Cokie Roberts' 'Capital Dames': Not equal, but influential

POSTED: Sunday, May 24, 2015, 3:01 AM

Capital Dames

The Civil War and the Women of Washington 1848-1868

By Cokie Roberts.

Harper. 512 pp. $27.99

Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

'I have never studied the art of paying compliments to women," President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed in 1864, "but I must say that if all that has been said by orators in praise of women were applied to the women of America, it would not do them justice for their conduct during this war."

As Lincoln implied, the Civil War provided challenges and opportunities for women in the United States. Especially women in Washington. In Capital Dames, Cokie Roberts - political commentator for NPR and ABC News and the author of Founding Mothers, as well as Ladies of Liberty and We Are Our Mothers' Daughters - provides an engaging narrative of their wide-ranging experiences.
Drawing on private correspondence, diaries, newspapers, and public records, Roberts documents the struggles of many women to overcome their second-class status.

Roberts does not ignore the experiences of "ordinary" women. As men left for the battlefield, she indicates, government jobs were filled by women. Those who cut large sheets of greenbacks into individual bills were paid the substantial sum of $600 a year by the Treasury Department.

And with thousands of soldiers stationed in the city, prostitution was a lucrative business. When Gen. Joseph Hooker attempted to confine bawdy houses to a single area in the city, Roberts reminds us, wags called it "Hooker's Division," and sex workers got a new name.

Roberts also tells the fascinating life story of Elizabeth Keckley. Born a slave in Virginia, Keckley became a seamstress and eventually the loyal companion of first lady Mary Todd Lincoln. Caught up in petty squabbles and shunned for having the audacity to publish a memoir, Keckley was employed in the Department of Sewing and Domestic Arts at Wilberforce University. She died, destitute, in 1907.

Most of Capital Dames, however, is devoted to affluent, well-connected women. Many of them exerted influence in traditional ways: through and in behalf of their husbands. Others, like Clara Barton, Dorothea Dix, and Mary Walker (the first female surgeon in the United States), were trailblazers. Some were sui generis. Anna Carroll, Roberts suggests, could credibly claim that she mapped out the strategy Gen. Ulysses Grant used in his military campaign in Tennessee. She demanded compensation from the U.S. government and proposed Lincoln send her to Europe as a publicity agent, at a salary of $25,000. And Jessie Benton Fremont was a publishing machine, writing speeches, essays, and books in her husband's name and in her own.

Roberts sets her narrative within the era's political and military conflicts. And she manages to include Southern women, including Varina Davis - wife of Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy - who was a powerhouse in Washington in the 1850s.

Roberts' judgments, alas, are not always reliable. She indicates a bit too simply that because in law wives were the property of their husbands, some women "just didn't see slavery as being all that different from marriage." And she asserts that Virginia Clay was solely responsible for the parole granted to her husband, a Confederate politician.

Because she ends her book in 1868, Roberts also misses a Washington controversy demonstrating that although their roles had expanded during the Civil War, women had not yet achieved anything approximating equal rights in American society. In 1869, Congress passed the 15th Amendment to the Constitution, forbidding any state from depriving a citizen of the right to vote because of race, color, or previous
condition of servitude. By 1870, the requisite number of states had ratified the amendment, which became the law of the land. During the debate over the 15th Amendment, which began well before 1868, women's rights advocates Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony demanded the franchise be extended to women as well.

"I would not talk of Negroes or women, but of citizens," said Stanton.

It was not to be. Met with condescension, ridicule, "pragmatic" arguments that they must wait their turn, and a split in the ranks of reformers over means, ends, and timing, the suffragists were rebuffed. Women did not get the right to vote until 1920. Many, but by no means all, of Roberts' "capital dames" would have been pleased.

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