Glory's glittering lies

MARK BOSTRIDGE

Amanda Foreman

A WORLD ON FIRE

An epic history of two nations divided

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By the time the American Civil War broke out in the spring of 1861, following the secession of eleven slave-owning Southern states from the Union, Anglo-American relations had long been prey to mutual suspicion and hostility. Politically and militarily this deep-seated prejudice dated back to the War of Independence, as well as to the more recent attempts by the United States, in 1812–14, to invade Britain's Canadian territories and annexe British North America for itself. But feelings of distrust also surfaced widely in expressions of public opinion in both countries. According to Alexis de Tocqueville, Americans were so convinced of their superiority as "the only religious, enlightened, and free people", that they were not far from believing themselves to be "a distinct species of mankind". The more the English ridiculed this point of view, the more resentful American attitudes became towards their "uneasy cousins". In 1832, Fanny Trollope had provoked a furore on both sides of the Atlantic with her uproarious bestseller, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, in which she set out to expose American democracy as a sham. "You will see them", she wrote, "with one hand hoisting the cap of liberty, and with the other flogging their slaves. You will see them one hour lecturing their mob on the indefeasible rights of man, and the next driving from their homes the children of the soil, whom they have bound themselves to protect by the most solemn treaties."

The Civil War of 1861–5 between the Union States of the North and the Southern Confederate States was to test to breaking point a central plank of Palmerstonian foreign policy: that of maintaining a polite but firm distance from American problems. Although Britain swiftly made a declaration of strict neutrality, in practice this was adhered to only under extreme pressure, with the threat of war or of the possibility of British military intervention never far away. The North, particularly in the guise of President Lincoln's bullish Secretary of State, William Seward, who warned the Foreign Secretary, Lord John Russell, that "a contest between Great Britain and the United States would wrap the world in fire", seethed with outrage at its failure to win Britain's support, and at the decision of Palmerston's government to award the South the recognition of belligerent status. For its part, the Southern Confederacy could not understand why the imports of 80 per cent of cotton it provided for Lancashire's mills did not bring Britain immediately rushing to its aid. "Cotton is king", declared one Texan senator, who demanded that Queen Victoria should "bend the knee in fealty and acknowledge allegiance to that monarch".

"Drum and Bugle Corp, Civil War Encampment" by Winslow Homer, 1865

The conflict threw the question of slavery and the issue of American superiority into a new, though somewhat blurred, relief. Harriet Beecher Stowe's sensational anti-slavery tale, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, had sold a million copies in Britain on publication in 1852 – more than three times the number of American sales at the time – and had inspired a renaissance in Abolitionist clubs throughout the country. The book had revealed the true South to be a world apart from the idealized picture many people on the other side of the Atlantic had of "courtly manners, charming plantations and contented slaves". It would have been so much easier for the British people and the British government had the American Civil War been fought on an abolitionist platform. Charles Darwin was among those who wished to God "that the North would proclaim a crusade against slavery". But this was never a war centred on moral absolutes. As Lincoln himself admitted, his overriding aim was to maintain the Union, and he intended do so "by freeing all the slaves", or "without freeing any slave". Pragmatism was all. Meanwhile, the South attracted a flock of English eccentrics and sympathizers, demonstrating the native appetite for a rebel cause, many of them apparently convinced that the Confederacy would abolish "the peculiar institution" of slavery for itself once it had won independence.

Amanda Foreman's epic history is concerned, first and foremost, with depicting "the world on fire" as it was seen by Britons in America and by Americans in Britain. This, she believes, will provide a "special" perspective on the war. Her book is fashioned like a three-volume Victorian novel, with a vast array of characters – its dramatis personae lists over a hundred individuals, and there are many more incidental ones – stretched over a wide canvas. Running to over 800 pages of narrative, the book is as thematically unwieldy as it is physically unmanageable. In order to make sense of British and American reactions to events, Foreman has first to describe them. This she does with considerable dramatic flair and organizational skill, enlivening the story with an evocative range of personal testimony. The protagonists include Lord Lyons, Minister at the British Legation in Washington, and his opposite number in London, Charles Francis Adams, the stiff, unsociable son and grandson of two former presidents. It is Lyons, rather than Prince Albert, traditionally seen as the hero of the hour, who is given most credit for having defused the *Trent* affair of December 1861, which nearly toppled Britain into the war, when the commander of a US Navy steamer intercepted and boarded the British packet *Trent* and forcibly removed two Confederate commissioners who were on their way to Europe to persuade the British and the French to grant the South sovereign status.

President Lincoln, with his long arms and wrinkled black suit, like "an undertaker's uniform at a funeral", and his wife Mary, three of whose brothers were killed fighting on the Confederate side, is given a significant cameo. Among the supporting cast are William Howard Russell of *The Times*, who was hounded from the United States after his dispatches were considered insufficiently favourable by the North, and the intrepid Frank Vizetelly of the *Illustrated London News*, whose eyewitness sketches of key moments from the war provide moving visual accompaniment to Foreman's text. Then there are the host of bit players, like Rose Greenhow, the Southern Society hostess who became a Confederate spy, was imprisoned in Washington, and later ran the Northern blockade on an English steamship. Henry Morton Stanley was one of the many expatriate Britons who joined up – or were impressed – on both sides. Stanley fought with the Dixie Grays at Shiloh, remembering that it was "the first time that Glory sickened me with its repulsive aspect, and made me suspect it was a glittering lie". He switched to the Union Army before returning home to Wales, determined to get as far away from the war as possible. Stanley claimed that he'd never cared about politics anyway: "there were no blackies in Wales".

Just occasionally the weight of personal testimony in *A World on Fire* impedes the flow of Foreman's narrative, slowing it down rather than driving it onward, without adding anything of notable substance. One has only to compare Foreman's protracted account of the First Battle of Bull Run with Doris Kearns Goodwin's terse three pages on the same subject in her *Team of Rivals* (2005) – the one book that Barack Obama said he couldn't live without in the White House – to realize how self-indulgent Foreman's historical reconstructions can be. This detail can also obscure important connections. Foreman notes the superiority of the Union Army's equipment over that of the Confederates at Shiloh, but fails to point out that the marked improvement in equipment, and in the general condition of army campsites, was an early achievement of the United States Sanitary Commission. The Commission's work represented a highly significant exchange of ideas between the Federal government in America and the government in Britain, which had absorbed some of the lessons of the neglect of the British soldier in the Crimean War during the previous decade (there is a nice irony here, given that the Americans had supported Russia in the war).

At successive stages of the story, however, Foreman impresses with her ability to combine personal and political drama. There is something Margaret Mitchell-like in her portrayal of the Union Army's siege of Vicksburg in the valley of the Mississippi, in the summer of 1863, especially in her description of Southern ladies, who had been raised in

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luxury, living rough like country peasants "with nothing but a few yards of canvas to protect them from the frequent thunderstorms which burst in terrific magnificence at this season of the year over the Mississippi". Foreman's account of Gettysburg begins with a bird's-eye view of the Federal defences of the town seen from the vantage point of an Englishman, Arthur Fremantle, sitting at the top of an oak tree. When the fighting begins, the cannonade sounds, and in the words of Frank Lawley, Russell's successor at *The Times*, "A thick canopy of smoke, constantly rent by bright darting flashes of flame, cast its dense pall over the struggling, bleeding thousands who toiled and died at its centre".

A World on Fire takes full advantage of the spectacle in scenes like these. It conveys the horror of a war which, by the end of 1862, with nine battles fought, and more to come, had already taken more than 150,000 casualties on both sides, leaving Lincoln muttering to himself after the Battle of Fredericksburg, "What has God put me in this place for?". It is much more difficult, though, for Foreman to summarize the multiple shifts in British public opinion, as the propaganda campaigns waged by North and South started to have an effect on different sections of the population. She pays proper acknowledgement to the pioneering work of the Stanford historian E. D. Adams, in his *Great Britain and the American Civil War*, published in 1925, itself a hefty two volumes. The secondary sources that Foreman has relied on aren't always immediately apparent, as her book lacks a bibliography, but she has clearly been guided by the research of R. J. M. Blackett's *Divided Hearts* (2001). Blackett's study attempted to understand the changing and conflicting range of British attitudes towards the war, and especially to the debates surrounding slavery. He concluded that the complexity and subtlety of British reactions "are almost staggering", a view implicitly echoed by Foreman as she tries, not always successfully, to weave them into her account. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, issued at the beginning of 1863, marked one watershed, leading even abolitionists with strong pacifist beliefs to support the Union. But then, less than six months later, Stonewall Jackson's death at Chancellorsville produced just as decisive a shift of opinion in Britain, with a spontaneous outpouring of public grief that surprised even Confederate agents plotting in the country. Waterloo Station was placarded with posters depicting the British Union Jack crossed with the Confederate flag.

Amanda Foreman's first book, a well-executed biography of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, became a publishing phenomenon when the eighteenth-century Georgiana was perceived as a kindred spirit to the lavishly mourned Diana, Princess of Wales. It seems safe to say that the daunting length and scope of *A World on Fire* mean that it will not have anything like the success of its predecessor. But as a work of history and biography, this epic tale of two nations divided is the far greater achievement, remarkable above all for putting a human face on one of the most brutal conflicts in history. Foreman's book reminds us – if we currently needed reminding – that though united by language and shared heritage, there is much that separates Britons and Americans.

Judicious modification

GARY L. McDOWELL

Jack Rakove

REVOLUTIONARIES

A new history of the invention of America

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978 0 618 26746 0

Alison L. LaCroix

THE IDEOLOGICAL ORIGINS OF AMERICAN FEDERALISM

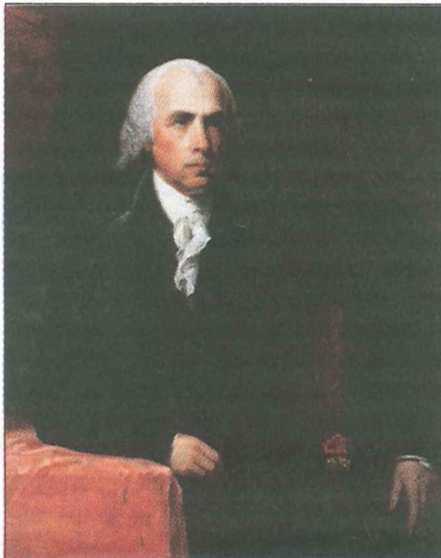
320pp. Harvard University Press. £25.95 (US $35).

978 0 674 04886 7

As Thomas Jefferson neared the end of his long life ("with one foot in the grave and the other uplifted to follow it", as he put it), he had occasion to reflect on that extraordinary generation of which he so proudly had been a part. He was convinced that the "host of worthies" that comprised his "generation of 1776" had secured to all mankind in all future times the philosophical grounds for "the blessings and security of self-government", and thereby "the rights of man". Yet his pride in the accomplishments of his own generation was tempered by the nagging fear that the "unwise and unworthy passions of their sons" might yet, by their inept handling of the problem of slavery and the potential "scission" of the Union, lose all Jefferson and his fellow founders had achieved.

There was a difference between his generation and others that could not be denied. James Madison, Jefferson's lifelong friend and collaborator, was similarly moved by his own recollections of his fellow constitutional framers. It was his "profound & solemn conviction" that "there never was an assembly of men, charged with a great & arduous trust, who were more pure in their motives", nor more dedicated to securing "the permanent liberty and happiness of their country", than the members of the Constitutional Convention of 1787. Madison, like Jefferson, knew how to count his nation's political blessings.

Even the most cursory listing of the great and the good of their day is enough to make the point. What other nation ever enjoyed at the same moment the collective intellectual and political virtues (whatever their all too human weaknesses) of the likes of John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Franklin, Samuel Adams, George Washington, Gouverneur Morris, Richard Henry Lee, John Jay, James Wilson, George Mason and John Witherspoon, to say nothing of Madison and Jefferson themselves? It is precisely this enduring historical "puzzle" that lies at the heart of Jack Rakove's splendid and original new book, *Revolutionaries: A new history of the invention of America*. In many ways, that generation of what Rakove calls "unlikely provincial revolutionaries" inexplicably discovered the necessary resolve within themselves and rose to the occasion. As he suggests, they "became revolutionaries despite themselves", and as they made their revolution, so their revolution in turn made them. It was an event, Hamilton observed, that brought forth "talents and virtues which might otherwise have languished in obscurity". Yet what emerges from this new telling of an old and familiar tale is something more than a series of brilliant biographical sketches or even a remodelled narrative of the Revolution and the creation of the new republic. These studies come together to form something of a primer on statesmanship – or at least leadership. Rakove shows us how, by combining the grand visions of high-minded political theorists with the often petty and self-interested calculations of street-savvy politicians, the Americans made what would prove to be their principled republican way not simply to independence, but to a new and lasting understanding of constitutionalism.



James Madison by Gilbert Stuart, 1805–07

At the heart of that new constitutional order was the successful combination of previously independent states into a federal union, a national government beyond the sum of the parts and one intended to endure for ages to come. As Alison L. LaCroix argues in *The Ideological Origins of American Federalism*, this was not simply the result of ad hoc compromises but, more deeply, the result of a fundamental theory, or what she insists on calling an "ideology"of federalism, the belief that multiple levels of governance could – and should – exist within the same polity.

With a glance back to Madison (whom Rakove calls simply "the greatest lawgiver of modernity"), we see how he, more than anyone, understood the nature and extent of the idea of federalism as a principle of government. He was convinced, as he privately wrote to Washington on the eve of the Constitutional Convention, that a consolidation of the states into one simple and seamless republic was to be deemed not only politically "unattainable" but theoretically "inexpedient". Madison's goal was to find "some middle ground" and thereby transform a dangerously loose confederation of states into a nation through what he would call in *The Federalist* a "judicious modification . . . of the federal principle". What this "judicious modification" meant in practice was to retain the states as states wherever they could be "subordinately useful", yet to make clear that the national authority enjoyed a near unquestioned constitutional supremacy. The virtue of La Croix's account is to show not only that federalism as it developed was more intellectually coherent than a mere bundle of compromises, but also that its theoretical core had begun to emerge decades before the delegates travelled to Philadelphia in May 1787. Yet with such a theoretical or ideological centre, the tensions implicit in Madison's "judicious modification" would still prove to be nearly irreconcilable. Even with the Supremacy Clause of the Constitution suggesting that the federal judiciary would be the "crucial fulcrum on which the federal-state balance pivoted", it would not be possible to remove completely the potentially dangerous structural ambiguity of a regime deemed neither "wholly federal, nor wholly national", but rather a combination of both.

It is perhaps no small irony that it was Jefferson himself (aided and abetted by Madison) who would exploit that ambiguity through the arguments and actions of their Republican party. To their critics, such as Chief Justice John Marshall, the Republican agenda was to smuggle a foreign theory of states-rights confederalism into the new nationalistic constitution through political, if not judicial, interpretation. The Jeffersonians were, said Marshall with more than a little bitterness, engaging in mere "political metaphysics", seeking to transform the essence of the new republic back into what the framers had sought to leave behind. Indeed, such notions as "nullification" and "interposition", uttered by Jefferson and Madison, would do much to roil the political waters surrounding that generation whose "unwise and unworthy passions" worried Jefferson.

Those passions would eventually find their fiercest expression in the secession of the Southern states and their attempt to dissolve Madison's "partly federal" and "partly national" union once and for all. And it would take another kind of statesman to preserve the nation, but one still imbued with an appreciation for the founders' principled invention of America. And in that sense, at least, Jefferson was ultimately correct. The ideas of that "host of worthies" at the beginning, those who had put the republic on the path to securing the fundamental blessings of liberty and self-government, would eventually give rise to what Lincoln at Gettysburg one wintry November day would call simply a commitment to "a new birth of freedom" and the fulfilment of the original pledge of that generation of 1776 to secure a "government of the people, by the people, [and] for the people". And American federalism, one of the old revolutionaries' proudest inventions, would never be the same.

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