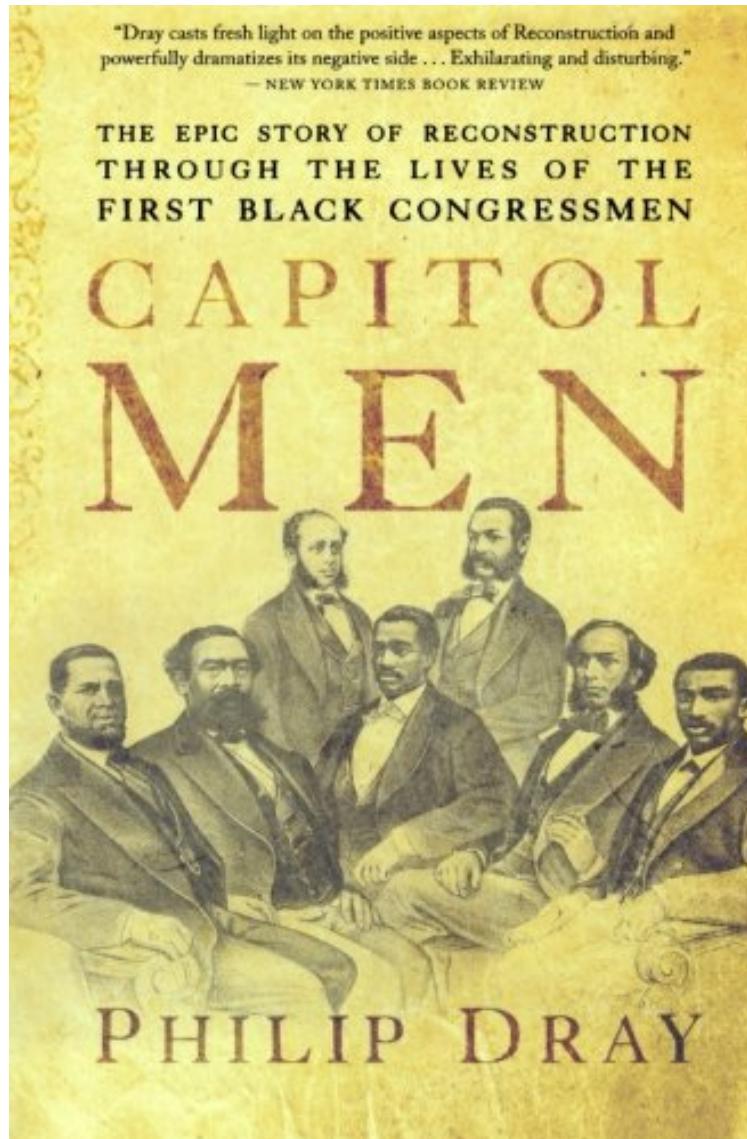


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Capitol Men: The Epic Story of Reconstruction Through the Lives of the First Black Congressmen

Philip Dray

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Philip Dray : Capitol Men: The Epic Story of Reconstruction Through the Lives of the First Black Congressmen before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Capitol Men: The Epic Story of Reconstruction Through the Lives of the First Black Congressmen:

24 of 24 people found the following review helpful. Long Overdue!By M. A NewmanThis is the first history, to the

best of my knowledge which addresses the careers of the first African American congressmen who attempted to fulfill the notion of post civil war democracy and equality as embodied by the 13th 14th and 15th Amendments. It is a study that is long overdue. Paul Lawrence Dunbar once observed that "some men are born great, others have greatness thrust upon them and others lived through the Reconstruction." (He might have added the so-called Redeemer period as well when whites disenfranchised African American citizens as well). What this book demonstrates is the exceptional nature of all of the men who represented their constituencies in the South after the Civil War until they were denied representation for nearly 80 years. This book chronicles many exceptional individuals, but perhaps my favorite is Robert Smalls. Again and again I kept asking "why have I not heard of him before?" Smalls was a war hero, who delivered the steamboat "Planter" to Union hands. Smalls managed to desegregate Philadelphia street car lines and served many years, until he was gerrymandered out of congress by whites who refused to permit African Americans the right to vote, no matter how many ways it took to undermine the law, constitution, and fundamental documents like the Declaration of Independence. Just as there are heroic seekers after freedom like Smalls, Blanche K. Bruce, Robert Brown Elliot, P.B.S. Pinchback, Hiram Revels, Alonzo Ransier, John Roy Lynch, there are also villain who people this remarkable book. Many of white Republican figures who sought to create a more equal post-Civil War south tended to fold their tents and decamp for more hospitable parts of the country when they encountered resistance (in this way they reflected the national Republican Party, increasingly less vigilant after 1876). However, it would not be a misstatement to award Ben Tillman, an unapologetic racist as the most disagreeable and evil figure in this narrative. Through his efforts, African Americans lost all political power and the United States was a poorer place. This is a wonderful book and aside from acquainting the reader with remarkable and overlooked characters from American history, it also serves to destroy the myths of the Reconstruction created by Claude Bowers and James Ford Rhodes in their mean-spirited histories. At last justice is done!

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. **Capitol Men, Courageous Men** By Lacy Trekker This is the history of America that one does not learn in a classroom setting. It should be mandatory reading for every American. This is the story of what might have been, post Civil War, post Emancipation Proclamation, post slavery. A question arises almost immediately, and winds its thread throughout the entire book-----"why were the black people, who had been owned as property, far more insightful, more gracious, more optimistic about the future of the country, and more willing to work with just about any power that be, than the people who had once owned them? This question boggles the mind. These "Capitol Men" were willing to work hard, dedicate their lives, and work with a lot of negativity, and many times downright danger, in order to make this country become the true democracy it could be. Alas, smaller minds, and selfish hate-mongers intervened, to leave us instead, with all the ongoing racial problems we have to this day. One shakes one's head, and mutters to oneself, "if only". It may be too late already, but we had better wake up and smell the coffee, work together, and learn how to live in peace. Finally. Please God! This is one of the best written, readable books on the difficult issue of post Civil War America, that I have ever read. Philip Dray is absolutely phenomenal in his ability to put one in this historical setting, and telling it like it was, when this country had the opportunity to turn a very dangerous corner in the right direction.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. **A Must Read for EVERY AMERICAN!** By Alice Giraud This book offered a very detailed and an amazing account of the late 1800's of the Reconstruction Era and the events that preceded it. As I read this book, I felt as though I was really there. It was a real eye-opener for me. Every American should read this book and it should be a required reading for every high school and college student.

Reconstruction was a time of idealism and sweeping change, as the victorious Union created citizenship rights for the freed slaves and granted the vote to black men. Sixteen black Southerners, elected to the U.S. Congress, arrived in Washington to advocate reforms such as public education, equal rights, land distribution, and the suppression of the Ku Klux Klan. But these men faced astounding odds. They were belittled as corrupt and inadequate by their white political opponents, who used legislative trickery, libel, bribery, and the brutal intimidation of their constituents to rob them of their base of support. Despite their status as congressmen, they were made to endure the worst humiliations of racial prejudice. And they have been largely forgotten often neglected or maligned by standard histories of the period. In this beautifully written book, Philip Dray reclaims their story. Drawing on archival documents, contemporary news accounts, and congressional records, he shows how the efforts of black Americans revealed their political perceptiveness and readiness to serve as voters, citizens, and elected officials. We meet men like the war hero Robert Smalls of South Carolina (who had stolen a Confederate vessel and delivered it to the Union navy), Robert Brown Elliott (who bested the former vice president of the Confederacy in a stormy debate on the House floor), and the distinguished former slave Blanche K. Bruce (who was said to possess the manners of a Chesterfield). As Dray demonstrates, these men were eloquent, creative, and often effective representatives who, as support for Reconstruction faded, were undone by the forces of Southern reaction and Northern indifference. In a grand narrative that traces the promising yet tragic arc of Reconstruction, Dray follows these black representatives struggles, from the Emancipation Proclamation to the onset of Jim Crow, as they fought for social justice and helped realize the promise of a new nation.

From Publishers Weekly Starred . With this densely textured history of Reconstruction, Pulitzer Prize finalist Dray (*At the Hands of Persons Unknown*) moves the first black congressmen including Robert Brown Elliott, P.B.S. Pinchback and Hiram Revels from the margins of American history and places their careers in an integrated context that includes not only the challenging world in which they lived [but] the stories of the men and women of both races whose actions affected their role. Particularly illuminating on local political history, Dray is equally attentive to broader issues (e.g., the rift between women's rights advocates and civil rights activists). Events frequently treated as separate African-American issues (e.g., the collapse of the Freedman's Bank, the legal entrenchment of separate but equal) are examined in the fuller milieu of contemporary history. The author asserts, [I]t is difficult to imagine another period in America's past as complex as Reconstruction, or one that has been more controversial in the telling. Dray's triumph is to have crafted a lucid and balanced narrative, thoroughly researched and well-documented to satisfy the scholarly, while consistently fascinating and fully accessible for the casual reader. (Sept.) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. "Pulitzer finalist Philip Dray's *Capitol Men: The Epic Story of Reconstruction Through the Lives of the First Black Congressmen* is a history of an often overlooked chapter. The stories of men like Hiram Revels of Mississippi, the first black senator, are all the more powerful from some 140 years before Barack Obama began his presidential quest." --*The Washingtonian* "Absorbing ... Dray devotes the majority of his pages to a significant minority: some of the first African Americans ever to serve in Congress. A few, such as Robert Smalls and Blanche K. Bruce, have been the subject of recent, thorough biographies. Others, such as Robert Brown Elliott and John Roy Lynch, emerge here as fascinating figures deserving full-length studies." About the Author Philip Dray is the author of several books, including *Stealing Gods Thunder* and *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America*, which won the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award, the Southern Book Critics Circle Award, and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.