

The  
Economist

## The American civil war Into the flames

An ambitious reappraisal of the bloody war between the states

Nov 11th 2010 | from the print edition

**A World on Fire: An Epic History of Two Nations Divided.** By Amanda Foreman. *Allen Lane*; 988 pages; £30. To be published in America by Random House in June 2011; \$35. Buy from



AMERICANS proudly, and understandably, stress the exceptional character of their history. Yet from the beginning it has been intertwined with larger narratives of European, Atlantic and world history, including themes of migration, trade, ideology and power. The American revolution itself was an episode in the long conflict between Britain and France. Now Amanda Foreman, an Anglo-American historian, has looked at the American civil war “as it was seen by Britons in America, and Americans in Britain”. She points out that it was a defining moment not just in American history but in the relations between the two countries.

The scale of Ms Foreman’s book is epic. It encompasses the high diplomacy of a conflict that more than once brought Britain and America to the verge of war. It follows the experiences, some comic, some tragic, of individuals caught up in the conflict, from Irish immigrants who rushed to volunteer because they thought they would be fighting the British to ambitious British army officers who joined up with the Confederates to see modern warfare for themselves; from the buffoonish soldier of fortune, Sir Percy Wyndham (he was English, his knighthood Italian), to Rose Greenhow, a beautiful spy who set about trying to vamp Louis Napoleon and drowned while trying to run the Union’s naval blockade of the Confederacy.

Ms Foreman draws many memorable portraits. Among them are the British foreign secretary, Lord John Russell, and William Seward, Abraham Lincoln’s secretary of state; diplomats such as

Lord Lyons, Britain's long-suffering minister in Washington, and Charles Francis Adams in London; journalists like William Howard Russell of the *Times* and Frank Vizetelly, the war artist of the *Illustrated London News*. The book carries his on-the-spot sketches.

There are walk-on parts for many eminent Victorians, including Leslie Stephen, father of Virginia Woolf, and Henry Morton Stanley, the "serial deserter" and Dr Livingstone's saviour, whose ne'er-do-well son Robert was killed trying to escape from a prisoner-of-war camp. Ms Foreman records some telling vignettes: Henry Adams's description of John Bright, greatest of Liberal parliamentary orators, shaking an opponent as a mastiff might shake a terrier, and sour Benjamin Moran, of the Union legation in London, exposing the insincerity of the Adams family's proclaimed indifference to London society. She even tells an off-colour Victorian joke. When the prime minister, Lord Palmerston, at 80, was cited in the divorce of a Mrs O'Kane, the Pall Mall clubmen asked, "She was Kane, but was he Able?"

London and Liverpool crawled with Confederate supporters, lobbying politicians and the press, and commissioning ships to run the blockade. Although the Union had its own counter-intelligence agents, the South's men also commissioned the "Laird rams", two fast ironclads built on the Mersey to ram Union ships. The crew of another Confederate ship built at the Laird shipyard, the highly potent *Alabama*, were raised in Liverpool. As they fired on a Yankee ship the crewmen shouted, "That's from the scum of England." Southerners raged that London did not recognise the Confederacy, northern statesmen threatened war and British ministers wondered if they were bluffing. Canada was drawn in when Confederate desperadoes raided across the border.

Rich as "A World on Fire" is in incident and character sketches, it is also a corrective to historical myths. Ms Foreman, the author of a bestselling earlier biography of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, is the daughter of a blacklisted Hollywood screenwriter, Carl Foreman, and was educated partly in Britain, partly in America. As a historian, she is free from narrow national and sectional prejudices. To this day many Americans believe that British opinion was pro-Southern. Not so. Ms Foreman shows that, though the *Times* and *Punch* (and to a lesser degree *The Economist*) did favour the South, the Union had its supporters too. Both nations were divided.

Lancashire worried about its precious cotton, but many Lancashire working men supported the North out of their hatred for slavery. When, at a Manchester banquet, John Roebuck, a member of Parliament, said, "The North will never be our friends. Of the South you can make friends, they are Englishmen, not the scum and refuse of Europe," the mayor of the great cotton city shouted, "Don't say that; don't say that! [The North] are Englishmen, and we must make them our friends."

Hostility to Britain was strong in both the North and the South. The Confederates could not forgive Britain for refusing recognition; the North could not forgive the unofficial help Britain gave the South. Three-fifths of the South's rifles were shipped through the blockade. Though all social classes in Britain hated slavery, it took Lincoln's death to make many realise that ending slavery was indeed the North's goal. As a British commentator wrote in the *Atlantic Monthly*, "the entire country had divided over the merits of the civil war" and whether abolition or the union was the principle at stake. But it also took the war to make Britain acknowledge something it had not quite done before—that a Union with 1m men under arms must be accepted as an equal.

from the print edition | Books and Arts