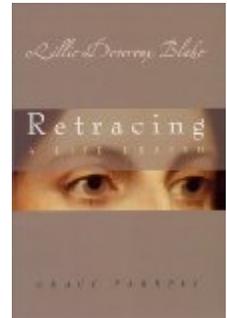




Grace Farrell. *Lillie Devereux Blake: Retracing a Life Erased.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002. 280 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-55849-349-0.



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A Notable Woman: Lillie Devereux Blake

As the subtitle implies, *Lillie Devereux Blake: Rediscovering a Life Erased* is about the lost story of Blake: a reformer, author, journalist, and lecturer. In her new book, Farrell proves that the accomplishments and writings of Lillie Devereux Blake, which have been overlooked by scholars, deserve attention. In the course of her life, Blake published seven novels and numerous articles; in addition she vigorously worked to open the doors of Columbia University to women, and she was active in the suffrage movement, playing a vital role in the unification of the National Woman Suffrage Association and American Woman Suffrage Association. In 1900, Blake ran for president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association.

This book is divided into three sections: "Erasures," "Recovery," and "Retracing." These divisions are logical and help the reader understand how Blake's life was slowly erased, and then recovered and retraced by Farrell. In the first chapter, Farrell describes her search for Lillie Devereux Blake in New Haven, Connecticut, Blake's

hometown. Here, Blake's life had been nearly erased, and in 1999 the erasure was complete when Yale University tore down Blake's childhood home, Maple Cottage.

Upon arriving in New Haven, Farrell learned that the town remembered Blake as "a lady of the night" (p. 3), not as a reformer, author, journalist, or lecturer. Farrell uncovered the source of the rumor during a research trip. In volume 107 of the Dana Collection from the Whitney Library of the New Haven Colony Historical Society, Mrs. F. B. Dexter recounted, "the House and Escapades of Lily [sic] Devereaux [sic]" (p. 14). In two sentences, Dexter defamed Lillie Devereux's reputation by implying that she was a divorcée and that Lillie was involved in a scandal that resulted in the expulsion of a Yale student. Although the reference written by Dexter reads as though Yale University implicated young Lillie, Farrell finds that Lillie was actually the victim. The university expelled W. H. L. Barnes for impeaching Blake's character and depriving "a defenseless girl of the priceless treasure of an unsullied reputation" (p. 18).

Nonetheless, in 1998, Yale University used the rumor to justify the destruction of Blake's home. Upon learning this would occur, Farrell became involved in the campaign to prevent the home's demolition. Twice, she wrote to the president of Yale University, insisting that the home not be torn down, informing the university president that the information used by Yale was false. In the end, Yale University razed the cottage and built a parking lot, wiping away any material evidence of Blake in New Haven.

In the chapters that follow, Farrell explores how Blake created her own identity when roles for middle-class women were limited. Farrell effectively demonstrates that Blake struggled against these prescribed roles. Blake's published essays and novels reflect her battle against the common belief that women were pious, pure, domestic, and submissive. Here, Farrell cleverly uses culture to explain how Blake's radical ideas about womanhood were held "captive" by social attitudes.

Blake's first novel, *Southwold*, featured a woman who was independent and yet still a true woman. Farrell explains that Blake's heroines were flawed because true women could not be assertive and aggressive. As a result, Blake developed what Farrell calls a "double-voiced narrative." In her novels, her "heroine--strong, passionate, trapped in a world of hypocrisy in which she has no sanctioned place--is condemned by a patriarchy whose legitimacy is questioned throughout the text" (p. 62).

In the second section Farrell presents material she has recovered about Blake. In chapter 4, she explores Blake's career as a correspondent during the Civil War. During the war, few women worked in Washington, D.C., as journalists, and so this chapter provides a new perspective of the different roles played by women during the war.

Following the war, Blake became active in the woman suffrage movement. >From there she became a popular and well-paid lecturer for the

woman suffrage, labor, and peace movements. Farrell argues that many of Blake's contributions to the suffrage movement were omitted from the sanitized history of the movement. It is difficult to accept Farrell's assertion. Many suffragists who played a prominent role in the state campaigns have been overlooked, and if one looks at the index of the *History of Woman Suffrage*, there are still references to Blake.[1]

There is important material in this chapter, however, about Blake's campaigning methods and work for woman suffrage in New York. Farrell's research indicates that Blake encouraged the development of a cross-class coalition of suffragists in 1871. It would have been interesting to see this point carried further. Historian Ellen Carol Dubois credits Harriot Stanton Blatch with attracting both working-class and society women to the New York suffrage movement.[2] The fact that Blake also saw the importance of bridging relations between women of different classes is a significant find. It would have been interesting to learn how successful Blake's efforts were in 1871. And how did she attract both classes to these meetings?

In the third section, Farrell explains how she retraced Blake's life. Her final chapter about the trials and tribulations of research is particularly interesting. Researchers will sympathize with Farrell's determination to locate materials. Those who have not spent years hunting for tidbits of information about an individual will come to understand how difficult and time-consuming Farrell's search for Blake was.

In summary, Farrell's research is impressive. This is a well-written book. The title is confusing, however. The subtitle, *Retracing a Life Erased*, suggests that Blake's life was purposefully eliminated from historical memory and texts and that all traces of Blake's life were destroyed. Blake's life was not completely erased. Farrell also makes this point in the last chapter of her book where she writes, "no matter how effective the powers of

erasure, the etching of her life left enough of an imprint that its substance could be retraced" (p. 189). Indeed, Blake's papers are at the Missouri Historical Society and her own daughter, Katherine Devereux Blake, wrote a biography of her mother called *Champion of Women*.^[3] Thus, her life was not erased but merely forgotten or neglected.

Although Farrell effectively makes the case that Lillie Devereux Blake's life has been overlooked, she never tells readers why she undertook this project. Many notable women in U.S. history have not been studied. Why was Blake's life so compelling to Farrell? Despite this lingering question, this is an important book. Farrell has done extensive work, bringing the story of Lillie Devereux Blake to light. Women's historians will find this an important study.

Notes

[1]. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, eds., *The History of Woman Suffrage: 1876-1885*, vol. 3 (Rochester: Susan B. Anthony, 1886); and Susan B. Anthony and Ida Husted Harper, eds., *The History of Woman Suffrage: 1883-1900*, vol. 4 (Indianapolis: The Hollenbeck Press, 1902).

[2]. Ellen Carol Dubois, *Harriot Stanton Blatch and the Winning of Woman Suffrage* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

[3]. Katherine Devereux Blake, *Champion of Women* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1943).

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