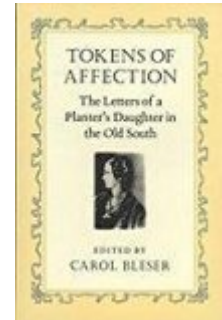


Carol Bleser, ed.. *Tokens of Affection: The Letters of a Planter's Daughter in the Old South*. Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1996. xxix + 403 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8203-1727-4.



Reviewed by Janey Dudney

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Tokens of Affection is an extraordinary work for many reasons, not the least of which is the astounding and meticulous research that accompanies this collection of letters. Over a period of twenty years (1824-1844), Maria Bryan wrote to her sister Julia in Augusta, Georgia. Details of everyday life are included and provide an excellent record of what living was like during this time—at least on a plantation in Mt. Zion, Georgia. For example, accounts of visits to the country to visit relatives, in themselves probably of interest only to direct descendants, are put into historical context by the editor and explained as being "medically necessary" to escape the "sickly season" in the cities when those who could fled from the fevers (typhoid, yellow, and malaria) that claimed so many lives (p. 11). A complete genealogy of the Bryan family is provided; in addition, anyone who is mentioned in the letters—including distant family, friends, neighbors, and servants—is identified and their relationship to the Bryans explained. Editorial comments which precede nearly every group of letters explain the circumstances under which they were written and give added testimony to painstaking research. However, as impres-

sive as this detailed explanation of the myriad Bryan connections is, its historical value is questionable unless a person happened to be a descendant, either of the Bryan family or of some other family referred to in the letters. The value of these letters lies in the vivid picture of a woman's difficult life in the ante-bellum South, even when this woman is well educated and from a prosperous family.

Maria's time is spent sewing (for both the family and their servants), nursing the sick (likewise), preserving food, reading, and *writing letters*. Because of the unusual (for a female) classical education that Maria had received, her letters are highly readable, sprinkled with literary allusions, foreign phrases, and comments on contemporary publications. Maria often requests that her sister burn the letters after she has read them—fortunately for the reader, Julia did not obey.

After reading the letters, full of gossip and daily concerns of family and friends, the reader feels that these are people who could be part of anyone's family—the brother who does not pay his bills, the mother who is chronically unwell for

years and constantly complains, and the father, who survives into his nineties, but who had been at death's door many times. (After enduring letter after letter recounting "Pa" Bryan's dire illnesses, most of which Maria didn't believe he could survive, it is something of a shock to read the editor's note that at age seventy-two, Pa agreed to have his portrait painted and a Jane Armour, who became Pa's second wife, visited the artist [p. 291]).

Life was difficult, and the importance of religion as one of the dominant influences in the South at this time can be seen as Maria recounts the litany of illnesses that beset family, friends and slaves. No one seems to ever be completely well, with the most common complaints being chills and fever, intestinal upsets, coughs and consumption, and of course, the trials of childbirth and the attendant deaths of mothers and babies. A glimpse of medical practices is included with references to the use of leeches, bleeding, purgatives, cathartics and various herbal concoctions. Maria comforts herself and her sister with the hope of a better land "someday" when all will be well again (Maria herself dies suddenly at age thirty-six in 1844). Julia (to whom the letters are written) apparently complains often about the brevity of Maria's correspondence, and Maria's response ("There is nothing of very great importance to write about ... I am confined to the news of the family and the neighborhood ...") describes both the strength and the weakness of this collection (pp. 86-7).

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