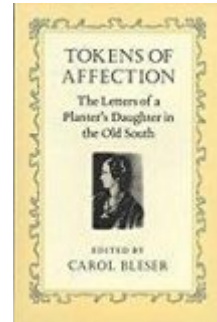


Carol Bleser, ed. *Tokens of Affection: The Letters of a Planter's Daughter in the Old South*. Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1996. xxix + 403 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-1727-4.

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Published on H-PCAACA (February, 1997)



Southern Belle through Letters

On 7 March 1824, sixteen-year-old Maria Bryan wrote her recently married sister, Julia Ann Bryan Cumming. She promised to correspond frequently as long as her sister respected her simple request. "No living mortal must see one of my letters," Maria warned. "I request you as a particular favour to burn them as soon as they are read" (pp. 5-6). We can be grateful that despite Maria's repeated instructions, Julia failed to heed her sister's conditions. We are even more fortunate that Carol Bleser has edited the 167 extant letters in *Tokens of Affection*, the inaugural work in the series "Southern Voices from the Past: Women's Letters Diaries, and Writings," from the University of Georgia Press. The letters in this collection, which span twenty years, reveal much about the life of a planter family in a small southern frontier community, Mount Zion, Georgia. In detailing both the remarkable and the quotidian events in her life to her absent sister, Maria vividly describes the culture of the antebellum South. She fills her letters with her views on religion, slavery, friendship, courtship, marriage, childbirth and child rearing, sickness, death, fashion, books, education, travel, and politics. Scholars of the Old South will find a wealth of information in these letters.

What remains partially hidden, despite Maria's otherwise forthright commentary on the world around her, is Maria herself. We learn frustratingly little about Maria's courtship and marriage to her first husband, William Harford, for example. Her letters suggest that her father disapproved of the match, but they do not tell us why. Bleser can be of little help on this score, for apparently

no other sources survived to fill in the gaps of Maria's letters. "No letters have been found to tell how or where she [Maria] met Harford," Bleser confesses, "what her real feelings toward him were, or where and when they were married" (p. 130). Shortly after Bryan and Harford married, they moved to New Orleans. Maria confides to her sister that she is "low spirited and homesick." She has no friends, and "the few acquaintances I have here are mostly fashionable people," she continues, "who, after paying me a call about once a month, and perceiving little to attract them in my abode and much elsewhere, say adieu and I, presume, do not think of me again until they look over their visiting debts." Harford provides Maria little solace, for "he is entirely engrossed in the most perplexing business, and even when I am with him, I have but little of his conversation" (p. 145). Despite these tantalizing glimpses, however, Maria's letters reveal more about the New Orleans cholera epidemic of 1832-1833 than about Maria's marriage. Maria writes not at all on Harford's death in January 1835, nor of her mourning, save for a mention of dyeing a winter cloak black.

Tokens of Affection is a satisfying volume nonetheless. In the end, these letters are more remarkable for what they tell us about the Old South than for what they obscure. Bleser has served us well by editing this fine collection.

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Citation: Sarah E. Gardner. Review of Bleser, Carol, ed., *Tokens of Affection: The Letters of a Planter's Daughter in the Old South*. H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. February, 1997.

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