

First Lady of the Confederacy: Varina Davis's Civil War

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Review

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A Reluctant Rebel

Scholarly Gap is Filled

In an age when Southern women's history is filled with dynamic and prolific scholarship, the absence of any serious examination of the life of Varina Davis is quite the historiographical anomaly. Joan E. Cashin has filled this scholarly gap with the publication of her highly anticipated biography, **First Lady of the Confederacy: Varina Davis's Civil War**. Drawing upon an array of primary material including newspaper articles, legal documents, autobiographies, political papers and correspondence, Cashin portrays Varina as a Southern woman who did not conform to the stereotypes of her time or our own. A troubled wife unable to break free from the dominance of her celebrated husband and a half-hearted patriot ambivalent about the Confederate cause, Varina Davis engaged in a life-long struggle to fulfil her roles as Southern wife and Confederate First Lady.

Varina Howell was born on May 7, 1826, in Natchez, Mississippi. The daughter of Margaret Kempe Howell and William Howell, Varina's childhood was shaped by her father's Northern heritage and his financial woes. After settling in Natchez in 1815, William Howell built up a successful merchandising company with his brother-in-law, Sturges Sprague, only to lose everything in the Panic of 1837. William's family bore the brunt of his poor business decisions. Although life was clouded by financial instability, Margaret Kempe Howell ensured that her daughters were educated in the social and cultural responsibilities of elite Southern womanhood. Years of private tutoring and a brief stint at a young ladies academy in Philadelphia prepared Varina for her life as a belle, and an invitation to visit her father's long time friend, Joseph Davis, presented her with an opportunity to put her training to use. Davis's Hurricane

plantation attracted many elite visitors, but it was Joseph's widowed brother, Jefferson, who caught Varina's attention during her stay in December 1843. While Varina noted that Jefferson had an uncertain temper and a way of taking for granted that everybody agrees with him when he expresses an opinion, she was taken with his peculiarly sweet voice and winning manner of asserting himself. The couple soon fell in love and agreed to marry by the time Varina returned home in February 1844. The wedding took place on February 26, 1845, and after honeymooning in New Orleans, the couple settled at Brierfield plantation, located on the stretch of land along the Mississippi River known as Davis Bend.

Marriage to Jefferson Davis turned out to be one of the greatest challenges in Varina's life, as she struggled to strike a balance between devotion to others and her duty to herself. Overwhelmed by her obligations as Brierfield's new mistress, Varina soon found herself in the middle of a nasty dispute with her brother-in-law, Joseph, who meddled in her plans for a new kitchen and then instructed Jefferson to allow his sister and her seven children to take up residence at the plantation. These squabbles, together with a row about Jefferson's decision to leave Brierfield and a share of income from the property to Varina for her lifetime only, led to a serious rift in the Davis marriage. Varina longed for a companionate union with her husband, while Jefferson believed that wives had many duties . . . and not many rights. The couple was unable to find a middle ground, and by the late 1840s, they led relatively separate lives—Varina stayed at Brierfield while Jefferson climbed the political ladder in Washington, D.C. After two years of marital conflict, a desperate Varina conceded defeat and agreed to act the part of the dependent wife. With his headstrong wife temporarily subdued, Jefferson permitted Varina to return to Washington with him in December 1849. As Cashin notes, this pattern of resistance and submission came to define Varina's troubled relationship with her uncompromising husband.

Submission was difficult, but Varina was keenly aware that it offered up its own rewards. After relocating to Washington, the 1850s were a time of stability in the Davis marriage, enhanced by the arrival of children. Cashin argues that Varina—who remained childless for the first seven years of her marriage—basked in her new status as a mother, because at last she was doing what a woman of her time was supposed to do. However joyous, motherhood was often marked by tragedy. The Davis's first child, Samuel, died in 1854, and puerperal fever almost killed Varina when she gave birth to Jefferson Jr. in 1857. At times of great

sadness, Varina longed for her mother's good counsel and tried to follow her teachings on the supreme importance of duty. When she gave birth to a son in April 1859, Varina submitted to Jefferson's desire to name the boy after his brother, Joseph, even though she did not wish to pay tribute to a man who treated her with injustice and unkindness. Deference, Varina now realised, was a prerequisite to a happy marriage with Jefferson. Accepting the flaws in her marriage, Varina immersed herself in her family and friends and relished the small liberties that Washington life afforded a genteel Southern woman.

The Civil War ended the Davis's sojourn in Washington. While Varina remained ambivalent about secession, Jefferson chose to follow Mississippi out of the Union, and she had no alternative but to go with him. In January 1861, the family returned to Brierfield, and on February 9, Jefferson accepted an appointment as provisional President of the Confederacy. Within months, the Davis family had relocated to Richmond, Virginia, and Varina found herself thrust into the carefully prescribed role of Confederate First Lady. While Varina had loved the social buzz and politics in Washington, she felt uncomfortable in Richmond society where her impetuous tongue earned her a reputation as a coarse western woman. More importantly, Varina lacked the patriotic clout essential to her position. Admitting only weeks before Jefferson's appointment that she was not yet a secessionist, Varina struggled to muster enthusiasm for the cause and privately doubted the South's ability to wage war. At Jefferson's inaugural, the First Lady shocked patriotic Confederates by leaving half way through the ceremony, likening her husband to a willing victim going to his funeral pyre. Controversy and bad press followed. Ardent Confederates found Varina's resignation about the outcome of the war unsettling and disliked her enduring friendships with Northerners such as Minna Blair, whose husband was the postmaster general in Lincoln's cabinet. Varina found the public scrutiny unbearable. When Union forces threatened Richmond in early 1865, she gladly made her escape through North Carolina and Georgia to the piney woods not far from the Florida border. Jefferson joined her, and on May 10, the party were surrounded and captured by Union soldiers, with Jefferson clad in his wife's raincoat and shawl. Jefferson was transported to Fort Monroe, and Varina was placed under house arrest in Savannah, Georgia.

Varina's post war life was defined by her troubled marriage to Jefferson and her increasing inability to defer to his position. The couple travelled to Britain after Jefferson's release in May 1867, but when business opportunities were not forthcoming, the former Confederate President accepted a position with the

Carolina Life Insurance Company back in the United States. Varina eventually joined him in Tennessee but not before Jefferson had engaged in a romantic liaison with Clement Clay's wife, Virginia. It was the first of many indiscretions. After weathering the scandal of being caught on a train in the arms of another woman, Jefferson shocked even his most loyal supporters when he accepted Sarah Dorsey's rather unconventional proposal to write his memoirs at her Gulf Coast estate, Beauvoir, in 1877. In England, Varina only learned of the arrangement from a newspaper article, and while she agreed to move to Memphis, she staunchly refused to relocate to Beauvoir. The odd and titillating relationship between Jefferson and Sarah deeply hurt Varina, who swallowed her pride to join the Dorsey household in 1878. The move would prove a lasting one. Sarah left her estate to Jefferson when she died in July 1879, and while Varina hated the solace of Beauvoir, she was able to reconcile with her husband, helping him to complete his memoirs which were published in 1881. When Jefferson died from acute bronchitis in 1889, Varina abandoned Beauvoir for New York, where she earned a living as a writer and cultivated friendships with women such as Constance Cary Harrison and Julia Grant. Before her death in 1906, a liberated Varina mustered the intellectual courage to declare that the right side had won the Civil War; enraging unreconstructed Rebels but freeing herself from the burden of her Confederate past.

Joan Cashin's book is a beautifully written and compelling examination of one woman's struggle to come to terms with the legacies of Southern womanhood and Confederate defeat. Cashin skilfully interweaves Jefferson Davis's ascendancy to the leadership of the Confederacy into Varina's life story, and the military, social and political events of the time become a backdrop to her personal struggles and private heartache. My only criticism is Cashin's tendency to tell the story for Varina, rather than allowing her to tell it herself. Cashin uses brief quotes from Varina's correspondence, but I was left wanting more from the 600 odd letters that the Confederate First Lady left to posterity. That said, this book provides a fascinating and long overdue glimpse into the life of Varina Davis and will appeal to historians and general readers alike.

Dr. Giselle Roberts is a Research Associate in the Department of History at La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia. She is the author of The Confederate Belle (University of Missouri Press, ISBN 0826214649, \$32.50, softcover) and the editor of The Correspondence of Sarah Morgan and Francis Warrington Dawson (University of Georgia Press, ISBN 0820325910, \$39.95, hardcover).