

Searching for Freedom After the Civil War: Klansman, Carpetbagger, Scalawag, and Freedman

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Review

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Hubbs, Guy W. *Searching for Freedom after the Civil War: Klansman, Carpetbagger, Scalawag, and Freedman.* University of Alabama Press, \$34.95
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The Origins of an Iconic Reconstruction Image

On September 1, 1868, a crude and simply-drawn cartoon appeared in the Tuscaloosa *Independent Monitor* that shocked newspaper readers across the country. Titled “A Prospective Scene in the ‘City of Oaks,’ 4th of March, 1869,” it showed a leafless tree from which two men, one holding a carpetbag labeled “Ohio,” are seen hanging from a branch by the neck while a donkey with the letters “KKK” on its flank walks out from underneath the men. This woodcut image, and the lengthy caption that accompanied it, sent a message that Republican leaders would be lynched when, as Democrats hoped, their candidate, Horatio Seymour, would be sworn in to the Presidency. The cartoon’s prediction failed come to pass, of course, but the image did foretell a wave of Klan violence in Alabama, and to this day the image is one of a handful of iconic illustrations of the Reconstruction-era Klan. Uncovering the origins and meaning of this famous cartoon is the goal of C. Ward Hubbs’s detailed new book, *Searching for Freedom after the Civil War: Klansman, Carpetbagger, Scalawag, and Freedman.*

Hubbs, who has previously written about the Greensboro Guards in West Alabama and edited a collection of folk humor from a 19th century Tuscaloosa resident, devotes a chapter to each of the four individuals mentioned in the subtitle. The first, “Klansman,” describes Ryland Randolph, the editor and owner of the *Independent Monitor* and an avowed member of the KKK. He was born in Alabama, raised by a slaveholding family, and served in the Confederate army. After purchasing the newspaper, he shifted the editorial focus to a virulent opposition to Reconstruction and public support for white supremacy. The masthead stated, “White Man—Right or Wrong—Still the White Man!” (p. 7).

The impetus for the "Prospective Scene" was the imminent reopening of the University of Alabama, located in Tuscaloosa, under Republican leadership, but the caustic image was more generally rooted in a violent antipathy towards Reconstruction. Ironically, the cartoon had the opposite effect of what Randolph intended. Instead of encouraging Democrats to vote out the Radicals, it emboldened voters in the North, who were outraged by the hatred of former Confederates, to cast their ballots for Grant.

Arad Lakin is the focus of the second chapter and the individual holding the "Ohio" carpetbag in the cartoon. Randolph labeled Lakin a "carpet-bagger" because he was a white man from Ohio, but Lakin was a poor fit for the carpetbagger label. He did not move to the South to get rich or win a political appointment; rather, he was sent to Alabama by the Methodist Episcopal Church as a missionary to convert apostate southern Methodists. As the presiding elder in Huntsville, he also supported freedpeople's efforts to establish their own churches and schools. In 1868, the University of Alabama's board of regents, in an unusual decision, elected him president of the university. Lakin had no previous experience with higher education, but the regents hoped that he would provide "moral leadership" in the state (84). Randolph and other Democrats countered with vigorous opposition and prevented the university from opening. After his brief and failed sojourn with the university, Lakin returned to Huntsville, but he returned as a prominent Republican leader, prompting the KKK to target him and drive him into hiding.

Noah Cloud is the scalawag in this story and the other person strung up in the cartoon. Born in South Carolina, he was a physician, a slaveholding proponent of scientific agriculture, a Whig, and a Unionist. After the war he joined the Republican Party and called for agricultural reforms, such as dividing and leasing plantation lots to help ex-slaves establish an independent economic footing. Although Cloud had lived in Alabama for thirty years by the time he was elected Superintendent of Public Instruction, it was his identification with the Republican Party and his endorsement of civic equality that led Randolph and others to denounce him as a "scalawag." Cloud pushed for free public schools for all children and sought to modernize the University of Alabama, which led him and the university regents to select Lakin as the new president.

The fourth and final individual profiled in this book is Shandy Wesley Jones, who was born enslaved in Alabama but was freed at the age of three. Like Lakin and Cloud, Jones's life doesn't fit the label ascribed to him by Hubbs.

Unlike the vast majority of black people in the South, Jones lived free most of his life, became a prosperous barber, and had a legally-recognized marriage. Even more unusual, Jones openly championed colonization as early as the late 1840s. At a time when most northern free black people had embraced the land of their birth and often denounced the colonization movement as a racist plan to rid America of black people, Jones instead hoped to emigrate to Liberia. He was still planning to emigrate in 1868, even though by then he was a Republican legislator in the Alabama House. While he waited for an opportunity to leave for Liberia, he, like Lakin and Cloud, championed schools for black children and even integrated classrooms, and he hoped that his son would be able to attend the University of Alabama. Ryland Randolph, of course, would have none of this. He mentioned Jones in passing in the "Prospective Scene" caption but later published a derogatory cartoon, portraying Jones as a gorilla embracing a new professor at the university. Randolph's attacks in the *Monitor* and threats from the KKK eventually compelled Jones to uproot his family and move to Mobile.

Hubbs's careful research into the lives of these four men effectively explains not only the origins of the "Prospective Scene" cartoon but also the bitter struggles over Reconstruction in the Deep South. He is less successful, however, in his argument about the varied meanings of freedom. He asserts that each man represents a different conceptualization of freedom. Part of the problem is that Hubbs largely accepts Ryland Randolph's Klan-infected perspective on Reconstruction, in that it was a contest between Klansmen, carpetbaggers, scalawags, and freedmen. But as his evidence indicates, these were just caricatures. By sticking with these labels, he underplays the racism that fueled Randolph's vituperative attacks, and muddles the egalitarian sentiment shared by the other three individuals. Hubbs argues that Randolph articulated a "people's freedom," yet this wasn't a freedom for people in general. It was only for white people. Hubbs further clouds the issue by suggesting that Randolph was not a sane person because he believed in the subordination of black people, threatened to lynch his political opponents, and walked the streets armed and looking for revenge (161). If this is the standard for insanity, then it also applies to hundreds, if not thousands, of white people who held similar views. More to the point, treating racism as a psychological abnormality does little to help us understand its broad appeal then, and now.

As for the other three, Hubbs argues that Lakin embodied a "Christian freedom," Cloud a "Whiggish freedom," and Jones, in the weakest conceptualization of the bunch, a "hope" for freedom. The problem here is that

these three men had overlapping and complimentary visions of freedom, not three distinct versions. Both Jones and Lakin were Methodist ministers. All three championed political equality and public schools for black children. Cloud publicly endorsed the 1873 Civil Rights bill, a distinctly Republican proposal that antebellum Whigs had no interest in. While Jones embraced a more separatist vision of freedom than the other two, all three, again, supported the creation of black churches. In other words, their shared vision of social and political equality brought them together and animated their drive to remake Alabama and the South. These were direct threats to white privilege and power, and so it was not crazy for Randolph and other white Alabamians to lash out violently against these Republicans.

Although Hubbs missed an opportunity to reconceptualize the inaccurate labels that are all too often used as a shorthand for explaining Reconstruction, his deeply researched book offers an insightful perspective on these four individuals and the origins of this iconic image.

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