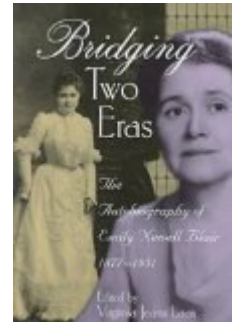


Virginia Jeans Laas. *Bridging Two Eras: The Autobiography of Emily Newell Blair, 1877-1951.* Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1999. xvii + 382 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8262-1254-2.



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>From Women's Clubs to Federal Politics

Reflecting upon her "ardent" feminism, Emily Newell Blair acknowledged not only the assistance of female activists, but also of men in the Democratic Party. Although she admitted that she knew little about politics as a young woman, Blair did understand how women thought and organized, as well as how to gain the confidence of men to advance women's issues. As such, Emily Newell Blair not only spanned two eras but many worlds: from Victorian to modern; from small town women's clubs in Missouri to male dominated politics of Washington, D.C.; and from the suffrage movement to a federal position under President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Blair's entry into politics followed the traditional paths of teacher, wife, and club member. As a single young woman, she became a teacher to supplement her family's income. Even then, she demonstrated her incipient activism by refusing to sign her contract until she received a higher salary. As a young wife, she willingly assisted her husband in his legal work. But shortly thereafter, when he ran for circuit judge, her home circle

"widened" as their dining room turned into a campaign office.

Similarly, her membership in a local woman's club prompted her participation in civic improvements. As Blair reasoned, "True, the women did not have a vote, but they did have tongues" (p. 157). The corresponding passage of a bond for a new almshouse gave her a sense of conviction and confidence that she needed to broaden her reformist horizons. Nonetheless, when a newspaper man asked her if she was a feminist, she replied that she didn't know. After reading the works of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Ellen Key, and Olive Schreiner, she surmised, "Their arguments seemed reasonable enough" (p. 155).

Thereafter, Blair became a committed suffragist, often working 18-hour days for the Missouri Equal Suffrage Association's campaign. Alongside her suffrage commitments, she accepted the presidency of the newly created Missouri Women's Press Association in 1913. This position contributed to the expansion of her role in politics and social reform, as did her articles on women's issues in *Cosmopolitan*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and

Woman's Home Companion. One year later, Blair was invited to speak at the national suffrage convention, along with M. Carey Thomas, president of Bryn Mawr College; Jane Addams of Hull House; and Kate Waller Barrett, founder of the Florence Crittenton Homes. She also worked closely with Anna Howard Shaw and Carrie Chapman Catt of the National American Women's Suffrage Association.

Nancy Cott has discussed how women of the early twentieth century were caught "in a double bind" when they entered party politics. Should they promote male politicians, already in positions of power? Or should they instead build a formidable bloc of female voters?[1] Blair promoted both strategies, at least initially. Following the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, Blair organized Democratic women into clubs in Missouri and other states. She then proceeded to Washington, D.C., where she founded the Woman's National Democratic Club in 1924. This club served two important functions: it provided opportunities for male legislators to gather informally and it educated women about politics through public speakers and educational programs.

But Blair was not content to be relegated to a women's political sphere. She realized that she needed access to the informal channels where male politicians often made decisions. She befriended a Washingtonian who invited her to join the senators for Sunday evening suppers. There, Blair learned to "understand things before perplexing" (p. 239). She became a savvy observer of politicians' personalities and befriended journalists who often knew more about politics than politicians themselves. And in the process, she advocated for women's agendas.

Yet Blair's success with male politicians was partial. She realized how men in the Party refused to treat women as equals, despite women's prodigious organizing and their equal representation on the national committee. Although she had initially believed that men and women could work

together within the Party, she later concluded that women had more to gain by organizing on their own. Perhaps Blair had been influenced by Eleanor Roosevelt who, as vice chair of the New York State Democratic Committee in the late 1920s, had reinvigorated the county branches, as well as raised funds for the committee's work. Roosevelt, along with other leading Democratic women, had encouraged Blair to found the National School of Democracy in New York to further women's education and involvement in party politics. When Blair became interested in the presidential campaign of 1932, Molly Dewson asked her to help by organizing, once again, the Democratic Party's women's clubs.

Under Roosevelt's presidency, Blair was finally able to achieve some degree of political visibility. In 1934, she joined the Consumers' Board of the National Recovery Act as head of the Consumers' Protective Bureau. The following year, she became chair of the Consumers' Advisory Board of the National Recovery Administration, which dispensed to women information about their male relatives in the armed forces. And in 1942, at the age of 65, Blair became chief of the Women's Interest Section of the Bureau of Public Relations of the War Department. There, she wrote material about the armed forces for women. In reflecting upon her advancement from local to national politics, Blair realized that she had not only been working for others but for herself. In the process, she had come to know herself, this person named Emily Newell Blair.

In *Bridging Two Eras*, Virginia Jeans Laas has given readers a nuanced portrayal of Blair as a wife, mother, writer, editor, reformist, and politician. As editor of this autobiography, Laas has painstakingly composed a compelling account of Blair's life from thousands of pages of memoirs, letters, diaries, and articles, plus careful consultation of nearly twenty-five manuscript collections, fifteen newspapers, and relevant secondary sources. In doing so, Laas has remained faithful to

the many sides of Blair: her small town sentiments; her shrewd political perceptions; her prodigious accomplishments for the Democratic Party; and her often conflicted roles as mother, wife, and reformist. In doing so, Laas has contributed significantly to the scholarship of women's political history in the early twentieth century.[2]

Notes

[1]. Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 110.

[2]. See, for example, Susan Ware, *Beyond Suffrage: Women in the New Deal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); Kristi Anderson, *After Suffrage: Women in Partisan and Electoral Politics Before the New Deal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Jo Freeman, *A Room at a Time: How Women Entered Party Politics: Women in the New Deal* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000); and Melanie Gustafson, Kristie Miller, and Elisabeth I. Perry, eds., *We Have Come to Stay: American Women and Political Parties, 1880-1960* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999).

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