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Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850-1954: An Intellectual History by Stephanie Y. Evans

Review by: Stephanie Wright

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Revolutionary War veteran, Maj. Claudius Bert de Majan from Alsace, who became instrumental in planning the invasion. The consul also armed a privateer while in Savannah, giving the corsair a staunch republican name, the *Anti-Georges*. The city of Savannah was strongly pro-British in sentiment, which Mangourit hoped to undermine by founding a club named Friends of the French Republic. Outside of Savannah, however, Mangourit's agents found fertile ground for recruiting American volunteers for the expedition.

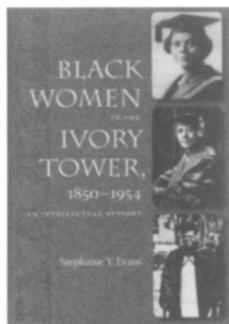
In 1793 Savannahian Joseph J. Clay, Jr., embraced Mangourit's message of international republicanism with these words: "It was reserved for this bright era of happy revolutions to behold the pulses of various nations of discordant manners beating in unison." (p. 83) This hope for a "bright era of happy revolutions" proved unrealistic as France and the United States could not sustain a partnership on the basis of republicanism alone. Even Mangourit finally recognized this fact. He was recalled in April 1794 in the midst of an abortive launch of the Florida invasion.

Alderson conveys Mangourit's conviction and his determination to carry out his mission in a well-documented work. If the book is repetitive at times, it provides ideological context for the critical issues of the French alliance, slavery, westward expansion, and defining republicanism in America during the 1790s.

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*Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850-1954: An Intellectual History.* By Stephanie Y. Evans. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007. Pp. 275. \$59.95. ISBN 978-0-8130-3031-9.)

Even as the nation witnessed the inauguration of its first African-American president, people of color continue to be underrepresented in American colleges and universities. Stephanie Evans's *Black Women in the Ivory Tower* puts the underrepresentation of black women, in particular, into historical perspective. Divided into two parts, the narrative focuses first on African-American women's educational attainment between 1850 and 1954. Unsurprisingly, Evans finds that black women's educational opportunities during this period were substantially limited. Nevertheless, a small number of women persevered and attended colleges, primarily in the North during the antebellum years, and later, in the South at historically black colleges

and universities (HBCUs). With the door slightly cracked, black women created a wedge and increased their numbers during the interwar period. By examining the experiences of six college women at both predominantly white institutions (PWIs) and HBCUs, Evans is able to examine change over time and place among black women collegians. Although the women at white colleges experienced isolation and discrimination, they, like their counterparts at black colleges, attempted to use their education and scholarship to improve the lives of other African Americans.

While it was a struggle for black women to obtain high school diplomas, much less college degrees during much of the period under study, the odds against pursuing post-graduate study were almost overwhelming. Yet, in 1921, three black women, the first of their race and gender, were awarded doctoral degrees. While only one of the three, Sadie Alexander, focused her doctoral research on a topic directly related to black people, Evans argues that all three of the women concentrated on issues of concern to African Americans. This brief exploration of the first three African-American women to obtain doctorates leads into the second part of the book, which focuses upon the intellectual legacy left by collegiate black women of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In part two, Evans focuses upon the three areas held to be the most important in institutions of higher learning: research, teaching, and service. Focusing upon the scholarship of Anna J. Cooper and Mary McLeod Bethune, Evans clearly shows how black women's intellectual production, when taken seriously, challenges and deepens traditional scholarship. For instance, Anna J. Cooper questioned the idea of the distanced researcher decades before modern critiques of objectivity. The writings of Cooper and Bethune highlighted the circular relationship that should exist between scholarship, teaching, and service. Both emphasized the importance of creating scholarship that helped to produce a class of students that cared about their world. As teachers, black women married their professional work with their community responsibilities. Since so few women of color were able to obtain a higher education, those who did largely, though not without exception, embraced a connection between education and community service. In particular, Evans argues that black women's community service centered upon social justice for themselves and other African Americans. Although black women scholars were, and are, rarely credited for their insights, Evans finds that black women like Cooper and Bethune, among others, left an intellectual foundation upon which current academics can build.

Scholars of black women's history will find much that is familiar in *Black Women in the Ivory Tower*. In particular, the experiences of the few black women who were able to obtain a college education have been explored in other places, such as Linda Perkins's work on Fanny Jackson Coppin and Marlene Merrill and Ellen Lawson's *The Three Sarahs*, which documents the experiences of Oberlin's early black women students. The growing body of work on the black women's club movement has explored

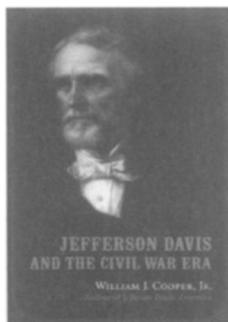
some of the other ground covered here, such as black women's commitment to "racial uplift."<sup>2</sup> In particular, two of Evans's main subjects, Anna J. Cooper and Mary McLeod Bethune, have been written about extensively in other monographs and biographies. Despite this, *Black Women in the Ivory Tower* is an important addition to United States educational history. It examines the understudied intellectual traditions established by ante- and post-bellum black women. It also suggests future avenues for study. Evans's last chapter focuses, in part, on women who entered college after the *Brown* decision. As the number of black women able to attend graduate school increased in the post-*Brown* era, it would be interesting to see whether the patterns identified by Evans in terms of their scholarship persisted during the second half of the twentieth century.

*Black Women in the Ivory Tower* brings together women about whom we know a great deal with those who are rarely recalled. In doing so, it meets its aim of challenging traditional ideas of "what an academic should do and be." Historians have begun to take seriously black women's roles in aiding their communities by waging battles for social justice. Evans's book does the important work of taking just as seriously the intellectual contributions of early black women scholars.

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Ms. Wright is the author of "Self-Determination, Politics, and Gender on Georgia's Black College Campuses, 1875-1900," in the Spring 2008 issue of the *Georgia Historical Quarterly*.



*Jefferson Davis and the Civil War Era.* By William J. Cooper, Jr. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008. Pp. 144. \$24.95. ISBN-13 978-0-8071-3371-2.)

William J. Cooper is arguably the nation's foremost expert on Jefferson Davis. His 2000 biography, *Jefferson Davis, American*, was an exhaustive seven-hundred-page study, based upon years of meticulous research and Cooper's considerable expertise in Civil War and southern history. Few people know the South, the Confederacy, or its enigmatic president so well.

<sup>2</sup>See for example, Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York, 1999); Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1996); Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York, 2001); and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994).