

The Telegraph

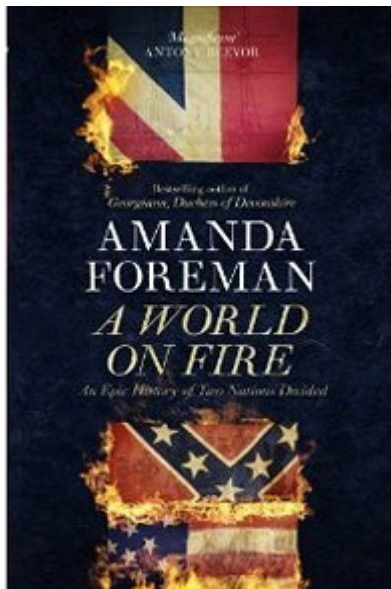
A World on Fire: An Epic History of Two Nations Divided by Amanda Foreman

Dominic Sandbrook admires *A World on Fire: An Epic History of Two Nations Divided* by Amanda Foreman, a sweeping history of the American Civil War.

By Dominic Sandbrook

12:39PM GMT 30 Nov 2010

At the end of November 1861, Britain and the United States stood on the brink of war. A few weeks earlier, the USS San Jacinto had pursued and intercepted a British mail steamer, the Trent, just off the Bahamas. On board were two envoys from the Southern slave states, James Mason and John Slidell, who had been dispatched to Europe to obtain diplomatic recognition for the secessionist Confederacy.



Carried off as prisoners to Boston, Mason and Slidell found themselves right at the centre of one of the biggest international storms of the century.

In London, the Cabinet prepared for battle, mobilising British troops along the Canadian border. How dare the Americans “with their dwarf fleet and shapeless mass of incoherent squads which they call an army ... fancy themselves the equal of France by land and Great Britain by sea?” asked one London paper. And across the Atlantic, tempers ran equally high. “While the British government has been playing the villain, we have been playing the fool. Let her now do something beyond drivelling – let her fight ... if she is not as cowardly as she is treacherous,” replied a Philadelphia newspaper.

If the Trent Affair had worked out differently, it might have changed the shape of world history. Had Britain and the Northern states gone to war, it is likely that the Confederacy would have survived. Perhaps even now African-American slaves would be toiling in the plantations of South Carolina. For as Amanda Foreman’s

gigantic narrative shows, the American Civil War was not merely the world’s first genuinely modern warfare, complete with slaughter on a horrifyingly industrial scale; it was also a potentially global conflagration.

Almost all of Britain’s cotton imports came from the Southern slave states; in Lancashire, the livelihoods of five million people depended on it. And although anti-slavery sentiment was strong, not all Englishmen felt a natural sympathy with Abraham Lincoln’s Union armies.

“Damn the Federals. Damn the Confederates. Damn you both. Kill you damned selves for the next 10 years if you like; so much the better for the world and for England. Thus thinks every Englishman with any brains,” wrote an anonymous correspondent to Charles Francis Adams, Washington’s man in London, in 1863. “NB PS We’ll cut your throats fast enough afterwards for you if you ain’t tired of blood, you devils.”

Although the British government sensibly stayed out of the American conflict – thanks partly to Prince Albert, who subtly softened an inflammatory message to Washington at the height of the Trent Affair – Foreman’s book shows that

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/8159687/A-World-on-Fire-An-Epic-History-of...>

thousands of ordinary Britons were deeply involved. Some were journalists, like the *Times* war correspondent William Henry Russell or the intrepid battlefield artist Frank Vizetelly. Some were tourists kidnapped in America and forced to enlist.

Others joined up voluntarily, such as James Horrocks, who fled across the Atlantic to avoid marrying the mother of his baby son. But he did not have much respect for his American comrades. General Benjamin Butler, he thought, was a “bloated-looking bladder of lard”, resembling “a sack full of mud” with “four enormous German sausages” for arms.

“If I was in England or the English service, I should consider that it was a shame and a sin to desert,” Horrocks said. But “in the land of the Yankee Doodle”, desertion was “regarded universally as a smart thing and the person who does it a dem’d smart fellow”.

As Horrocks’s experience might suggest, Foreman’s sprawling narrative is a long way from the romantic fantasies of *Gone with the Wind*. Like all civil wars, this was a dirty, savage conflict.

At the battle of Shiloh in 1862, the Welsh volunteer and future explorer Henry Morton Stanley spotted a young boy picking violets and sticking them in his cap. “They are a sign of peace,” the boy said. “Perhaps they won’t shoot me if they see me wearing such flowers.” Impulsively, Stanley stuck some in his cap, too. A little later, he heard the boy calling out. “Oh stop, please stop a bit.” He was “standing on one leg, staring at the remains of his foot”.

With her last book, a biography of *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire*, Foreman encountered fame, fortune and not a little criticism from rival writers unimpressed by her publicity stunts. Like *Georgiana*, this book deserves to be a huge popular success.

True, the narrative sometimes moves painfully slowly, while academic scholars of the American Civil War will learn little they did not know already. But there is something undeniably impressive about an author with the courage to attempt something so ambitious, a global history of a seismic conflict, spanning two continents and encompassing a massive cast of characters. This is a very long book, admittedly. But as a feat of sheer storytelling, it is also a very fine one.

* Dominic Sandbrook’s *State of Emergency* is published by Allen Lane

A World on Fire: an Epic History of Two Nations Divided

by Amanda Foreman

988pp, Allen Lane, £30

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