

Knights of the Golden Circle: Secret Empire, Southern Secession, Civil War

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Review

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Keehn, David *Knights of the Golden Circle: Secret Empire, Southern Secession, Civil War*. Louisiana State University Press, \$39.95 ISBN 978-0-8071-5004-7

Bringing a Secret Society into the Light

Historians have spent the last quarter-century reaching a substantive, though not total, consensus that the expansion of slavery and Republican opposition to slavery's expansion represents the most proximate and authentic cause of the Civil War. Robert May's monumental works of southern expansionism and filibusters, as well as Leonard Richard's convincing evidence for the reality of the slave-power, offer two parallel analyses of southern hopes for slavery's expansion. Keehn's work breaks new ground because it unites these and offers a convincing portrait of the shadowy Knights of the Golden Circle, an organization committed to slavery's expansion and to southern empire.

Knights of the Golden Circle impresses though its comprehensiveness. Seasoned scholars will find new ground trod here, particularly regarding the origins of the Knights. Often, histories of the Civil War Era portray the creation of the Knights as chronologically concurrent with early and mid-1850s filibustering expeditions. In fact the Knights only organized in 1858 due to the energy and zeal of George W.L. Bickley, a physician living in Ohio. Capable and talented as an organizer but inept as a leader, Bickley traveled throughout the South interacting with planters and attempting to sell them steamship bonds. More importantly, Bickley convinced the leadership of another southern imperialist fraternal group, the Order of the Lone Star, to affiliate and ultimately be subsumed into the Knight of the Golden Circle. The Lone Stars brought a membership of nearly 15,000 to the Knights.

Kheen shows that members of failed previous expeditions to Cuba and Nicaragua actually filled the Knights' rolls. The Knights' organization takes up an entire chapter, and although it makes for sometimes tedious reading, it is nonetheless a testament to just how seriously they took their aims and their

abilities. The Knights were organized into three degrees. A military degree formed the numerical base. On top of that was a sort of Knights benevolence association. At the very top of the membership pyramid was the political degree, charged with electing southern politicians committed to expansion and filibustering.

The relationship between groups like the Knights and the Democratic Party overlapped, but Kheen shows that more often than not the Knights borrowed from the Democrats instead actually affecting the party. Interest in Mexico followed on the heels of a similar interest by the Buchanan administration. Kheen accurately delineates actual Knights southerners like Robert C. Taylor and Elkanah Green from mainstream Democratic politicians. Kheen also identifies a number of Knights sympathizers, among them notable Fire-Eaters like Louis T. Wigfall and Henry Wise. More spurious is his accusation that James A. Bayard joined the Knights.

The majority of the book is devoted to the activities of the Knights during the Civil War. The most infamous Knight was John Wilkes Booth. Kheen is quick to note the presence of Knights in nearly all the major conspiracies perpetrated by southern partisans, and the assassination of Abraham Lincoln was no exception. But for all the conspirators' machinations, the Knights proved surprisingly unable to hide their activities. Kheen eventually argues that the Knights' secrecy harmed their potency as an effective paramilitary organization.

Kheen's most interesting chapter, and in many ways his most controversial, is his assertion that the Knights effectively forced Texas to secede. His analysis of the circumstances of Texas' secession leads the reader to admit the possibility of the Knights' involvement, but further evidence is necessary to justify the claim that the Knights exercised leadership on the subject. Kheen admits a connection to the Knights for only 11 of the 177 delegates to Texas' secession convention, stating only that others in the convention were probably members or sympathizers.

Also of interest is the Knights involvement with secession in the Southwest. Kheen argues again convincingly that the Knights actively supported secession, but he fails to fully tie the Knights' activities into a broader discussion of secession. Slavery and fears over Republican policies proved more than sufficient to propel the Deep South states to secede. Did the Knights really matter? Per Charles Dew, it is clear that South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama

secession commissioners found fertile ground for their public arguments for secession. Were the Knights simply an auxiliary to Deep South secessionists? More work is needed regarding the Knights and the historiography of secession.

All told, Keen's work is excellent. He has offered a comprehensive history of an organization long shrouded in mystery. His research is impeccable, and the work moves quickly. *Knights of the Golden Circle* offers one more proof that Lincoln and southern Unionist contended not against a group of downtrodden southern planters, but against an active slave-power.

Miles Smith received his PhD from Texas Christian University in 2013. He has published articles on the American South, Texas, and Americans in Europe during the nineteenth century.