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Review Of "Capitol Men: The Epic Story Of Reconstruction Through The Lives Of The First Black Congressmen" By P. Dray

Richard M. Valelly , '75
Swarthmore College, rvalell1@swarthmore.edu

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Capitol Men: The Epic Story of Reconstruction through the Lives of the First Black Congressmen. By Philip Dray. (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008. Pp. [xvi], 463. \$30.00, ISBN 978-0-618-56370-8.)

Reconstruction showcased a male, biracial public sphere: black and white male officeholders at the national, state, and local levels doing legislative, administrative, and judicial work together. African American politicians took dozens of legislative actions and gave speeches in the House and Senate, before crowds, and in public halls that attracted admiring public notice—but just as often angry, racist reactions. Surprisingly, besides individual articles or book-length biographies and Eric Foner's essential reference work *Freedom's Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders during Reconstruction* (New York, 1993), there has not been, until now, a full modern discussion of them. Yet these talented, ambitious politicians have long needed a complete group portrait—and not the sort of Dunningite dismissal they received from Samuel Denny Smith in *The Negro in Congress, 1870–1901* (Chapel Hill, 1940). With *Capitol Men: The Epic Story of Reconstruction through the Lives of the First*

Black Congressmen, Philip Dray fills that gap with great literary verve and profound psychological and historical insight.

Dray's essential insight—one self-evidently resonant in the era of President Barack Obama—is that the service of black members of Congress during Reconstruction was a huge political novelty that caught all of America's attention and got several national conversations going about black officeholding and what it said about the country's development. The politicians whom Dray portrays were fascinating and very ambitious characters. They were quintessentially self-made men who grasped the opportunities for making a mark that were opened up by Reconstruction.

Dray deftly interweaves dozens of political, legislative, and legal stories and biographies. His work is based on an efficient, no-nonsense tour through the secondary literature and a small set of choice primary sources. He worked in these sources quickly, to be sure, but with a literary journalist's eye for telling details and spoken words that will keep the reader turning the page. All kinds of things come through in fresh ways: the controversy over the Senate seating of P. B. S. Pinchback of Louisiana; the sensation of South Carolina representative Robert Brown Elliott's great speech in favor of civil rights legislation; the profound disillusionment of Blanche K. Bruce, a senator from Mississippi, with the Ulysses S. Grant administration. These are just a few examples of eye-opening storytelling that can be culled from the book.

With complete narrative control Dray also locates the public history of Reconstruction's openness to both black and white male political ambition against the counterpoint of white conspiracy and violence that, like termites, ate away at the foundation of the new era. Thus Dray traces the so-called Mississippi Plan: to provoke a riot that then led to the violent displacement of local black officeholders in a pogrom-like frenzy unleashed by whites over the course of several days. Or, he shows how the demand for joint Republican-Democratic electioneering led to the Redemption of Mississippi by providing a veneer of democratic and deliberative legitimacy to Democratic hooliganism and paramilitary displays of white supremacist force. In places Dray's narrative assurance is actually quite breathtaking. His discussions of the byzantine politics of Louisiana are the clearest and most succinct that one can find, as is his telling of the Mississippi and South Carolina stories.

Moreover, Dray does a fine job of carrying the stories past the Compromise of 1877, treating the Exodusters, the post-Reconstruction black congressmen, such as George H. White of North Carolina, and the final days of the men whose lives he chronicles. The book executes a grand arc from the moment when South Carolina's Robert Smalls smuggled a Confederate warship out of Charleston's harbor to White's farewell speech in the House of Representatives in 1901.

For this reviewer there are, however, a couple of quibbles worth noting. Dray accepts at face value the thesis that the U.S. Supreme Court abandoned African Americans. The story is more complex. For instance, *United States v. Cruikshank* (1876) was not actually a state action decision; instead, Chief Justice Morrison Remick Waite expressly conceded the government's claim that Congress could regulate racially motivated private conspiracies against exercise of the right to vote. The decision for the Court turned on the technical

requirements of criminal indictments under the new election laws, as the brief for the United States shows. Also, in this reviewer's opinion Dray treats Booker T. Washington incorrectly and unfairly.

But these are relatively minor matters. *Capitol Men* is a breath of fresh air. It is a wonderful teaching volume, certain to hold the attention of students. Historians and political scientists will see the Reconstruction and the post-Reconstruction periods with new eyes after reading this fine book.

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RICHARD M. VALELLY