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Book Review: Carol Haber, *The Trials of Laura Fair: Sex, Murder, and Insanity in the Victorian West*

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Carol Haber, *The Trials of Laura Fair: Sex, Murder, and Insanity in the Victorian West*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. Pp. 328. \$39.95 cloth (ISBN 978-1-4696-0758-0). doi:10.1017/S0738248014000674

On November 3, 1870, the four-time married, twice divorced, and twice widowed Laura Fair embarked on a San Francisco ferry, anxiously searching for her married and much older lover Alexander Parker Crittenden. Doubting, after much promise, the intention of Crittenden to divorce his current wife Clara and finally introduce Laura respectably to society as his future spouse, Laura decided to witness her paramour greeting Clara and their three children as they debarked from the train and then take the ferry together. When running through the decks, Laura finally found Crittenden comfortably seated on a bench with his family showing affection to his wife. Laura pulled a gun out of her cloak and fatally shot him. After declaring "I did it and I don't deny it. He ruined me and my daughter," she was immediately arrested.

In *The Trials of Laura Fair: Sex, Murder, and Insanity in the Victorian West*, Tulane University history professor Carole Haber recounts what became one of the most sensational nineteenth century criminal proceedings. Tried for murder a few months later, Laura pleaded not guilty on the grounds of temporary insanity caused by dysmenorrhea, a medical condition of painful menstrual cycles. Despite the efforts of the defense to prove Laura's lack of memory of and control over her actions and the events that occurred on the ferry, the first jury decided to disregard her testimony. The court chose to focus on the prosecutors' portrayal of Laura Fair as a dishonorable woman, who, in the words of Haber, embodied "the horrors of free love, wanton sexuality, and radical thinking" (2). Meanwhile, women's rights activists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton viewed Fair as a victim of the much older, deceitful, and powerful Crittenden.

After an appellate court overturned the original verdict and during her second trial, Laura Fair refused to testify, and increasingly embraced the role of an innocent woman plagued by her mental and physical disturbance. Haber masterfully describes such multiple representations of Laura Fair throughout her life, from the skilled and independent businesswoman who made a fortune in Nevada's silver mines to the disreputable mistress and home wrecker. Fair was not an exception. Other historians, including Mary S. Hartman, have documented that such manifold presentations of characters and personal histories was not uncommon among "lady killers" of the Victorian era, who "[i]n their own time . . . whether excused or vilified, were almost never presented as the women they were. They assumed multiple identities fashioned by both themselves and by others" (3).

Haber not only tells the story of Laura Fair's life and trials to illustrate the role of reputation and its reinvention in the Victorian West. She also connects

the multiple presentations of Laura Fair's character to the various interpretations of defendants in criminal trials. During the nineteenth century, the inquisitorial justice system, in which the investigation was typically overseen by a prosecutor or an examining magistrate, and the conduct of the trial was largely in the hands of the court, was replaced by the adversarial justice system. In the adversarial model, both the prosecutor and the defense were responsible for gathering evidence and presenting a narrative of the crime during the trial. Therefore, the courtroom became a sentimental theater in which opposing counsels recreated for the jury the story of the defendant and the events leading to the crime. The trial, therefore, represented the exclusive forum for seeking out and determining the truth.

During Fair's second trial, her counsel portrayed her as an innocent single mother who had been failed multiple times by the men of her life, and was finally deceived by her devious lover. Doctors testified that her biological condition impaired her capacity to control her behavior and emotions, whereas prosecutors, on the other hand, described her as a mischievous and unscrupulous woman whose "heart was evil, [and] her hands smeared with the blood of revenge" (4). Convinced by an effective defense supported by distinguished medical opinions on the connection between insanity and women's biological cycles, the jury returned a not guilty verdict to the astonishment of the entire country.

Laura Fair's case not only shocked and enchanted her contemporaries but captivated the imagination of the public and the press for well over a century. Haber's fascinating chronicle succeeds in providing a mesmerizing story of Laura Fair's life and trials, examining their many competing narratives and how they were reinvented over time. It also describes the beliefs, contradictions and constructions of gender roles, reputation, marriage, deception, insanity, crime, and sexuality in the Victorian era, as well as how these concepts were perceived and recreated in American courts.

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David A. J. Richards, *The Rise of Gay Rights and the Fall of the British Empire: Liberal Resistance and the Bloomsbury Group*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. 282. \$95.00 cloth (ISBN 978-1-107-03795-3); \$34.99 paper (ISBN 978-1-107-65979).
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The scope of this book is much broader than its title suggests. Richards, a law professor at New York University, has written not only about gay rights and