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Madam Belle: Sex, Money, and Influence in a Southern Brothel (Topics In Kentucky History)

Maryjean Wall

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Belle Brezing made a major career move when she stepped off the streets of Lexington, Kentucky, and into Jennie Hill's bawdy house?an upscale brothel run out of a former residence of Mary Todd Lincoln. At nineteen, Brezing was already infamous as a youth steeped in death, sex, drugs, and scandal. But it was in Miss Hill's "respectable" establishment that she began to acquire the skills, manners, and business contacts that allowed her to ascend to power and influence as an internationally known madam.

In this revealing book, Maryjean Wall offers a tantalizing true story of vice and power in the Gilded Age South, as told through the life and times of the notorious Miss Belle. After years on the streets and working for Hill, Belle Brezing borrowed enough money to set up her own establishment?her wealth and fame growing alongside the booming popularity of horse racing. Soon, her houses were known internationally, and powerful patrons from the industrial cities of the Northeast courted her in the lavish parlors of her gilt-and-mirror mansion.

Secrecy was a moral code in the sequestered demimonde of prostitution in Victorian America, so little has been written about the Southern madam credited with inspiring the character Belle Watling in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. Following Brezing from her birth amid the ruins of the Civil War to the height of her scarlet fame and beyond, Wall uses her story to explore a wider world of sex, business, politics, and power. The result is a scintillating tale that is as enthralling as any fiction.

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