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A Southern Woman Successfully Pursues Her Dreams in the Chaos of the South After the Civil War

A LAND WITHOUT RUINS

*The True Story of a Slaveholder's Daughter
Who Became a Leader in the Civil Rights Movement*

by Belle Kearney

As an enlightened, sophisticated, and ambitious woman, Belle Kearney does not seem the type of person to have come from a slave-holding family in the American South. Yet, the social environment does not necessarily determine personality and beliefs. **A LAND WITHOUT RUINS**, Kearney's only written work, is a highly intriguing and informative memoir describing her life on a slave plantation, her travels in Europe and America, her success as an educator, and as a leader in the Suffrage and Temperance movements. This biography is part of a critically important "unknown" history of America, in that it tells of a strong-minded woman who had the courage to break free from the bonds of a stultifying community to pursue her own effective and beneficial mission.

Belle Kearney (1863-1939) was born on a plantation near Vernon, Mississippi, and was educated in her native state. Although her community was very conservative, her parents were in certain ways very liberal, and encouraged their daughter's intellectual development. At an early age, it was Kearney's desire to study law, but her father discouraged her, saying that it would be impossible to do so in the peculiar cultural atmosphere of the American South. She admits that she drifted in the high-society life, feeling depressed and unfulfilled. As Kearney says: "The desire of my heart had been to lead the life of a thoroughly independent person," but the reality was different: "conscious of not living up to my high conceptions of life, I hated myself and abhorred the way my time was spent."

Kearney's life shows a definite progression in identity and individuality. She became increasingly distanced from friends, wishing to break away and forge her own life. Her will was strong: "After the last fierce struggle with the profound elements of my being, a definite determination was made to abandon the shallow, aimless life that I had entered upon; — and it was done, — suddenly and forever. I concluded further that I must go to work, that an occupation which was uplifting and strengthening must be secured, if every family tradition was shattered and if my life were forfeited in the attempt." Finally, making the courageous decision to change her life, at the age of 19 she became a teacher and for six years was a very successful educator. As her social and political beliefs gained better definition, she decided to become an "active modern worker". Being logical and well-spoken, she embarked on a career as lecturer and rose to be one of the most logical, brilliant and popular speakers upon the American platform. She attained great success, establishing friendships with notable people including Susan B. Anthony, thus garnering for herself high-level membership in the Suffrage and Temperance movements.

Kearney's public life made her an extensive traveler. At 32, she toured Europe, taking in the classical history and sophisticated cultures she found there, and as a result learned different and varied ways of thinking and perceiving. She also traveled to Canada, and throughout the United States from Alaska to the Gulf of Mexico. In her forays to the Western regions of the North America, she met with Mormons, and came away with the unusual view of them as a "pleasure-loving people". Being a bold explorer, she even visited an opium den in San Francisco.

Kearney's book, which is both an autobiography and a social analysis, covers a wide range of issues. The text portrays the huge challenges facing the country in the post-Civil War environment, and the difficulties encountered in rebuilding the South and unification of the Republic. She compares the American situation with the one in Europe, such as in the area of female legal rights, education and suffrage. The complicated situation of blacks in the post-Civil War environment is sympathetically but objectively examined, including issues rarely covered at the time, especially by a woman writer. Kearney was part of a broader effort, to help black communities deal with serious problems, such as educational deficiencies, illegitimacy, and sexually transmitted diseases. She also confronts the challenges facing black assimilation into white society, and the Negro dialect she reproduces in the book was not meant to be demeaning, but rather to show the divisions in society at the time.

No doubt, Kearney's upbringing was the product of a traditional, wealthy land-owning social class that underwent the deprivations of the post-war period. Yet, her memoirs present an uncommon mix of what today would be called liberal and conservative views. Indeed, the diverse experiences which Belle Kearney assimilated over the years engendered an intensely personal philosophy about the problems of humanity. Because she held reasonable beliefs that defied simple classification, she was looked upon as one of the leaders of thought in the nation of her time, and as someone who raised the consciousness of a generation. Belle Kearney's excellent work, **A LAND WITHOUT RUINS**, gives us real insight into the mind of a trail-blazing woman, who refused to accept the path laid out for her by the remarkably complex and restrictive society in which she lived.

Paul Dennis Sporer (editor) is the author of *The Dimensions of Companionship; Liberating Love; The Concept of Family*; and *Equal but Different*. He has also served as editor on more than 30 culturally and historically significant books, including *Painting Explained*, by Thomas Gullick; *Is Secession Treason?*, by Albert Bledsoe; *The Heart of Aryavarta*, by Lawrence Dundas; *Beauty and Art*; by Aldam Heaton; *The French at Home*, by Albert Rhodes; *From Slave Cabin to Pulpit*, by Peter Randolph; *Newer Ideals of Peace*, by Jane Addams; *Views of Old Europe*, by Bayard Taylor; *Gentle Measures*, by Jacob Abbott; *Parental Influences*, William Bacon; *Finding a Way Out*, by Robert Moton; *The New Birth*, by Austin Phelps; *Tupelo*, by John Hill Aughey; *An Incident of Travel*, Arthur Jerome Eddy; *End of an Era*, by John Sergeant Wise; *The Missionary*, by Samuel Mazzuchelli; *Half a Century*, by Jane Swisshelm; *Born Three Times*, by Thomas L. Johnson; *Dark Hollow*, by Anna Katharine Green; and *1492: Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, by Mary Johnston.

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