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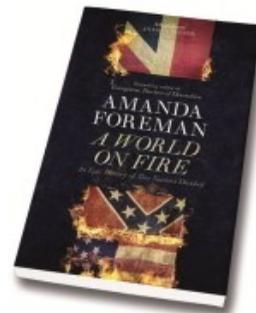
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A World on Fire

January 19, 2011 - 13:05



Adam I.P. Smith reviews a work by Amanda Foreman.



A World on Fire
An Epic History of Two Nations Divided
Amanda Foreman

Allen Lane
988pp £30
ISBN 978 1846142048

The premise of Amanda Foreman's magnificent new book is that the American Civil War – the greatest military confrontation in the world between the fall of Napoleon and the Great War – was fought in the shadow of Britain, the world's greatest military and economic power, just as Britain, for those years, lived in the shadow of that bloody conflict. There are many splendid narrative histories of the Civil War, but none that describe its global impact as clearly as this one. Written on a vast canvas that weaves together the inner lives of individuals with a sweeping narrative of the war in all its military and diplomatic dimensions, this book resembles nothing so much as *War and Peace*.

When the news of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln reached Newcastle-upon-Tyne one clergyman recalled that he had seen 'men in the public street reaching out their trembling hands each to the other trying to articulate some words of comfort, the hot tears falling down their cheeks, and every manifestation given of the profoundest, most intense grief'. The emotional response to Lincoln's death in a country he never visited was the natural consequence of the close interest that Britons took in the conflict across the ocean. Lincoln had come to personify what radicals and liberals in Victorian Britain often called the 'Great Republic of the West'— and the United States was not, in a sense, a truly foreign place in the British imagination; instead it represented an alternative, romanticised England. As one speaker at a mass public meeting to mourn Lincoln's death explained, 'his was not an assassination that had taken place in some foreign country [but] in a land kindred to our own, speaking the same language, moved by the same impulses, and animated by the same principles'. This evidence of British empathy with America prompted the heartfelt gratitude of many Union supporters, which in turn was revealing about the central place of England in the American imagination. Benjamin Moran, the assistant secretary of the American legation in London, who Amanda Foreman brilliantly brings to life as a sort of selfpitying, cynical Dickensian clerk, was genuinely moved that 'we had friends in England in our day of sorrow, whose noble sympathy should make us pause'.

As might be expected from the author of *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire* this is a story populated by vividly drawn characters. Some are among the tens of thousands of Queen Victoria's subjects who fought for the Union or the Confederacy. A few, such as Henry Wemyss Feilden, a former officer in the Black Watch, were aristocratic military adventurers. Most were simply British subjects living in the United States who found themselves carried into the Union or Confederate armies with varying degrees of enthusiasm. The book moves effortlessly from ballrooms and cabinet rooms to cigar smoke-fugged saloons and muddy army camps and from Congressional politicking to the cloak and dagger world of Confederate agents in Liverpool and London.

One of the most important threads in the story is the relationship between US Secretary of State William H. Seward and the long-suffering, self-doubting British minister in Washington, Lord Lyons. Foreman's brilliant description of the ups and downs of the relationship between these two men is one of the many ways in which she brings out the touchy post-colonial temperament of mid-19thcentury American culture, which combined Anglophobia and Anglophilia in a curiously unstable amalgam.

Does setting the Civil War in this broad Atlantic context make a fundamental difference to our understanding of what Amanda Foreman concedes 'is and will always remain an American story'? Not really. But to be reminded of the overbearing influence of British power, especially at this critical moment of American nation-building, is a useful corrective to the insularity of much American historical writing and viewing the American Civil War through British eyes highlights subtly different themes and events. If anything, she could have pushed even harder the case for understanding the war as a cultural and political conflict with deep historical roots in the two countries'shared past. And some important perspectives, such as that of the labour movement in both countries, are surprisingly underplayed. Yet, if there is no grand new interpretation of the meaning of the Civil War contained in these pages, there are, nevertheless, hundreds of shrewd historical judgements. Amanda Foreman has offered us a brilliant example of how to combine thrilling narrative on a grand scale with genuine scholarly authority.