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Lawrence Otis Graham. *The Senator and the Socialite: The True Story of America's First Black Dynasty.* New York: HarperCollins, 2006. xxiv + 455 pp. $27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-06-018412-4; $15.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-06-098513-4.

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The careers and lives of Blanche K. Bruce, Mississippi landowner and U.S. senator, and his prominent wife, Josephine, an educator and politician in her own right, were emblematic of the promise and tragedy of post-Civil War America. After the war, the United States saw the growth of a generation of ambitious and successful black politicians and entrepreneurs. Some were former slaves, like Blanche, others the advantaged scions of antebellum free blacks, like Josephine. Americans also witnessed their demise at the hands of white supremacists at the turn of the twentieth century. Racial discrimination and an unsteady economy impeded rising as well as established African Americans, most of who struggled mightily against political, social, and economic suffocation. Some managed to enjoy relative success in the segregated niches of Chicago, New York City, and the District of Columbia. Many more discovered what it meant to live as second-class American citizens.

Lawrence Otis Graham attempts to tell the important story of the Bruces and their legacy in *The Senator and the Socialite: The True Story of America's First Black Dynasty*. Starting his story before the Civil War, Graham follows the "First Black Dynasty" through its ultimate fall from grace in mid-twentieth-century New York City. As with his previous bestseller, *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class* (1999), Graham takes on the ambitious task of capturing the meaning and importance of an underappreciated group of Americans.

Blanche Kelso Bruce was born in 1841, the son of Polly, a slave woman, and her owner, Pettis Bruce, in Prince Edward County, Virginia. Favored because of his bloodline connection to Bruce, Blanche was taught to read and was well prepared for freedom when he moved to Kansas in 1863. Josephine's early years were less dramatic and also less typical for antebellum African Americans. Born in 1853 to free blacks Joseph and Elizabeth Willson of Philadelphia, Josephine was privileged by her parents' prosperity–Joseph was one of the city's first black dentists and both parental families were quite wealthy. The Willsons soon moved to Cleveland, where they enjoyed the benefits of financial and social security, including easy relations with the city's wealthy white community.

Blanche and Josephine made the most of their relative advantages. Blanche taught school and took classes at Oberlin College. Recognizing the political opportunities of Reconstruction for ambitious black men, he moved to Mississippi in the late 1860s and joined the ascendant state Republican Party. Hard work, well-connected friends, and patronage appointments yielded both a fortune and statewide political prominence. Skillfully using his Republican connections, Bruce earned election by the Mississippi legislature to the U.S. Senate in 1874. Bruce was the first African American elected to a full senate term. (He would serve only one term.) Marriage in 1878 to the elite and graceful Josephine, who had earned notability as the first black teacher in the Cleveland school district, firmly established the Bruces as members of what Willard B. Gatewood has called the "aristocrats of color."[1]

The accrual of advantages like wealth, education, and political connections ensured the Bruces' security in Washington, D.C., even as white supremacists began wreaking violence and havoc across the South with increasing audacity after Reconstruction. As southern blacks were losing the right to vote, and, in many cases, the right to life and liberty, the couple's son Roscoe Conkling Bruce, named for the racially liberal New York senator, headed off to Philips Exeter Academy and then Harvard College.

Roscoe, lacking the political skills and opportunities of his father, did not manage to add much to the family's prestige or wealth. He did use his connection to the controversial but powerful Booker T. Washington to assume the superintendency of D.C.'s segregated black schools, a job that Tuskegee had maneuvered out of the expectant hands of W. E. B. Du Bois. Du Bois's attacks on Washington's accommodation of white supremacy, which he

published famously in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), were becoming increasingly popular among D.C.'s black educated middle class. Roscoe's fidelity to Tuskegee and his inability to win friends brought down his administration and forced his family out of the capital. Roscoe's wife, Clara, a smart, former Radcliffe student, attempted to rescue the family (and herself) by earning a law degree at Boston University. The first black editor of a law review in U.S. history, Clara's law career was blocked by the lack of opportunity for black lawyers in early twentieth-century America.

Roscoe and Clara's children, Roscoe Jr., Clara Jr., and Burrill, also seemed incapable of capitalizing on their family's fame and ultimately faded into obscurity. Clara Jr. did so as a white woman, using her light complexion to "pass" for the rest of her life. Outside of occasional scandals, the Bruce family disappeared from the headlines. It is a sad story that Graham sometimes tells with real force and feeling.

Ultimately, however, *The Senator and the Socialite* is too lightly documented and undercontextualized to be a rich source on this important subject. The limited footnotes offer too little insight into the material Graham has used. Quotations are frequently chosen for no clear reason and do not support Graham's more serious arguments. Too often, even these verbatim quotations do not have citations, and, in almost all cases, important secondary historical work goes unmentioned. Perhaps Graham and his publisher have tried to limit the scholarly apparatus that might distract lay readers. Nevertheless, one would hope that even nonexperts would welcome proper citations.

At several points, the limited citations can be especially frustrating. For example, Graham mischaracterizes the racial circumstances of post-Reconstruction Washington, D.C. "[Josephine] had always lived in cities where wealthy blacks and whites mixed," Graham writes of the Bruces' move to D.C. in 1878, and "[t]he racial attitudes of Washington citizens, and the treatment accorded by white congressmen and their wives, would take considerable adjustment for Josephine" (p. 90). Though no idyllic bastion of egalitarianism, Washington was not the Deep South in the 1880s, and upper-class white and black people did mix to a surprising extent. Many African Americans found real economic and social opportunity in the city, and northern Democratic and Republican congressmen were generally considered friendly to black Washingtonians. Perhaps this prevailing view of Washington in the 1870s is wrong, and Graham has a better understanding of the period. Nonetheless, historians generally expect some documentary evidence for such revisionism. It is worth noting here that Graham's bibliography, which is extensive but does not compensate for the lack of citations, omits Constance McLaughlin Green's Pulitzer Prize-winning scholarship on Washington.[2] Though dated, Green's work would still have provided much needed context.

Factual errors mar the work in several places. Graham confuses the famous Washington minister Francis Grimke with Archibald Grimke, a Harvard-educated lawyer who lived in Boston, and refers to Paul Laurence Dunbar as a "Harlem Renaissance poet." (Dunbar, who died in 1906, did most of his writing in Ohio and Washington.) Such mistakes can usually be forgiven, but they become serious when combined with the previously mentioned concerns about methodology.

Despite these problems, readers should admire Graham's honesty about his subjects. This book, while a celebration of black ambition and success, is no simple hagiography. Blanche could be frustratingly passive in the face of racism; Josephine bordered on racism herself in her suspicion of dark-skinned African Americans; Roscoe was obnoxious, snobbish, and self-destructive; and Roscoe's children were spoiled. The unsavory aspects of the Bruces raise a question that Graham does not address: If the family was widely disliked by their peers, as was the case in Philadelphia, Mississippi, Washington, D.C., and New York City, then how did its members maintain their influence and power? Though not necessarily a problem for a successful businessman, unpopularity would presumably harm greatly the family of "the senator and a socialite." For example, Roscoe Bruce left Washington in disgrace in 1921, banished to an unglamorous job in West Virginia. Graham tells this part of the Bruce family history with real drama, yet insists that the Bruces continued to enjoy considerable prestige. Graham explains that Josephine still had a coterie of powerful black Washingtonians, but does not identify these remaining friends. Either Graham has overemphasized the degree to which Roscoe burned bridges or he has not provided enough background and context for Washington's social and political scene.

It is in this area, that of the Bruce family's interactions with other black Americans, that Graham offers some theses. Blanche and Josephine, argues Graham, actively separated themselves from ordinary African Americans–even family members–and Roscoe got the message from his parents that he was better than most people. Roscoe's children also believed this, but, Graham suggests, they could not back up their assumed superiority with in-

tellect or success. Lay readers will probably wonder whether Graham sees the Bruces' antisocial behavior or the rising tide of American racism as the cause of the family's tragedies. No doubt both worked against them, but Graham offers few real conclusions.

For historians, Graham's work will prove tantalizing. The Bruce family has a fascinating history: Why not give this history its due with credibility and evidence?- Those less concerned with historiographical conventions, like evidence and citations, may find the tragic–and well-written–last third of *The Senator and the Socialite* a good read, though the book's plodding opening chapters and repetitious middle section may lose many casual readers.

Readers interested in a solid history of the experiences of privileged black Americans after the Civil War should still consult the works of Willard Gatewood, David Levering Lewis, and Dickson D. Bruce Jr.[3] In particular, Bruce does the work one wishes Graham had done: provide deep insight into the development, struggles, and triumphs of one of America's most important families.

Notes

[1]. Willard B. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), x.

[2]. Constance McLaughlin Green, *Washington*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962-63), and Constance McLaughlin Green, *The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967). Green won the 1963 Pulitzer Prize in history for the first volume of the former work.

[3]. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*; David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois*, 2 vols. (New York: Henry Holt, 1993-2000); and Dickson D. Bruce Jr., *Archibald Grimke: Portrait of a Black Independent* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993).

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