

# Woman Around Town: Amanda Foreman— British View of the Civil War

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By [Robin Weaver](#) on [Woman Around Town](#)

This year as we mark the 150th anniversary of the start of the American Civil War, there's no better place to get a fresh perspective on the subject than by reading Amanda Foreman's recently released, *A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War*.

The book, which was twelve years in the making, looks at the American Civil War through the stories of politicians, diplomats and journalists on both sides of the Atlantic. The book has 197 characters. As Foreman explains, "I had so much material, it was actually quite daunting. To be included as a character in my book, each character had to have known at least one other character or have one degree of separation from a character."



Foreman, an Anglo-American historian, whose previous book was the best-selling biography of *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire* later made into a movie with Keira Knightley, seems an unlikely author of a book on the American Civil War. "The whole question of slavery and racial injustice was something I became keenly aware of my sophomore year at Sarah Lawrence when students held a six week sit-in protesting perceived racial injustice at the school. Coming from an English boarding school background I had never really been exposed to the issue of slavery — so front and center in the American Civil War."

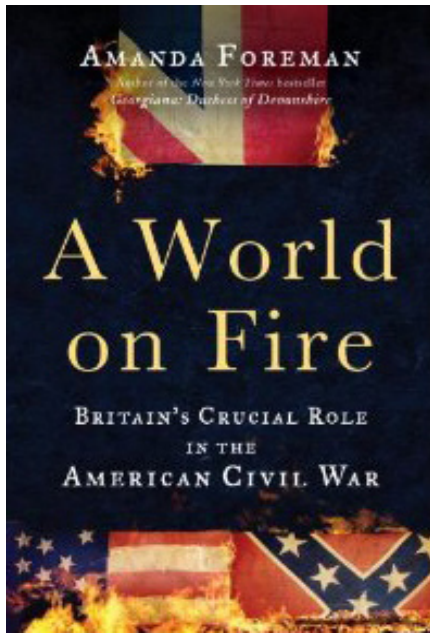
Casually dressed in a white blouse, summer green slacks and red sandals, Foreman an attractive, slim mother of five, speaks with an accent that sounds mildly English. She spent her early years living in Los Angeles before attending boarding school in England. Her father was the American screenwriter, Carl Foreman, best known for writing the screenplays for *High Noon* and *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. Her mother is English and her brother Jonathan is a London-based foreign correspondent.



At Oxford, where Foreman did her master's and her doctorate on Georgiana, she picked up on her earlier interest in the American Civil War in a circuitous way. As history would have it, Georgiana was the mistress of the British politician (William Wilberforce) who abolished slavery in 18th century England. Fast forward to 1862: Georgiana's great nephew, the eighth Duke of Devonshire, arrives in the U.S. and shortly finds himself in the role of "bag carrier" for Confederate General Robert E. Lee, spending Christmas Day 1862 making eggnog for Lee's Confederate cavalry officers. So, was England at heart sympathetic to the South because of its dependence on Southern cotton? "Absolutely not. There was at the time of the Civil War an actual glut of cotton on the English market. Many in England saw the North's interest primarily in fighting for territory and the South's interest in independence. It was the North's inability to articulate the real cause of the war as slavery that made some in England sympathetic to the South's cause."

Making analogies to 20th century geopolitics, Foreman argues that President Lincoln, like President George W. Bush, entered a conflict without securing international allies first. "Both the North and the South expected England to be on its side." The British government never did recognize the Confederacy. Once Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, British popular opinion swung decidedly in favor of the North.

While the key characters in the book are men, there are several women who play a prominent role. Foreman points with a special fondness to Rose Greenhow, a wealthy widow and Washington hostess, who among her other claims to fame, smuggled in her petticoat the battle plans for Bull Run to Confederate General Pierre Beauregard. Greenhow was later sent to England to serve as a special envoy of Confederate President Jefferson Davis. On her return to America in 1864, Greenhow, who was carrying special reports and gold for the Confederacy, was on a ship captured by Union naval ships and drowned during its seizure.



The BBC/HBO have bought the movie license for Foreman's book. She plans to serve as an adviser for the screenplay and would love to see the actress Rachel Weisz play the part of Greenhow.

Without sounding too cliché, Amanda Foreman appears to have it all: best-selling books, a successful devoted husband and five children ranging in age from nine to four, including a set of twins. But she opines, "You can't have it all. When you're a mother, you have to decide what to sacrifice. We don't socialize. My husband and I focus on the family." Her husband, British-born financier Jonathan Barton, has been in remission for the last 18 months after being diagnosed with non-Hodgkins lymphoma, shortly after the birth of their four-year old twins. It's the only time during our meeting when Foreman's brown eyes lose their sparkle.

She lives in Gramercy Park with her family but often spends blocks of time in London, "feeling equally at home in both cities." She closely follows the state of the British-American relationship and politics. "I feel good about the state of the 'essential relationship' between America and Britain. It's like a family, remaining strong, even when occasionally at each other's throats. I know David Cameron [UK Prime Minister] and admire the gutsy austerity measures he's taking in Britain. I think President Obama needs to do the same thing here."

Foreman is about to begin a book tour for *A World on Fire* that will take her to a number of Southern ports of call: Atlanta, Richmond, Charleston, and Lincoln territory, Springfield. She's also active in a reading group made up of serious writers who've recently focused on young, adult literature. "I find it the most imaginative and inventive literature today." And for real fun, she loves to do crafts with her children. Scholarship, books and family are the big parts of Foreman's world. The American Civil War may have created a world on fire, but in Foreman's world serenity reigns.

## Woman Around Town's Six Questions

**Favorite Restaurant:** Devi

**Favorite Place to Shop:** Eataly for food; Etro for clothing; Renny & Reed for flower arrangements; McNally Jackson for books

**Favorite New York Moment:** Taking my children to see the *Nutcracker* each year

**Favorite New York Sight:** Central Park in the spring

**What You Love About New York:** The culture

**What You Hate About New York:** Potholes