

Broken Promises: A Novel of the Civil War

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Review

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Hoffman, Elizabeth Cobbs *Broken Promises: A Novel of the Civil War*.
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A Novel Look at Civil War Diplomacy

One of the more subtle touches in Ken Burns's popular Civil War documentary appears in white letters under the film's favorite historical informant when he first appears in an episode. Shelby Foote wrote several novels prior to publishing his three-volume narrative history of the Civil War, and the credit introduces him to the audience not as a historian but rather as a "writer." Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, a historian and the Dwight Stanford Chair of Foreign Relations at San Diego State University, has now earned the same title by reversing Foote's trajectory and moving from history to literature. Transforming well-worn facts of Civil War history into an original novel, Cobbs Hoffman gives readers a fresh and engaging war narrative without depicting a single battle. *Broken Promises: a Novel of the Civil War* focuses on diplomacy, one of Cobbs Hoffman's areas of academic expertise, and presents the conflict from an almost exclusively transatlantic perspective. Readers follow the war's fitful progress through the experience of Charles Francis Adams, the Union's chief diplomat in London; his son Henry, whose classic autobiography later became a central text of the American canon; and several wholly fictional characters. Successful on many levels, the novel demonstrates Cobbs Hoffman's literary sensitivity for lively details that shine a light into an area that, in the minds of many, remains one of the dimmest corners of war memory.

This is not to say that Cobbs Hoffman breaks entirely new ground. After a hundred and fifty years, nearly every parcel of the Civil War has been mapped by generations of authors working in genres ranging from journalism and history to poetry and romance. Moreover, every history worth its binding has addressed the complex diplomatic relations between Britain and the warring sections. Yet the international aspects of the conflict remain under-appreciated by the average

Civil War buff. Partly this is because they tend to appear as matters of dull diplomacy hovering behind bright scenes of battle, but largely it is because we tend to imagine the war as a domestic drama—the story of one nation, divided and ultimately reconciled. Thus our great national war story seems most fittingly set in Richmond or Atlanta, most aptly viewed from the windows of the White House or the crest of Little Round Top. To see the war from London or Liverpool seems to complicate a narrative that most Americans regard as a purely national heritage.

Cobbs Hoffman manages to fashion a genuine page-turner while transporting a mostly American audience to an international vantage point, and this is an important achievement. She shows us how, for Charles Francis Adams, the first battle of Bull Run is fought in *The Times* of London. The federal rout from the Virginia battlefield to Washington plays out as a tense moment at the Adams's breakfast table in London. For Adams the most significant participant in this battle is not the newly renamed "Stonewall" Jackson, but rather *The Times's* correspondent. Yet Cobbs Hoffman makes us feel that this is where the *real* battle was fought: in the pages of the most powerful newspaper in the world, which in the first summer of the war exposed the Union to widespread ridicule in the streets and clubs of the most powerful nation on earth.

The historian has a point to make here, and thus the writer has a fascinating story to tell. In that story, Adams strives to embody American dignity in the face of supercilious British observers even as he struggles to suppress surges of Confederate sympathy in the British Parliament and public. As we follow Adams's adventures in diplomacy, Cobbs Hoffman keeps "the war that might have been" hovering in the wings. It is a war in which Britain's omnipotent navy breaks the Union blockade, rains fire on Washington, and opens a vast highway of gold between the cotton-growing South and Britain's textile mills; a war in which the North diverts troops from southern battlefields to invade British Canada, pulls back from the coasts, and dares the British to conquer an aroused and militant populace in the land they call home. These sorts of alternative histories have always been appealing side-alleys of Civil War stories, and they were widely discussed during the war. *Broken Promises* presents the plausible proposition that, were Adams to fail in his diplomatic mission, such a fantastic scenario might well become a fact. Thus, though it takes readers far from the battlefield, *Broken Promises* recounts one of more consequential components of both Union and Confederate war efforts with enough narrative verve to keep the action moving.

Ironically, the literary weaknesses in the novel tend to proliferate around fictionalized characters rather than the historical figures of the Adams family, their allies, and their opponents. The romance between Julia Birch, invented daughter of a British aristocrat, and Baxter Sams, imagined as an enlightened son of Virginia slaveholders, proves somewhat troublesome. Their story is presented as central but can only be linked to the Adamses through fictionalized contrivances. Early in the novel, Sams appears as one of Henry's friends from Harvard, come to England to study modern medicine. They both meet Julia Birch—tall, capable, and more beautiful than she realizes—at a dance; Baxter is smitten, Henry is merely grateful for a sociable conversation partner. Still single in her early twenties, Julia runs the estate of her widowed father, an aristocratic Confederate sympathizer who, despite his pro-Southern stance, is scandalized when his daughter inevitably falls in love with an actual American Southerner.

Following this pair of star-crossed lovers gives Cobbs Hoffman a chance to elucidate the tangled roots of British public opinion during the war years, and reveals how the war forced individuals on two continents into imperfect compromises between various social allegiances. Baxter must sort through the competing claims of his family loyalty, his medical vocation, his aversion to slavery, and his growing attachment to Julia. Julia must somehow navigate between her duty to her father, the free exercise of her talents and opinions, and Victorian notions of feminine propriety. Thus the novel's fictional characters create a complex historical background involving class, gender, and regional identities that would have been difficult to construct solely through an account of the Adams delegation. Yet Julia, Baxter, and their fictional accomplices provide this sense of historical context only by exemplifying various political and social positions. They offer valuable service as shifting coordinates within a complicated Anglo-American system, but can only perform their function as complex types rather than fully fleshed-out characters.

This is a structural problem, but even in the midst of it Cobbs Hoffman displays real literary skill and a knack for spotting the potent detail or providing the perfect turn of phrase to establish a British world in the minds of American readers. Towards the end of the novel, there is a lovely epiphany of gender consciousness in which Julia, walking away from a quarrel with her father, notices that each of the expensive items in her own house is actually owned by the man who has just threatened to cut her off without a penny. This exquisitely nineteenth-century moment wavers on the cusp of the modern era, for it helps

resolve Julia's divided loyalties not just in favor of the man she loves but also in favor of her own individuality.

Most of the best writing in the book, however, appears in Cobbs Hoffman's explorations of the historically legitimate Charles Francis Adams, who exhibits unusual depth for a character in a somewhat overcrowded popular novel. For example, Cobbs Hoffman's version of Minister Adams is habitually fastidious about arranging paper of all sorts, and Cobbs Hoffman repeatedly returns to this quirk as if to remind us of the power of the papers that govern both Adams's life and the outcome of the war. On page 167, struggling against immense internal and external pressures, Adams presses a dispatch flat before arranging it in a neat pile on his desk, "in inverse proportion to the messy events" that complicate his life. Decorously arranged, these weapons of paper become material symbols of the brave face this heir of two presidents turns daily toward a stiff headwind, the blustering British hostility to the republic his grandfather helped to found.

Shelby Foote, musing on the similarities between writing fiction and history, posited that novelists must stay as true to their facts once they are established in mind as historians do to their sources. Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman's beguiling Civil War novel is at its best when those fictive "facts" rest most firmly upon the foundation of established history.

Dr. Samuel Graber, Assistant Professor at Valparaiso University, is currently revising for publication his dissertation, Twice-Divided Nation: the Civil War and National Memory in the Transatlantic World, winner of the D.C. Spriestersbach Prize for Outstanding Dissertation in the Fine Arts and Humanities at The University of Iowa.