
Black Women Reporters on the White House Beat

Alone Atop the Hill: The Autobiography of Alice Dunnigan, Pioneer of the National Black Press

Edited by Carol McCabe Booker

Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015,

219 pp., \$26.95, hardcover

Eye on the Struggle: Ethel Payne, the First Lady of the Black Press

By James McGrath Morris

New York: Amistad, 2015,

466 pp., \$27.99, hardcover

The Presidency in Black and White: My Up-Close View of Three Presidents and Race in America

By April Ryan

Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015,

176 pp., \$24.95, hardcover

Reviewed by A. J. Verdelle

This trio of books chronicles African American “lady journalists” who advanced to the carefully controlled climate of the White House press corps. Using scythes of self-determination, these three women tore through the thicket of male-dominated journalism and across a briar patch of social change and upheaval. Their narratives tell a story worth following, provide a legacy worth noting, and set up an echo worth listening to.

In *Alone Atop the Hill*, Alice Dunnigan penned the record of her own life and career. Rediscovered and edited to a manageable length by Carol McCabe Booker (herself an African American journalist) Dunnigan’s narrative is, surprisingly, a page turner. Dunnigan offers the record of her life’s undulations with a storyteller’s sleight of hand, a journalist’s precision, a novelist’s attention to detail, and a filmmaker’s devotion to rising action.

Dunnigan rose from the depths of crippling segregation, backwoods poverty, and societal unconcern. Born on a red clay Kentucky hill in 1906, she grew up two miles from the nearest village: Russellville, Kentucky, population about 5,000. There were no neighbors within sight of her house, and Dunnigan reports growing up lonely, a condition many writers credit with giving birth to their imaginations. Showing her penchant for turning a phrase and juxtaposing ideas, Dunnigan describes her father not as a tenant farmer but as a “dirt farmer” and her mother not as a hand laundress but as a “washerwoman”—terms, Dunnigan argues, that reveal conditions and lack of convenience, not disrespect. Dunnigan’s mother, though a consistently hard and excellent worker, had not been “allowed to spend much time in school,” writes Dunnigan. Like most black sharecroppers, her father did not earn enough money even for basic necessities; his share was so meager that his kitchen garden had to provide the family’s food.

Thus, Dunnigan began her life at a subsistence level, at a time when races were rigidly separated, decent jobs for blacks were scarce or nonexistent, and no permissions were in place to allow blacks to be well educated, or well traveled, or even well fed. Nevertheless, Dunnigan ultimately advanced beyond her circumstances to become the first black female reporter accredited to the White House press corps, the first of her race and sex



Alice Dunnigan, the first African American woman to hold a White House press pass, on the steps of US Capital.

credentialed to the Capitol, and the first black member of the Women’s National Press Club. She acquired skills and related to institutions that her parents and siblings could not have dreamed of. En route to this pinnacle, she first worked as a laundress, like her mother. Later, she married and became a teacher—two tasks that took turns commanding her attention. She was determined to learn, to work, and to have a profession in an ugly time, and she struggled: to get the education she needed to teach school; to find the money to pay for it; to get her teaching certificates renewed and reinstated, as required, every two years; to find schools to teach in; to clothe herself respectably enough to teach in the Kentucky towns where she worked; and to maintain her marriage, which meant appeasing her husband. Dunnigan describes the conditions under which she prepared to seek her first job:

There were no office jobs since there were no Negroes in business who needed secretaries, typists or even file clerks. There were no Negro sales-girls since no Negroes owned stores. There were no librarians since there

were no libraries in these small towns. There were no jobs for trained nurses since there were no hospitals nearby. There were no social workers since there were no social welfare programs in existence. And even if there had been any jobs in these categories, no whites would employ blacks for them.

Dunnigan made a way out of no way: washing clothes, rinsing bottles at a dairy, negotiating with her employers for food, and eking out spare pennies to pay for her education courses. In spite of the discouragement and disdain of her husband’s family, and of her husband himself, she survived the unbearably low wages and extreme poverty, and her narrative is that of a hero—or *shero*. Over the course of a couple of decades, Dunnigan resolutely marched herself away from grit and poverty, toward the northern and eastern borders of Kentucky, and away from what turned out to be the degradation of her marriage. Using words from the black spiritual tradition, Dunnigan describes the first twenty years of her adult life as “inching along.” Like many people who keep their “eyes on the prize,” though, her perseverance paid off.



Ethel Payne with US occupation soldiers in Tokyo (Courtesy of the Moorland-Spangarn Research Center). Ethel Payne, the First Lady of the Black Press.

Dunnigan negotiated a game-changing job for herself when she secured two days of work a week at one dollar per day—excellent money in the 1930s—for the Depression-era jobs program, the Works Progress Administration (WPA). She asked a local contact why the agency was not employing more negroes and was told that

city officials were acting under pressure, brought by middle-class white women of the town, who feared that if black women were employed on a public project at the rate of six dollars per week, then all of the cooks would leave their kitchens, where the work was more demanding and the pay was considerably less.

The local WPA administrator had honored their request as long as no one complained, but the quiet ended abruptly when Dunnigan “raised a ruckus,” she writes.

Like many African Americans who were given opportunities through the WPA, Dunnigan thrived, having accessed occupational dignity, intellectual engagement, and a living wage for the first time in her life. She began writing and thinking, using language as a tool. She parlayed her confidence, skills, and interests, honed at the WPA, into reporting positions, first with black Kentucky newspapers—of which there were several, and then with the Associated Negro Press (ANP)—which, in the pre-civil rights years, was the major source of black-related news from the nation’s capitol. Through her daring and resolve, she became the ANP’s Washington bureau chief—actually, its sole Washington reporter—in 1947, her articles circulating to the many newspapers that informed and educated negroes nationally, through the country.

Many small town southern newspapers were founded to serve blacks, who needed news to penetrate the enforced barriers of segregation and to foreground the issues they faced, since African Americans were only tragically reported on (if at all) in the mainstream press. In the 1930s, there were as many as 300 – 400 black newspapers, many serving small pockets of the South and urban centers whose black populations were swelling as a result of the Great Northern Migration.

Black newspapers passed from hand to hand in the precarious decades from the 1920s through the 1940s. News stories were even read aloud, to keep those who could not read informed. Each copy was passed from person to person, read and reread, until the worn newsprint was retired to wrap fish. According to journalist Ethel Payne’s adept biographer, James McGrath Morris, in *Eye on the Struggle*, the most read African American newspaper in the nation during these years was the *Chicago Defender*, which passed through at least five readers’ hands before it was retired or the next issue arrived. Payne was the second African American woman journalist (after Dunnigan) to be credentialed at the White House. A longtime reporter for the *Defender*, Payne arrived in Washington, DC, in 1954; her White House tenure overlapped with Dunnigan’s, with whom she was something of a rival. Morris notes that Dunnigan had been publishing an “unsigned column” as “Washington bureau chief” for the *Defender*, which was cancelled when Payne began covering the White House beat under her own byline. The loss of the column cost Dunnigan a third of her income, which Morris indicates was “paltry” to begin with—a fact Dunnigan’s narrative supports. Dunnigan had accepted the paltry salary for the title, the exposure, and the experience.

Payne traveled a road that Dunnigan had paved. A Southside Chicago native, Payne had emerged from a vibrant, if ruthlessly segregated, urban environment. Her sense of civics, of politics, and of the bustle and energy of life was far clearer and more sophisticated than her sometime rival’s. Dunnigan had risen from Kentucky to Washington; Payne endeavored to see far more of the whole world.

Both women came late to their positions as reporters. Like Dunnigan, Payne was jobless, or woefully underemployed, during the early years of her career. As a girl, she had “scribbled,” dreaming of becoming a writer; her family nickname was Jo March, after the scrappy heroine of Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*. Payne also dreamed of becoming a lawyer, but in 1930, when Payne graduated high school, the maw of the Great Depression sucked up and dissipated blacks’ already precarious reach for solvency, and quashed negro ambitions *in vitro*. Ethel Payne was lucky to

find a clerical job at an insurance company to support her while she floundered around, applied to the government, and near frantically searched for some kind of job a black woman could get, which would enable her to use her good mind.

Eventually, Payne obtained a job as matron at a girls’ school west of Chicago. Like Dunnigan, she was influenced by the WPA, although in a different way: she took creative writing classes from a former WPA regional director, who encouraged her, telling her she had a “rich feeling for words,” as well as rich experience to share. Payne took this much-needed encouragement to heart. Continuing to search for a job that would support and engage her, she applied to the USO, and in 1948, was accepted and assigned to be a social director for segregated black regiments stationed in Japan, after World War II. This assignment fed her confidence, her creativity, and her sense of possibility. She wrote copiously in a journal during her several years overseas.

While Payne was in Japan, the segregated troops she tended were drawn into active fighting after North Korea surged across the 38th parallel, a temporary division drawn at the end of war. Payne worked at her duties and accelerated her correspondence relating the battles of the Negro soldiers. In the fall of 1950, at the Foreign Correspondent’s Club, Payne met a *Defender* reporter who had traveled to Japan to report on what the options would be for black soldiers as they returned to the US, after having been paid well and consistently employed as military personnel. Payne saw an opportunity in the *Defender* reporter’s interest in the many notes she’d taken over the years. She offered him her notebook, which he took back with him to the *Defender*’s offices. When her USO commission ended with the war, she returned to Chicago. Her journals had preceded her and auditioned her for a job, and Payne diligently applied herself to learning her trade.

Payne covered the White House until she was seventy, in 1981. Ronald Reagan was president, and Payne joked that she was as unperturbed at turning seventy as he was. She was irked, however, by his policies. In 1982, she refashioned herself, transitioning from her long assignment to the White House, to an endowed journalism chair, which she inaugurated, at Fisk University..

Dignitaries came from around the country to celebrate, and a 45-minute documentary was made to mark the event: *A Tribute to Ethel L. Payne on Her Selection as the First Recipient of the Ida B. Wells Chair in Journalism and Mass Communication at Fisk University*. Long title. Big job. Payne continued to speak, write, and act as a journalist and activist from her new post. She responded, in the 1980s, to significant events such as the election of Harold Washington as the first African American mayor of her hometown of Chicago, and to the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. Like other black Americans, especially readers of the waning black newspapers, she was watching these developments intently. In an oral history she recorded, Payne said she felt that she'd led a charmed life, because she'd seen so much and had been an eyewitness to so many major, nearly tectonic changes.

The journalists of the twenty-first century have witnessed change more profound than Dunnigan or Payne could ever have anticipated. April Ryan, author of *The Presidency in Black and White*, reported for duty at the White House in 1997, when Bill Clinton was president. As Washington bureau chief and White House correspondent for American Urban Radio Networks, she offers her take on the racial politics of three presidents—Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama. Her narrative is more analytical and clinical than Dunnigan's or Payne's—but then, she is working in a far more congenial environment. Ryan's take is also more immediate and far less retrospective. In separate chapters on each president she has covered, she analyzes his

policies and political proclivities, finally offering a terse race report card on each that reflects her blunt judgments, based on performative evidence, without any softening

Where Dunnigan and Payne both told stories of struggle and triumph and strain, Ryan focuses less on her life and more on the details of the press in Washington and of the presidents, in their hot seats. A few tender moments can be found in Ryan's narrative, though, including her visit to the White House before her first day of work, as she looks through the gate from the street. She describes the preparations of Rear Admiral Stephen Rochon, chief usher at the White House, to receive the first black president of the United States—a stunning, almost incredible moment for African Americans. Rochon was an adviser for the recent blockbuster film, *The Butler*, by the African American director Lee Daniels, which depicted the White House from viewpoint of the workers in its busy back stairs.

White House reporting is not a soft job, which explains, in part, why male editors felt they could refuse women this beat. The professional journeys of Dunnigan, Payne, and Ryan stretch from the beginning of the Truman administration, through the era of the civil rights movement, to the election of the country's first black president. Between them the women wrote millions of words—even if, in Dunnigan's case, her articles were sometimes unsigned.

Dunnigan was known for investigating the news with a social conscience and without apology. She armed herself with moral force and undaunted energy in what she termed, in her autobiography, a



White House reporter April Ryan.

great new world of journalism, plying a trade she worked assiduously to learn. In 1962, after nearly twenty years as Washington correspondent, she traded in her steno pad for a government appointment, which after a few years, she then traded for a seat and a desk, where she penned her riveting story. Of the three stories of black women White House reporters, Dunnigan's reads most engagingly and carries the most heft. All three stories are worth a look, but *Alone Atop the Hill*, about a true hero and her pioneering, is worth a couple of afternoons of inspirational reading. ♻️

A. J. Verdelle publishes essays and reviews, and is author of the prize-winning novel, *The Good Negress* (Algonquin/Harper). Verdelle writes essays and teaches fiction and creative nonfiction in the MFA program at Lesley University, in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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