

### White Robes, Silver Screens: Movies and the Making of the Ku Klux Klan

Thomas R. Pegram

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## Review

Pegram, Thomas R.

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**Rice, Tom** *White Robes, Silver Screens: Movies and the Making of the Ku Klux Klan*. Indiana University Press, \$28.00 ISBN 9780253018434

### The Celluloid Klavern

Historians are familiar with the linkage between the 1915 release of D. W. Griffith's epic film, *The Birth of a Nation*, and the formation that same year of a revived Ku Klux Klan in Atlanta, Georgia. Tom Rice's fascinating book, *White Robes, Silver Screens*, demonstrates that the engagement between the 1920s Invisible Empire and the nascent culture of film was deeper, longer-lasting, and more complicated than an evanescent spark of inspiration from popular culture that energized an emerging social movement. Rice, a lecturer in film studies at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, brings the perspective of his discipline along with deep and wide-ranging research in Klan and film industry sources to assemble the first comprehensive history of the place of film in the second Ku Klux Klan period from 1915 until the dissolution of the hooded order in 1944.

He argues that the newly formed Klan used and reused *Birth of a Nation* to define, legitimize, and then popularize the white Protestant order during its rapid expansion in the early 1920s. The Klan also assumed the role of a moral critic of the commercial film industry, defending Protestant "Americanism" from foreign, Jewish, and lascivious influences it detected in the products and culture of the film colony. But the Klan also embraced the propaganda value of film, producing its own movies and exhibiting them in a network of public and private venues that blended entertainment and "education." The mix of theaters, rented halls, schools, and churches that screened Klan-made or -supported films reflected a broad secondary layer of film culture in the United States among ethnic, religious, and fraternal associations that Rice believes deepened the impact of film beyond the commercial products of Hollywood. Finally, Rice explores the use of Klan images in mainstream films into the 1930s. He

concludes that direct reference to the 1920s Klan was considered too controversial for filmmakers, so that the familiar hoods, sheets, and night riding vigilantism of the Klan was relocated to indistinct nineteenth-century southern locales, the pioneer west, or the harmless confines of comedies and children's entertainment. In the 1930s, murderous outgrowths of the 1920s Klan movement such as the notorious Black Legion were criticized in a cycle of social problems films. Yet David O. Selznick completely removed the Reconstruction Klan from the 1939 film adaptation of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. Built upon the framework of Griffith's fanciful reinvention of the Reconstruction Klan, the 1920s Invisible Empire slipped into insignificance as the most influential cinematic rendering of the Reconstruction era edited out the historical role played by the original Ku Klux Klan.

Specific elements of Rice's argument unfold in four detailed chapters. In establishing historical connections between *Birth of a Nation* and its exploitation by the second Klan, Rice begins with the film's source text, Thomas Dixon's 1905 novel, *The Clansman*. Amid the racial tension that would explode into a fury of white violence in 1906, Dixon presented a stage version of his novel that not only celebrated the hooded vigilantism of Reconstruction but issued a "prophecy" that a similar assertion of white authority would become necessary (5). By the time Griffith's cinematic masterpiece premiered in Atlanta in December 1915, a simmering tension fed by the Leo Frank lynching provided the opportunity for William Simmons to drape his newly-founded fraternal order in the sensational regalia of the movie-made Klan. To create a distinguishing image for his new order that connected with an admired past, Simmons adopted the white hooded robes and the burning crosses that Griffith had placed in the film to create a fictive historical link to the Reconstruction Klan. Rice's textual analysis of advertising posters and scenes from *Birth* may prove heavy slogging for historians, but there is weight to his point that the growth of Simmons' Klan was aided by its appropriation of the film's Klan costume and that continual reshowings of the film (nine revivals over the next decade in Atlanta) contributed to the visibility, legitimacy, and growth of the hooded organization. Despite the fact that Dixon criticized the revived Klan and that Griffith distanced himself from the Kluxers, Klan organizers used the film to recruit new members during the massive expansion of the Invisible Empire in the early 1920s. Hooded Klansmen began attending commercial screenings of the film, while Klan recruiters obtained copies of *Birth* and made it a staple of Klan outreach into smaller communities. Moreover, the Klan appropriated an anti-radical film made

by the American Legion (*The Face at Your Window*) and used it effectively as Klan propaganda. By the mid-1920s, these films became identified in public controversies with the second Klan rather than with their original creators.

The chapters on the Klan censorship campaign and the production of Klan-made films furnish valuable evidence on the degree to which the 1920s Klan used modern cultural forms to build the hooded mass movement. Taking on the role of the defender of Protestant American culture, Klan critics launched outraged protests against specific films that appeared to mock Protestantism or trespass against prevailing moral standards. Hollywood star Charlie Chaplin drew hooded invective for his comic portrayal of a morally-tempted Protestant minister in the 1923 film, *The Pilgrim*. Klan-led campaigns successfully barred the film in locations around the country. The same year, Chaplin's exotic-looking fiancée, Pola Negri, was also targeted for crossing the sexual color line for an on-screen romance with an Egyptian. Her movie, *Bella Donna*, was shut down by protests in some Klan strongholds. Klan propaganda linked objectionable films to the promotion of sexual themes by Jews in Hollywood, even making the preposterous claim that Chaplin was Jewish. But the Klan maintained religious exclusivity in its outrage. When the Catholic Legion of Decency, which in the 1930s supplanted the Klan as the principal popular monitor of film content, organized to oppose immoral films, Klan representatives rejected it as an un-American tool of the Pope.

Historians of the 1920s Klan may be most interested in Rice's careful excavation of two Klan-made films, *The Toll of Justice* and *The Traitor Within*. Rice reveals that several Klan film companies sprang up in the Midwest, some of them financially-backed by important figures in the Klan hierarchy, such as Grand Dragon David Curtis Stephenson in Indiana. He traces the bewildering changes in ownership and distribution that resulted in advertising for *The Toll of Justice* that alternated between, on the one hand, claims that the film was a mainstream entertainment feature and not Klan propaganda, and, on the other hand, assertions that all Klansmen should view the film for inspirational and instructional purposes. Klan promoters attempted to book the films in legitimate theaters, but then exhibited them in the cinematic underground of Klan assemblies in schools, churches, and rented rooms. Moving between self-representation and attempts to influence contemporary entertainment, the films combined actual footage of Klan ceremonies with scripted adventures involving aerial acrobatics, car wrecks, and murder mysteries. Rice shows that the films borrowed heavily from *Birth of a Nation*, even recreating iconic scenes

from the 1915 classic. This Klan-created cinema eventually failed, but it demonstrated the hooded order's appropriation of the popular culture of the interwar era. *White Robes, Silver Screens* is a welcome contribution to an emerging body of studies on the second Ku Klux Klan's tangled relationship with history, modernity, and popular culture.

*Thomas R. Pegram is professor of history at Loyola University Maryland. He is the author of One Hundred Percent American: The Rebirth and Decline of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s (2011), Battling Demon Rum: The Struggle for a Dry America, 1800-1933 (1998), and Partisans and Progressives: Private Interest and Public Policy in Illinois, 1870-1922 (1992).*