

THE HILL



Britain's role in the American Civil War

By Emily Goodin - 07/21/11 06:53 PM ET

Historian Amanda Foreman took 12 years (during which time she had five children) to write *A World on Fire*, her follow-up to the best-selling *Georgiana: Duchess of Devonshire*. This tome, clocking in at a mighty 1,008 pages, examines the role Britain and its citizens played in the American Civil War.

Foreman talked to *The Hill* about what inspired her to pick this subject and how Britain played a major role in this important time in American history.

Q: How did a British historian become interested in the American Civil War? It seems like such a random connection.

I know it seems that way. The thing is, I was at Sarah Lawrence as an undergraduate. And while I was there, we had what we called “the Great Sit-In.” And that disrupted classes for six weeks. It was during the PC [political correctness] movement, so the late '80s, early '90s. And so that actually really interested me in the history of slavery in this country. So I went to Oxford to do a Ph.D. on attitudes to race and color in the late 18th century. It was while I was doing that I came across the Duchess of Devonshire because her lover, Charles Gray, had proposed the motion to abolish the slave trade. So I then went off on a tangent and I did work on her. And while I was researching her ... I decided to go through all of the archives that were available to me. So I went through the fifth duke, sixth, seventh, and then I got to the eighth [duke of Devonshire]. And the eighth duke turned out — and I had no idea about this — actually when he was a young man he went out to America during the war. ... He was seduced by the Southern way of life, by Southern rhetoric about independence — which was a very English thing, loving the cause of self-determination — and returned completely and utterly convinced of the rightness of the South's cause. Whereas his brother, Lord Frederick Cavendish, always remained completely pro-Northern. And so I was about to say, this is the germ of a book: How could two brothers, both politicians, both in the liberal party, be utterly divided over the meaning of the war?

Q: Was there an even split among British people about favoring the North or the South?

I would say that the majority of British opinion was pro-Southern. They were completely and utterly seduced by Southern propaganda that argued that the North was fighting for empire or territory. ... Some of the propaganda also said that if and when the South

became independent, it would deal with slavery in its own time, on its own terms — just the way Britain had dealt with slavery on its own terms. And who was going to argue with that? That was a very easy thing to swallow.

Q: So how did that end up affecting American-British relations after the North won?

Well, you know, it's kind of fascinating. First thing is, after the second World War, for example, if you went to Germany, you just couldn't find a Nazi anywhere. "Oh, no, I wasn't a Nazi." "Those Nazis? They came from somewhere else." Someone else was always a Nazi, but not them. And so we have the same kind of collective amnesia in Britain. "No, I didn't support the South. No, no, that was someone else." That was the first thing, the mass amnesia. The second thing was that some of the most egregious newspapers ... apologized and admitted that they were wrong. ... And then finally, there was a court case between the United States and Britain that went to arbitration in Geneva over whether or not Britain should pay reparations for allowing the South to build raiders in British dockyards. ... And Britain paid \$15 million in gold [to the United States]. And that was how they were able to kiss and make up.

Q: So what happened to the two brothers who sparked this? Did they survive the war?

Oh, yes. ... They stayed in England, so they were never in any danger and they never revised their opinions. The eighth duke remained always pro-Southern, and Lord Frederick was always pro-Northern.

Q: So was there a family rift, or did they agree to disagree?

They agreed to disagree.