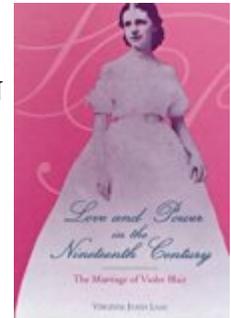


Virginia Jeans Laas. *Love and Power in the Nineteenth Century: The Marriage of Violet Blair.* Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1998. 192 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-55728-505-8.



Reviewed by Betsy Glade

Published on H-SAWH (March, 2000)

Violet Blair debuted in the nation's capital in mid-December 1866, at age eighteen. She had spent her youth and teenage years, which coincided with the American Civil War, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. As a young woman, Violet found herself surrounded by men, in whose attention she delighted but whom she found boring and beneath her. A trip to Europe in 1867 did little to disabuse her of her superiority in education, intellect, social position and graces, and emotional control, as European aristocrats and American diplomats and military officers followed her around the continent like lovesick puppies.

Violet's role models were strong women, especially her mother, aunts, and grandmother. She lacked strong male influences because her father died when she was a young child, after seeking his fortune in California for much of her early years. Her grandfathers and various uncles and cousins met her every whim. Her brother was dependent upon her. Violet's goal at eighteen was to have a dozen proposals of marriage before she turned twenty-one. She delighted in leading men on and then dashing their hopes by refusing

them. After returning to Washington in 1868 as the belle of its society, she began to reconsider the overtures of a New Orleans lawyer, Albert C. Janin, who, while "ugly and Southern," was the most intellectually suited of her suitors (pp. 23, 25). After her engagement to Janin, she continued to flirt with men at the many balls, teas, dinner parties, and other social activities of Washington's elite.

The author describes in detail the "tests" that Violet set for her "Bertie," as outlined by Karen Lystra in *Searching the Heart*.^[1] He passed them with flying colors, but nonetheless Violet suffered from "marriage trauma," as defined by Nancy Cott. Cott studied the psychological anguish that nineteenth-century women endured because of their limited choices and described women's practice of postponing the inevitable loss of freedom that marriage demanded as long as they could.^[2]

Albert Janin finally wooed Violet with promises to support her continuing study of languages and literature and to seek publicly her advice for his law firm. He also acceded to her demand that she remain in Washington in her mother's home,

even though his home and practice were in New Orleans. She made demands on him, including that he distinguish himself as a lawyer and prove to her that she would continue to live in the materially comfortable manner to which she was accustomed. The couple finally married in May 1874.

Marriage, though mostly spent apart, proved satisfying in the first years. Violet suffered from gynecological problems that made abstinence necessary but not onerous since the couple lived half a nation away from one another. Nevertheless, Violet feared pregnancy, and the couple practiced forms of birth control, including the use of condoms, which Janin managed to get in New Orleans despite the Comstock Law of 1872. The couple eventually did try to have children, and their efforts resulted in a pregnancy that ended abruptly in the seventh month with the birth of a premature baby girl who died within twenty-four hours. This devastated Violet, and, apparently, she was unable to conceive again.

Although Violet married Janin to fit into conventional practice, she claimed she did not love him. However, after they were married, she found that she did, in fact, love him dearly, and their long separations, sometimes for more than a year at a time, wore on her. She finally agreed to accompany him for short visits to New Orleans in the spring and fall, but she insisted on spending the winter social seasons in the capital and the summers with her mother at their country home in Maryland. Consequently, the marriage became one of separation rather than union.

Violet began the marriage financially independent. She made Janin sign a prenuptial agreement that left her property at her own disposal. This turned out to be quite necessary, as she was much more financially conservative and responsible than her husband, who was a gambler and an utter failure at business despite diligent effort. Janin tried his hand at politics, but he either could not get nominated by his party or lost at the polls.

He most persisted in pouring time, money, and energy into a canal in Louisiana that came to naught, except to nearly exhaust the resources of his wife and her mother. They lent him money, paid interest on his loans, and signed notes so that he could get loans elsewhere. The one business that he succeeded in running was a tour business in a cave in Kentucky owned by Violet's mother and her sisters. This endeavor kept Janin away from Violet, who had expected him to spend more time with her after he sold his worthless canal. For most of the marriage, Janin only visited his wife for a few days at a time, a few times a year. On these occasions, he avoided company, which Violet loved, by retreating into inner chambers or out of the house. Violet considered her marriage a failure. It ended with the death of her husband in 1928. She died in 1933.

Laas's sources are a gold mine, and she is an able miner. She tapped into the letters and diaries of Violet Blair and the letters of Albert Janin to tell this sweeping story of a fifty-four-year marriage of two interesting, if atypical, people. While fascinating, the book raises more questions than it answers. Its title indicates that it is about the marriage of Violet Blair, and, indeed, very little else intrudes into the story. Despite the fact that this presumably upper-class couple practiced illegal methods of birth control, there is no discussion of how widespread such actions were among this or any other class. Violet seems to have held extremely prejudiced opinions of anyone who did not belong to her class, but it is not clear who exactly made up this class. Henry Adams came from poor stock and so could not presume to be included. Violet's husband was the son of an immigrant, yet she despised immigrants and turned her back on woman's suffrage rather than see immigrants get to vote too. Her money was central to her lifestyle, and yet it is not clear exactly how she had enough means to put on lavish parties to reciprocate Washington's most prominent old families. She supported woman's suffrage in the 1870s and then changed her mind in the 1890s and beyond,

yet it is not clear whether she participated in any public activity in that regard. In fact, the world does not penetrate this story at all, which is the book's major shortcoming.

Laas describes Violet Blair as a southern belle, but Blair spent the Civil War in the North, found the South backward, and initially rejected her future husband in part because he was southern. She would not move to his house and reacted angrily when he presumed she would by buying her a house of her own. She did not want to live in the South. Like other belles, Violet did spend her life in socializing with a particular class of people and flirted continually with men throughout her marriage, evidently with impunity. She and most people who saw her considered her a beauty. Men whom she had rejected in her single years confessed how difficult it was to recover from her refusal of them. Violet took particular interest in a German diplomat whose attentions to her were close to scandalous. She questioned the propriety of their relationship in her diary, and she described the flirtation in detail to her husband, as she had done with regard to similar alliances before she was married. Janin rarely objected and spent so little time with her that she suffered no chastisement from him. The couple lived independently of one another, save for Violet's monetary support of him.

It is not clear from the evidence presented whether this couple was typical. Their independence from one another seems unusual, but not unheard of in the nineteenth-century. My own study of Richmonders Dr. George W. Bagby and Lucy Parke Chamberlayne Bagby shows a twenty-year marriage spent apart at least half, if not more, of the time. Like the Janins, the Bagbys experienced economic insecurity assuaged only by Lucy's contributions from taking in boarders. Yet, without looking at many other couples, I could not claim that the Bagbys were representative of middle-class southern married couples. In her epilogue, Laas claims that "many couples lived

apart for a good deal of their marriage." Where is the evidence? Is she trying to show that Violet Blair was typical? In the same sentence, she writes that, "few left such an extensive record" (p. 121). Without such records, can we assume there were many such couples?

Laas suggests that Violet Blair's experience in love and marriage shows a need to redefine the southern belle beyond the stereotype of the "beautiful, frivolous flirt with no more substantial thought than what to wear to the next party" (p. 121). Violet Blair was intelligent, well read, and fluent in a number of languages. She remained beautiful and sought after by men throughout her life. She maintained a social schedule of parties, dinners, teas, visits, and balls, and she was esteemed as a hostess among Washington, D.C.'s elite. She joined a number of organizations that sought exclusivity in terms of breeding and heritage and was a well-known member of the capital's "cave dwellers," those elite who shunned the nouveau riche and immigrants who had arrived after the Revolutionary War.

But was Violet Blair typical? She belonged to a very exclusive group of people. Who were they? Were there other women whose marriages were structured in the way Violet's was? Was Albert Janin typical? Why did these two marry? Why did Janin stay away? For a time, I thought it was because he was not upholding his manliness by supporting his wife, but rather was sponging off her and her mother. After he gave up his canal and was headed home, however, he successfully turned around their family business in Kentucky. Still, he chose to stay there until he got too old to take care of himself, and Violet had to take him home to care for him in his last days.

Violet Blair did have power: the power to live outside her marriage while still maintaining respectability. She did love her husband. Her husband paid homage to her, but did he love her? He, too, exercised power in the relationship, although not in typical fashion. He stayed away despite her

requests that he return to her. He ignored her advice about finances and exerted pressure on her to leave his finances to him, even though it was her family's money and credit that supported his lifestyle and dreams.

There is no evidence in the book that these two were typical. Without such evidence, it is difficult to let their actions redefine belles, marriage, love, power, propriety, or manliness. That Violet Blair redefined her gender role to some degree in her marriage is very obvious. Whether or not that became a standard for other women is not clear.

Notes

[1]. Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[2]. Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

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Citation: Betsy Glade. Review of Laas, Virginia Jeans. *Love and Power in the Nineteenth Century: The Marriage of Violet Blair*. H-SAWH, H-Net Reviews. March, 2000.

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