



The Senator and the Socialite: The True Story of America's First Black Dynasty

Lawrence Otis Graham

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This is the true story of America's first black dynasty. The years after the Civil War represented an astonishing moment of opportunity for African-Americans. The rush to build a racially democratic society from the ruins of slavery is never more evident than in the personal history of Blanche Kelso Bruce and his heirs.

Born a slave in 1841, Bruce became a local Mississippi sheriff, developed a growing Republican power base, amassed a real-estate fortune, and became the first black to serve a full Senate term. He married Josephine Willson, the daughter of a wealthy black Philadelphia doctor. Together they broke racial barriers as a socialite couple in 1880s Washington, D.C.

By befriending President Ulysses S. Grant, abolitionist Frederick Douglass, and a cadre of liberal black and white Republicans, Bruce spent six years in the U.S. Senate, then gained appointments under four presidents (Garfield, Arthur, Harrison, and McKinley), culminating with a top Treasury post, which placed his name on all U.S. currency.

During Reconstruction, the Bruce family entertained lavishly in their two Washington town houses and acquired an 800-acre plantation, homes in four states, and a fortune that allowed their son and grandchildren to attend Phillips Exeter Academy and Harvard University, beginning in 1896.

The Senator's legacy would continue with his son, Roscoe, who became both a protégé of Booker T. Washington and a superintendent of Washington, D.C.'s segregated schools. When the family moved to New York in the 1920s and formed an alliance with John D. Rockefeller Jr., the Bruces became an enviable force in Harlem society. Their public battle to get their grandson admitted into Harvard University's segregated dormitories elicited the support of people like W. E. B. Du Bois and Franklin D. Roosevelt, and broke brave new ground for blacks of their day.

But in the end, the Bruce dynasty's wealth and stature would disappear when the Senator's grandson landed in prison following a sensational trial and his Radcliffe-educated granddaughter married a black Hollywood actor who passed for white.

By drawing on Senate records, historic documents, and the personal letters of Senator Bruce, Josephine, their colleagues, friends, children, and grandchildren, author Lawrence Otis Graham weaves a riveting social history that spans 120 years. From Mississippi to Washington, D.C., to New York, *The Senator and the Socialite* provides a fascinating look into the history of race and class in America.

The Senator and the Socialite: The True Story of America's First Black Dynasty Details

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From Reader Review The Senator and the Socialite: The True Story of America's First Black Dynasty for online ebook

R.K. Johnson says

Mr. Graham is a clever devil!!! I love reading his work because it always sheds light on so many gems of our past. He doesn't just name drop, but details all of his subjects, characterizing them in a way that just makes you want to know more. His writing is articulate, confident and provocative in a way that lures you right on in.

The only thing I don't particularly care for is the way he always points out how some uppity Blacks, or members of the Black elite were separatists who considered themselves better than the masses who were not quite light, or right enough for them. I just don't buy it. Not when so many civic organizations were born by this group and others who were a part of the middle and working classes.

Anyway, this is a great read. So much history and fine, intelligent writing.

You highbrow son of gun, you, Graham. Always going on about the Black and the Bougie! blah...blah...blah...but you know what?

I love it :)

Allyson Wilson says

I absolutely loved this book and highly recommend it to everyone looking to acquire a better understanding of black politicians post-reconstruction.

Mrs. T says

Very interesting and informative about Reconstruction America, Post reconstruction politics & the Black Elite

Brendan says

such an interesting book on America's first black dynasty... blanche bruce went from slavery to the first african american to be elected into senate, then the treasury... beyond amazing that a former slave was now signing every dollar bill in the united states.

K.C. says

Wonderful book, wonderful writer, disturbing conclusion. It begins well, first full term Black senator Blanch

K. Bruce gathers wealth and power but ends horribly with a grandson going to jail and his own son dying poor and unknown. Graham is a gifted story teller who makes all the numbers and facts fun and informative.

Susan says

It took me forever to get through this! The book has a lot of information in it. This families story should have made a difference in lives of black Americans, but like most politicians they were out of touch with the common man and only looked out for their best interest and so instead of changing things for the better they made things worse! The book is dry, but worth the read!

Kenne Jones says

I enjoyed learning about this man. Surprised to not have known of him before.

Frederick Douglass says

To this day there have only been six black American members of the United States Senate, five elected. Only three have served full-terms. The six are Revels (R) Mississippi, Blanche Kelso Bruce (R) Mississippi [full-term], Washington, DC's own Edward Brooke (R) Massachusetts [full-term, 2], Carol Mosley Braun (D) Illinois [full-term], Barack Obama (D) Illinois (vacated his seat when he won the 2008 Presidential race), Roland Burris (D) Illinois (filled seat vacated by Obama).

Elle says

A historical account of a little known fact – Blanche K. Bruce was born a slave in 1841 and rose to become the 1st African-American man to serve a full term in the United States Senate. He also served as Register of the Treasury; both high-ranking government positions that provided significant wealth and prestige. Together with his wife, Josephine, they produced a son, Roscoe C. Bruce Sr., who with his wife Clara, produced a son, Roscoe C. Bruce Jr., who eventually – through his overblown ego, and entitlement issues – shamed the Bruce family name.

Political, social, and financial progress made by African-Americans during Reconstruction had come to a grinding halt when the South took control of the country's political landscape, and after the death of the patriarch, Blanche, the son and grandson splurged the family's fortune in an effort to "keep up with the Jones'." Blanche's political connections were no longer viable resources for Roscoe Sr. who later found himself begging the Rockefeller family for employment as manager of Harlem's Dunbar Apartments; a relationship that would also suffer due to Roscoe Jr's illegal activities.

Sadly, Blanche K. Bruce was a man who worked tirelessly to build a life for his family, but not to improve life for his constituency. He didn't stand firm on issues that he knew were important because he was more concerned with maintaining his connections and stature – in essence, he was a coward. Roscoe Sr. who directly benefited from his father's wealth and privilege became a highly educated, self-aggrandizing, greedy, selfish snob who sought prominence based on his father's position in government. Roscoe Jr. grew to be a petty criminal who served jail time. Both died penniless. I think the author, Lawrence Otis Graham, did

a fine job depicting the dichotomy that existed within many light-complexioned, well-to-do African-Americans during Slavery, and Reconstruction; which was to suffer the belief that they were somehow separate from their African-American lineage because of their social class, and political affiliations, and should be entitled to certain privileges irrespective of their race. The Bruce's avoided dark complexioned African-Americans, including members of their family, and soon became unwelcome in both sectors of society – black & white.

Herein, Mr. Graham also gives an account of the strongly opposing (and infamous) philosophies between two very prominent African-American figures – W.E.B. DuBois, and Booker T. Washington.

This book, as it depicts the life of one family during a contentious time in history, is a sweeping indictment on class, race, and politics in America. A good read that I highly recommend.

Samara says

We had an African-American Senator, born a slave in 1841, that served his full term (six years in office), in 1880.

Riley says

Blanche Bruce of Mississippi was the first black elected to a full term in the U.S. Senate. But, unlike say Frederick Douglass, he doesn't come off as a terribly inspiring figure, since he seemed to be more focused during his time in Reconstruction with building a family dynasty and ensuring federal appointments. His descendants do even worse, and reminded me of Thurgood Marshall's barely veiled criticism of Clarence Thomas that "there's no difference between a white snake and a black snake. They'll both bite...."

Brandie says

The Senator and the Socialite is the true story of Blanche K. Bruce, a Mississippian who was the first elected black senator to serve a full term in the U.S. Senate. In the book, Graham chronicles the Bruce family's rise to prominence during the 19th Century, a time when blacks were truly on the bottom rungs of society. Graham also relates the story of the family's subsequent decline in the 20th Century.

As a black Mississippian, I'd heard of Bruce before reading this book. He was one of the famous names that Mississippi school children hear about as they're growing up and learning about state history. But I'd never read more than paragraph about him, even in grad school. When I first noticed this book on my mother's dresser, I couldn't pass up the chance to read a whole book about not just Bruce but also his family.

The Senator and the Socialite starts off great. It's historical non-fiction, but it's certainly not a dry read. Graham is a very capable writer. As expected, I learned a ton of new stuff. For example, I had no idea that Mississippi has had a black Lt. Governor. Alexander K. Davis served as Lt. Governor under Adelbert Ames. Even more amazing is that Davis and Ames were elected in November 1873.

The more I read about Bruce and his wife, Josephine, the more I didn't like them, which is something I hate to admit. They both seemed extremely opportunistic, and there doesn't seem to be any justifiable reason for

it. They both wanted to acquire and hold onto power, even when it meant neglecting their extended family. When I think of historical figures who accomplished great things, I tend to think of them as having pure reasons for their actions, and I find myself holding them to a kind of lofty ideal. When I read accounts like what's in *The Senator and the Socialite*, it brings these people down to reality, and I realize that they were humans with flaws, like the rest of us. I guess that can be both a good and bad thing.

Unfortunately, my dislike for the Bruces isn't limited to Blanche and Josephine. I feel the same about Roscoe, their son, though, his personality isn't totally his own fault. His parents were often so busy with their own professional and social obligations that they didn't spend any time with their kid. It's heartbreaking to read about how he wanted to get to know them, how he yearned for closeness with them, but they just weren't there for him emotionally.

In Chapter 15, we finally get an instance where Roscoe doesn't seem like a snob. Josephine wanted him to marry someone from a wealthier family so that problems wouldn't arise due to mismatched financial backgrounds. Her brother's first wife was a woman from a family of more modest means than theirs, and when they split, she took everything he had - literally. The woman took all his possessions. Josephine didn't want Roscoe to succumb to the same fate. But Roscoe didn't budge. He wanted Clara, even though her family was middle class and not as wealthy as the Bruces.

As I began Chapter 15, I thought that Roscoe may have matured and turned over a new leaf, but my thoughts were premature. Right before his marriage to Clara, he was such an brat about the wedding and who was supposed to pay for it. He wanted a grand wedding but he wasn't willing to help Clara's family pay for it, even though they couldn't afford all the things he demanded. I've never heard the term groomzilla, which would be the male version of a bridezilla, but I would say Roscoe definitely qualified. He wouldn't help pay for the wedding, and he was unwilling to postpone it so that Clara's family could save some more money for it. Also, he made Clara leave school to marry him and suggested that she was immoral for wanting to postpone so that she could finish. What a jerk!

Josephine had at least one moment of redemption, too. In Chapter 16, she decided to pay her workers, going against the advice of her asshole brother-in-law. So the Bruces weren't totally opportunistic about everything. To be fair, the Bruces aren't the only ones who seemed less shiny to me by the time I finished the book. Through the accounts that Graham decides to include, he also manages to make Booker T. Washington seem like a cretin.

Final Opinion

While it was certainly interesting to read about this extraordinary family, I can't help but feel sad about the outcome. In a way, even the modern family doesn't leave any hope for a happy ending for the "dynasty". Nearly all of the Bruce descendants have disappeared or have chosen to obscure their family ties to the family. Some of the descendants live as white people and refuse to acknowledge ties due to racial reasons. And many of the family members who look black don't necessarily feel the need to embrace the family history.

Honestly, my opinion of Bruce and his family kept declining throughout the book, and they never really were able to redeem themselves to what my opinion of them had been prior to reading the book. Granted, prior to reading the book, I'd known very little about them, but I'd had a positive perception because of Blanche Bruce's role in the history of Mississippi and the nation. *The Senator and the Socialite* was a great book, but the story it tells is overwhelmingly sad.

Dutchermann says

Easy to follow story of Senator Blanche Bruce, Reconstruction politician, his wife, and their son.

Markita says

Wow. One of the best books I have ever read. This book has everything: a lot of history, a great story, and so many things to really make you think. The people of the Bruce dynasty are very polarizing people. They're elitist and condescending on one hand, but also live in a very difficult period that is full of racism and limited opportunities. They are also a part of a really small circle of the "black elite" so not many people can really relate to their struggles, and it's not a perspective that I've heard that often.

It's a thick book and kind of a slower read if you want to take it all in, but I loved every moment.

Anne Harm says

I think this book is fabulous -- providing inspiring to dispiriting views of human nature, inclusion, exclusion, and the decisions we make. The exquisite relationship between family, personality and social convention is well-supported by a solid academic framework. The Cast of Characters in front, Timeline in back provided steady and loyal guidance throughout the growth and development of the family tree. Our book club questioned the use of the term 'dynasty' in the subtitle, one of many potentially juicy discussions inherent. Enjoy, and be wiser.
