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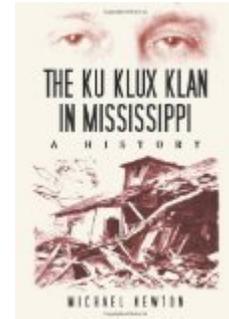
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael Newton. *The Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi: A History*. Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2010. v + 246 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7864-4653-7.

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Mason on Ku Klux Klan

The past decade has understandably witnessed the explosive growth of scholarly literature on terrorism, genocide, and other extreme forms of deadly violence. A cottage industry on 9/11 and international terrorist groups has emerged—indeed, there are probably more people writing about al-Qaeda than there are actual members of the organization. While most of this literature looks outward, beyond America’s shores, many scholars are also revisiting America’s own violent past, including a new generation of historians exploring the causes, nature, and meaning of lynching and other forms of racial violence.

Michael Newton’s book *The Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi: A History*, fits within these recent historiographical trends by offering readers a close-up view of America’s most (in)famous homegrown terrorist organization, known especially for its violence against blacks but also, in its second and third incarnations, with a significant anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic streak. Although Newton is by no means the first to write on the activities of the Klan in the Magnolia State, his book does fill a niche by focusing exclusively on only one state and then chronicling the Klan from its beginnings in the immediate post-bellum period to the present day. *The Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi* is an exhaustively detailed account that will prove beneficial to scholars and students of southern history, African American history, and race relations and violence in American history. Newton’s account is long on detail but relatively short on analysis, making it a helpful first stop for readers interested in the subject while

leaving abundant room for future scholars to build upon.

This is not a pleasant book to read. Even those who are well aware of Mississippi’s violently racist past cannot fail to be struck, and disturbed, by the horrors related herein. Newton typically moves quickly from one violent episode to another, leaving the event—and the reader—little time to breathe in between. On the one hand, this “just the facts, ma’am” approach can be tedious, even numbing at times; on the other hand, the onslaught of evidence demonstrates the persistence and pervasiveness of (mostly racial) violence. The relentless narrative of violent terror gives the reader some sense of how fearful it must have been to be African American in Mississippi in the century following emancipation.

The meat of the book lies in chapters 1, 3, and 5, which trace, respectively, the activities of the Klan as constituted during Reconstruction, the 1920s, and the 1960s. Newton dutifully sketches out the Tennessee origins of the Klan, then traces its spread throughout the South, with the first Mississippi “den” organized in 1866. By the following year, it became clear that the Klan was not just a harmless fraternal organization dedicated to playing pranks—“exclusively on blacks,” as Newton notes (p. 3)—but rather “a paramilitary movement to defend the sacred Southern Way of Life” (p. 9). While “some of the Klan’s antipathy toward blacks was economically inspired” (p. 19), most of the violence was “blatantly political” (p. 21), with the Klan constituting the vigilante arm of the resurgent Democratic Party. The Klan provided an outlet for

“many restless and embittered veterans [who] found the wartime killing habit hard to shake” (p. 11). It was led by former Confederate officers and supported by others among the state’s upper crust, though it was typically the younger generation and poor white folk who did most of the actual night riding. Newton does not use these terms, but shows that Klan violence was both purposive and performative, designed not only to accomplish a particular task (intimidating or eliminating an African American with political ambitions, for instance) but also to strike fear–terror–into the hearts of the entire targeted community.

Newton’s description of the Reconstruction period in Mississippi offers little that is not already familiar to scholars, but the chapter’s meticulous account of Klan violence, its support by leading politicians such as Lucius Q. C. Lamar, and its effectiveness in helping “redeem” the state from Republican rule provides a good case study that could be used in various undergraduate courses—although not as effectively as Nicholas Lemann’s *Redemption* (2006), which covers much of the same information but in a more compellingly written narrative. One of the chapter’s (and book’s) weaknesses is its failure to cite key secondary literature on both the Reconstruction Klan and broader patterns of extralegal violence in southern and American history.[1]

The second chapter, covering a period of “hiatus and revival” from 1877-1921, is largely superfluous. Precisely because the Ku Klux Klan proper disbanded in the mid-1870s, in part because of increased federal prosecutions but largely because Klansmen accomplished their aim of restoring white power, there is little to report of Klan activity from the end of Reconstruction until its resurgence in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Newton nevertheless dedicates an entire chapter to racism in Mississippi politics during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In a book purportedly about the Klan, and not the broader dynamics of race in Mississippi, this material could have been condensed into a brief introduction to the following chapter. The same holds true for chapter 4, which also covers a period of pervasive and pronounced racism in Mississippi but little actual Klan activity.

Chapter 3 surveys the resurrected Klan of the 1920s, which though known as the “Invisible Empire” was anything but invisible. This new and updated Klan “offered recruits a mixture of fraternalism, bedrock Protestant moralism, nativism à la Tom Watson, and traditional white-supremacist dogma” (p. 73). It expanded its targets to Catholics and Jews, bootleggers and adulterers, though

the movement still remained anchored in the rhetoric and enforcement of white supremacy. Newton helpfully demonstrates how “kleagles” targeted their recruitment efforts to fraternal orders (the Masons, Elks, Odd Fellows, etc.) and Protestant churches. Klansmen would show up en masse to Sunday services, handing the minister a cash donation and a statement of Klan principles. Newton reveals multiple strands within the second Klan—many of its members maintained that it was a peaceful, patriotic, moralistic movement, whereas other evidence clearly points to continued Klan violence, particularly against blacks. Both narratives are true, reflecting a broader, more public, and more entrepreneurial Klan that now housed various constituencies and operated on different levels.

The weaknesses of chapter 3 are illustrative of the book’s broader limitations. Though the rise and fall of the 1920s Klan is thoroughly documented—Newton does well in rehearsing opposition to the organization and its eventual decline into irrelevance by the time of the Depression—the chapter fails to ask, let alone answer, key interpretive questions. For instance, what precisely was the relationship of the Klan to southern religion, and how did particular strands of southern Protestantism, and the racial views embedded therein, contribute to the Klan’s mythology and practices? Newton notes the rise of women’s auxiliary organizations within the Klan, but the book contains no sustained analysis of the role of gender, including any consideration of how southern views of manhood contributed to (and were perhaps shaped by) Klan ideology, membership, and activities.

After relating a series of violent episodes following James Meredith’s 1962 desegregation of Ole Miss, Newton poses the question, “Was this the Klan at work?” (p. 124). Indeed, this question should have been asked throughout the book, as it is not always clear that particular acts of anti-black violence were in fact perpetrated by the Ku Klux Klan. Newton does not plainly differentiate between Klan violence and the acts of other white supremacist vigilantes, many of whom were copycats but distinct nevertheless. Newton may have begun to solve the quandary by framing it through the statement of FBI agent Joseph Sullivan, who said that in Neshoba in the 1960s “there proved to be no difference between a real Klansman and someone who was not a member but whose friends and neighbors were. Even if they themselves had declined to join the klavern, they identified totally with those who had” (quoted, p. 140). If partly helping to answer one question, however, this quote raises another: Why would some Mississippians deeply sym-

pathize with the Klan but refuse to join it?

The longest, most detailed chapter chronicles the 1960s, when at its peak the Mississippi White Knights, headed by Sam Bowers, claimed up to 100,000 members (and certainly had at least 10,000). Newton details the extensive terrorist campaign that reached its zenith in 1964 during Freedom Summer, which was met with “more concentrated Ku Klux violence than any other period since Reconstruction” (p. 152). Klan attacks on blacks and civil rights workers continued nearly unimpeded into 1965, despite investigations by the FBI and the House Un-American Activities Committee, but began to wane in the latter part of the decade. When the Klan bombed a synagogue in September 1967, public reaction turned decidedly against the movement, with the logic of violence finally consuming itself and antagonizing the majority of “moderates.” By 1970, the Klan was more or less defunct in Mississippi.

The final chapter documents continued anti-black violence in the 1970s and beyond. Newton refers several times to “Klan-type violence” (p. 187) and “Klan-type incidents” (p. 199), but for the most part the Klan had been entirely marginalized in the late twentieth century, and by 2005 there were “more hecklers than Klansmen” at a cross-burning ceremony in Tremont (p. 205). The author effectively shows how multiple factions competed for members in Mississippi and around the South, but he misses the chance to conclude with a sustained comparison of the three generations of the Klan, a final casualty of a book that emphasizes chronicling events over ana-

lyzing them. Newton thus packs a lot of well-researched information into *The Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi*, but scholars will wish he did a little more unpacking as well.

Note

[1]. On the role of violence in Reconstruction politics, a few notable titles (uncited by Newton) include George C. Rable, *But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984); Michael Perman, *The Road to Redemption: Southern Politics, 1869-1879* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); and Kenneth C. Barnes, *Who Killed John Clayton? Political Violence and the Emergence of the New South, 1861-1893* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998). A foundational work examining the history of extralegal violence in America is Richard Maxwell Brown, *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975). The new literature on lynching is extensive, and includes George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865-1940: Lynchings, Mob Rule, and “Legal Lynchings”* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press University, 1990); W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Christopher Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch: Extralegal Violence and Punishment in America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); and Michael J. Pfeifer, *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society, 1874-1947* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

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