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Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge

Historians have ventured into historical fiction writing in the past and escaped “tar and feathering” if they made clear that they were writing fiction and not history rather than history with a little fiction introduced. When they introduce fictional characters into a biography or a work of self-proclaimed history, as Edmund Morris did with his biography of Ronald Reagan, they risk heavy criticism. Frustrated with an inability to penetrate Reagan’s exterior persona to the internal core, Morris introduced a fictional “Edmund Morris” to communicate with Reagan during his post-college career and then a fictional son, Gavin, of the fictional Edmund Morris, with fictional letters. When historians such as Jane Kamensky and Jill Lepore write a novel within a historical setting with a very good grasp of all aspects of the period, historians accept their creative efforts.¹

Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman has avoided some of the perils of historians face in writing fiction by making clear that she has produced a work of historical fiction even as she makes extensive use of historical sources for the setting, the American Civil War, and several of the leading characters, most notably Charles Francis Adams and his son, Henry Adams, who are dispatched to London in 1861 to persuade the British government to reject aid and recognition of the Confederacy. The fiction side of the study emerges in Cobbs Hoffman’s introduction of fictional characters, Baxter Sams, a Virginian who reluctantly supports his slave-owning family and the Confederacy, and Julia Birch, the daughter of an enthusiastic British supporter of the South who combines an overbearing patriarchal stance towards his daughter with hopes for revenge over the American rebellion for independence. Cobbs Hoffman weaves together the two stories into a series of transatlantic crises that Charles Francis Adams addresses, most notably British temptations to recognize the Confederacy and to allow the South to acquire much-needed naval weapons such as the Laird Rams to break the Union blockage of Southern ports to undermine the King Cotton export trade, and crises in the relationship of Sams and Birch that includes Sams’s imprisonment in a Union camp and Birch’s efforts to rescue him and their eventual reunification in London and marriage.²

The reviewers suggest that Cobbs Hoffman has succeeded in writing an informative novel that makes effective use of the historical record, the Adams family papers, and that she develops her fictional characters carefully within the context and attitudes of the period.

¹ Edmund Morris, *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Modern Library, 2000). By using memoir in the title, Morris indicated the further mixing of genres as he included himself in the narrative once he signed on to write the study and began to frequent the White House. Some critics suggested that the final product included too much on Morris and not enough on Reagan. See Jane Kamensky and Jill Lepore, *Blindspot: A Novel* (2008) which is set in Boston in 1764 in the aftermath of the Seven Years War and the beginnings of the American Revolution. For an interesting discussion by the authors, the former, chair of the Department of History at Brandeis University and the latter, the David Woods Kemper ’41 Professor of American History at Harvard, see www.common-place.org Vol. 9:3 (April 2009).

² *In the Lion’s Den: A Novel of the Civil War* has won a literary honor as “a notable work of American historical fiction for 2009 helping to make the rich history of America accessible to the educated general public” from the Langum Charitable Trust.

“For a fictionalized account of historical events to have value, it must stay true to fact and, in doing so, promote a deeper understanding of the period,” Howard Jones notes, and “Hoffman succeeds on both counts. The quotations she creates add color to the historical record and are not contrived but based on the materials of the time. Her writing style is lively, witty, snappy, clever, and sometimes emotionally moving and quite funny.” (5) William Weeks concludes that Cobbs Hoffman succeeds at using the two main fictional characters and their “external circumstances and their internal struggles” within the realities of the Civil War to “shed a very particular light” on this traumatic period. (5)

Any historical fiction is bound to challenge the historian in some respects. Cobbs Hoffman’s response, moreover, offers interesting insights on the differences between the historian looking back and the novelist moving the story forward in time within the perspective of the main characters. “The novelist and the historian are different creatures,” Cobbs Hoffman has discovered: “they have different personalities and different missions. The novelist suggests, while the historian explains. The novelist cultivates a sense of mystery, while the historian tries to make everything clear. For the novelist’s protagonists, the future is still unwinding. The historian looks back upon the path taken and maps it.” (1) Nicole Phelps appreciates the favorable attention that the author devotes to the role of the consular service in helping to get Sams out of prison as well as other aspects of diplomatic culture during the period, most notably the lack of coordination among governmental departments, the social rituals of diplomacy, and the lack of funds for American officials to fulfill their duties. Phelps does suggest that the author is too critical of the British for not recognizing Minister Adams as an ambassador since “no other country sent an ambassador to the United States at the time” and Washington did not want to operate at this level in the 1860s. (2)

Niels Eichorn raises several issues concerning the author’s treatment of special episodes, such as the *Trent Affair*, the Laird Rams, and the *Alabama* issue. Eichorn, for example, suggests that Cobbs Hoffman by focusing on the views and suspicions of U.S. officials that London allowed the *Alabama* to escape, has presented a misleading assessment contradicted by historians. (3) In her response, Cobbs Hoffman emphasizes the difference between the historian and the novelist: “the novelist strives to create a world that is fully in the moment, complete with the characters’ own convictions and misperceptions... Even when the characters are ‘wrong’ from a strictly historical point of view, they believe in the evidence before them—and the author must not cheat by enlightening them about what subsequent generations have uncovered.” (1-2)

Participants:

Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman holds a Ph.D. from Stanford University and is the Dwight E. Stanford Professor of American Foreign Relations at San Diego State University. She is the author of *The Rich Neighbor Policy: Kaiser and Rockefeller in Brazil* and *All You Need is Love: The Peace Corps and the Spirit of the 1960s*. She is co-editor of *Major Problems in American History: 1865 to the Present*. She is currently working on a re-conceptualization of American foreign relations in world historical terms. *In the Lion’s Den* is her first novel.

Niels Eichhorn received his M.A. from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and is currently working on his Ph.D. at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville. He has presented his work on Civil War diplomacy at a number of conferences. Mr. Eichhorn's dissertation research focuses on a German diplomat in Washington during the late antebellum and Civil War years, who participated in the 1848 uprising in Schleswig-Holstein.

Howard Jones is University Research Professor of History at the University of Alabama and the author of numerous books, including *Union in Peril: The Crisis over British Intervention in the Civil War* (1992), *Abraham Lincoln and a New Birth of Freedom: The Union and Slavery in the Diplomacy of the Civil War* (1999), and, most recently, *Blue and Gray Diplomacy: A History of Union and Confederate Foreign Relations* (2010). He is currently writing a book tentatively entitled, *Into the Heart of Darkness: My Lai*.

Nicole M. Phelps is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Vermont. She received her B.A. in International Affairs from The George Washington University in 2000 and her Ph.D. in History from the University of Minnesota in 2008. Her dissertation, "Sovereignty, Citizenship, and the New Liberal Order: US-Habsburg Relations and the Transformation of International Politics, 1880-1924," won the University of Minnesota's Best Dissertation Prize in the Arts and Humanities and received an honorable mention for SHAFR's Unterberger Dissertation Prize. Her research interests in diplomatic history include US-European relations, diplomatic social and ceremonial activity, and consular services.

William Earl Weeks received his Ph.D. at the University of California, San Diego in 1986 and specializes in 19th century U.S. History at the University of California, San Diego. He is the author of *John Quincy Adams and American Global Empire* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1992), *Building the Continental Empire: American Expansion from the Revolution to Civil War* (1996) and, as a contributing editor, "Expansion into the Americas, Asia, and the Pacific, 1815-1861," in *American Foreign Relations since 1600: Guide to the Literature*, 2nd edition (2003). His work explores the relationship between American nationalism and American imperialism.³

Love, war, intrigue, and diplomacy are a great combination for a page-turning novel. Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman tried her skill by combining a fictional love story with the diplomatic work of the U.S. legation in London during the first two and a half years of the Civil War. Most of the story is about the developing relationship between Julia Birch and Virginia medical student Baxter Sams. Charles F. Adams and his son Henry Adams play supporting roles. *In the Lion's Den* has an engaging plot but raises many questions as well. The danger of historical fiction is that people may take it for accurate depictions of the past. We all have experienced moments where students approached us about movies. My personal favorite remains the moment when a fellow classmate said during a presentation, fully serious, that Forrest Gump was born near Montgomery, Alabama, but she could not find the place on a map. In the same way, some of the stories told *In the Lion's Den* struck me as problematic and worried me that lay readers might take them as factual. I will address these after a short summary of the two interrelated story lines.

The diplomatic story line starts with Charles F. Adams waiting to see President Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of State William H. Seward. After being shipped off without instructions, the concerned Adams wonders about the danger of war between the Union and Great Britain. Through Adams, Cobbs Hoffman explores some of the crucial aspects of Civil War diplomacy, starting with his dilemma during the *Trent* affair. The last two-thirds of the novel involves the close cooperation between Adams and the U.S. consul in Liverpool, Thomas H. Dudley, as they attempt to uncover James D. Bulloch's Confederate shipbuilding scheme in Liverpool. Cobbs Hoffman illustrates the loopholes in British law, which worked against the United States. After the escape of the *Florida*, Charles F. Adams's attention was temporarily distracted by rumors of British mediation proposals. While the close escape of the *Alabama* was a serious blow for the Union representatives, the detainment of the Laird Rams elated the three Union representatives—Henry Adams, Charles F. Adams, and Thomas H. Dudley—and created the impression that the threat of war had forced the British to act.

The second story line involves the romantic relationship between Julia Birch and Baxter Sams. It also introduces Julia's father, Sir Walter Birch, who had a grudge against the United States dating back to the Revolution. Baxter Sams, a Harvard friend of Henry Adams, meets Julia Birch at a party in Mayfair (Lancashire) and falls in love with her. Sams approaches Birch, who is known to outfit blockade runners, when his father asks him to send a shipment of medical supplies through the blockade. Loyal to his family, Sams runs the blockade, but on his return trip from Charleston, he is captured and imprisoned at Fort Lafayette, New York. He puts his medical skill to good use among his fellow inmates and continues to write Julia. In the meantime, Julia asks Henry and Charles F. Adams for help in freeing her beloved. When her father intervenes, burns her correspondence with Sams, and orders her to end the relationship, Julia, with financial support from her uncle, Randolph Barclay, departs for the United States. After four months of dealing with the military bureaucracy, gaining assistance from the British representatives, and even going to Washington, Julia successfully frees Baxter Sams.

One has to commend Cobbs Hoffman for her attempt to bring more attention to the international dimension of the Civil War through the appealing vehicle of fiction. However, it is a delicate task for a reviewer to separate the historical material from its fictional context, especially where the author has used her imagination to create the story's dialogue. That gap between fiction and history raises questions. None of them need to detract from the overall attempt to dramatize events, but only to suggest how the story could have been improved.

The most discordant element is the story's dialogue. Cobbs Hoffman mentions at a number of places that the refined language of Baxter Sams impressed Julia Birch. However, his language is in no way different from that of any other character, and everyone speaks in a distinctly modern idiom. Equally strange is the moment when Sams is imprisoned at Fort Lafayette and meets with other Southerners. One of his fellow prisoners, Devereaux Council, described by Cobbs Hoffman as a New Orleans native and privateer, exhibits none of the accent and uses none of the slang associated with that distinctive part of the South. In addition, mariners tend to have an even more jumbled language. It might be too much to ask for dialogue along the lines of Patrick O'Brien's novels, but a better effort would have given a more natural feel to the story.

Beyond that general observation, a few particular episodes demand attention. In chapter three, for instance, readers meet with the Adamses in London. It is a strange starting point for the diplomatic part of the story because it does not give readers a feel for the concerns and worries that plagued Charles Francis when he first arrived in England on 13 May 1861 to find that not only had his Confederate counterparts made inroads in London, but that the British government had declared the nation's neutrality. Cobbs Hoffman is correct, though, in mentioning the concerns about Seward that circulated widely in London, and she does a good job developing the problem faced by Adams in promoting internationally a war to preserve the Union, in contrast to a war for emancipation.¹

The next major diplomatic incident that Cobbs Hoffman deals with is the well-known *Trent* affair. Unfortunately, she does not convey the suspense or the gravity of the situation. After Charles Wilkes removed the Confederate envoys James Mason and John Slidell from the British mail packet *Trent*, news of the incident shocked London. As Cobbs Hoffman correctly point out, for the British, the matter was not about law but about honor. Charles F. Adams's concern that all of Europe would be opposed to the United States if it had authorized the capture of Mason and Slidell are not unfounded. Some European nations, especially in Central Europe, joined in the protest against the *Trent* affair in order to prevent war on a larger scale. Three of the continental powers supported Great Britain's demand for an apology and the release of Mason and Slidell. Cobbs Hoffman's handling of

¹ For more detail on Seward and the British see Norman B. Ferris, *Desperate Diplomacy William H. Seward's Foreign Policy, 1861* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1976). For the problem with slavery in Union diplomacy see Howard Jones, *Abraham Lincoln and a New Birth of Freedom* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).

the defensive preparations for war made in Canada is also disconcerting. The novel does not address the problem of winter operations in Canada, which made reinforcing Canada, as well as going to war, difficult if not impossible.²

The last two thirds of the book is about the Confederate shipbuilding program. It is nice to see Thomas H. Dudley receive credit for the work he did in Liverpool, a town with close economic ties to the South. However, suspense could have been added to the story had Cobbs Hoffman created a chapter that detailed the incident in which Dudley prevented three hooligans from entering the consulate. Instead, she handles it with a dry one-liner in an Adams-Dudley conversation about the damaged flag.³ Cobbs Hoffman has mixed success when explaining the problems Union diplomats faced in uncovering evidence that the vessels in Birkenhead were built for the Confederacy. Under the Foreign Enlistment Act ships could be built for a belligerent but not be armed in a British port. James Bulloch's ability to hide his schemes severely limited the ability of the British government to prevent the departure of the vessels. Without mentioning the anger of the Union representatives about the British government's inability to prevent the escape of the *Oreto-Florida*, the novel moves on to the *290-Alabama* and the even more urgent need to ascertain Bulloch's true intentions of the vessel in order to force the ship's detention by British authorities. Cobbs Hoffman does well in presenting the necessity of convincing Foreign Secretary Lord John Russell that the *290* was built for the Confederacy and intended for military use against Union shipping. To illustrate the point, she creates a meeting between Adams and Lord John Russell, after which Russell refers the matter to the Queen Victoria's Advocate Sir John Harding. Strangely, Cobbs Hoffman never introduces the role of Queen's Council Robert P. Collier, who helped formulate the Union's case. Once again, despite all the detail, the story does not recreate the suspense and confusion that prevailed during those days. When Confederate agents took the ship to sea, Lord Russell had reacted, but he was too late. By focusing on the Union representatives, Cobbs Hoffman creates the false impression that the British authorities had some role in allowing the escape of the *Alabama*, which was not the case.⁴

The weakest part of the book comes in chapter thirty-three, which is based on false assumptions. The introductory paragraph, which describes the wedding ceremony between Prince Albert Edward and Princess Alexandra of Denmark, indicates that the events described occurred after mid-March 1863. It was at this time that the Laird Rams occupied Adams's attention. Cobbs Hoffman uses the occasion of the wedding to create a conversation between Adams and the Russian Ambassador Philipp von Brunnow. In the conversation, Brunnow indicates that the Russians were interested in the Laird Rams, but

² For the reaction to the *Trent* affair in Prussia see Enno Eimers, *Preussen und die USA 1850 bis 1867* (Berlin, Germany: Dunker & Humblot, 2004).

³ David H. Milton, *Lincoln's Spymaster: Thomas Haines Dudley and the Liverpool Network* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stockpole Books, 2003), 32.

⁴ The best work on the *Alabama* and related diplomacy is Frank J. Merli, *The Alabama, British Neutrality, and the American Civil War*, ed. David M. Fahey (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

that would be impossible. By mid-March 1863, Russia and Great Britain were on a collision course. War appeared imminent due to the developing diplomatic crisis over Russia's handling of the Polish Insurrection. Brunnow, in his fictional conversation with Adams, also mentioned the possibility of a goodwill visit by the Russian navy to New York. That the Russian fleet visited New York for that purpose has been a long held but false assumption. In fact, the fleet sailed to New York and San Francisco to avoid being caught in port by the British navy, should war break out with Great Britain over Poland. In addition, only a handful of people knew about the admiralty's plans. Thus to create a conversation built on the assumption that Russia would be interested in buying the Laird Rams and that the Russian fleet would be visiting New York on a goodwill tour seems problematic. There are still people who adhere to the myth of the goodwill visit, so a novel confirming that myth is not helpful.⁵

The last chapter raises similar concerns. The chapter starts with an emergency meeting at the legation between the Adamses and Dudley concerning the Laird Rams. The fear that the United States and Great Britain would go to war over the rams dominates the atmosphere in the room until news arrived from Lord Russell that the ships would be detained. Cobbs Hoffman closes her work with Henry Adams jubilantly declaring "Congratulations, Father. Your letter must have finally awoken the cabinet. They can't want a fight. What purpose could it serve" (316). The U.S. minister had indeed threatened that relations would suffer if the rams were allowed to leave England, and Cobbs Hoffman stresses in an Author's Note that the British government had already decided to detain the ships. However, the danger remains that lay readers will skip the Author's Note and assume that the threat of war made the British government take action.

Having tried my own hand at short, introductory vignettes, I was impressed by the vivid imagination demonstrated by Cobbs Hoffman *In The Lion's Den*. The book is well written. I had hoped, based on the title, to find Charles F. Adams play a more prominent role. Only on two occasions—the Brunnow incident and the concluding chapter—did I think that the novel went too far in its literary freedom. It is always a challenge to deconstruct myth, and novels offer a good opportunity for connecting with lay readers, who might never or only rarely touch a historical monograph. Some of Cobbs Hoffman's chapters could have been better framed, but overall her book is an enjoyable read. I would, however, suggest that the novel be read in conjunction with a good monograph on the subject. Howard Jones or Frank Merli might be the most fitting authors.

⁵ E. A. Adamov, "Russia and the United States at the Time of the Civil War," *Journal of Modern History* 2 (December 1930), 586-602; Frank A. Golder, "The Russian Fleet and the Civil War," *American Historical Review* 20 (July 1915): 801-12. For the British perspective see Werner E. Mosse, "England and the Polish Insurrection of 1863," *English Historical Review* 71 (January 1956): 28-55 and John F. Kutolowski, *The West and Poland: Essays on Governmental and Public Responses to the Polish National Movement, 1861-1864* (Boulder, Colo.: East European Monographs, 2000).

In this novel, Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman has written an engaging story, set within the efforts by Union minister Charles Francis Adams to keep the British from intervening in the Civil War and complete with a romance between two fictional characters. Quotations and descriptions from contemporary materials fill the account, the first largely manufactured but drawn heavily from the Adams family papers. Most of the events related here are loyal to the historical record, the primary exception being the love story between Julia Birch from England and H. Baxter Sams from Virginia that bolted the wishes of her arrogant and domineering father, Sir Walter Birch of Belfield Manor, and grew within the ongoing controversy over the fighting in America and whether the British government should extend diplomatic recognition to the Confederacy. Yet even this piece of fiction could well have happened, given the Victorian standards of the day in England in which a daughter must adhere to her father's choice of a young man to wed or risk losing a dowry. And the situation was even more complicated in that Birch, a wealthy businessman, still smarted from the American Revolution that had robbed his people of a continent. Thus did he welcome the Civil War as a crippling blow to the upstart United States as well as an opportunity for him to profit from wartime commerce and investments in the Confederacy's attempt to contract the building of a navy in British shipyards.

Cobbs Hoffman opens her work with a colorful description of President Abraham Lincoln's and Secretary of State William H. Seward's meeting in the White House with Adams, then about to embark for his new post in London. As the grandson of one president and the son of another, Adams expected praise for taking on this arduous but highly important public duty in the midst of his nation's greatest travail. As Cobbs Hoffman so aptly put it, John Adams "had bearded the British lion after the revolution and toasted the King who threatened to hang him from a yardarm in Boston Harbor." (4) Three decades afterward, John Quincy Adams had signed the Treaty of Ghent ending the War of 1812—"the second time that mighty paw had knocked America sprawling." (4) Now it was Charles's turn to tame the lion—perhaps for good—by heading the ministry at the Court of St. James's and preventing British interference with the Union's war effort. And what more fitting epitaph for the mother country than one provided by a "direct descendent of the American Revolution." (4)

Instead, Lincoln appeared singularly unimpressed by his visitor, hardly raising his head from the clutter of papers on his desk when Adams entered the room and then making it clear that Seward had chosen the Massachusetts Brahmin for the position. When Adams expressed appreciation for the appointment, the president abruptly asserted that "there's no need to thank me. You're not my choice. You're Seward's man. I've no claim on you a'tall." (5) Lincoln smiled in an apparent attempt to smooth over what Adams considered at the least an indiscretion that revealed hidden feelings. "I reckon you'll do just fine, though." (5)

Adams was similarly unimpressed by his superior, finding it difficult to believe that the Illinois transplant from Kentucky now occupied the presidency. Lincoln, Cobbs Hoffman

writes in expressing Adams's assessment, "had served one forgettable term in Congress a decade earlier and was just as homely as the newspaper artists sketched him, with a plain, plowed face. His beard softened the angular jaw but it couldn't hide the deep furrows running under his prominent Indian cheekbones or the dark bruises around his sunken eyes." Lincoln "was as raw as the frontier," making "weather-beaten Andrew Jackson look like a Broadway dandy. Of all the presidents Charles had known, and he had known most of them, none seemed so unfinished." (3)

Capitalizing this disparaging description of Lincoln's physical appearance was Adams's belief that the president had failed to understand the gravity of the Union's relations with the British. "England," Lincoln declared, "can't have much interest in our affairs." (5) More disconcerting, the president had no guidance to offer Adams and calmly asserted, "Mr. Seward will send your instructions presently." Adams was astounded by this naïveté but restrained himself. How would he respond to questions in the queen's court about the Union blockade? Didn't its implementation signify that the Union confronted a foreign enemy? How did the Union's blockade fit with its insistence that secession was illegal and that the Confederacy remained part of the American nation? Adams finally spoke. "He will *send* my instructions?" (5) Realizing he too might have spoken abruptly, Adams tried to smooth over his remark by declaring, "That is, I mean, surely you wish to discuss my instructions before I leave?" (5) The moment was not "opportune," Lincoln replied in referring to the pile of papers on his desk. (5) "Mr. Seward will send your instructions as soon as possible." (6) The president, Adams thought, had no plan of action.

The meeting over, Adams walked out of the office, indignant over his poor treatment, while quietly fuming over the president's referring to him as "*Seward's man*." (8)

Cobbs Hoffman's ensuing account of this tumultuous period in Anglo-American relations demonstrates the complex and varied British reactions to the war raging in America. Julia's father considered American democracy a step backward in civilization, and was not averse to profiteering at the expense of either side in the war. He found liberal causes ridiculous, whether giving workers the right to vote or abolishing poorhouses, or even reforming the laws that denied married women the right to own property. Like Confederate agent James D. Bulloch who skirted British neutrality laws to secure warships for the Confederacy, Birch stayed just within the letter of the law while taking advantage of the Union's troubles. Lincoln's blockade had been a boon to British business, driving prices and profits up for those shippers willing to risk capture by Union warships.

Birch joined more than a few British (and European) contemporaries who believed southern independence a fait accompli and slavery *not* the central issue behind the war. As he scoffed to Julia, the United States would break into two parts, for the Union could not defeat so many people and conquer so much territory. The republic was "kaput, as the Germans say." (15) The Americans have been so boyishly proud of their democracy. "Oh, how I wish grandfather were here. America's position is deliciously absurd! Her citizens have voted to secede in defense of their inalienable rights. It's democracy at its finest," he laughed. (15) But if the Confederacy wins independence, Julia asked, "won't that mean slavery will go on?" (16) "I suppose so, but that's not really our business. We can't reform

the world my dear, and it's utter folly to try. Parliament ended slavery in all of England's colonies thirty years ago. We've cleaned our house; let others clean theirs." (16) Besides, he added, Lincoln had made plain that the war was not about slavery. It concerned "wounded pride, like most wars." (17)

Adams meanwhile worked closely with his twenty-three-year-old son Henry, who served as his private secretary in London and repeatedly defused his father's anger over the British reaction to America's great trial. Especially irritating to the minister was his host's disdain for democracy. How dare the British consider it their prerogative to suggest that the United States cure its ills by establishing a monarchy! Lincoln had stated that the war was not about slavery, so the British agreed, "despite every stitch of evidence to the contrary. The British mind is the slowest of all minds. One might as well read Dante to a mule." (23) The war grew out of slavery, both Adamses agreed. The greatest threat to the government in Washington, Henry warned, was the possibility that British foreign secretary Lord John Russell would give in to merchants and other groups advocating recognition of the Confederacy. Hadn't Russell already met twice with Confederate representatives, albeit on an unofficial basis? Charles realized that such a step appeared natural after the queen's proclamation of neutrality, but he also knew that Russell did not want to provoke the president.

The war of brother against brother involved friends as well. Henry Adams had attended Harvard College and in his four years there had developed a close friendship with a young Virginian, H. Baxter Sams, who lived in the same rooming house. After their graduation in 1858, Adams and Sams eventually relocated in London, the former joining his father in the embassy and the latter attending lectures at the Royal College of Surgeons, where his father had sent him to study medicine with a focus on traumatic wounds. When they reunited in London, they talked about the war, with Adams insisting that slavery lay at its root and Sams declaring that he likewise opposed slavery but supported the war because his home was under attack. They tacitly agreed to discuss other matters.

At this point, Cobbs Hoffman brings Julia Birch and Baxter Sams together. It was in the high time of the social season when Julia attended a ball and encountered numerous suitors for her affections. But none appealed to her until a friend arranged a meeting with a tall, dark, and handsome physician from Virginia who had accompanied Henry to the affair. Julia knew Henry as a friend but was immediately attracted to the young man at his side. He looked "surprisingly civilized," Julia observed with wonder from across the room. "One expects barbarians." (37) Wasn't this how Charles Dickens portrayed Americans after his travels in that wild frontier? One dance together, and it was the proverbial love at first sight. But given the mores of the day, it was a mutual love best left unexpressed except, perhaps, in humor. Julia admitted that she and her friends often found Americans to be strange. "Your previous ministers to the Court made a show of dressing in simple black, as if to reprove our frivolity. My father enjoyed pretending to mistake them for the butler at the Queen's receptions. He liked to hand them his empty glasses." (39-40) Baxter laughed and admitted that the puritanical strain in New Englanders was so strong that "Even sinners sound like preachers." (40) Julia continued the repartee by noting that the new minister, Charles Francis Adams, had surprisingly appeared before the queen in proper

ceremonial dress. "Gossip has it that Victoria received him with the observation, 'I am thankful we shall have no more American funerals.'" (40)

In showing the complexity of the slavery issue, even to southerners, Cobbs Hoffman reveals a rough spot in this fledgling relationship when Julia asked Baxter whether his family owned slaves. She immediately realized she had raised a sensitive subject—especially in using the word "own." But she firmly believed slavery to be an evil and that Lincoln would work to abolish it despite his rhetoric about preserving the Union. Baxter responded that his parents kept two servants and that they were a "mercantile family, not planters." (42) But wouldn't the war be worth the bloodshed, Julia asked, if it ended slavery? "It's such a blight." (42) "Perhaps," Baxter replied with a frown, "but it won't. Even Mr. Lincoln says the war is about re-union, not abolition, and I see little glory or gain in the bloodshed that's sure to follow." (42)

The waltz at an end, Baxter excused himself to rejoin Henry. Julia wondered if she would see him again. But she also allowed that it did not matter. Her father would never approve a relationship. Baxter "might be tall and seriously handsome, as well as the best dance partner she had had in ages, but he was also an American and a slaveholder. Neither attribute excited admiration at Belfield Manor in Mayfair." (43)

But Julia and Baxter did cross paths again—most notably at a meeting of the British Anti-Slavery Society. A southerner—and a slaveholder—at such a gathering? Baxter had recently learned of his parents' decision to free their two servants so no one could say their sons were fighting for slavery and that they sought only to defend their homeland. Julia, of course, was not aware of this development and was surprised at his presence. "What are you doing here?" (79) Embarrassed at her own presumptuousness, she had spoken once more before thinking. Baxter, however, took no offense. "I'm here for the same reason you are. To save my immortal soul," slightly smiling before becoming serious. "Slavery is a crime against the heart. When they admit it to themselves, Southerners know that better than anyone." (79)

Julia was baffled. Knowing he was about to return to Virginia, she asked, "How can you help the wrong side?" (79) Thomas Jefferson, Baxter declared, had denounced slavery because "it robbed masters and slaves alike of their humanity." Yet he never freed his own slaves and thus "didn't live up to his own ideals! He didn't do what was right." (80) Despite Lincoln's denying that the war was about slavery, and despite the Confederacy's agreement with that position, "every man, woman, and child, North and South, knows that slavery is exactly what divides us." (80) The war is "horrible—and absolutely necessary." (80) "Then why in heaven's name," she asked, "are you running the blockade? How can you possibly justify it?" (80) "I have to help the wounded, regardless of consequences," Baxter replied. "I'm a doctor. I'm a Christian." (81)

Julia finally understood the battle raging inside Baxter—how, above all other considerations, he would risk his freedom to help those soldiers wounded on the battlefield. She also realized she had no right to criticize him. Her father had profited from

his investments in ships that doubtless went to the Confederacy. "Who knew what suffering paid for Belfield Manor?" (82)

Julia's worst fears materialized when she learned of Baxter's capture off Charleston while trying to return to England. His father had approved his resumption of medical studies in London, as well as his marriage to Julia if she consented to his entreaties. Instead, Baxter found himself on a Union frigate bound for prison in New York. Julia's appeal for help from Charles Francis Adams ultimately led to Baxter's release, but only after his marked deterioration in health, her estrangement from her father, and her disguise as a man in making a flight to the United States that led to an awkward reunion salvaged by a successful wedding proposal—all this just prior to the Confederate defeats at Vicksburg and Gettysburg, followed by a winding down of the last Anglo-American crisis, this one over the Laird rams.

For a fictionalized account of historical events to have value, it must stay true to fact and, in doing so, promote a deeper understanding of the period. Cobbs Hoffman succeeds on both counts. The quotations she creates add color to the historical record and are not contrived but based on materials of the time. Her writing style is lively, witty, snappy, clever, and sometimes emotionally moving and quite funny. And her character sketches flesh out the actors, revealing a complex range of British and American reactions to the Civil War. Sir Walter Birch represents the wealthy conservative groups who opposed democracy and sought wartime profits almost as recompense for the British losses in the American Revolution. He also exemplified the starch-like protector of the status quo—even breaking with his daughter over her romantic choice. Cobbs Hoffman's portrait of the North-South contest as seen by British observers is fairly complete, except that one wishes she would have given a greater voice to the humanitarians in England who expressed concern over the horrific nature of the war and simply wanted the fighting to stop. More than Christian principles guided this thinking, however, for realistic analysts feared the collateral effects of a long war on the Atlantic economy—a potential impact that Russell regarded as a legitimate justification for intervening in the war, and all within his broad interpretation of the international laws of neutrality. In general, however, Civil War enthusiasts will benefit from reading this novel.

Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman's novel *In the Lion's Den* tells two interconnected tales of the US Civil War. First, it follows the efforts of Charles Francis Adams, the US minister to Britain, to live up to his famous family's reputation for outstanding public service by convincing the British government not to recognize Confederate independence and to block British companies from selling ships to the Confederacy. He is assisted in this effort by his son and secretary, Henry—who, of course, later went on to tremendous literary fame—and the US consul in Liverpool, Thomas Haines Dudley. This part of the novel is based on primary sources, including Adams family correspondence, State Department records, and contemporary newspapers, and it also draws on secondary historical literature about Adams and Anglo-American Civil War diplomacy.

The second story is purely fictional: Julia, the marriageable daughter of a British merchant who favors the Confederacy out of a family grudge against the Union that dates back to the American Revolution, falls in love with H. Baxter Sams, a Virginian who went to Harvard with Henry Adams and is in London to complete his medical training. While Sams opposes slavery—although his family owns slaves—he feels compelled to support the Confederate cause by running a cargo of opium through the blockade; on his return voyage to England, he is arrested and then imprisoned in New York's Fort Lafayette. The two stories come together when Julia enlists the aid of Charles and Henry Adams to get Sams released from prison on the grounds that he is a British citizen through his mother's family. The minister agrees to support Julia's attempt in part because, as a member of a family known for its happy marriages, he sees True Love as a noble cause. More importantly, Adams helps because forcing Julia's father to attempt to reign in his daughter will take him away from his pro-Confederate efforts and thus be of benefit to the Union. Adams writes to American military authorities on Julia's behalf, and, with the indispensable help of a British consul, Sams is released from prison, free to marry Julia and, presumably, to live happily ever after.

I enjoyed the account of the diplomatic and consular efforts to get Sams out of prison the most; as a historian who studies the consular service and citizenship protection cases, I was delighted to see a consul save the day. (They almost always do, but they never get much glory!) This aspect of the storyline demonstrates the importance of individual office holders in nineteenth-century international relations. Cobbs Hoffman has Adams stress to Julia that the success of her efforts depends entirely on the specific people who receive her request (249), and that's certainly correct. In the 1860s, communication between Washington-based Department of State staff and diplomats and consuls in the field was still slow enough to allow those diplomats and consuls to make real decisions on their own. In this case, Charles Francis Adams opted to help Julia when he really didn't have a particularly compelling official reason to do so; had he asked for permission, someone in Washington likely would have told him he was overstepping his bounds—and wasting the Washington man's time, too. The case also demonstrates how flexible citizenship could be in a period without passports, visas, border patrols, or much specific legislation on the issue. Sams's claim to British citizenship rested on the citizenship of his mother before her marriage; it really was up to the particular officials handling the request to decide if that

was British enough, or if they were going to go with the more common—but not yet statutory—practice of viewing citizenship as something passed on exclusively from the father.

The novel also provides a window into several other aspects of nineteenth-century diplomatic culture. There is discussion of the lack of financial support for diplomats and thus the need for diplomats to spend their own money for official activities. We see the minister frustrated by an absence of instructions from Washington and relying on newspapers for information from home. Through Charles and Henry Adams, we witness several of the social rituals of diplomacy: paying calls, attending less-than-exciting parties—and not being invited to some important ones for political reasons—observing mourning for Prince Albert, and representing the United States at the wedding of the Prince of Wales. The reader also gets a clear view of the lack of coordination among the various departments of both the US and British governments.

On the whole, the novel is sympathetic to the importance of these kinds of activities; Charles Francis Adams certainly had a lifetime to witness their importance, and it is through him that Cobbs Hoffman primarily conveys the norms of the system and their significance. The general lack of support in the United States for diplomatic efforts could have received more attention; in particular, at one point, we hear the complaint that Queen Victoria “did not even deign to extend him [the American minister to Great Britain] the rank of Ambassador. The United States was not considered important enough.... England exchanged ambassadors only with countries she considered her equal. The United States was not in this category” (49). This struck me as being rather too harsh on the British and letting a lot of Americans off the hook. Yes, the ambassadorial rank was only used among equals, but that was a system-wide norm, not a unilateral British decision. No other country sent an ambassador to the United States at the time; the first ambassador was actually from Britain, and he came in 1890. This was partially because the British government didn’t view the United States as an equal, but it was also because it needed to be an *exchange* of ambassadors, and there wasn’t support in the United States for operating in international relations at that level in the 1860s; continuing desire to carry out George Washington’s mandate against involvement in European affairs and financial concerns stood in the way of Americans using the ambassadorial rank for their own officials until the last decade of the nineteenth century.

As I read the novel, I was struck by how closely it stayed to the historical record and subsequent scholarship; I often felt that I could have put in the footnotes. On the one hand, this makes the book a good candidate for use in the undergraduate classroom: it covers official Anglo-American relations accurately—as we currently understand them—so there’s no need to dispel falsehoods. The book could therefore serve as a way for instructors to give their students more information about Civil War diplomacy than they might otherwise have time to present in class, and since it’s a novel, it would bring some variety to the reading list.

On the other hand, in sticking so closely to extant written evidence, the book did not harness all of historical fiction’s power to bring the past vividly to life. The story is

delivered in the third person omniscient, and we as readers spend all of our time with either Charles Francis Adams, Julia, or Sams. This narrative viewpoint is not very far from that employed in scholarly history—and in romance novels, for that matter. The historical fiction that I find most powerful—Caleb Carr’s *The Alienist* and Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* come particularly to mind¹—is told in the first person, and usually that person is a fictional creation. With a first-person narrator, there’s plenty of room to bring contemporary ideas and day-to-day activities accurately into the story, and there’s also more room to construct a more dramatically satisfying plot that one expects from fiction but real life rarely provides. It also helps the reader imagine the scene and action more effectively, since one is down on the ground, rather than above. Reading *In the Lion’s Den*, I was never able to lose myself in the story and learn without realizing I was learning; the history professor was always there, lecturing. I had confidence in the professor’s accuracy, which is absolutely vital and not a feeling I often have when I read historical fiction, but I did not feel like I had really been to the 1860s after I closed the book.

¹ Caleb Carr, *The Alienist* (New York: Random House, 1994); Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 1996).

My thanks to Tom Maddux for the opportunity to participate in this roundtable.

Writing in the 5 November 2009 issue of *The New York Review of Books*, Stephen Greenblatt argues that “In the most fully realized historical novels, the historical figures are not merely background material or incidental presences but the dominant characters, thoroughly reimagined and animated.” (24) The historical novelist starts with what is known about the historical figure or figures about which they are writing, but in contrast to the historian is not limited by what those sources suggest. The historical novelist has license to go far beyond what the record of a person’s life reveals and, based on these records, build a character based as much (if not more) on what is not known about them, but which, seen from a certain perspective, might be true.

By this definition, Lisa Cobbs Hoffman’s new work *In The Lion’s Den: A Novel of the Civil War* might not fit the definition of a historical novel. True, it is richly peopled with historical figures—Charles Francis Adams, his wife Abby, their son Henry, various members of the British government including Lord Palmerston, Lord John Russell, Sir John Bright and others—who are drawn both from the historical record as well as the novelist’s imagination. These historical characters are rendered in such a way as to provide new insight into the personal side of a diplomatic achievement of world historic significance—forestalling the seemingly inevitable British intervention in the American Civil War. This, combined with the richly resonant details of daily existence in the 19th century Anglo-American world that frame the narrative, makes *In the Lion’s Den* a very satisfying read and, my teaching colleagues, a potentially valuable undergraduate course reading.

But *In the Lion’s Den* still might not fit Professor Greenblatt’s criteria for a historical novel in that the most compelling characters (at least as far as this reader was concerned) are fictional. Yet the author constructs their fictive lives in such a way as to cast light on some of the major historical issues of the time, including loyalty, identity, independence, and union. And in this respect, *In The Lion’s Den* is very much a historical novel.

The outline of the story is as follows: In early 1861, Henry Adams is accompanying his father Charles Francis on a mission to London to persuade the British government that the collapse of the American experiment in subverting the international political and economic status quo is not something to be actively supported. In London, Henry literally bumps into the fictive Baxter Sams, a young Virginian of well-off circumstances who was Henry’s Harvard roommate and who is now studying to be a physician at the Royal College of Surgeons. The onset of Civil War strains the relationship of Henry and Baxter; where regional differences were formerly a source of amusement and curiosity, they now are signifiers of potentially relationship-ending differences. Baxter reveals himself to be a lukewarm confederate at best, but his affirmation of support to state and family even to a

cause with which he disagrees creates tension. Henry and Baxter handle their differences the old-fashioned way—they agree not to talk about them.

While accompanying Henry to a soiree, Baxter is introduced to the young, beautiful, and very eligible Julia Birch, daughter of Sir Walter Birch, active Confederate sympathizer and hater of all things American. Henry's serious manner and balding pate do nothing for Julia, but she is immediately attracted to the debonair Baxter Sams, who in addition to being handsome and a good dancer, is, like Julia, tall. At the dawn of the Darwinian era, Julia's attraction to the tall, hardy specimen before her is a very natural selection indeed. Baxter, true to evolutionary theory and contrary to the popular notion that it is the man who does the choosing, signals his responsiveness to Julia's subtle blandishments with a few well chosen charming words and a lingering handshake that leaves her tingling. In a perfect world, Julia and Baxter would then go off and make tall children together.

But a mountain of social, cultural, and political obstacles must be climbed before our couple can act on their limbic attraction. Julia introduces the first obstacle in their first meeting by assuming the worst about Baxter's southern background and his attitude toward the slaves, especially the two ("servants") that are owned by his parents. This makes for some awkward moments, as she attempts to place the full weight of race, history, and politics on Baxter's broad shoulders. Baxter's training as a Southern gentleman and his instinctual longing for Julia prevent him from appearing too insulted by her questions, but an otherwise warm introductory encounter is given a chilly edge, and the two parties part, not expecting to see each other again.

The plot thickens when Baxter's father writes from Virginia describing the unmedicated suffering of the rapidly-increasing numbers of Confederate wounded and requesting that Baxter escort from London a shipment of Indian opium through the Union blockade, via the island of Nassau, to South Carolina. Baxter opposes secession and wants nothing to do with the war, but his father's humanitarian request is impossible for him to refuse, both as a son and as a doctor. Baxter has strong sense of loyalty, but it is to his family and to his profession, not his country.

The British contact assisting the smuggling turns out to be Sir Walter Birch, father of Julia. Thus, when Baxter pays Sir Walter a visit in order to arrange the deal, who should be in the drawing room other than Julia, demure, tall as ever, and reading a book, *Jane Eyre*. Julia inveighs Baxter to stay for tea, somewhat to the aggravation of her father, whose support for the confederacy does not mean that he does not hold confederates—who are, after all, still Americans—in contempt. The sparks fly once again between them. Baxter sees before him a person "who seemed less artificial" than the average British woman, with beautiful eyes faintly reminiscent of the Blue Ridge and, most significantly, someone who resembled his father's description of his mother, an Englishwoman who "held herself like a princess."

But Baxter's sense of duty to medicine and to family overrule his desire for Julia. He realizes that his new career as a smuggler-humanitarian makes an attraction to a British gentlelady quite out of the question, and in any case, if he were successful in avoiding the blockade en route with the opium, there seemed no chance of returning to England, at least

until the war was over. “Blockade running is rather like roulette” observes Sir Walter, no doubt happy to assist Baxter in his plans if only to remove him from proximity to Julia, whom he seems to sense has more than a passing interest in the Virginian.

A third chance encounter between Julia and Baxter, this time at a performance of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” at the British Anti-Slavery Society, confirms their romance. The setting provides a suitable context for Baxter to clarify his personal objections to slavery and to explain that his parents—somewhat anomalously in my view—have responded to the war by freeing their slaves. Julia is relieved to perceive that Baxter is willing to put his life on the line out of loyalty to his father and to his commitment as a doctor to helping the sick and wounded, not in the name of keeping a race of people in bondage. Besides, aiding the confederacy couldn’t be too egregious a sin—her father was doing it, too. Her conscience now salved, Julia gives in completely to her natural desires. She urges Baxter to “come see me when you get back,” not grasping for the moment the risk to him that would entail. Baxter’s gentle kiss of her hand in leaving sends shockwaves through her being. “For reasons she did not understand, it was hard to keep from crossing the lines of propriety with this man.” Reason had nothing to do with it, passion and instinct everything.

Julia’s rising attraction for Baxter unfolds in parallel to her rising discontent with her subordination to Sir Walter. A patriarch of the old school, Sir Walter presumes to use his total control of the family’s wealth and position to tell his minions what to do. In Julia’s case, it is to agree to have nothing further to do with the rascally Mr. Sams, who, having made it to South Carolina with the illicit cargo, has been so bold as to write a letter to Julia hinting at his intentions. Sir Walter will have none of it, and forbids Julia to contact him again, or suffer the punishment of being disowned and losing her substantial, yet unspecified in terms of amount, dowry. Sir Walter’s anti-American sentiments reach back four-score years to the revolution, a primal act of disobedience that in his mind can never be forgiven if only to head off future rebellions that may occur, colonial or otherwise. His efforts to characterize Baxter as a traitor, a coward, and worst of all, from a mercantile background, only strengthens Julia’s resolve to be with the man she thinks she loves. Perhaps as a result of reading too many novels by Jane Austen, Julia is determined to marry for love.

Aided and encouraged by her uncle, who loathes the cruel and overbearing style of his late-sister’s husband, Julia schemes to defy her father and declare her own independence from patriarchal control. Having learned nothing from the example of George III, Sir Walter does not understand that patriarchy works best when the patriarch seeks to create at least the illusion of consent from those he dominates, and that the tyrannical application of authority will result in combinations forming against you, in this case Julia and her uncle.

At this point Julia establishes a committee of secret correspondence with Baxter, aided by her friend Flora Bentley, who agrees to receive Baxter’s letters in order to keep them from Sir Walter’s prying eyes. Julia is aware that while she may not be putting her life on the line, her fortune (i.e., her dowry) and her sacred honor (“virtue”) as a lady are at risk. Attraction to the confederate drug smuggler cannot explain it all. Also pushing her toward Baxter is younger brother Edmund’s just-kidding admonitions that her expiration date as

an eligible maiden is fast approaching, and if she does not move fast she may be looking at a career as a spinster. Time is passing, it is now or never for Julia.

Things take a turn for the worse when Baxter is captured on the return trip to London by the steadily-tightening Yankee blockade and sent to a Union prison camp. Not all the blame for this foolish attempt to return to England can be placed on Julia. Baxter's father, concerned that he might face the draft if he remains in Virginia, urges him to return to marry the woman he loves and gives Baxter his grandmother's ring to take back to London to make it official. But before this can happen Baxter must survive incarceration. His time behind bars becomes a sort of internship for him to perfect his medical skills and to master the details of the recently-published *Gray's Anatomy*, allowed to him by his jailers. He daydreams of Julia while pondering the volume's renderings of female anatomy (no kidding).

But Julia now finds that her beloved is a POW, possibly for the duration of the conflict. Making matters worse, Sir Walter's all-seeing eyes get wind of her correspondence with Baxter and cuts her off for defying his authority. Showing great resourcefulness, Julia endeavors to get Baxter released. If she can document Baxter's birth in London to an English woman, it plausibly could be said that he's not a confederate at all, but an Englishman wrongfully seized on the high seas. Victorian habits and attitudes being what they were, she must disguise herself as a man in order to go to America unescorted and gain Baxter's freedom. Julia goes to great lengths and some compromises of her dignity and sense of propriety in order to get this done, and it is in this sequence that the pace of the narrative speeds up noticeably. Having lost her dowry, Julia puts her life and her honor on the line in the name of her own autonomy, risking all for a man she hardly knows.

Although she eventually succeeds in getting Baxter released, Julia is shocked to finally meet up with him again. She suffers a sudden jolt of buyers remorse when she realizes that the tall, debonair, well-dressed man she knew in England has been reduced to a ragged, semi-starved, stringy-haired shell of his former self. This is partly Baxter's fault, whose letters to Julia from prison tended to be newsy, upbeat tales of prison life, omitting the fetid water, moldy bread, and rivers of diarrhea that both defined the experience and created the ragged creature that now stood before her. Baxter, too, is at first put off by Julia's obvious ambivalence about his current state. Her cause is not helped by the fact that Baxter arrives on the dock blindfolded owing to a bout of ocular inflammation, and thus can hear Julia's ambivalence about him loud and clear and undistracted by her multi-hued eyes and tall, willowy figure. Recall that for Baxter, personality was not Julia's strong point, and her sudden doubts at the moment of truth nearly wrecks things now.

Baxter's mood shifts when he realizes that, whatever her hesitation, she has spurned Sir Walter and his offer of dowry in order to be with him, effectively putting him in the position of being the new patriarch in her life, hopefully of a kinder and gentler sort. That, combined with the appearance of his grandmother's ring from a recess in his shoe where he cleverly hid it from his jailers, is enough to seal the deal, and the love birds contemplate a life of gracious living in England as a proper British couple with "servants" (this time

likely Irish). For Baxter, life as an expat may have been his only choice, as his record of dodging service to The Cause would not have played well in reconstruction-era Virginia.

Thus, both Darwin and Jefferson stand vindicated. In evolutionary terms, our two lovers show the determination of an entire school of salmon in overcoming the various blockades—personal, familial, political, bureaucratic, and naval—that keep them from acting on their instinctual desire to couple. In political terms, each dissolves the bonds that formerly tied them to another—in Baxter’s case Virginia and in Julia’s case her father—and move to establish a new marriage union based on mutual consent and the pursuit of happiness. We may assume they enjoy that happiness forever, or at least until their marriage union falls prey to its own internal dissension and civil war.

So while the characters of *In The Lion’s Den* are part historical/part fictional, the most compelling historical lessons in it stem from the actions of two of the invented characters, Julia and Baxter. As fictional characters, both their external circumstances and their internal struggles are functions of the major historical realities of their time, albeit in an idiosyncratic and therefore very believable way. However one may categorize it, Lisa Cobbs Hoffman has produced a work that sheds a very particular light on the complex realities of the Civil War, and for that she is to be congratulated.

Author's Response by Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, San Diego State University

The novelist and the historian are different creatures. They have different personalities and different missions. The novelist suggests, while the historian explains. The novelist cultivates a sense of mystery, while the historian tries to make everything clear. For the novelist's protagonists, the future is still unwinding. The historian looks back upon the path taken and maps it.

The conflict between these styles of writing became gradually evident to me as I groped my way through my first novel, *In the Lion's Den*. These insightful essays by Niels Eichhorn, Howard Jones, Nicole Phelps, and William Weeks reaffirm it.

A common theme in their reviews is that the fictional characters are more fully realized—or at least more deeply felt by the reader—than the historical ones, namely Charles Francis and Henry Adams. In my own imagination, Charles and Henry are as fully dimensional as Julia and Baxter (perhaps more so). But it is nonetheless true that I hewed closely to what I knew that they had actually said and done—with the important exception of their interaction with the fictional characters. Nicole Phelps suggests that the storyline may in fact have been hampered by “sticking so closely to extant written evidence.” Yet written evidence is not the only proof I use. For example, the novel contains a scene of bedroom intimacy between Charles Francis and his wife Abigail. We cannot know what happened on any given night between those two, but we do know that they created seven children. Such scenes were based on plausibility, not provability, and the author must take such liberties if the story is to have any immediacy or life. But Phelps is correct in intuiting that primary sources are a brake on the imagination, at least to those trained in what used to be called the “German method” of archival research, pioneered by Leopold Van Ranke. Weeks also finds the fictive characters more engrossing than the real, but I wonder to what extent that is inevitable when the expert reader (a historian) knows what happened to the historical actors, yet remains in suspense about the lives of the imaginary ones. The latter would have to be more compelling.

Of course, nowadays, post-modernism has freed the imagination of any number of scholars who feel ever more empowered to free-associate when it comes to the emotions and motivations of historical figures. Natalie Davis's *Trickster Travels*, or Robert Darnton's *Great Cat Massacre*, are good examples of the modern propensity to go well off the paper trail to explore interesting thickets. But historical scholarship of this nature is explicitly speculative—sometimes maddeningly so—and it rarely claims to assert fact, only probabilities and possibilities.

In fiction, however, the novelist strives to create a world that is fully in the moment, complete with the characters' own convictions and misperceptions. This is no place for a discussion of what-ifs. Even when the characters are “wrong” from a strictly historical point of view, they believe in the evidence before them—and the author must not cheat by enlightening them about what subsequent generations have uncovered. So, for example, Eichhorn states that the novel “creates the false impression that the British authorities had

some role in allowing the escape of the Alabama, which was not the case.” Nearly 150 years later we may argue about whether or not the British were fully culpable, and a search through the archives might exonerate Lord Russell and company (even though they ultimately paid \$15 million in damages), but the members of the American Legation in 1863 were genuinely convinced of British involvement. As Henry Adams stated, “no one could be so simple as to believe that two armoured ships-of-war could be built publicly, under the eyes of the Government, and go to sea like the Alabama, without active and incessant collusion” (*Education of Henry Adams*, Houghton-Mifflin, p. 168).

In my novel the Adamses were also sometimes blinkered by the “intelligence” to which they were privy at the time, including newspaper accounts full of wild rumors about potential purchasers for the Laird Rams. As Howard Jones points out in his illuminating *Blue and Grey Diplomacy* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010), whether or not Russia was genuinely partial to the Union cause or merely ducking into American harbors to avoid the British Navy, “contemporaries were convinced that the fleet was there to show support for the Union” (p. 294). Indeed, Jones’s comment that the novel overall stays “true to fact and, in doing so, promote[s] a deeper understanding of the period” is a great satisfaction—and relief—to an author normally more conversant with 20th century diplomacy.

Another difference between history and historical fiction is in the level of detail. The professional historian strives for comprehensiveness. Eichhorn suggests that a really full treatment of Union diplomacy should illuminate such things as the role of Queen’s Council Robert P. Collier, or the logistical constraints on “winter operations in Canada” that undercut British threats. But such details aren’t necessary to the story, and fiction demands that the reader remember the individual adventures of every character that appears. Introduce too many characters, and the reader loses focus. The drama wilts. Monographic histories, in contrast, require the reader to discern and follow the thesis, not the characters. As scholarly authors, we hardly expect the reader to recall every fact dutifully inserted for the sake of creating a full historical record. Events are described in painstaking detail for the benefit of succeeding generations.

Phelps offers some interesting literary advice, preferring the first-person point of view to the third person. She may be right that this is a more compelling technique. But I found the structure of a single narrator (one “I”) ultimately too constraining in this case. I was interested in conveying the differences in how Northerners, Southerners, and Brits viewed the very same events, and so chose one of each for the three main characters. Phelps observes that a purely fictional central character gives the author more scope in devising a “dramatically satisfying plot,” yet I admit that I wanted to be inside Charles’s head, seeing what he saw and constrained by the real details of his actual life. In other historical novels, such as Gore Vidal’s *Lincoln*, I have sometimes been frustrated by the fact that the reader never gets very close to the person whose life story is the *raison d’être* of the story.

I am pleased that some of the reviewers envision assigning the book to undergraduates, because it was my own undergraduates who inspired me to write the novel. I’ve taught this period many times, and each year came away more impressed with Charles Francis Adams. The psychic burden of keeping Britain out of the American Civil War must have been nearly

overwhelming. It would have been so for anyone in that position. But for Charles Francis, this was a sacred trust: it was his mission to save from utter ruin the nation that his own father and grandfather had been so instrumental in creating. Fiction has an important pedagogical role because it forces the reader, along with the protagonist, to watch history unfold in the order it does in real life—looking forward onto an uncertain future rather than backward onto the dead past. Contingency is foremost, deepening the reader's empathy. Keeping that suspense alive is the novelist's daily challenge.

As it turns out, professors who wish to assign the novel may have to wait a bit, however. Originally published by iUniverse as part of their "Editor's Choice/Rising Star" series, *In the Lion's Den* has just been picked up by Random House, which will bring out a new edition in Spring 2011 to coincide with the sesquicentennial of the Civil War—and Charles Francis Adams' mission to London. For me, this is a very happy ending, indeed.

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