

A World on Fire

Review by Stephen Graubard

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A World on Fire: An Epic History of Two Nations Divided, by Amanda Foreman, *Allen Lane RRP£30, 1,040 pages*

America's civil war was not simply a conflict between the industrial north and the agrarian south, the states free of slavery and those still bound to a slave economy.

While thousands of books have treated the war primarily as an American event – certainly the most important after the American revolution – historian Amanda Foreman understands that it was a historic happening of great importance for many who lived outside the US, and not only those dependent on the south for raw cotton exports.

The great revelation of this extraordinary book, rich in abundant and interesting detail, is what it tells us about how Abraham Lincoln and those who served him managed to cope with many in England whose sympathies lay with the south, often for very good economic reasons.

Foreman's treatment of Lincoln is imaginative, showing his suppleness in understanding the risks he ran, but is no less interesting for what she tells us of a host of other Americans, many now scarcely known or recalled.

Her understanding of the role of major British figures, including the Liberal politician, the first Earl Russell, and William Howard Russell, one of the first of England's war correspondents, gives Britain's role in America's civil war an importance that few historians have recognised.

Foreman treats the civil war as others have treated the Russian revolution, recognising that the foreign reaction to such cosmic happenings gives them a significance that can never be neglected. Because the war was a "great slaughter", it could not fail to engage the interest of many political figures in Britain, including liberal humanitarians such as William Gladstone.

The Union defeat at Fredericksburg is presented here as a searing description of "death, nothing but death everywhere". In pages that remind one of the terrifying descriptions of first world war battles, Foreman describes the agony that Lincoln felt and the risks he took in declaring the Emancipation Proclamation. The decision to free 3.1m of the nation's 4m slaves proved immensely popular in Britain, making many more sympathetic to the northern cause.

Lincoln felt such gratitude to the people of Manchester, suffering from US trade embargoes, mostly on cotton, that he thought it appropriate to thank them for their patience and sacrifice, saying: "Whatever misfortune may befall your country or mine, the peace and friendship which now exist between the two nations will be ... perpetual."

When thousands of Britons moved to America to fight on the Union or Confederate side, British diplomacy could not fail to respond to their engagement. Because the involvement at times came perilously close to Britain abandoning its neutral stance, the civil war always carried the risk of becoming more global. We are reminded by Foreman that more than 620,000 soldiers and 50,000 civilians died in the civil war. At least 470,000 were wounded or maimed.

It is scarcely surprising that the civil war has commanded such attention from American historians or that its intellectual and political legacy has been so great. The south suffered for decades following its defeat; the north made a remarkable comeback, gaining greatly from its victory.

Foreman shows great sympathy for Lincoln as a man in deep distress who, knowing there was no honourable exit for him from the White House, had to endure perpetual and often unfair criticism. She shows comparable regard for the Confederate leaders, for Jefferson Davis, the Confederate president, and for its distinguished generals, including Robert E Lee and Stonewall Jackson.

While the book avoids conventional hero-worship, it shows appropriate respect for heroism, as common among those who led the Confederate armies as those who led the victorious Union forces.

The study can be read with profit and sympathy by Americans of all political persuasions but also by Europeans – not least by the English who stand to learn a great deal. This is a tale never previously told. It is a reminder of both an America and a Britain that existed in the 19th century, insufficiently known today.

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