

A World on Fire: An Epic History of Two Nations Divided by Amanda Foreman – review

Jay Parini on a book that sees America's darkest hour in a British light

Jay Parini

The Guardian, Saturday 27 November 2010

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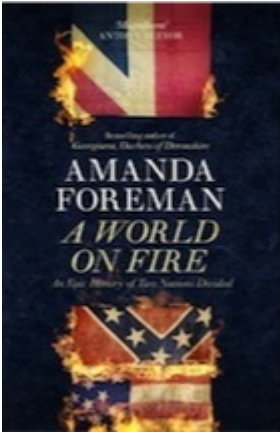
Lord Lyons, the British envoy to Washington, who took up his position in 1859 – the worst possible moment.

Photograph: US National Archives

Amanda Foreman leapt into public view with her Whitbread-prizewinning portrait of Georgiana, the Duchess of Devonshire, in 1999, proving herself a storyteller of lavish gifts, a writer with an eye for the telling biographical detail who could also portray society at large – in that case the world of late-18th-century aristocrats in Britain and France. More than a decade later, she has delivered a massive work of considerable artistry, which tells the complex and riveting tale of British involvement in the American civil war.

A World on Fire: An Epic History of Two Nations Divided

by Amanda Foreman



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At more than 1,000 pages, this book looks terrifying. But the pages dissolve quickly as Foreman summons a range of vivid characters, such as Lord Lyons, the British envoy to Washington, who took up his position in 1859 – the worst possible moment. Hostile feelings between the north and south had been rising for years, but they were then at fever pitch, and Lyons foresaw that trouble lay ahead. Yet nobody could imagine the extent of the horror to come – a conflagration that would ultimately "cost the lives of more than 620,000 soldiers and 50,000 civilians," as Foreman observes.

Poor Richard Lyons was charged with the task of maintaining British neutrality. This was not easy work, especially for a man as shy as Lyons. As Foreman says: "Any display of emotion – including his own – made him uncomfortable." But there was a lot at stake for Britain, as the livelihood of large numbers of workers in the Lancashire mills and countless others depended on transatlantic trade in cotton. The British government could hardly afford to alienate the rebels, nor could they risk bad feelings with the north, with whom they had vital economic and political ties.

Lyons proved himself up to the delicate task before him, interceding at crucial times, as when Lincoln blockaded major ports in the south or when the northern legislature attached a hefty duty to imported products – the bulk of which came from Britain. In the face of huge opposition from William Seward, Lincoln's forceful secretary of state, Lyons simply threatened that Britain would recognise the south as a legal entity if such intolerable behaviour continued. "Such recognition will mean war!" cried Seward, who nevertheless backed down, in due course becoming a reliable friend to British interests.

Queen Victoria issued a proclamation of neutrality on 14 May 1861, angering both sides across the Atlantic. There was no such thing as neutrality in this context, and Lyons lost many nights of sleep, having been thrust into a dicey position. "I don't see how I can get out of the scrape of happening to be the Minister here just now," he wrote to his sister in England. Matters grew increasingly awkward for him, especially when it turned out that a surprising number of British sympathised with the southern cause. In due course, against the terms of the neutrality, British shipbuilders would aid the south, and many

British subjects fought for one side or the other – there were indeed as many as 2.5 million expatriates in the disunited states.

Perhaps the worst incident, from Lyons's viewpoint, was the Trent affair, when an American naval officer from the north intercepted a British packet ship on the high seas. He captured two emissaries from the south, en route to London to establish diplomatic ties. Needless to say, the British were outraged, and Lord Palmerston sent 11,000 fresh troops to Canada to bolster that fragile border and threaten the north. Lord John Russell, Britain's foreign secretary, relied heavily on Prince Albert, an unlikely source, for wording a response that allowed both sides to save face.

Direct confrontation was avoided. But there was nothing but trouble for Lyons throughout his tenure in Washington, nor did things get easier as the war progressed for any of Foreman's other major protagonists, Russell, Seward or, for that matter, Charles Francis Adams, the US ambassador in London. Foreman concentrates on their stories, being at heart a biographer, although she is a gifted historian as well. She theorises on this distinction: "The most obvious difference is that biographers delve deeply into individual lives and the influences that shaped them, whereas for historians it is the sum of individual experiences that is important."

Foreman regards her book as an "epic" history, and by this she means that her chronicle, which consists of many episodes and figures, unfolds on a grand scale, inexorably. The reader is swept along by events: the first glimmerings of war as shots are rudely fired on Fort Sumpter by provisional Confederate forces in South Carolina, right through the major battles – Bull Run, Antietam, Gettysburg, Vicksburg, Chikamauga – ending with the eventual surrender of General Robert E Lee at Appomattox. Foreman misses nothing, creating a panorama of successive clashes, always with an eye for what General Sherman caustically referred to as "the British mark on every battle-field". Indeed, as Sherman elaborated with an ironic twang: "The muskets, cartridges, caps, projectiles were all British and had the British mark upon them."

One can hardly overestimate the brilliance of Foreman's conception, seeing this turning point in American history from a British viewpoint, drawing on a vast range of actors on this great stage, including lesser-known British sympathisers who fought on either side in this conflict or journalists such as Frank Vizetelly, a reporter who drew startling pictures for the Illustrated London News and seemed never to miss a major battle. One might quibble with the word "epic", in that there is no tragic hero in this work. (Lyons is the least heroic of men, yet perhaps he is the accidental hero of this saga.) But Foreman has created a shimmering tapestry, which offers readers a fresh view of this convulsive, devastating war.

Jay Parini's *The Passages of Herman Melville* will be published by Canongate in January.