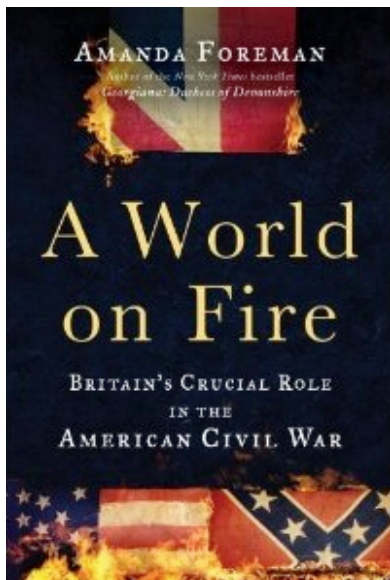


Great Britain's role in U.S. Civil War is explored

By Myron A. Marty – Special to the Post-Dispatch | Posted: Sunday, July 31, 2011 12:00 am



When Confederate troops fired on Fort Sumter on April 14, 1861, they started two wars. One pitted troops loyal to the Union against the rebels who sought to secede from it. It claimed the lives of more than 600,000 soldiers, some of them British volunteers, before it ended four years later.

British leaders, seeking tenaciously to avoid being drawn into that war, waged a largely bloodless war of their own. Relying on diplomatic, political and economic maneuvers, neutrality was their goal — this despite Britain's dependence on cotton grown in the rebel states and the benefits gained from building ships for the Confederacy. The issue of slavery played a crucial role in their decisions, as it was anathema to most British citizens.

British historian Amanda Foreman tells the story of the sometimes contentious and tenuous relationship between the two wars in "A World on Fire."

With a vast array of her research findings, Foreman pondered the challenge of engaging her audience in a story featuring countless characters: military officers, battlefield soldiers, seamen, politicians, bureaucrats, diplomats, journalists, nurses, merchants, financiers, spies, conspirators, propagandists and volunteers, among others. Also to be included were accounts of battles, strategies, troop movements, and a panoply of other topics in which they had played a part.

Approaching the war from an international perspective complicated Foreman's challenge, as did her determination "to treat each of the significant figures, and many of the lesser ones, as though he or she was the principal subject of the book." Hoping to immerse the reader in the British-American world of the Civil War, she decided to write a "history-in-the-round" (a version of theater-in-the-round). Her tightly crafted narrative weaves together illuminating stories, giving readers a variety of angles for perceiving the Civil War.

Foreman gives major figures their place at center stage, including Britain's prime minister, Lord Palmerston; Foreign Secretary John Russell; and Lord Lyons, minister at the British legation in Washington.

Sharing the stage are U.S. figures, including President Abraham Lincoln; Secretary of State William Seward; Charles Francis Adams, U.S. ambassador to Britain; and several other members of Lincoln's Cabinet. Also claiming a place are Jefferson Davis and his Confederate representatives in England. The principal issues, including the effects of British policies concerning slavery in the American South, receive appropriate attention. Many readers, though, will be intrigued by the activities of lesser figures, particularly the British volunteers, as their stories continue throughout Foreman's narrative. Here is a sampling:

- Francis Dawson (an assumed name), at age 21 a failed playwright seeking a new occupation, found it by slipping aboard the *Nashville*, a Confederate blockade runner. He arrived in America as a common sailor, became an artillery officer and was present at a number of battles, including Antietam, Gettysburg and Chattanooga. He served on the staff of several Confederate generals and, at the headquarters of Robert E. Lee, he endured a tirade of sarcastic remarks by the general, who was frustrated "by the relentless attrition of troops, supplies and other options." At the war's end, he settled in the South.

- Mary Sophia Hill came to America to be with her brother Sam, a member of an Irish regiment of volunteers. She became a nurse in the Louisiana regiment in which the Irish served. After returning from a visit to England, she found New Orleans controlled by Union troops. Soon she was imprisoned, charged with passing information to the enemy. Prison conditions were miserable and took a severe toll on her health. After the war, the government awarded her \$1,500 in damages.

- Henry Morton Stanley was shamed into enlisting in the Arkansas Infantry. When he witnessed the bloodshed at Shiloh, the first Union victory, he wrote that it "was the first time that Glory sickened me with its repulsive aspect, and made me suspect a glittering lie." He soon switched to the Union army. In 1863 he deserted, returned to England, joined the Union navy, jumped ship, and spent two years in various ventures in the West before exploring in Africa for almost two decades. The rest of his story — including his service as a member of Parliament and being knighted — is the stuff of which books are made.

"A World on Fire," a powerful, gripping book, is a remarkable contribution to Civil War literature, especially during the observance of the war's sesquicentennial.

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'A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War'

By Amanda Foreman

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