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Bystander to a vile conflict

A World on Fire: an epic history of two nations divided

Amanda Foreman

Allen Lane, £30

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The British response to the American Civil War was muddled. It might be assumed that most of the nation's leading thinkers and politicians immediately cheered for the slavery-hating North. This wasn't the case. As Amanda Foreman's superb new book reveals, the moral juices of the war took a long time to ferment. In many circles, there was confidence that the South would rid itself of slavery sooner or later and, crucially, economic ties with the states of the Confederacy were too vital to ignore. Almost a million English jobs depended upon the American cotton industry: a position of studied neutrality was quickly adopted by the British government. It seemed wise not to get involved (so we didn't) but one of the most surprising revelations of this book is that the North was a far more likely adversary than the South.

Early on, the relationship between London and Washington was very tense. Animosity reached such a pitch that there was a genuine risk of Britain and the North going to war. London was sensibly worried that an attack might be launched against British-ruled Canada (this had been a possibility for decades) and policy maven dutifully made plans to launch a first strike against Maine and blockade (perhaps even bombard) cities like Boston and New York. This was all avoided, of course, but Foreman demonstrates just how perilous the situation became. By December 1861, British troops were sailing across the Atlantic, only to turn tail when the crisis simmered down. One can't help but wonder how history might have looked if events had unfolded in a slightly different way.

As it happened, conflict was avoided and neutrality was sustained, but this did not reduce Britain to the role of bystander. On the contrary, both North and South were desperate to win over British public opinion. As one irked newspaper grumbled in 1862, the two sides were treating Britain like "a kind of supplemental fighting ground

". Foreman offers a painstaking account of this process: the American envoys who pleaded their case, the British politicians who had to negotiate treacherous geopolitical waters, and the ordinary British people who tried to make sense of it all.

Ultimately and gloriously, most Britons decided to lend their sympathy to the Northern cause. The moral significance of the conflict rose to due prominence, and by the time Lincoln was assassinated he had become something of a hero: when news of his death arrived, hard-headed newspaper and magazine editors felt obliged to

apologise for all the critical things they had written about him in the past. In retrospect, this sluggish, guarded response to the Civil War might seem reprehensible. Before rushing to judgement, however, it is important to remember the tetchy history of Anglo-American relations during the nineteenth century: only a few decades previously, British troops had been setting fire to Washington and the White House. We should also bear in mind the dominant theme of the American Civil War: shock. There had never been a conflict like this one. In a single battle, the casualty figures could match those of the entire Crimean War. Choosing sides wasn't always easy.

Foreman's book is very long, but this allows it to reflect the chaos of the subject. These were not pleasant years through which to live: not for the crowds at the Liverpool docks who awaited the latest news-bearing ship; not for the politicians in London, and not for the many British men who, regardless of their government's prohibitions, decided to join the forces of both North and South. It is an extraordinarily poignant and tragic tale and Foreman tells it very well. She moves effortlessly between reliable accounts of the Civil War's bloody progress, analyses of the power-politics that transfixed the whole of Europe, and the intimate human stories that were recorded in such rich and agonising detail.

Foreman is overly keen on meandering, and if there is a character (however minor) to be sketched she is sure to portray him or her in seemingly unnecessary detail. I don't know if this is a deliberate narrative strategy (an attempt, perhaps, to replicate the delightful infuriation of a Victorian novel) but, nine times out of 10, it works. You will emerge from these pages with a spinning head and usually that would be cause for complaint. On this occasion, given the messiness of the topic, it seems appropriate.

The relationship between Britain and America during this awful period has rarely been tackled in the realm of popular historical writing. Foreman is to be applauded for her bravery and initiative. Her historiographical radar is still in working order. Apparently, it took her 12 years to write this book. They have been well spent and the results will be of great value both to the general reader and to the specialist. I haven't done the maths, but I suspect that the American Civil War has been written about as frequently as any other conflict in human history. That's as it should be: it was the vilest and most interesting of wars. Coming up with something fresh is very difficult. Foreman has succeeded and, while her book is bloated, it is still magnificent.

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