingstone, I presume" fame) enlisted in the Dixie Grays, was captured and turned coat to escape captivity. He subsequently deserted. His inglorious career conjures up that fictional eminent Victorian and boulder Harry Flashman, protagonist of George M. Fraser's hilarious "Flashman" novels.

Foreman also depicts a fascinating tribe of British journalists, including William Howard Russell of The Times of London, one of the first modern war correspondents. His conviviality and capacity for booze, "qualities that made Russell an unsatisfactory husband . . . were precisely those" which his editor "hoped would endear him to the Americans."

The Times adopted a pro-Southern editorial stance, and, after receiving several Northern death threats, Russell plaintively wrote his editor, "I don't want to ask you to sacrifice the policy of 'The Times' for me, but I would like you if possible not to sacrifice me."

Meticulously researched, colorfully written and lavishly illustrated, Foreman's volume is a worthy addition to the Civil War sesquicentennial bookshelf.



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