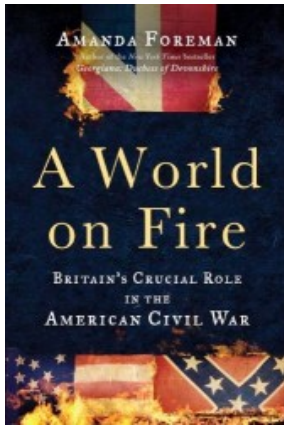


[A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in America's Civil War](#)



Amanda Foreman
Random House
1008 pp.

Reviewed by Brian Odom

In December of 1861 while attending a ball held by the Portuguese minister to the United States, Secretary of State William Seward aptly described a likely outcome of a potential war between the United States and Great Britain. Before a number of guests, Seward bluntly avowed that “we will wrap the whole world in flames!” and that no power was “so remote that she will not feel the fire of our battle and be burned by our conflagration.” In *A World on Fire*, Amanda Foreman brings her immense talents that produced the bestselling *Georgiana: Duchess of Devonshire* to a breathtaking examination of just how close Seward’s prediction came to coming true.

Foreman’s sweeping narrative opens with a 14-page *dramatis personae* that in itself remarks upon the sheer magnitude of the author’s sprawling account. This extraordinary cast of characters embraces not only the preeminent generals, notable diplomats, and distinguished politicians on both sides of the conflict, but also those British men and women who participated directly in the conflict as journalists, observers, and even volunteers on both the Union and Confederate sides. According to Foreman, her objective in *A World on Fire* is to “depict the world as it was seen by Britons in America, and Americans in Britain, during a defining moment not just in U.S. history but in the relations between the two countries.”

As Foreman makes quite clear, the outbreak of war in April 1861 placed an incredible strain on diplomacy on both sides of the Atlantic. In America, Lord Lyons, described by a 19th-century journalist as being “reserved while appearing open,” capably managed British diplomacy and inherited from Lord Napier the delicate task of avoiding a war with the United States. Throughout the narrative, Lyons’ reserved demeanor serves as a steady balance to the fiery, bombastic temperaments of American politicians such as Seward and Charles Sumner.

Across the Atlantic, representatives of both sides persistently lobbied Lord Palmerston’s government with their own demands. Some in Britain shared the opinion of Lord Russell’s predecessor at the Foreign Office, Lord Clarendon, who stated, “if we could be sure of getting raw cotton from them, I should not care how many Northerners were clawed at by the Southerners and vice versa!” More moderate British politicians staked out a position similar to that of Lord Russell who argued, “For God’s sake, let us if possible keep out of it.” For Russell, a policy of strict neutrality would allow Britain the most diplomatic flexibility.

As the U.S. representative to Britain, Charles Francis Adams faced the unenviable task of preventing either British recognition of the Confederate independence, or, worse, a war between the two powers. For much of Foreman’s account, the diplomat of considerable pedigree (whose sons included the future luminary Henry Adams) remained an alien in a foreign land, continually lamenting his failure to secure invitations to prominent galas. As Foreman points out, Confederate diplomacy with Britain was firmly rooted in “King Cotton.” As the main supplier of a raw material that fueled Britain’s massive textile industry, the Confederate government wagered recognition on the collapse of the British economy, a move that in the face of the Union blockade ultimately met with failure. Throughout the war, the British government stretched the legal boundaries of neutrality and turned a blind eye to support for the Confederacy

emanating from the private sector (*CSS Alabama* raider and the Laird Rams). Throughout the war the U.S. government continually deemed such actions by the British as possible *casus belli*, the most significant of which was the incident known as the Trent Affair: On November 8, 1861, the USS San Jacinto intercepted the British mail packet *Trent* and removed two Confederate delegates, James Mason and John Slidell. The Trent Affair soured agitated public opinion on both sides and convinced the British government to increase its military presence in Canada.





The nurturing of public opinion throughout the war remained a high priority for all sides. “Emissaries” representing the various viewpoints sought to “cultivate” popular opinion by flooding media outlets with sympathetic accounts. Typical of these industrious individuals was Henry Hotze, a Confederate journalist from Mobile, Alabama whose weekly newspaper, *The Index*, consistently placed the “sufferings” of the peoples of the Confederate States before its British readership. Northern supporters countered Hotze and his minions by tapping into an abolitionist persuasion that continued to view Britain as the nation of anti-slavery. As Foreman states, “every respectable British household owned a copy” of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (which in 1852 sold a million copies in Britain compared to 300,000 in the U.S.). While she does give some shrift to the idea that Britain avoided outright support for the Confederacy due to the existence of slavery within its borders, Foreman’s central argument is that Britain continued to withhold its recognition and support out of economic, political, and military necessity.

Whether discussing military engagements or providing descriptions of significant individuals, British war correspondents for the *Times*, *Spectator*, and *Morning Herald* kept their readers back home enthralled with their edifying dispatches brimming with rich imagery. Witnesses firsthand to the destructive forces of war, British journalists in both sections bravely faced a number of indomitable burdens. In *A World on Fire*, readers are introduced to Times correspondent Francis Lawley whose Confederate sympathies and “belief in the purity of the Southern planter class as the epitome of all that was noble and intelligent in the human race” was not immune from the ire of his hosts. When it came to writing about the war, Lawley became convinced that “anything less than unqualified praise” would “not be tolerated by his hosts.” Lawley once confided to his friend William Gregory that he was increasingly finding it difficult to avoid topics “which will be calculated to ruffle the amour proper ... of the most susceptible people and government on earth.”

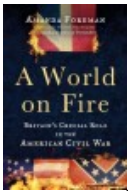
Initially, one of the most striking features of the book is its gargantuan size. Foreman has gone to great, elegant lengths in the recreation of the turbulent world her dynamic characters inhabited. While general readers unfamiliar with the history of the Civil War will find the meticulous accounts of battles and leaders a welcome addition, knowledgeable readers may conclude that it causes the story to become bogged down unnecessarily.

The most appealing aspect of *A World on Fire* is the fresh perspective it applies to such a well-worn topic as the American Civil War. While this sesquicentennial anniversary year of the war has already seen the publication of noteworthy works such as Adam Goodheart’s *1861: The Civil War Awakening* and Barbara Gannon’s *The Won Cause*, readers and scholars alike are hungry for fresh points of view. By examining the individual histories of the British participants “in what is and always will be an American story,” *A World on Fire* provides readers with “the sharper focus that often comes with distance.” Foreman’s account of the Civil War as it was viewed by the major nonparticipant is a breath of fresh air into the seminal topic of American history.

Brian Odom is a graduate of the University of Alabama, with master’s degrees in history and library science. He currently teaches history at Jefferson State Community College outside of Birmingham, Ala., and is a reference librarian at Pelham Public Library.

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