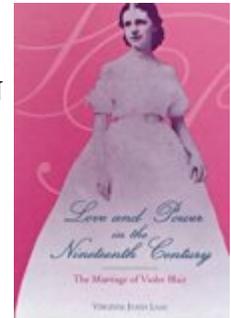


Virginia Jeans Laas. *Love and Power in the Nineteenth Century: The Marriage of Violet Blair*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1998. 192 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-55728-505-8.



Reviewed by Jeanette Keith

Published on H-CivWar (December, 1998)

"Everyone thinks I am throwing myself away to marry you," wrote Violet Blair to her future husband, Albert Janin, one month before their wedding in 1874 (p. 40). Violet Blair was a member of Washington, D.C.'s social elite. Her grandfather was Thomas Sidney Jesup, who served as quartermaster general of the Army from 1818 until his death in 1860; her grandmother, the sister of George Rogers Clark. Violet's father, who died when she was a small child, left his widow and orphaned children under the protection of the powerful Blair family of Maryland. Violet's uncles included Montgomery Blair, Abraham Lincoln's postmaster general, and Francis Preston Blair, Jr., who served as a general in the Union Army.

Violet Blair, a beautiful and erudite young woman, had gloried in her reputation as one of the belles of Washington in the late 1860s; her relatives complained that men trailed young Violet wherever she went, and she complacently recorded in her diary a dozen marriage proposals from impressive young men, including veterans of both sides of the recent Civil War. Her family and friends had a right to be shocked when she chose

to marry Albert Janin, a young lawyer from New Orleans who was lacking in family background, talent, ambition, good looks, and good sense.

In this study of their marriage, Virginia Jeans Laas works hard to make a case that Violet's marriage, which endured for fifty-four years, was not a mistake, since it allowed the imperious young woman to maintain the autonomy and personal power she had enjoyed as a belle. Alas, Violet's power within her marriage derived from Albert's weakness. Constantly broke, sponging on Violet's family and his own, continually involved in foolish get-rich schemes, Albert barely escaped disgrace. Violet recognized that she had married a "Colonel Sellers": her husband was like the dubious hero of the Twain-Warner novel, *The Gilded Age*.

After the Janins' one baby died at birth, Albert and Violet lived separate lives, rarely residing in the same town for the rest of their long marriage. Violet refused to leave her mother's house in Lafayette Square and the round of social engagements that consumed her life, and Albert preferred to live in New Orleans. By May, 1894, Violet

noted in her diary that she had not seen her husband in more than a year: "It is sad, this unwedded married life--.... At least we do not bore each other and we make no scandals (p. 103)." So they continued until death (that of Albert) finally severed their marriage in 1928; Violet lived on, an aged but still beautiful doyenne of Washington society, until 1933.

Laas's story of the Blair-Janin marriage is based upon meticulous research in the papers of the Blair family and the Janins, supplemented by much material on Washington's social elites. Laas places Violet Blair in various contexts, discussing her as a belle, as a feminist, and as a participant in a new style of courtship and marriage evolving among middle-class Americans in the late nineteenth century. These attempts at analysis are unconvincing, and seem extraneous to the story Laas wants to tell: that of an intelligent, willful woman whose own choices ruined her life.

The result is something like a historically accurate version of a novel by Henry James or Edith Wharton. This is not entirely a compliment. Like a novel by Wharton, Laas's book requires the reader to care about people whose life-and-death concerns revolve around acceptance in "society," that select company of pseudo-aristocrats found in every 19th-century American city. Judging by the example of Violet Blair, this was a game not worth the effort.

Isolated by her own choice from the great, raucous carnival of late-nineteenth century America, with neither love nor work to occupy her days, Violet spent her life in social engagements and unconsummated flirtations. The only person she seems to have truly cared for was her mother, Mary Jesup Blair. She used her diary to congratulate herself on being born a Blair, possessed of "high birth and blood, unusual learning,... acknowledged beauty and a spotless reputation" (p. 1) and to vent her anger against immigrants: "I would stop at nothing to rid my country of these vermin (p. 109)." If as Laas suggests, Washington

high society was dominated by women like Violet Blair, then it was indeed provincial, insular, and mediocre. The most significant thing Violet ever accomplished was to leave her money to the National Cathedral when she died.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Jeanette Keith. Review of Laas, Virginia Jeans. *Love and Power in the Nineteenth Century: The Marriage of Violet Blair*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. December, 1998.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2561>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.