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BOOK REVIEW: When Britain sided with the South

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By Joseph C. Goulden

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A WORLD ON FIRE: BRITAIN'S CRUCIAL ROLE IN THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

By Amanda Foreman

Random House, \$35, 1,008 pages

Doggerel in an 1861 issue of Punch, the British satirical magazine, aptly expressed the nation's dilemma about the American Civil War:

Though with the North we sympathize

It must not be forgotten

That with the South, we've stronger ties,

Which are composed of cotton.

Thus, the thin line trod by Britain during the conflict. In a seeming paradox, a majority of what Amanda Foreman calls the "great liberal peerage" thrust aside its claimed revulsion with slavery - banished in Britain in 1835 - and sided with the South. Economics played a major role in the merchant classes' sympathy; after all, the cotton trade was worth \$600 million annually, providing jobs and financial security for more than 5 million men and women.

Ms. Foreman's work is massive but never boring. Of joint Anglo-American heritage - she studied both in Britain and the United States - she has the knack of finding and using the quotations and descriptions that put vitality into her writing. With her, the reader skitters from English drawing rooms to gory battlefields as the author paints cinematic profiles of mercenary soldiers and politicians. She is one of the more exciting historians I have encountered in years. And, given she is in her early 40s, she should be entertaining readers for decades more.

Despite their professed hatred of slavery - "Uncle Tom's Cabin" sold a million copies in Britain its first year of publication, versus 300,000 in the United States - London politicians saw reasons not to give reflexive support to the Union. After all, the American Revolution and the War of 1812 remained painful memories, and the United States was emerging as an economic challenger to the British Empire. Further, the United States supported Russia in the Crimean War of the 1850s. Many Brits, Ms. Foreman writes, sympathized with what they saw as a "Southern struggle for independence."

A few months into the war, Queen Victoria declared neutrality, barring the arms sales to either side and making it illegal for a British subject to volunteer for military service. Lord John Russell declared, "For God's sake, let us if possible keep out of it!"

Such was not to be. The Confederacy immediately dispatched purchasing agents to the United Kingdom to buy ships covertly to pit against the Union, and even to commission the laying down of sizable men of war. Southern privateers preyed on Union shipping, the CSS Alabama alone sinking 65 Union vessels.

And, most notably, British citizens flocked to enter the war. Although Ms. Foreman writes that exact statistics do not exist, she estimates that perhaps 50,000 Brits fought in the war, as soldiers, sailors, doctors, nurses and guerrillas. European soldiers of fortune, ever watchful for fights to join, signed with both armies.

Spies abound, several of whom had not previously crossed my radar screen. In a foretaste of the covert operation Great Britain ran in Washington before and during World War II to court political and public support, the South dispatched a covert operative to London to swing public opinion toward the Confederacy.

The agent, a Mobile, Ala., journalist named Henry Hotze, was only 27 years old when he accepted the assignment. Gregarious and genial, he proved popular with English journalists, who eagerly snapped up the "news" - read propaganda not always 100 percent accurate - from the Confederacy. Hotze's aim was "to massage, not bludgeon, public opinion." He set up Confederate support groups across the United Kingdom. And Hotze surely made his spymasters happy when a propaganda publication he established actually turned a profit.

The British public closely followed news of the savage fighting, and Ms. Foreman does a superb job of describing the military actions. Her descriptions of the carnage are sobering even to a student of the war. Hear the young adventurer Henry Morton Stanley, a Brit who volunteered for the Confederate "Dixie Grays" after he saw the grisly aftermath of the Battle of Shiloh: "Glory sickened me with its repulsive aspect, and made me suspect it was a glittering lie."

British sympathies for the Confederate cause waned in 1863, after Southern losses at Second Manassas and Gettysburg. Confederate attempts to use Canada as a base for operations stirred fears that Britain could lose its sole remaining North American colony. Also, Confederate bonds marketed in London began going belly-up as the tide of battle turned against the South. And Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, late though it came, lessened support for the South.

One further word of praise for Ms. Foreman. In explaining why her book required a decade of work, she notes that during the 10 years she bore five children (including twins) and cared for her husband, who had a bout of cancer. Nonetheless, she scoured sources across two continents, and her chapter notes span an astounding 116 pages.

Throughout, she is a historian who views the tragedy of the war with objectivity, and whose narrative contains a valuable commentary on the Civil War as seen through non-American eyes. Five stars, at least.

Joseph C. Goulden's revised edition of "SpySpeak: The Dictionary of Intelligence" will be published by Dover Books in the fall.