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Book Review of, The Invisible Empire in the West: Toward a New Historical Appraisal of the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s

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THE INVISIBLE EMPIRE IN THE WEST: TOWARD A NEW HISTORICAL APPRAISAL OF THE KU KLUX KLAN OF THE 1920S, edited by Shawn Lay. University of Illinois Press, Champaign, 1992 (54 E. Gregory Dr., Champaign 61820). Tables. Notes. Index. 230 pp. \$32.50 (hardcover).

A resurgence of racially motivated hate crimes in the Pacific Northwest has refocused public attention and scholarly activity on hate groups in the region. This volume is devoted to an antecedent organization, the Ku Klux Klan, and the role it played in western life during the 1920s. As such, it offers valuable context for contemporary considerations of race, politics, and social movements.

The book includes individual essays on the character and dynamics of the Klan in six diverse western cities, from the Texas hinterland of El Paso to suburban California's Anaheim to eastern Oregon's La Grande. An excellent introduction places the Klan of the 1920s within the continuum of Klan evolution, from its origins in the post-Civil War Reconstruction era to its role in the anti-Civil Rights agitation of the 1960s. Differences in membership, motivation, behavior, and impact of the various incarnations of the Klan are discussed.

Preceding the essays on individual cities, the first chapter, by Leonard J. Moore, traces the course of Klan scholarship, describing traditional interpretations, pointing out their strengths and weaknesses, and finally offering, as the title suggests, a framework for what the authors consider a new appraisal of the "Second Invisible Empire," that is, the Klan in the 1920s. In addition, for the sake of unity and consistency among the essays, authors of the local studies were asked to address a set of five questions about the organization and activities of the klavern in their area.

Of these components, the introduction will be most helpful to the general reader; the local essays, meanwhile, will be of great interest and use to serious students of western history and sociology. The chapter on historiography is destined to incite a more mixed reception and perhaps energize a new discussion of the appropriate stance for a scholarly examination of organizations, such as the Klan, that tap deep roots of emotion in American racial history.

The book's introduction declares: "The re-emergence and spread of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s can in part be attributed to an earlier process of scholarly and popular cultural revisionism, which changed the way Americans viewed the post-Civil War Klan" (p. 3). It goes on to document the academic and social developments that "rehabilitated" the Klan's image and acceptance in the period from the 1890s to the 1920s. Though such rehabilitation is clearly not the objective of this collection, many readers today will be concerned about the dispassionate tone and purposefully neutral stance assumed in this self-described new appraisal, which paints the Klan of the 1920s as more a "populist" social movement than a race-baiting hate group on the fringes of respectable society.

Also in the introduction, we learn that this collection of essays is based on the following editorial premise: "It should never be forgotten that beneath the threatening white robes and hoods walked millions of otherwise respectable Americans" (p. 12). Many of the victims of Klan attention in earlier eras, as well as their descendants in our own time who find themselves the targets of new hate crimes, may find it difficult to appreciate such scholarly generosity. The complaint will be that such an approach demonstrates the shortcomings of an abstract analysis conducted from the safety and security of the academic tower—especially since the narrative occasionally includes such gently worded and benign observations as "the Klan appears to have acted as a kind of interest group for the average white Protestant" (p. 34).

The editor implicitly acknowledges the potential for such complaints about a "neo-rehabilitation" of the Klan as he concludes the introduction. As if in defense from such a charge, he describes the contributing authors as including representatives from groups that have been traditional targets of Klan repression: "We include two Roman Catholics, two Jews, a Greek American, and two ardent proponents of liberal causes. . . . Yet, we feel that our assessment of the KKK has for the most part been based on neutral and sober reasoning" (p. 12). Critics will be tempted to challenge the benefits of sobriety and neutrality in this context.

There will be those who suggest that a true understanding of the Klan and its role in American history can never be achieved through such a de-emotionalized, abstract approach, since the essence of the Klan was the strong visceral enthusiasm it generated in its members and the corresponding raw emotions of fear and loathing it engendered in its targets. Critics will suggest that any treatment of the Klan that fails to capture the essence of hoofbeats and the hooded visage silhouetted against a fiery symbol on a dark night is far from a "neutral" enterprise. Critics will suggest that any analysis of the Klan that fails to include the central feature of

violence has failed to capture the true nature of that movement and its path to power. These critics will also complain that as varied as the author group may be, it fails to include representation from the racial minority groups that were the original focus of Klan terrorism—and who continued as less conspicuous targets of the Klan during the so-called populism of the 1920s, even in places with small *actual* racial minority populations.

This new appraisal is aimed generally at the traditional description of the Klan (expressed in mainstream white scholarship) as a movement founded primarily on “small town roots[,] with ignorance and economic marginality” (p. 22) as its defining characteristics. Most members of racial minorities will be unimpressed by the attempt, in Moore’s essay, to sacrifice this traditional academic lamb on a new altar of evidence, or by the other authors’ efforts to demonstrate the widespread mainstream appeal of and participation in the Klan. Such an understanding of white society has long been axiomatic in the folk wisdom and rhetorical analysis of American racism by minority racial commentators. The conclusion that the Klan “was composed primarily of average citizens representing nearly all parts of America’s white Protestant society” will hardly be news to this audience (p. 33). For them this will not represent a “new” appraisal of the Klan as much as a confirmation of a long-held truism. In the 1960s black nationalist spokesman Malcolm X, whose own father was murdered by the Nebraska Klan in the 1930s, frequently observed that “southern justice” started at the Canadian border. The inclusiveness of this sentiment is similar in scope to the traditional beliefs of racial minorities about the extent of “klannishness” within white society.

The merits of these contrasting perspectives will be tested in subsequent discussion and debate. That debate, however, should not prevent potential readers from enjoying the rewards of this book. Fortunately, the individual local studies avoid excessive abstract theorizing. In general, compelling fact is offered with only such interpretation as is necessary to bind events together and establish cohesion and continuity. The facts speak eloquently for themselves and often create a framework for judgment in spite of editorial intention.

Readers interested in Oregon history will be happy to find two offerings about the Oregon Klan, an appropriate prominence considering the magnitude of the movement in the state. Both are especially welcome for another reason: Neither focuses on the often-studied urban experience of interracial Portland. “Robe and Gown: The Ku Klux Klan in Eugene, Oregon, during the 1920s,” by Eckard V. Toy, Jr., does a commendable job of addressing the complexities of local politics that made the Klan a powerful influence at the southern end of the Willamette Valley, at a time when its power in other parts of the state had waned. “Order, Solidarity

and Vigilance: The Ku Klux Klan in La Grande, Oregon,” by David A. Horowitz, deals confidently with the operation of “klannishness” in small-town life, via the interplay of economic, political, social, and religious factors. Such interactions defined the ramifications of Klan membership against a backdrop of larger national events of the day. All essays in the collection are well written and thoroughly documented, often relying on materials newly unearthed by these authors and unavailable to earlier scholars.

Contemporary events, this new material and its appraisal, as well as the dialogue it will incite, all make this book an important addition to Klan historiography as well as to Oregon and western history.

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