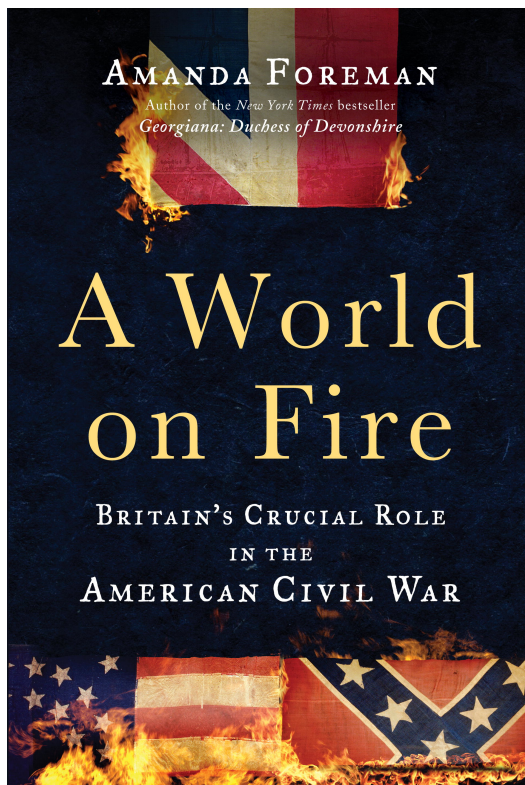




A WORLD ON FIRE: BY AMANDA FOREMAN

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If you believe the history books, the Civil War pitted a magnanimous Union against a craven Confederacy. Abraham Lincoln and his cabinet struggled to keep the nation together, abolishing slavery while the cowardly Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee led an effort to destroy the very foundation of freedom our forefathers envisioned when writing our the Constitution. You would also believe that the Civil War occurred in a vacuum, American against American duking it out while the rest of the world gingerly stayed out of the way.

Amanda Foreman's exhaustive new book *A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War* deep-sixes those misconceptions that make up our scrubbed-clean history books. Did you know that the British not only diligently followed the Civil War, waiting for news reports and telegrams, but many of its citizens also joined sides and fought? Just like the Americans, Great Britain had a vested interest in whichever side won the war and while most of the nation's population detested slavery, many were enamored with not only the rebellious spirit of the South, but sympathized with a society afraid its culture would be snuffed out by the industrialized North.

Like much of the world, Britain's future hung on the precipice of the American Civil War. The Confederacy demanded recognition. Secretary of State William H. Seward threatened to invade Canada if the British sided with the South. But Foreman does something miraculous in *A World on Fire*. She not only shows us the war from the British perspective, she writes a comprehensive history of the entire conflict, beginning with the caning of senator Charles Sumner and ending with the assassination of Abraham Lincoln at the end of the conflict.

Foreman's cast is large enough to earn a *dramatis personae* at the book's front section, but *A World on Fire* unfolds like a Victorian-era novel, filled with soldiers, politicians, observers and journalists. Using primary documents to tell much of the story, we see the war through the eyes of a cast both British (such as reporter Frank Vizetelly of *The Illustrated London News* and diplomat Lord Lyons)

and American (American abroad Henry Adams and Southern supporter Rose Greenhow). Foreman does well to tell a balanced story where neither side is innocent in the conflict.

While the subtitle promises an Anglo perception of the Civil War, a good amount of *A World on Fire* deals with its various battles. Foreman does well to describe skirmishes of which there are hundreds of other books, but the British point of view adds a new dimension to the proceedings. Public opinion is a fickle thing and while the North began the war with near unanimous support in Great Britain, that goodwill began to waver as the fighting tapered on and the Confederates proved to be more tenacious than anyone at first thought. *A World on Fire* is quite long, but it is rarely boring. Only the numerous sections describing battles at sea and the illegal construction of Confederate ships in Great Britain drag in places.

Much of the narrative centers around Lord Lyons, Britain's minister to Washington, D.C. and Charles Francis Adams, the American sent to the legation in England. Both men suffer the differences in their respective new countries: Lyons swelters in the stifling Washington summers while Adams finds it difficult to break into British society. Each man is tasked with keeping angry politicians at bay and maintaining the tenuous peace that exists between the United States and England, bringing them years of stress and annoyance.

As the war wears on for many years, Foreman does an admirable job tying up all the loose strands and stories that populate *A World on Fire*. We learn how a law imposed by the Union against the women of New Orleans almost cost them the support of the British public. Foreman uncovers various terrorist plots conducted by Confederates based in Canada. She even chronicles what happened to many of the people in the years following the war, rounding out an already complete picture of the era.

The Civil War may have been the bloodiest war for the United States, but it almost plunged us headlong into another conflict with Great Britain. Amanda Foreman and *A World on Fire* show us how politicians such as Adams and Lyons prevented this almost inevitable slide into what could have been the First World War (the Confederates tried to woo France into taking their side). It is a breathtaking feat of work, one that should replace those hollow history books as it tells our country's story through foreign eyes, perhaps the most perceptive of all in such a situation.

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