



The History of Parliament lecture: Dr Amanda Foreman

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The History of Parliament has held an annual lecture in Westminster for eight years, until last year Dr Amanda Foreman, author of 'Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire' and 'A World on Fire' was unfortunately delayed thanks to Hurricane Sandy. Not to be deterred, Dr Foreman made it over to Westminster at the beginning of June to give her long-anticipated lecture: 'How to make friends and corrupt people: the Confederate Infiltration of Parliament during the American Civil War.'

Dr Foreman began with the story of Spencer Cavendish, 8th Duke of Devonshire, who sailed to America during the Civil War to escape his mistress, 'Skittles'. Skittles managed to pursue him as far as Richmond, Virginia, the capital of the Confederacy. Whilst there, Cavendish was completely won over to the Southern cause by a mixture of hospitality and propaganda; something of a coup for the Confederacy, as he returned to Britain to become under-secretary of state for War. He was by no means alone, however, as in Britain a concerted Southern attempt to win over the population was well underway and making some gains.

The main subject of Dr Foreman's lecture was her analysis of how the Confederacy gained such ground in a country which, by this time, viewed slavery as unacceptable. The approaches of the North and South were considerably different, Dr Foreman argued. The North made very little effort to win over international opinion, whereas the South sent a group of men across the Atlantic with a clear goal: to gain the British government's recognition of the Confederacy.

Led by Henry Hotts, they used several tactics to win over the press, public opinion and individual MPs; all to put pressure on the government to change from its policy of neutrality. Hotts courted journalists, started his own publications and manipulated the major news networks to ensure that the only news Europe received about the war came from the South. He set up societies to win over public opinion; some legitimate,

such as the Southern Independence Association, others less so, which used violence and intimidation against pro-Northern groups. He also targeted key figures, such as then Prime Minister William Gladstone, and had some high profile converts to his cause. By 1863 the London Times viewed Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation not in a positive light but as the 'last card' of an increasingly desperate man, and after the death of Stonewall Jackson a society was established to pay for a statue of him in America.

Dr Foreman concluded by addressing the fact that despite the considerable success for the Confederate propaganda, ultimately they were unable to change British policy. Britain could not, at this time, risk war with the Union, and the issue of slavery was too large to overcome. Dr Foreman ended by arguing that an attempt had been made to 'hoodwink' politicians into supporting the 'underdog' in a fight for their liberty; the real aim, however, had been to preserve the system of slavery.

Afterwards Dr Foreman took many questions which further explored changing British attitudes to both sides in the American Civil War; the actions of the North and the role of economic factors on public opinion.

During the evening we also presented prizes to the winners of last year's HOP competitions. Gary Hutchinson won the undergraduate dissertation competition with his 'No Party Matter either in or out of doors: reaction to the Impeachment of Henry Dundas, First Viscount Melville'. The A level essay competition was won by Benjamin Kybett with 'In the context of the period 1893-1998, to what extent were socialist ideals a major factor in the Irish nationalist movement?' Hopefully you will hear more from them shortly!

Our tenth annual lecture will be back to normal (weather permitting!) and take place in November. Baroness Patricia Hollis will speak on women in parliament. Watch this space for more details!

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