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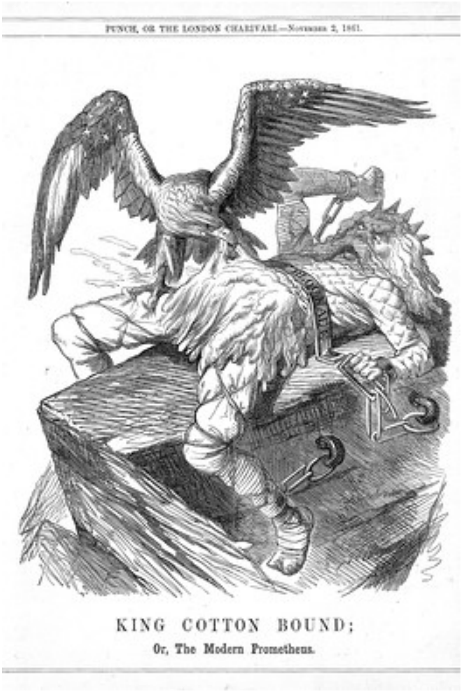
When Cotton Wasn't King

As America plunged into civil war, North and South both expected Britain's favor

By MICHAEL BURLINGAME

If the oddsmaker Jimmy the Greek had been alive 150 years ago, when the American Civil War broke out, he would have probably given the South a better-than-even chance of winning, for it was widely assumed that Great Britain would support the Confederacy to maintain its access to Southern cotton. That commodity was as essential to the British economy as oil is to our own economy today. It was thought that, if the cotton supply were cut off, thousands of unemployed British millworkers would demand that Her Majesty's government intervene to break the Union blockade of Southern ports, thus touching off a war with the United States and guaranteeing Confederate independence.

A few months after the conflict began, the British government did indeed gird for war against the United States. On Nov. 8, 1861, a Union naval officer, Charles Wilkes, rashly seized Confederate diplomats James M. Mason and John Slidell from the Trent, a British mail packet, as it steamed from Havana to St. Thomas—one neutral port to another.


PUNCH, OR THE LONDON CHARIVARI.—November 2, 1861.
KING COTTON BOUND;
Or, The Modern Prometheus.

The essential commodity: John Tenniel's 1861 cartoon from Punch showing 'King Cotton Bound; Or,

Britain's public and its government ministers were apoplectic, and tempers in both countries rose. As war loomed, the U.S. Secretary of State William Henry Seward exclaimed: "We will wrap the whole world in flames!" But the Lincoln administration wisely chose to release the two envoys, much to the dismay of Confederate officials who hoped that Britain would use the incident to declare war on the North.

Amanda Foreman's well-researched and highly readable "A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War" examines why the British government never did recognize the Confederacy. Ms. Foreman, the author of the best-selling biography "Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire" (1999), is such an engaging writer that readers may find this 958-page volume too short. She supplements the traditional scholarly approach to British-American relations with an array of testimony from dozens of British witnesses to and participants in the Civil War. Their diaries, letters, reminiscences and newspaper reports provide insights into the war that differ from similar accounts by Americans, who perforce could not achieve the detached perspective of foreigners.

The Modern Prometheus.' The Union is portrayed as an eagle pecking at a Confederacy restrained by the blockade of its ports.

British opinion during the American Civil War was sharply divided. Support for the North was strong among those who abhorred slavery, an institution that Parliament had succeeded in abolishing decades earlier. The antislavery movement in Britain, led by the crusading William Wilberforce, had eliminated the practice throughout the British Empire a quarter century before the bombardment of Fort Sumter in 1861. But British business interests and many Foreign Office types supported the Confederacy because they feared that if the United States remained united, and continued to grow as fast as it had been growing, it would soon eclipse Britain as a world power. In addition, some English aristocrats felt a bond of identity with Southern planters, who constituted a kind of landed aristocracy.

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

By Amanda Foreman
Random House, 958 pages, $35

Pro-Confederate sentiment particularly ruled in Conservative Party circles, where it was hoped that, if the United States became the Disunited States, the idea of democracy would be discredited. As Lincoln remarked less than a month after the outbreak of the war: "I consider the central idea pervading this struggle is the necessity that is upon us, of proving that popular government is not an absurdity. We must settle this question now, whether in a free government the minority have the right to break up the government whenever they choose. If we fail it will go far to prove the incapability of the people to govern themselves."

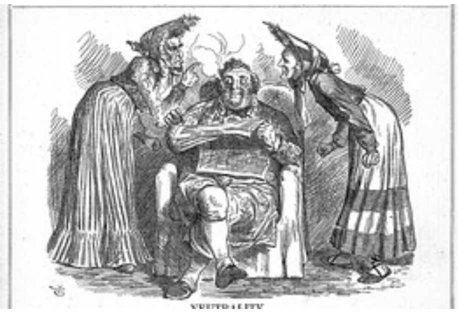
Ms. Foreman recounts numerous incidents that, during the course of the Civil War, stoked sentiments on both sides of the Atlantic without ever rising to a *casus belli*. Britain legitimately complained about the mistreatment of its citizens residing in the U.S., whether in the North or South. Each side drafted or shanghaied ("crimped") British men of military age. When these involuntary soldiers understandably deserted, some were tortured and others executed. Yet the North showed remarkable restraint in treating British sailors who manned blockade runners: When captured, the sailors were quickly released by the Union forces, in keeping with international law.

Lincoln's government, for its part, protested against Britain's failure to meet its obligations as an officially neutral power. Among other things, Britain allowed vessels destined for the Confederate navy to be built in British shipyards; it permitted the Bahamas to be used as a base by blockade runners; and it let Canada become a center of operations for Confederate terrorists. Such lapses by Her Majesty's government were more the result of carelessness than pro-Confederate bias.

In the end, Britain's Liberal government, under Lord Palmerston, decided not to intervene in the Civil War. As a naval power, Britain did not want to pursue a policy that would undermine the effectiveness of the blockade as a tool of war. It also did not want to risk getting involved in a conflict with the United States that might result in the loss of Canada or in the increase of French power in Europe and the Americas. Britain eventually found alternative sources for cotton, primarily in Egypt and India. Finally, Northern leaders, like Lincoln, and diplomats, like Thomas H. Dudley, were more skillful and sensible than their Confederate counterparts. As time passed, it seemed less and less likely that the South would win, and once Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, in January 1863, British popular opinion swung decidedly in favor of the North.

As Ms. Foreman recounts this transatlantic saga, she sketches brilliant vignettes of American and British leaders, legislators, journalists and diplomats. She includes colorful tidbits about these figures, including the octogenarian Palmerston, who in 1863 was named as a co-respondent in a divorce suit brought by one Tom O'Kane against his wife. Wags asked puckishly: "She was Kane, but was he Able?"

But Ms. Foreman does not confine herself to often-chronicled incidents of politics and diplomacy; her scope is broader and her cast of characters much larger. Some were famous at the time, such as the celebrated Times of London reporter William Howard Russell, whose book "My Diary North and South" (1863) collected his impressions of the leaders on both sides. Another journalist she frequently quotes, Frank Vizetelly of the London Illustrated News, was also a gifted artist. "A World on Fire" reproduces dozens of the illustrations he drew while accompanying Confederate forces. One of the most striking shows Jefferson Davis seated on a box by the roadside, signing government orders in the days before his capture.



Old wives tale: John Tenniel's 1863 carton 'Neutrality' depicts a comfortable John Bull—the traditional stand-in for Britain—enjoying his leisure while two warring harridans (Abraham Lincoln's North and Jefferson's South) seek his attention.

Ms. Foreman also weaves in accounts by Americans in Britain during the war, most notably the American minister to the Court of St. James, Charles Francis Adams, as well as his gifted sons and members of the legation staff. ("All the English eccentrics rushed into the ranks of the rebel sympathizers," Henry Adams wrote years later of that nation of eccentrics, "leaving few but well-balanced minds to attach themselves to the cause of the Union.") She describes the dramatic cat-and-mouse game played by Confederate agents trying to obtain arms and ships from the British and by the Union consuls and their detectives who sought to foil such attempts.

Many Britons found it hard to understand the moral dimensions of a war that, at times, appeared to be an act of imperial aggression (of the North against the South). Even some liberals supported the Confederate cause because they likened it to the Greek revolt against Ottoman hegemony in the 1820s or the Hungarians' 1848 bid for independence from the Hapsburg Empire. The British public failed to understand that constitutional constraints kept Lincoln from abolishing slavery as soon as the war began. They assumed that, since the president opposed slavery, he could emancipate slaves immediately upon taking office.

Incredibly, many Britons believed that the Confederates would voluntarily end slavery if they won the war. Ms. Foreman argues that the British might have intervened if the Confederacy had liberated the slaves in early 1863, after its victories at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville. The Confederate congress did pass a law allowing slaves to serve in the army and thus gain their freedom, but it did so only in 1865, when the war was virtually over.

Equally incredibly, many unemployed British textile workers supported the North despite the Union blockade that had cost them their jobs. When the workingmen of Manchester sent Lincoln an address congratulating him on the Emancipation Proclamation, he replied in a public letter, which Ms. Foreman cites: "I know and deeply deplore the sufferings which the workingmen at Manchester and in all Europe are called to endure in this crisis. It has been often and studiously represented that the attempt to overthrow this government, which was built upon the foundation of human rights, and to substitute for it one which should rest exclusively on the basis of human slavery, was likely to obtain the favor of Europe. Through the actions of our disloyal citizens the workingmen of Europe have been subjected to a severe trial, for the purpose of forcing their sanction to that attempt. Under these circumstances, I cannot but regard your decisive utterance upon the question as an instance of sublime Christian heroism which has not been surpassed in any age or in any country."

Some Americans expressed a hostility to Britain rooted largely in memories of the Revolution and the War of 1812. They failed to understand that, early in the war, Britain had been compelled by international law (and not by malice) to declare formal neutrality, because the Lincoln administration had established a blockade. On that occasion, the hot-tempered Seward wrote a blistering protest that Lincoln toned down. Though no record indicates that Lincoln actually said "one war at a time," his actions showed that such was his watchword in dealing with European powers.

Ms. Foreman's achievement is to help us see the Civil War-era controversies between Britain and America as Lincoln did, in the wider context of Anglo-American relations. She cites a conversation in which the president told an army officer that the surrender of Mason and Slidell—the two Confederate diplomats seized off that British packet steamer—made him feel like the sick old man in Illinois who learned that his days were numbered. Wishing to make peace with his enemies, especially a fellow named Brown in a nearby village, he sent for that gentleman. When Brown arrived, the sick man meekly explained that he wanted to die at peace with all people and that he hoped that he and Brown could bury the hatchet. Touched, the tearful Brown extended his hand to his neighbor. As Lincoln told the story, "after a parting that would have softened the heart of a grindstone, Brown had about reached the room door, when the sick man rose up on his elbow and said, 'But, see here, Brown, if I should happen to get well, mind that old grudge stands.'"

—Mr. Burlingame is professor at the University of Illinois at Springfield and the author of "Abraham Lincoln: A Life" (2009).

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