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THE LODGE WOMEN, THEIR MEN AND THEIR TIMES

Emily Lodge

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BOOK REVIEW

Lodge tells the story of her famous New England family via biographies of her foremothers in this debut work of American history.

The Lodges, and their close relatives, the Cabots, have long histories in the United States. The author is the granddaughter of U.S. senator and ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., and the daughter of politician George Cabot Lodge. Her family tree is filled with other names associated with Boston Brahmins—families who landed in Massachusetts during the colonial era and have been involved in American society ever since. This book is a family biography of sorts, focusing specifically on the female members of the Cabot and Lodge clans, dating back to 17th-century Salem, Massachusetts. Anna Cabot joined the two families together when she married John Ellerton Lodge in 1871. She was also a scrapbooker who preserved various details of life in mid-19th-century Boston and moved in the same social circles as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Nannie Lodge Davis (1851–1915) was a well-traveled woman who nurtured her husband’s political career and whom Theodore Roosevelt called “the closest America had to having a queen.” Bessy Davis Lodge (1876–1960), the scion of a New York City political dynasty, married into the Lodge family, only to be widowed at 36; she lived another half-century, moving to Paris at the encouragement of authors Edith Wharton and Henry James. In these women’s life stories, a portrait of domestic life in the American upper class emerges, particularly during the era of American aristocracy that became known as “the Gilded Age.”

The author’s book is thoroughly researched, relying heavily on letters and other primary-source documents. Lodge gives her subjects many opportunities to speak for themselves, where possible, and her own prose is both breezy and detailed, particularly when describing some of her ancestors’ playgrounds: “Tuckernuck, an almost deserted island in the Elizabeth chain in Buzzards Bay off Nantucket near Cape Cod, was a place of unimaginable beauty— sparkling sea, summer air, swallows winging over ocean grasses and sand dunes in apricot sunsets.” There are moments in which her rarified perspective may strike many readers as unrelatable, as when she notes that “Daughters of admirals will recognize themselves in Nannie Davis Lodge,” but the author is generally a capable and charming guide throughout this work. The narrative drags in some sections, and certain episodes and letters could have easily been omitted for the sake of concision. That said, there’s much here to engage readers interested in the history of wealthy, well-connected American families. As much as this book reveals about the Cabots and Lodges, it’s also a portrait of the United States in the late-19th and early 20th centuries—perhaps the last time that the country was so embodied by a single family. Also, the Lodge’s biographies of these women here do much to fill in the gaps of a history that’s too often fixated on the men in their lives.

A wide-ranging, if occasionally uneven, biography of the women in one of America’s great political families.

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