



The Original Black Elite: Daniel Murray and the Story of a Forgotten Era

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In this outstanding cultural biography, the author of the *New York Times* bestseller *A Slave in the White House* chronicles a critical yet overlooked chapter in American history: the inspiring rise and calculated fall of the black elite, from Emancipation through Reconstruction to the Jim Crow Era—embodied in the experiences of an influential figure of the time, academic, entrepreneur, and political activist and black history pioneer Daniel Murray.

In the wake of the Civil War, Daniel Murray, born free and educated in Baltimore, was in the vanguard of Washington, D.C.'s black upper class. Appointed Assistant Librarian at the Library of Congress—at a time when government appointments were the most prestigious positions available for blacks—Murray became wealthy through his business as a construction contractor and married a college-educated socialite. The Murrays' social circles included some of the first African-American U.S. Senators and Congressmen, and their children went to the best colleges—Harvard and Cornell.

Though Murray and other black elite of his time were primed to assimilate into the cultural fabric as Americans first and people of color second, their prospects were crushed by Jim Crow segregation and the capitulation to white supremacist groups by the government, which turned a blind eye to their unlawful—often murderous—acts. Elizabeth Dowling Taylor traces the rise, fall, and disillusionment of upper-class African Americans, revealing that they were a representation not of hypothetical achievement but what could be realized by African Americans through education and equal opportunities.

As she makes clear, these well-educated and wealthy elite were living proof that African Americans did not lack ability to fully participate in the social contract as white supremacists claimed, making their subsequent fall when Reconstruction was prematurely abandoned all the more tragic. Illuminating and powerful, her magnificent work brings to life a dark chapter of American history that too many Americans have yet to recognize.

The Original Black Elite: Daniel Murray and the Story of a Forgotten Era Details

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From Reader Review The Original Black Elite: Daniel Murray and the Story of a Forgotten Era for online ebook

Joe Hall says

As I venture into acquiring knowledge of our black ancestors the story of the Murray's and Washington spoke of the hardships of being black and without rights or privilege but seeking to gain them,

Nancy says

The Forgotten Era - Reconstruction abandoned by Jim Crow and white Supremacists

This is a portrait of an era of US history, a period of time that has been largely overlooked by many scholars and authors but one that is important to our fuller understanding of our nation.

Follow Daniel and Anna Murray as they make a life in Washington, D.C. during a very crucial period in the US. And sadly, witness the rise of Jim Crow and white supremacy.

I found the book to be truly enlightening; a must-read for anyone wishing for a better understanding of Washington's history and the foundational contributions made by so many great black Americans.

Gary says

I looked for my ancestors but couldn't find any mentioned! Otherwise this was a thoroughly detailed account of short window of time between slavery and Jim Crow when there was so much promise for the future. My things have changed!

Patrick Campbell says

I liked the book. It drags at some parts but it is really an enlightening book for a history that we know very little about. Had some great conversations regarding the division between the light and darker skin brothers and sisters in our community and how to bridge those gaps. All in all it's a good book a shy off great.

Christine says

I learned a lot about the black elite superficially and how he and his elite friends participated. they were really impressive.

Sarah Beth says

I received an uncorrected proof copy of this book from HarperCollins.

This work of non-fiction covers the life of academic, political activist, and black history pioneer Daniel Murray, whose life embodies the rise and fall of the black elite from the time of Emancipation through the Jim Crow era. Daniel was born free in Baltimore and quickly rose to prominence as part of Washington D.C.'s upper class. He was appointed Assistant Librarian at the Library of Congress and he and his college educated wife was tremendously socially and politically active. Yet the Murrays' glittering social and cultural prospects were dimmed and ultimately squashed by encroaching Jim Crow segregation that left the Murrays and the rest of their social circle bereft of opportunities that were earlier available to them. In short, the Murrays' story is one of the downfall of the black elite and descent into racial segregation.

It was amazing to read about the accomplishments of Daniel Murray during his lifetime from 1851 to 1925. After being raised in Baltimore, he moved to Washington D.C. and began working for his brother who was a prominent caterer and whose client list "was topped by President Lincoln himself" (15). Eventually, he was hired as one of 12 staff members for the Library of Congress, where he would remain until his retirement. Eventually, Daniel married and he and his wife Anna belonged to the "colored aristocracy" of Washington: "well educated, refined, accomplished, and prosperous, these men and women followed politics and current events, engaged in the city's civic life, race-related issues in particular, and enjoyed socializing" (62).

Beyond their social status and Daniel's occupation, the couple worked hard to increase the opportunities and recognition of their race. In addition to maintaining their spacious home and vacation home and raising their five sons who would live to adulthood, Anna Murray found the time "to start several model private kindergartens for black children, develop a series of Mothers' Meetings, found and manage a training school for kindergarten teachers, and introduce day nurseries for strapped working mothers" (133). Although he never managed to publish it, Daniel Murray devoted years to a bibliography that he termed an "Encyclopedia of the Colored Race" that topped at 7,500 titles and "presents to the world for the first time the only authoritative and complete history of the achievement of colored people and their contributions to culture and civilization" (388). Among its impressive achievements, Daniel's bibliography is likely responsible for preserving ex-slave Paul Jennings's memoir from obscurity.

Unlike most histories that seem to paint American history as a slow, uphill fight for equality, this work of history sheds light on backsliding in racial equality and the gradual encroachment of racial segregation that occurred during the Murrays' lifetime. For instance, Daniel Murray had his position of Assistant Librarian, well earned after years of service and keen ability, stripped from him only to be given a lesser title and salary solely due to his race. Although this seemed to pose no issue when he was first hired and promoted. Late in his career, the Library of Congress excluded blacks from the public cafeteria and a separate "colored men's locker room" was installed (336). As one of the longest standing employees, who saw the library grow from 12 to over 500 staff members, this must have felt like such a betrayal of his years of service and abilities. This social stratum of wealthy, well educated, and politically active blacks were increasingly treated less like Americans capable of realizing the American dream and more like second class residents due to their race. The tragedy for Daniel and Anna Murray and their social circle was that by the end of their life, their opportunities and those for their children and grandchildren were much more restricted than when they themselves had been born.

Although this is a biography, this work also functions as a cultural history and spends significant time detailing the political and social history of the time, which was informative but did add greatly to the length

of this book and dragged at times. Additionally, I had a hard time following the careers and lives of the Murray's many sons, as they all seemed to blend together. However, this is a significant book that illustrates the opportunities once available to the black elite of the northern United States in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War.

Ari says

"Daniel Murray was 'a race man to the core.' If he took any pride in being the first Black man to join this organization or the only one to be invited to that social occasion, his greater goal, his long-range vision, was to be in the vanguard of merit-based recognition for every American of color. The rise of those in Murray's black elite circle was realized rather than potential." (pg. 3)

After reading this book I'm not sure if people would say the Black elite of today is as race-conscious as the Black elite were during Reconstruction. But my hope is that that particular audience will read this book and be reminded of their duty to 'lift as the climb'. Especially when you realize that all the people mentioned in this book were the epitome of Black excellence and still faced major setbacks and eventually had most of their rights taken away. I was proud to read that Black people of all classes fought back, I have to admit I didn't expect the Black elite to rally in both nonviolent and violent ways as their freedoms were taken away from them. But Taylor goes into detail about the ways the Black elite rallied to protect themselves when faced with physical confrontation (and managed to be successful!); "Neighbors mobilized in self-defense, erecting crude barricades around the perimeter of their community. More than a thousand armed residents manned U and 7th streets. Sharpshooters waited tensely on the roof of Howard Theater, the tallest building in the area. White mobs did advance and were met by armed resistance. [...] Overall, whites fared as badly as or worse than blacks" (368).

This is an ambitious undertaking, it is based around the story of Daniel Murray but Taylor expertly weaves in most of the major Black figures of the time. It becomes very clear that all rich Black people knew each other during this time and it made me proud to read about all our achievements. Since the Black elite is so connected and incestuous, the book while primarily set in DC, also expands to Chicago and New York City at certain moments as well as parts of the South and Midwest that the elite enjoyed 'summering' at or visiting. "Without unduly romanticizing segregated black life, a vital and vibrant culture flourished in the U Street neighborhood, and so did racial pride: ironic fruits of exclusion. It evolved into a community in which residents could patronize a full range of black-owned businesses, three hundred of the by 1920, that met essentially all their needs" (345). Furthermore I was pleasantly surprised the book noted the cultural renaissance in DC, I remember learning briefly about this in a 'history of DC' class that I took; "The cultural flowering in Northwest Washington in the 1920s rivaled that in Harlem. Black Washingtonians made up more than a quarter of the overall number of city residents. Only New York and Chicago had larger African American populations. The U Street neighborhood was the locus of African American intellectual, literary, and artistic life, bringing forth an outpouring of talented and inventive writers, artists, and performers" (379). However I also finished the book feeling sad since the U Street described doesn't exist anymore and we still face a lot of the same challenges, especially when the author describes the education battle. Daniel Murray served as a precursor to Carter Woodson and his story should be told, the lifelong Black history encyclopedia project he took on was incredible and it's extremely frustrating to go on the journey of publishing rejection with him. It's also frustrating to see that while the story is about a man, equal amount of time is spent on his wife, Anna (super power couple alert) and other influential women of the time. Anna was a champion of kindergarten before it was a popular accepted concept and she was a quintessential 'society woman' involved in a variety of other causes as well. This is not to say that Murray was not problematic, he believed mixed

race was the ideal ethnic combination and he could be extremely petty. But the book delves into that and also does not hesitate to stress that the Black elite were most often descended from light skinned slaves or always-free families, so they had a small leg up from the beginning.

In addition to Black excellence being unable to save you from racial prejudice, the Murray family also seemed extremely cursed (near Kennedy curse levels) in their private life. They broke down barriers or had a hand in most major historical moments (founded the Alphas, participated in the John Brown raids, helped found the pre NAACP, etc etc) but also face several familial tragedies that strike me as unbearable but they manage to shoulder on. The story runs smoothly and while a family tree would likely have been helpful to flip back to throughout the reading, for the most part it wasn't too difficult to keep everything straight. An inspiring read that reminds you Black people have always strived for achievement and excellence, regardless of the obstacles thrown in their way.

"The single greatest reversal in our history was the disregard of black citizens' newly won rights when Reconstruction was peremptorily abandoned. Worse yet, here was a case where the Constitution spoke loud and clear but was discounted. Worst of all, though we tout our being-first and foremost-a nation of laws, violent crimes such as arson and lynching were ignored or even tacitly condoned. It is a part of our history many Americans do not want to hear about, much less own. Yet only by remembering, and determining to respect the rights of all henceforth, can we redeem ourselves as a nation for shameful chapters in our past. Americans recognize, even as James Madison did, that slavery was 'a blot on our Republican character,' but too many think that prospects for African Americans grew continually from the day the Emancipation Proclamation was released, and if progress was slow, well, maybe blacks tended not to be the go-getters, rather preferring to languish in the victim role. The historical reality reveals a temporary rise in status followed by a disastrous suppression, forced by white supremacists and reinforced by government. Blame-the-victim characterizations of black struggles do not take into account the full historical evolution. Unrealized black advancement is America's problem, and our government and society are rightly tasked with fixing it" (411).

Dan Downing says

Elizabeth Dowling Taylor bites off a large chunk of American history and chews it well. The subtitle is more accurate than the title: "Daniel Murray and the Story of a Forgotten Era".

Daniel Murray was an assistant librarian at the Library of Congress and a fighter for rights for the African-American people. What made him and his circle unusual was that they were high society. They had parties and balls and cotillions, lived well and traveled, employed people as domestic help, used caterers and hired halls for the parties. They attended University, often Harvard and other top tier institutions. At Presidential Inaugural time they had bashes easily comparable to those given by the Washington establishment; in fact, many of the Black Elite were also part of the Washington establishment. That is the 'forgotten' part of the story; an era existed when Negroes were treated like humans.

What happened is that a base of successful black businessmen and professional people existed before the Civil War; free Negroes. After Emancipation this group grew. Those with ambition and good fortune became successful and enjoyed almost unfettered privilege. But Reconstruction ended, the poisonous Southern political and social miasma reasserted itself, moved North, and began to spread its Jim Crow deceit and hatred. Jobs disappeared, positions were diminished, restaurants and schools and trains and hotels began to become 'separate but equal,' meaning, of course, separate and very unequal.

Dr. Taylor paints us a picture of how the world of the elite worked, and painstakingly builds the life of Daniel Murray. Once the black ties and custom house are in place, she begins to erode the base, ending the main part of the book with Daniel dying in a segregated hospital and buried in a segregated cemetery.

Following that, we are given a tour of the remainder of the families' lives and the disposition of Murray's life's work, as well as an historical analysis in the Epilogue. This is American history without very much distortion, with little of the veil of deceit we so often are forced to digest in tales of The Great American Way.

One added the point: among the Negro community there existed a caste system, sometimes entailing racism as vicious as that fostered by the worst Southern gentlemen. This is noted here, but not explored.

Highly Recommended.

Anna Wedel says

This is a must read.

Spencer says

Mid 19th century Washington DC had a group of elite black families who exhibited certain unique characteristics—they were for the most part college educated, financially well off, broadly accepted into white society, and they occupied leadership positions in Washington society. They dressed conservatively and in good taste, they played croquet during garden parties, practiced archery in their spare time, attended plays and concerts, and they looked forward to the future. Though there were never more than 100 such families, they remained very influential in Washington DC society for nearly 70 years. They had one other characteristic—for the most part they were very light-skinned. Baltimore and Washington in the early 19th century never had a plantation economy and they were more open to emancipation. And there had been more interbreeding than with blacks in the Deep South. They had a head start on the blacks that were to be freed at the end of the Civil War. This head start would soon start to crumble.

The Compromise of 1877 would lead to the start of the crumbling in 1877 with the end of Reconstruction. The Republican Party essentially declared that the US federal government would no longer enforce the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments. They turned their collective backs on the very people they so strongly supported going into the Civil War. Southern states methodically took over state legislatures, replacing the blacks who had made inroads into elected positions, also replacing blacks who had gained office in Congress and the Senate. They seized control of the state courts, and as Democrats reclaimed Federal offices they had held prior to the Civil War, they were able to influence legislation favorable to the southern views on race. It was the start of the age of Jim Crow laws, which would continue well into the 20th century.

The author traces the lives in the families of Daniel Murray and Anna Evans from the mid 1850s through the early 1920s. Elizabeth Dowling Taylor shows how the elections of Grover Cleveland in the 1880s and 1890s were detrimental to all blacks, especially the elites. Employment of blacks in the federal government was reigned in. *Plessy v Ferguson* 1896 opened the door for discrimination in transportation, interstate commerce, and housing. Voting rights were curtailed. The prevailing mood in Congress, the Senate and the White House was to appease the South, as it still had "grievances" for what they had "suffered" because of the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments. Expansion of the Jim Crow laws continued on into the 20th century. Election of southerner Woodrow Wilson in 1912 brought segregation and discrimination to Federal

Departments and Agencies. The dedication of the Lincoln Memorial in 1922 was witness to segregated seating for blacks at a most distant location.

It is a maddening chain of events that brought humiliation to millions of black Americans, many who had fought bravely for their country in three wars. Future generations faced fewer prospects for the future than did their grandparents and parents. Taylor makes the assertion that it was a failure of governance, racism, intolerance and prejudice that was to blame. The South committed treason, lost a war, but yet took back the upper hand with a vengeance, while relegating blacks to 2nd class citizenship and worse. Though they had lost the Civil War, time has born out that they were the political victors of the historical phase that followed.

Maria says

This was initially a capturing read. Using Daniel Murray and his family, Taylor offers insight into the black elite that emerged after the Civil War and how their gains slowly dissipated into the 1900s. But the author is careful to discuss the triumphs of this group despite legislation to demean Black people. I also enjoyed the human aspect of the book; it read like a novel at certain points.

Where Taylor tragically falters is her compulsion to describe any and everyone. I simply could not keep up with all of the characters she kept introducing. Most of the characters played no role in Daniel Murray's life and appeared to just prove to the reader that Taylor has done her research. This was disappointing, as the long description sullied the book for me.

Kenneth says

Interesting research through period newspaper and journals of the reconstruction and post reconstruction eras and the black elite in and around the Capital. Should be read for another side of the fascinating history of a people just released from slavery and others who had been free during the horrible slave era and what they achieved in business, education and social graces.

Rob says

Before reading this I was unaware of the story of Daniel Murray or the black elite of Washington DC. This is an extremely interesting and valuable work. I wasn't able to give it five stars, because the author, anxious to show the number of black elite, filled the book too full, making it at times too confusing as to identity and how they fit in to the story. Still, this is a superb book.
