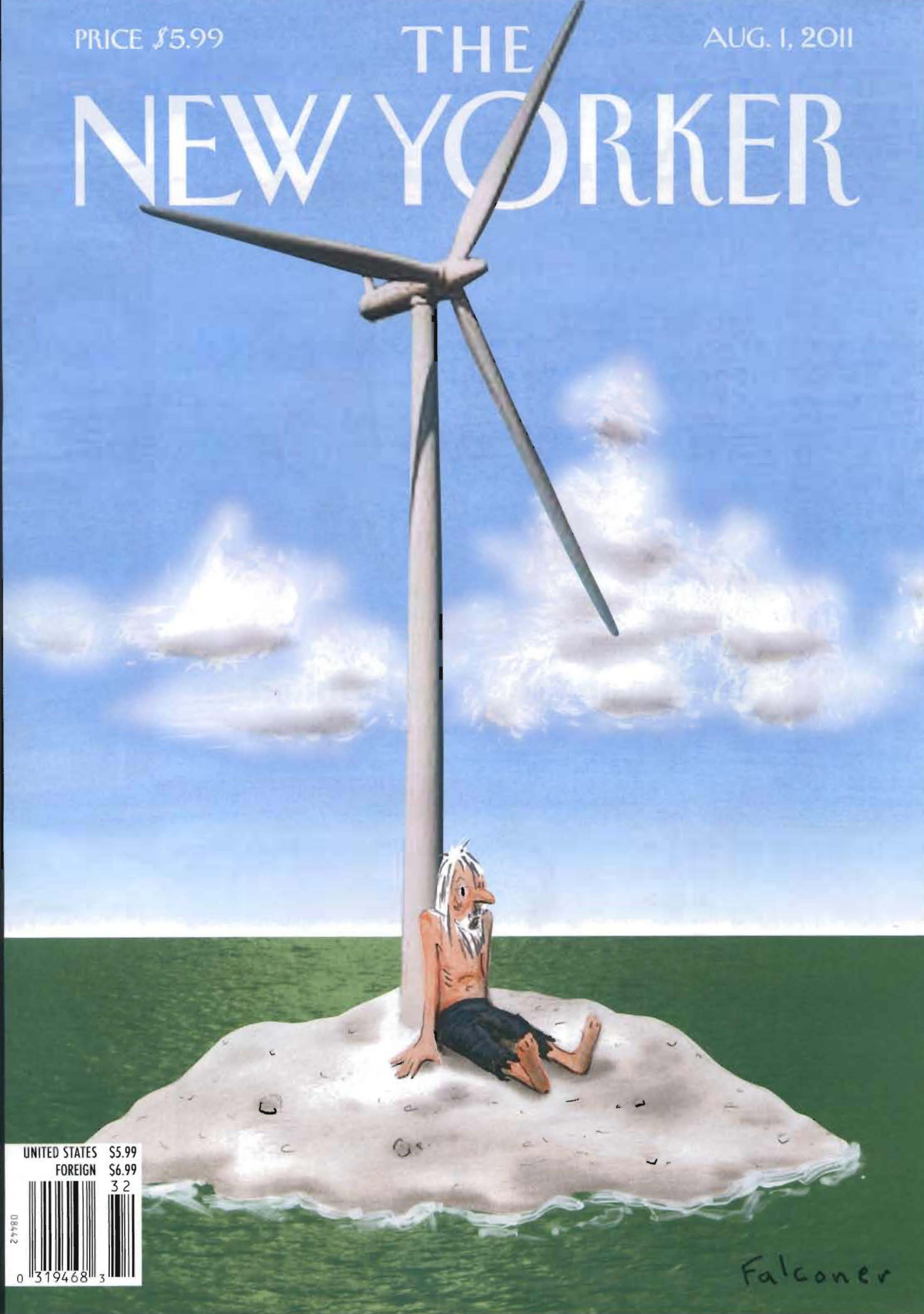


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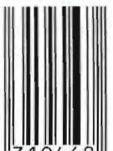
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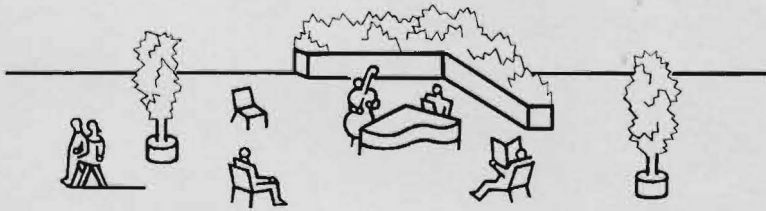


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# THE CRITICS



BOOKS

## OVER THERE

*A new history of Britain's role in the American Civil War.*

BY HENDRIK HERTZBERG

For the first fourscore and, oh, six or seven years after our fathers brought forth what they brought forth, the former owners of the new nation did not always regard it with the unmixed admiration and respect that the noisiest ex-colonists considered their due. From the beginning—from before the beginning—a gap yawned between America's pretensions and America's reality. A year before the Declaration of Independence, Samuel Johnson had pointed out the obvious. "How is it," the great Tory lexicographer growled, "that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?" For the next several decades, English visitors found much to admire (albeit, sometimes, with a tinge of condescension) and much to deplore. "It is impossible for any mind of common honesty not to be revolted by the contradictions in their principles and practice," Anthony Trollope's mother, Frances, wrote after sojourning among the Americans during the late eighteen-twenties. "Look at them at home; you will see them with one hand hoisting the cap of liberty, and with the other flogging their slaves." Charles Dickens, who toured in 1842, predicted that "the bloody chapter" of slavery would have "a bloody end." In stentorian tones that belied his youth (he was just thirty), Dickens anathematized the "owners, breeders, users, buyers, and sellers of slaves," who, he warned, "would, at this or any other moment, gladly involve America in a war, civil or foreign, provided that it had for its

sole end and object the assertion of their right to perpetuate slavery, and to whip and work and torture slaves, unquestioned by any human authority."

Until Dickens's dark prophecy came true, the United States of America was on the sidelines of history. European élites kept tabs on the interesting republican experiment unfolding across the sea, but they took it for granted that the greatest of great events, from Caesar's wars to Napoleon's, were the prerogative of their side of the Atlantic. America was thinly populated, at once exotic and provincial, boastful and naive, politically and mechanically innovative but with little to offer in the way of art or literature, possessing formidable natural splendor but rather less of the human variety. Then came Fort Sumter—and Bull Run, and Gettysburg, and Appomattox, and Ford's Theatre.

More than our War of Independence, which we grandly styled a Revolution (France, 1789: now, *there* was a revolution!), the American Civil War provoked awe. When the news from Antietam reached the English papers, almost two weeks after the event, readers were stunned: twenty-five thousand casualties in a single day, nearly five times the total of all the battle deaths Britain had suffered in the previous decade's Crimean War. The scale of the bloodshed, the size of the armies, the mechanized horror of the combat, the moral and spiritual weight of the underlying issue: this was a serious war, and it made the United States a seri-

ous country. It marked the end of America's childhood and cleared the way for its emergence as a global power. The world's next great war, five decades later, was the Great War, with Americans fighting on European battlefields. And the next century was the American one.

Although there's always a steady drizzle of Civil War books, this year's Sumter sesquicentennial brings a downpour that won't let up until the hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of Lincoln's assassination, if then. For obvious reasons, almost all such books are of, by, and for Americans, focussing exclusively on American events, American places, and American personalities. Amanda Foreman's "A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War" (Random House; \$35) broadens the scope. Her story is more than an eye-opening corrective to American insularity. It is an immensely ambitious and immensely accomplished—and just plain *immense*—work of narrative art. At a third of a million words sprawled over nearly a thousand pages, "A World on Fire" is not far south of "War and Peace." Yet the pages fly like the wind—like "Gone with the Wind"—because there's so much life, so much action, and so many vivid people in them.

In its British edition, which appeared last year, "A World on Fire" was subtitled "An Epic History of Two Nations Divided." Perhaps someone at Random House thought that Yankee browsers would misread "two nations" as a reference to the Union and the Confederacy and conclude that the author was taking a rebel stand. (Or maybe the sales force just wanted the ever-reliable Civil War brand on the dust jacket.) In any case, the British subtitle is truer to the spirit of the tale than the American, and not just because the history is indeed epic. The role of Britain, to the extent that it weighed in the war's outcome, was notable more for what that country didn't do than for what it did. The official policy of Her Majesty's Government, however bumpily arrived at, was consistent, cautious, and almost shockingly cold-blooded. With few exceptions, it was to stay as aloof as possible from the American quarrel, keep a close eye on who was winning and who losing, and attend to the mother country's eco-

*From Punch, October 3, 1863. The official policy of Her Majesty's Government was almost shockingly cold-blooded.*



### JOHN BULL'S NEUTRALITY.

"LOOK HERE, BOYS, I DON'T CARE TWOPENCE FOR YOUR NOISE; BUT IF YOU THROW STONES AT MY WINDOWS, I MUST *THRASH YOU BOTH.*"

PHILIP THE IMAGE WORKS; OPPOSITE: PHILIPPE WEISBECKER

conomic, imperial, and national interests.

Those interests did not always point in the same direction. Bankers in the City of London were heavily invested in the industrializing North—a little like Wall Street and China today—but, as seen from Manchester and Liverpool, the North was a potential competitor in export markets for manufactured goods. The agrarian South was one of those markets. More important, the South was the Saudi Arabia of cotton—the principal source of the raw material that kept the textile mills of Lancashire humming and their workers employed. Anyway, from the point of view of Britain as a dominating world power, a two-state solution had its attractions: wouldn't a pair of smaller and mutually mistrustful American republics be less troublesome than a single great big one? Considerations like these might prompt musings that it would be nice if America would just go ahead and divide itself in two without fuss. And they did persuade Whitehall to proclaim neutrality and grant the South the status of a belligerent, which, without challenging the legitimacy of the North's naval blockade, legalized Confederate privateering and allowed Confederate ships access to British ports for repairs and nonmilitary provisioning. But they were never enough to get the Confederacy what, failing overt intervention, it most wanted from Britain: formal recognition of its claim to independence, diplomatic support, and a protected supply of arms, ships, and loans.

The government of the United States, however beleaguered, had the advantage of embodying the accustomed status quo, the default mode of imperial foreign ministries inclined to value stability. The Union could build its own ships and arm its own soldiers; it was less needy than the Confederacy. Both sides wanted British help, but British inaction was inherently more compatible with Northern than with Southern interests. Moreover, from a British perspective, the North was better positioned to make mischief. There was never a chance that the South would risk war with Britain. To the very end, Confederate leaders saw Britain as the *deus ex machina* that, in their fantasies, would come to their rescue.

The North, by contrast, could keep alive the prospect of hostilities with Britain; more than once, when Washington thought London was tilting too much toward Richmond, the possibility of war with Britain felt palpably real. As Whitehall understood, the Union would have a hostage in any confrontation: the future of British North America, the annexation of which many Americans still saw as an unfulfilled part of their manifest destiny. After all, the post-Colonial United States had already come to blows with Britain once. Both sides had seen the outcome of the War of 1812 as a victory of sorts, the British because they kept what would eventually become the Dominion of Canada and because they chastened the Americans by sacking Washington, the Amer-

icans because they kept their independence and won the war's most spectacular battle, at New Orleans. Almost fifty years later, British perfidy remained a crowd-pleasing talking point for American politicians.

One such politician was William H. Seward, President Lincoln's Secretary of State, whose dramatic outburst in the waning days of 1861—"We will wrap the whole world in flames!"—was directed at London, not Richmond. Seward's threat, which gives Foreman the equally dramatic title of her book, was not exactly official policy: it was issued, tipsily, at a Washington ball thrown by the Portuguese minister. Actually, British and American diplomats, Seward among them, were at that moment in the last stages of negotiating a mutual stand-down in the Trent affair, named for the British mail ship from which, five weeks earlier and in blatant violation of international law, a rogue Union captain had seized a pair of Confederate envoys, James Mason and John Slidell, on their way to lobby London for recognition. Mason and Slidell were released. Neither then nor later did the literal flames of our Civil War reach the other shore of the Anglo-American world. But the fires of the war's passions burned there, too.

In the most narrowly "realist" conception of British national and imperial interests, the peculiarities of the labor system behind overseas cotton production would be a matter of indifference, as long as it delivered the drygoods. Yet public opinion counted for something in the making of British foreign policy, and so, on occasion, did the personal moral convictions of the policymakers. You might think that the spectre of slavery would be the Union's trump card in the contest for Britain's sympathy. After all, didn't Lord Palmerston, Prime Minister throughout the war, hate slavery with "unbounded zeal"? In Palmerston's mind, Foreman writes, "the acts abolishing the slave trade in 1807 and then slavery throughout the British Empire in 1833 had joined such other events as the Glorious Revolution and Waterloo in the pantheon of great moments in the nation's history." Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin," the nineteenth century's biggest best-seller in the United States, was an even bigger smash in the British Isles. There was a copy in nearly every household that could afford one, including the Prime Minister's. Palmerston,



*"Look, you've been great. It's just that we'd like to start seeing other marriage counsellors."*

it was said, hadn't read a novel in thirty years. But he read Mrs. Stowe's—three times, cover to cover.

Palmerston was the first British Prime Minister to take office under the banner of the new (and relatively progressive) Liberal Party, whose most prominent figures, himself included, were former Whigs; Lincoln was the first American President to take office under the banner of the new (and relatively progressive, at first) Republican Party, whose most prominent figures, himself included, were also former Whigs. That's another reason for the unwary to assume that the two governments should have been natural allies. The complex details of why they were not—of why official Britain was the dog of war that didn't bite and, until nearly the end, scarcely barked—are a big part of Foreman's story.

But if official Britain did not play a "crucial role" in the Civil War, other than by choosing not to, unofficial Britons in the tens of thousands cast themselves as supporting players. That, too, is a big part of Foreman's story, and it is one that she seems to have been destined to tell. Amanda Foreman is a citizen and resident of both the United Kingdom and the United States. Her education was impeccably binational: boarding school in Dorset, college at Sarah Lawrence and Columbia, and graduate studies at Oxford, where she wrote one thesis on Britain's abolition of the slave trade and another on Georgiana, the hard-partying, politically active (in the Whig Party) Duchess of Devonshire. The latter, expanded to book length and published in 1998, when the author was thirty, became a Whitbread Prize-winning best-seller—and, not incidentally, a film starring Keira Knightley and Ralph Fiennes. Amanda Foreman's father, Carl Foreman, was the illustrious screenwriter responsible for "High Noon" and "The Bridge on the River Kwai." He was a onetime Communist who, though he had left the Party in disillusionment well before the McCarthy era, refused to "name names." The blacklist sent him into exile. Hence his daughter's English birth, and hence, in a way, this book.

"A World on Fire" is at once a comprehensive military and diplomatic account of the war and a vast picaresque, the prose equivalent of one of those room-size, panoramic oil paintings of historical

or mythological events that artists used to take on tour in the nineteenth century. Spread across Foreman's crowded canvas is a multitude of gaudy characters, British and American, famous and obscure. We see the American struggle largely through the eyes of Britons—adventurers, war tourists, journalists, volunteers (or unwilling conscripts) in both armies, rascals, and idealists—whose letters, diaries, and memoirs Foreman pans for gold.

Their motives varied, and she threads their stories through the larger story of the war. James Horrocks, for example, was an unwed nineteen-year-old on the lam from Lancashire after fathering an illegitimate child. He joined a New Jersey artillery company—"a motley assembly—Irish, Germans, French, English, Yankees—Tall, Slim, Short, and Stout," he wrote his parents—for the mustering bonus, a hefty \$288. "As I fully intend to desert if I don't get good treatment," he added, "I enlisted under the name of Andrew Ross." Later, when his unit came under the command of General Benjamin "Beast" Butler, who had earned fame and infamy as the military governor of New Orleans, "Private Ross" treated mum and dad to a description: "Imagine a bloated-looking bladder of lard. Call before your mental vision a sack full of muck . . . and then imagine four enormous German sausages fixed to the extremities of the sack in lieu of arms and legs." James Horrocks did not desert. He saw plenty of action and ended the war as a white officer in a black regiment. When Richmond fell, he spent a night on the floor of a bedroom in the Confederate White House. "I had the honor of sleeping in the house of Jeff Davis, if there is any honor in that," he wrote. After the war, he settled in St. Louis and became an accountant.

Henry Morton Stanley was a twenty-year-old Welsh immigrant whose Arkansas neighbors shamed him into joining the Dixie Grays. At Shiloh in April of 1862, where, he wrote later, the dead "lay thick as the sleepers in a London park on a Bank Holiday," he discovered "that Glory sickened me with its repulsive aspect, and made me suspect it was a glittering lie." Taken prisoner by a Federal officer, who saved him from being summarily shot, he discussed "our respective causes" with his captors, "and, though I could not admit it, there was much reason in what they said." To get out of a hellish

stockade near Chicago, where three hundred of the eight thousand prisoners claimed to be British subjects, he switched sides and signed up for a three-year hitch in the Union Army. Sick with dysentery, he sneaked off the hospital grounds and made his way home to Wales, where, he once said, "there were no blackies." A year and a half later, he returned to America and, having ascertained that his "previous history as both a Confederate and a Federal deserter was unknown to the authorities," joined the U.S. Navy. Though his duties were almost risk-free (he was a clerk on board the U.S.S. Minnesota, chasing unarmed blockade runners), he jumped ship anyway. After the war, his talent for spinning tales won him a job as the Africa correspondent of the New York *Herald*—and, in 1871, global fame as the journalist who greeted a long-lost British missionary with the immortal words "Dr. Livingstone, I presume." Or so he quoted himself. (As it happens, Dr. David Livingstone's son Robert had been a Union soldier, who was killed trying to escape from a Confederate prison camp in 1864, when he was eighteen.) By the end of the century, Sir Henry Morton Stanley, M.P., was awash in honors. All the same, he was, on balance, a very bad man.

In the foreground of Foreman's panorama are matched pairs of diplomats at either end of the transatlantic seesaw: Secretary of State Seward and his opposite number, Lord John Russell, Palmerston's foreign minister, who, like Seward, thought he had deserved the top spot; Charles Francis Adams, the shy, socially awkward, and perspicacious son and grandson of Presidents, who served as American minister in London, and Lord Richard Lyons, Adams's similarly shy, similarly perspicacious counterpart in Washington. Peering sullenly over Adams's shoulder is Benjamin Moran, the legation's career drudge. Moran's private diary recorded every slight he thought he suffered from the boss and the boss's graceful son Henry, who was furthering his education as his father's private secretary. A little to one side is a trio of Fleet Street star reporters, sketch pad and notebooks in hand: Frank Vizetelly, whose moody drawings brought the sights of the war to readers of the *Illustrated London News* (and of Foreman's book, which uses twenty-six of them), and William Howard Russell and Francis Lawley, corre-

spondents for the lordly *Times*, the voice of England's conservative establishment.

Seward, whose feelings about Lincoln morphed from contempt to profound, even loving respect during the war years, underwent a parallel evolution in his attitude toward Britain. His notorious Anglophobia had always been more tactical than heartfelt. Visiting England in 1859, at a moment when he had reason to regard himself as the next President, he had revelled in being fussed over by the great and the good. Three years later, only a few months after his fire-breathing brinkmanship in the Trent crisis, Lord Russell, via Lord Lyons, secretly presented him with a draft treaty binding the two nations to cooperate in suppressing the outlawed but continuing Atlantic slave trade. Russell's draft, while permitting British ships to seize American slavers, already included "all the provisions and exclusions that the Americans might demand." Seward, Foreman writes, "liked the proposed treaty and was determined to have it ratified." So the Secretary of State

asked Lyons to play an elaborate game of subterfuge with him. In a brilliant political maneuver, he used the border states' traditional antipathy toward England to trick them into supporting the slave-trade proposal. He altered the wording of the draft so that the proposal came from the United States to Great Britain, rather than the reverse. Then he added a ten-year limit to the treaty and asked Lyons to make objections to it at first, only to allow himself to be publicly beaten down by the force of Seward's arguments. "Mr. Seward's long experience of the Senate, and his well-known tact in dealing with that Body, gives his opinion on such a point so much weight," explained Lyons to the Foreign Office on March 31st, "that I naturally thought it prudent to be guided by it." Lord Russell responded dryly that credit for the treaty was "immaterial" to Her Majesty's Government so long as the slave trade was suppressed. Lyons dutifully performed his role as directed by Seward, and grudgingly "changed" his mind after a testy exchange of notes.

Mission accomplished: the ruse worked, the border-state senators were beguiled, the treaty was ratified, and Seward ate his British-baiting cake and had it, too.

Seward's feel for public opinion, British and American, was not always so acute. He had flirted with the idea of provoking war with Britain when the South was still in the process of seceding; his bizarre notion was that a foreign war would reawaken the spirit of '76 and reunite the fracturing United States.

## DOTHEAD

Well yes, I said, my mother wears a dot. I know they said "third eye" in class, but it's not an eye eye, not like that. It's not some freak third eye that opens on your forehead like on some Chernobyl baby. What it means is, what it's *showing* is, there's this unseen eye, on the inside. And she's marking it. It's how the X that says where treasure's at is not the treasure, but as good as treasure.— All right. What I said wasn't half so measured. In fact, I didn't say a thing. Their laughter had made my mouth go dry. Lunch was after World History; that week was India—myths, caste system, suttee, all the Greatest Hits. The white kids I was sitting with were friends, at least as I defined a friend back then. So wait, said Nick, does *your* mom wear a dot? I nodded, and I caught a smirk on Todd— She wear it to the shower? And to bed?— while Jesse sucked his chocolate milk and Brad was getting ready for another stab. I said, Hand me that ketchup packet there. And Nick said, What? I snatched it, twitched the tear, and squeezed a dollop on my thumb and worked circles till the red planet entered the house of war and on my forehead for the world to see my third eye burned those schoolboys in their seats, their flesh in little puddles underneath, pale pools where Nataraja cooled his feet.

—Amit Majmudar

Lincoln restrained him, gently but firmly. Yet Seward's skittishness about slavery—he believed that his reputation as an outright abolitionist had cost him the Republican Presidential nomination—was one of the factors that kept the Union from fully exploiting British and European disapproval of the South's "peculiar institution," which was shared even by conservatives and aristocrats eager for a chance to gloat over the dissolution of America's democratic and republican experiment.

The surprisingly high level of British sympathy for the Confederacy clearly fascinates Foreman, and her narrative teases out many explanations for it. Some Britons believed—as the more sensitive slaveholders among the American founders had convinced themselves—that American slavery was on a

path to extinction in any event. Lord Russell, Foreman writes, was one of "many Englishmen" who "assumed that the effect of international moral pressure and enlightened domestic opinion would eventually force Southern leaders to abolish slavery, just as Czar Alexander II had abolished serfdom in 1861." Lord Russell's Cabinet colleague William Gladstone, Chancellor of the Exchequer, was another. Gladstone fell under the influence of Henry Hotze, a Swiss-born Alabamian who headed the South's remarkably effective propaganda operation in England. Hotze started a weekly journal, the *Index*, which circulated in the best London and Liverpool gentlemen's clubs, and he succeeded in placing hundreds of pro-Confederate articles in copy-hungry British newspapers. No subterfuge was needed at some. Vizetelly, initially inclined to be pro-Union, fell in

love with Dixie's dashing generals, gracious ladies, and courageous soldiers; so did Lawley, of the *Times*. For the *Times* and many of its readers, the South had romance on its side. It was the underdog. It was fighting for independence, not conquest. The South was plucky; the North was dour. From a distance, Cavaliers are always more attractive than Roundheads. (Frustratingly, Foreman never gives us a *tour d'horizon* of the British press. We're shown that the *Times* was pro-South almost to the bitter end, but we don't learn much about the rest of the newspapers—how many there were, their influence and readership, their political leanings. What, for example, was the attitude of the populist *News of the World*, which had been founded some twenty years earlier?)

In the view of some fashionably liberal Brits, the North kept its wage workers in a bondage scarcely better than the South's chattel slavery—a view little shared, incidentally, by the workingmen of their own country, including many of those hardest hit by the shortage of cotton. (Here, too, Foreman is a little frustrating—I longed to learn more about the internal debates in Britain's labor movement.) To some English grandees, meanwhile, the North's polyglot population—its Germans and Poles and Italians, to say nothing of its Irish—was “the scum and refuse of Europe,” while the leaders of the South were like them: aristocrats of British descent, presiding paternally over a hierarchical agrarian paradise staffed by submissive, contented “servants.”

The Confederacy's monolithic determination and its early military successes convinced many Brits that it would not and could not be subdued. If that was true, and if the Union's war was only against secession and not against the (supposedly doomed) institution of slavery, then how, simply on humanitarian grounds, could the suffering and slaughter be justified? The Lincoln Administration's tactical reticence on the central question in the war's first years baffled and confused British anti-slavery activists even more than it did their American counterparts. The President's early plea, in an open letter to Horace Greeley—“If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it”—was calculated to keep slaveholding border-state politicians from bolting the Union, but it ob-

scured the President's lifelong, animating conviction that “if slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong.”

Gladstone, speaking in Manchester in April of 1862, declared that there was “no doubt if we could say that this was a contest of slavery and freedom, there is not a man within the length and breadth of this room—there is, perhaps, hardly a man in all England—who would for a moment hesitate upon the side he should take.” But doubt on that point, common among Gladstone's liberal-minded countrymen, persisted, and for some time to come Gladstone continued to argue in the Cabinet for recognition of the Confederacy. Not even Lincoln's decree freeing the slaves in the rebel states could fully dispel such doubt. The Emancipation Proclamation, Foreman writes,

was widely denounced as a cynical and desperate ploy. Charles Francis Adams understood its symbolic importance, but even pro-Northern supporters could not understand why Lincoln had allowed the border states to keep their slaves, unless the emancipation order was directed against the South rather than slavery itself. “Our people are very imperfectly acquainted with the powers of your Federal Government,” explained the antislavery crusader George Thompson to his American counterpart, William Lloyd Garrison. “They know little or nothing of your constitution—its compromises, guarantees, limitations, obligations, etc. They are consequently unable to appreciate the difficulties of your president.”

They still are, and so is a formidable fraction of their American cousins—as big a fraction or bigger, probably, than in Lincoln's day. Both sides went to war claiming to be the true defenders of the Constitution of 1789. The Civil War amendments cleansed the document of the overt stain of slavery. But they did nothing to alter the arcane structural defects (features, if you prefer) that the slaveholding interest had done so much to engineer at Philadelphia: the malapportioned Senate, the electoral college, the high bar for ratifying amendments—even the separation of powers, which pits the government's three elected components against one another, multiplies veto points, and makes no one fully responsible or accountable. The great and noble conflict left no more ironic legacy.

By the war's closing months, when it became unmistakably clear that the Civil War was a war against slavery, British public opinion had moved overwhelmingly to the Union side. On Janu-

ary 31, 1865, Congress finally approved the Thirteenth Amendment, abolishing slavery everywhere and without qualification. It had been in the works for a year, and it “had an even greater effect on British public opinion than the North's recent military victories,” Foreman writes. “No amount of sneering by Henry Hotze in the *Index* could diminish the moral grandeur of emancipation.” At that moment, Duncan Kenner, a prominent member of the Confederate Congress and a confidant of Jefferson Davis, was sneaking across Union lines, wearing a wig and pretending to be a Frenchman, to catch an unblockaded transatlantic steamer out of New York. Kenner was on a secret mission from his President: to offer emancipation of the South's slaves in exchange for British recognition of the desperate and disintegrating Confederacy. When Kenner reached London, the Confederate minister there, the onetime Trent passenger James Mason, arranged an appointment with the Prime Minister. Mason, privately appalled by the proposal, persuaded Kenner that an experienced diplomat, namely himself, should do the talking. By Mason's own account, Foreman writes, he

prevaricated for almost twenty minutes before finally asking whether “there was some latent, undisclosed obstacle on the part of Great Britain to recognition.” Palmerston had already divined the real purpose of the conversation and replied without hesitating that slavery had never been the obstacle. Mason was elated until he recounted the conversation to a friend, Lord Donoughmore, who told him that Palmerston had said this precisely to forestall a last-minute appeal from the South: slavery had *always* been the chief impediment to recognition. The South had squandered her only chance of achieving it by not emancipating the slaves in 1863, when Lee was the undisputed victor on the battlefield.

Of course, that only chance had been no chance at all. Slavery was the Confederacy's midwife, slavery its life, and slavery its death rattle. Less than a month after Mason's meeting with Palmerston, Robert E. Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox. The fires of the Civil War sputtered and cooled. Over here, their embers still smolder. ♦

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