

In Praise of the Ku Klux Klan. *The Clansman* (1903) by Thomas Dixon

Text of a podcast, August, 2023

This is Ron Stockton

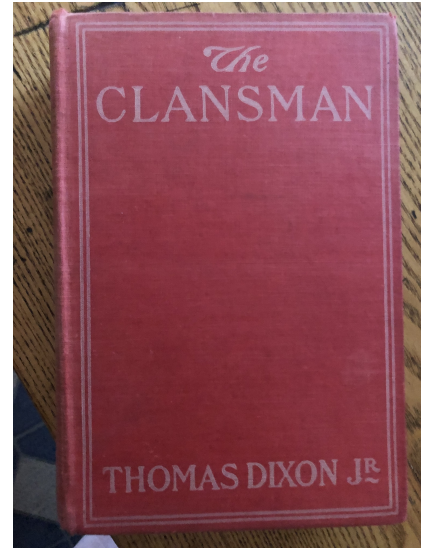
Once I was in a used bookstore and saw a book whose title I recognized. It was *The Clansman* by Thomas Dixon, Jr. This book was written in 1903 and became a best seller. It sold over 100,000 copies! The author made it into a play that was seen by over a million people. Then in 1915 D. W Griffin made it into a film, *The Birth of a Nation*, which was seen by millions more. That film was even shown in the White House by President Wilson. Wilson was a good president in many ways but he was a typical Virginia racist, a product of his time and place.

That book sat on my bookshelf for 20 years before I finally read it. What prompted me was a project I started to study the manifestos of violent white nationalists. I focused on nine of those. They are collectively and individually chilling. Their core theme is that white people are being displaced and oppressed within their own country.

The only way for the white race to survive is to organize a resistance movement and to suppress or exterminate non-whites before they do that to white people. This is a call for race war. The outcome must be a white Christian state where non-whites are either gone entirely or are small in numbers and are marginalized and subjected to white authority. (If you are interested my podcast called “The Replacement Wars” discusses those manifestos.

Back to that film, *The Birth of a Nation*. It is a gripping masterpiece, but I would have to add a “racist” masterpiece. It is about race war in America. It focuses upon the aftermath of the Civil War. The South has recognized the evils of slavery and is ready to rejoin the Union, but there are vengeful elements in Washington who have different goals. They want to exclude from influence anyone who supported the Confederacy. They would confiscate their property, give it to former slaves, disenfranchise whites, and let Blacks rule (and dominate). This is Reconstruction -- an evil military occupation designed to crush white people. Under Reconstruction Blacks were installed in power and whites became subjects in their own land. Special privilege and influence were given to those of mixed race, the mulattos. Not only were such people deluded into thinking that their white blood gave them special privilege, but they had no core heritage. They had neither white values nor Black values. They had no discipline, integrity, morals, intelligence, responsibility or respect for order. The men also had had a lust for white female flesh so that no honorable white woman was safe. This was a catastrophe until whites, calling upon their heritage of courage and defiance and integrity, created the KKK (Ku Klux Klan) to restore order.

Today this book is an artifact. Reconstruction ended in 1876. The Klan is no longer a force. President Grant crushed it. If any of you listening to this podcast have ever read that book, I would be surprised. But I am sorry to say that some of its ideas persist today. A key goal of the Klan was to challenge Black voting, something that still exists. There are also several beliefs about African Americans that are parallel to those in the book. First, they are violence-prone thugs. Second they are sexually violent and a threat

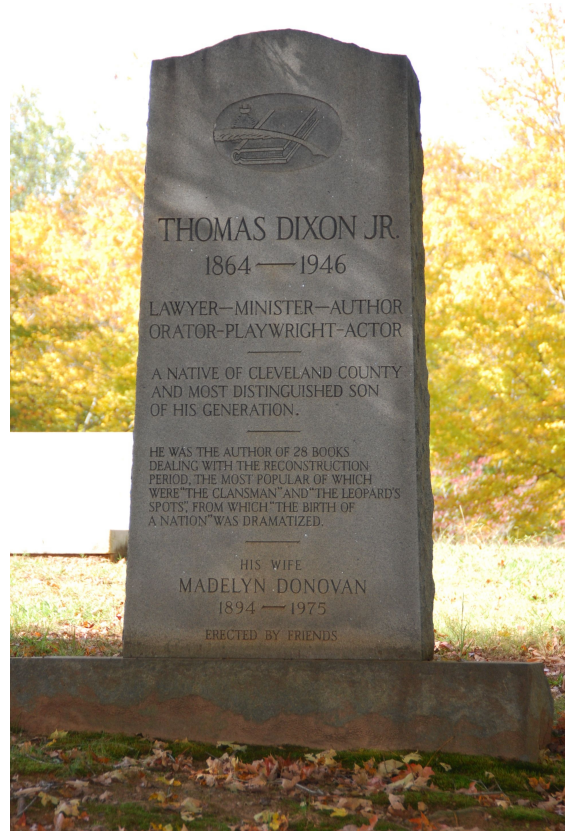


to white women. Third they get special treatment, especially advancement over much better qualified whites. Fourth, as public officials, they are corrupt. Fifth, when in positions of influence they promote Black interests over the public good. And sixth, they are not very bright.



I was at a gravestone conference in South Carolina a few years ago and saw Thomas Dixon's grave. It is in Sunset Cemetery in Shelby County. It is a tall, dignified stone, "erected by friends," as it says. It identifies Dixon as a "Lawyer, Minister, Author, Orator, Playwright, and Actor. He is "A

Native of Cleveland County and Most Distinguished Son of His Generation. He was the Author of 28 books Dealing with the Reconstruction Period, the Most Popular of Which Were "The Clansman" and "The Leopard's Spots," From Which "The Birth of a Nation" was Dramatized. " Those words are on the stone.

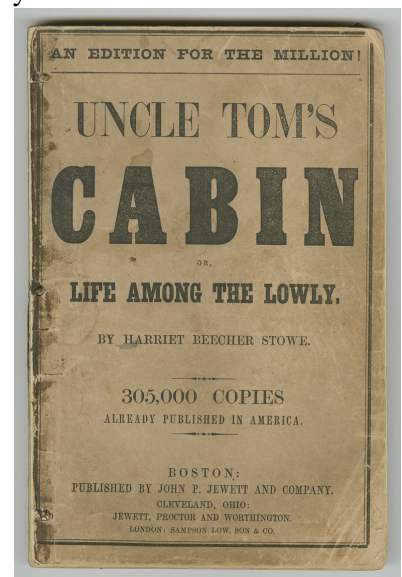


To say that he was admired during his age would be an understatement. He was seen as a heroic figure, speaking truth about the struggle of Southern whites to survive in the face of a double onslaught, from aggressive Northerners, and local Blacks.

Ironically, just across the path from Dixon's grave is the grave of W. J. Cash (1900-1941) whose scholarly book *The Mind of the South* was almost a response to *The Clansman*. It definitely did not glorify the Klan or its way of thinking. Unlike *The Clansman*, people still read it today.



About the time I read *The Clansman* I also also read an academic book on the 1852 novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. [*Mightier Than the Sword* by David S. Reynolds]. Jane and I had visited the home of Harriet Beecher Stowe in Hartford, Connecticut. Curiously, it shared a back yard with Mark Twain. Those two geniuses could walk over



and chat with each other if they wanted.

I had never read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* but when I was a boy the film appeared in our small town movie theater. Why they would show a silent film in the 1950s, I don't know, but my dad took me to see it. I had never seen a silent film but it was very powerful. No one can forget the scene when Eliza, holding her baby, runs across the frozen river, jumping from one piece of ice to another, pursued by bloodhounds, knowing that if she can get across the river alive she and her son will be in a free state and she will never be sold away from her son.

At the Stowe house I learned that Harriet herself had lost a child and at the gravesite had realized that a Black mother would feel exactly what she herself was feeling if she were sold away from her child. That personal loss inspired Harriet to include the ice scene escape in her book

When I read that book on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, I learned that the 1927 silent film by Harry A. Pollard had been a reaction to *The Birth of a Nation*. Pollard was so offended by the glorification of the Klan that he felt the need for a corrective, if we can call it that. He made a full two-hour version of *Uncle Tom* so people could see the alternative reality. And it became a hit movie.



I want to read to you some excerpts from *The Clansman*. They follow five themes: first, White Southerners are natural Leaders who will Fight for their Land; Second, Black people are Depraved, and have Destructive Impulses; third, White Women are at Risk; Fourth, We are in the Middle of a Race War; and finally When the Klan is Triumphant Peace and Order will be restored.

But before we start, I want to apologize to you for the words I am about to read. If you think you might be upset by these, it would be ok if you stopped listening at this point.

The story is situated in South Carolina, the author's home. The Carolinas – both North and South -- had exceptional violence and turmoil during the Reconstruction period. Let's just look at some excerpts from the book. One deals with the heroic Cameron family. Dr. Cameron, Mrs. Cameron, Ben and Margaret.

At a certain point Mrs. Cameron has to confront her fear. Fortunately, she has an inner strength that sustains her: “The heritage of centuries of heroic blood from the martyrs of old Scotland began to flash its inspiration from the past. Her heart beat with the unconscious life of men and women who had stood in the stocks, and walked in chains to the stake with songs on their lips.” More about that family in a minute.

The evil northern villain of this story is Thaddeus Stevens, the militant Reconstructionist member of Congress, here called Stoneman. (He is a hero in the film *Lincoln* where he is played by Tommy Lee Jones). Stoneman was “Honest and dishonest, cruel and tender, great and mean, a party leader who scorned public opinion, a man of conviction, yet the most unscrupulous politician, a philosopher who preached the equality of man, yet a tyrant who hated the world and despised all men.” As he explains to a group of followers: “The life of a political party, gentlemen, is maintained by a scheme of subterfuges in

which the moral law cuts no figure. As your leader, I know but one law – success... If any man thinks the abstraction called “honour” is involved, let him choose between his honour and his life!”

In one scene, Stoneman appears, carried by two Black servants: “No sculptor ever dreamed a more sinister emblem of the corruption of a race of empire builders than this group. Its black figures, wrapped in the night of four thousand years of barbarism, squatted there the ‘equal’ of their master, grinning at his forms of justice, the evolution of forty centuries of Aryan genius.”

Stoneman is warned not to mess with the Southern whites. “The breed to which the Southern white man belongs has conquered every foot of soil on this earth where their feet have pressed for a thousand years. A handful of them hold in subjection three hundred millions in India. Place a dozen of them in the heart of Africa, and they will rule the continent -- unless you kill them.”

But Stoneman is not deterred. He says to his black followers: “Give the white trash in this town to understand that they are not even citizens of the nation. As a sovereign voter, you, once their slave, are not only their equal – you are their master.”

Then there was Phil Stoneman, the son of the congressman. Politically he and his father were in different camps. Once he sees a negro trooper standing on the corner, watching the Cameron house. “Instinctively, he stopped, surveyed the man from head to foot and asked: What’s the trouble? Phil watched him with disgust. He had the short heavy-set neck of the lower order of animals. His skin was coal black, his lips so thick they curled both ways up and down with crooked blood marks across them. His nose was flat, and its enormous nostrils seemed in perpetual dilation. The sinister beady eyes, with brown splotches in their whites, were set wide apart and gleamed ape like under his scant brow. His enormous cheek-bones and jaws seemed to protrude beyond the ears.“

On one occasion, Dr. Cameron went to Stoneman’s office to see him about some offense, but to no avail. “But I must see him. No such outrage has ever been recorded in the history of the American people. I appeal to the Magna Charta rights of every man who speaks the English tongue – no man shall be arrested or imprisoned or deprived of his own household, or of his liberties, unless by the legal judgment of his peers or by the law of the land.”

The issue of 40 acres and a mule comes up. Ironically, many negroes refuse the offer out of laziness. “Some who hesitated about the forty acres of land, remembering that it must be worked, couldn’t resist the idea of owning a mule.” But they were promised that they would not have to work the land. “Forty acres and a mule, your old master to work your land and pay his rent in corn, while you sit back in the shade and see him sweat.”

White people who had never owned land resented the program. As one says, “Forty acres and a mule for every black man – why was I ever born white? I never had no luck, nohow.”

Dr. Cameron was an opponent of the Klan. But his son Phil disagreed: “It’s the only way, sir. The next step will be a black hand on a white woman’s throat!”

On another occasion, Dr. Cameron goes to a meeting of the legislature. “Negro policemen swung their clubs in his face as he pressed through the insolent throng up the street to the stately marble Capitol. At the door a black, greasy trooper stopped him to parley... As he passed inside the doors of the House of Representatives the rush of foul air staggered him. The reek of vile cigars and stale whiskey, mingled

with the odour of perspiring negroes, was overwhelming. He paused and gasped for breath.” There were “coal black negroes.” The legislature had nine scalawags, “who claimed to be white. “ [Note that Scalawags were Southerners who collaborated with the occupation army]. And there were 23 white men from the Scotch-Irish counties, “the remains of Aryan civilization.”

He noted one black leader as he spoke: “He was a born African orator, undoubtedly descended from a long line of savage spell-binders, whose eloquence in the palaver houses of the jungle had made them native leaders.”

Dr. Cameron also visited a court: What he saw was “a thick-lipped, flat-nosed, spindle-shanked negro, exuding his nauseating animal odour. . . Dr. Cameron watched the movements of the black judge, already notorious for the sale of his opinions, with a sense of sickening horror. This man was but yesterday a slave, his father a medicine man in an African jungle who decided the guilt or innocence of the accused by the test of administering poison. If the poison killed the man, he was guilty; if he survived, he was innocent. For four thousand years his land had stood a solid bulwark of unbroken barbarism. Out of its darkness he had been thrust upon the seat of judgment of the laws of the proudest and highest type of man evolved in time. It seemed a hideous dream.” The judge was a person “whose sole aim of life was sensual, whose only fears were of physical pain and death, who could worship a snake and sacrifice a human being.”

But white people had advantages in this “challenge of race against race to mortal combat.” Among them were “his genius for command, the deep sense of duty and honour, his hospitality, his deathless love of home, his supreme constancy and sense of civic unity, all combined to make him ultraconservative. He began now to see that it was reverence for authority as expressed in the constitution under which slavery was established which made Secession inevitable. “

(Here we see the argument that the secession was *on behalf* of the constitution rather than against it. The confederates were the true patriots).

Under Reconstruction, whites were confronted with a brutal reality.

“Black hordes of former slaves, with the intelligence of children and the instincts of savages, armed with modern rifles, parade daily in front of their unarmed former masters. A white man has no right a negro need respect. [Note that this is a reversal of the phrase from the Dread Scott decision which said that Black men had no right that a white man need respect. How things had changed].

What a tragedy it was that “The children of the breed of men who speak the tongue of Burns and Shakespeare, Drake and Raleigh, have been disarmed and made subject to the black spawn of an African jungle! Can human flesh endure it?”

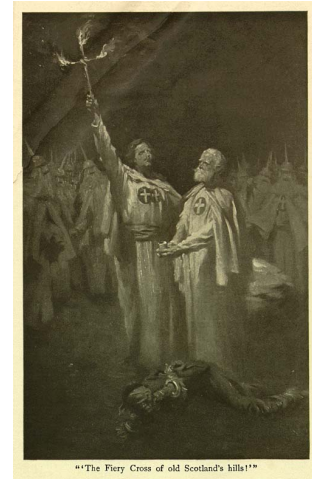
Of course, the issue is NOT slavery. That era is gone, Thank God. “Every man in South Carolina to-day is glad that slavery is dead. The war was not too great a price for to pay for the lifting of its curse.” But what they are fighting for is quite different, it is the Republic itself. That Republic is great “because of the genius of the race of pioneer white freemen who settled this continent, dared the might of kings, and made a wilderness the home of Freedom. Our future depends on the purity of this racial stock. The grant of the ballot to these millions of semi-savages and the riot of debauchery which has followed are crimes against human progress.”

Dixon continues: “That race is not an infant; it is a degenerate. Since the dawn of history the negro has owned the continent of Africa – rich beyond the dream of poet’s fancy, acres of diamonds beneath his bare black feet. Yet he never picked one up from the dust until a white man showed to him its glittering light. His land swarmed with powerful and docile animals, yet he never dreamed a harness, a cart, or sled. A hunter by necessity, he never made an axe, spear or arrowhead worth preserving beyond the moment of its use. He lived as an ox, content to graze for an hour. In a land of stone and timber he never sawed a foot of lumber, carved a block, or built a house save of broken sticks and mud. With league on league of ocean strand and miles of inland seas, for four thousand years he watched their surface ripple under the wind, heard the thunder of the surf on his beach, the howl of the storm over his head, gazed on the dim blue horizon that called him to worlds that lie beyond, and yet he never dreamed a sail! He lived as his fathers lived – stole his food, worked his wife, sold his children, ate his brother, content to drink, sing, dance and sport as the ape! And this creature, half child, half animal, the sport of impulse, whim, and conceit, ‘pleased with a rattle, tickled with a straw,’ a being who, left to his will, roams at night and sleeps in the day, whose speech knows no word of love, whose passions, once aroused are as the fury of the tiger—they have set this thing to rule over the Southern people.....Merciful God --- it surpasses human belief!”

Let’s pause for a minute to look at two phrases. The term “Acres of Diamonds” is from a noted story of the late 1800s of a man of color who did not realize the wealth just below the earth because he would not bother to look for it. And the phrase “pleased with a rattle, tickled by a straw” was from a poem by Alexander Pope describing the innocence of a small child.

But now the emotional infant is housed in a grown body. Blacks were a race of people with animal urges and no impulse control. The danger of rape was always in the air. Not to mention what would follow such an atrocity.

The “black brutes’ lurked about with their “yellow teeth grinning through thick lips.” One was Gus. “Gus stepped closer, with an ugly leer, his flat nose dilated, his sinister beady eyes wide apart, gleaming apeline, as he laughed. With a single tiger spring, the black claws of the beast sank into the soft white throat and she was still.” This was the tragedy of Marion Lenoir, the 15-year-old childhood sweetheart of Dr. Cameron’s son Ben who later became the Grand Dragon of the Klan. She survived this assault but the next morning, she and her mother walked to the peak of a nearby mountain and plunged to their deaths. Through extinguishing their lives they restored their honor.



It was Ben who found the bodies. He realized what had happened. He whispered a silent prayer: “Now, Lord God, Give me strength for the service of my people.”

Obviously, this atrocity would not remain unavenged. Fortunately, a local doctor has developed a microscope that could look into the eye of a dead person and see the image of the murderer. “Find the fiend who did this crime – and we will hang him on a gallows so high that all men from



the rivers to the ends of the earth shall see and feel and know the might of an unconquerable race of men.”

And that was the fate of Gus. Ben Cameron himself presided over his execution. And his body was thrown during the night onto the lawn of the black governor of the state. It was a wakeup call. The citizens of the South would not go quietly into the darkness.

Stoneman had two children, Phil and Elsie. Both saw the injustice being inflicted by their father on the South. Phil became friends with Ben and joined him in his struggle. Ben fell in love with Elsie. But she opposed the Klan, which she saw as violent and subversive. The two engaged in a heated debate.

“You are a conspirator ---“

“I am a revolutionist.”

“You are committing murder!”

“I am waging war.”

Ben’s argument rested upon an assumption about the nature of the social order:

“It is a question of who possesses the right of life and death over the citizen, the organized virtue of the community, or its organized crime.”

Obviously the Klan represents the “organized virtue of the community.”

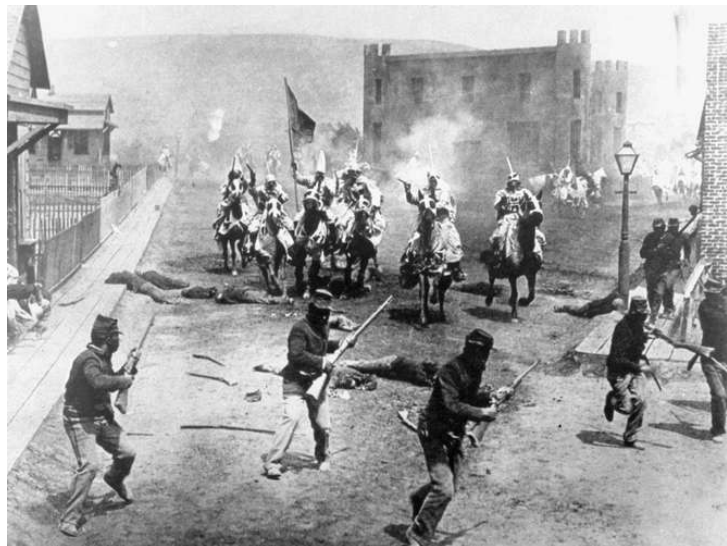
Ben gathers a group of 40 men who become the core of his new movement. He issues a challenge:

“To each man who accepts this dangerous mission I offer you for bed the earth, for your canopy the sky, for your bread stones; and when the flash of bayonets shall fling into your face from the Square the challenge of martial law, the protection I promise you – is exile, imprisonment, and death! Let the ten men who accept these terms step forward four paces. With a single impulse the whole double line of forty white-and-scarlet figures moved quickly forward four steps!”

Later Ben watched as the black soldiers engaged in their inept drills. When the inevitable clash occurs, they drop their weapons and flee.

Order is restored: “For the first time since the dawn of black Rule negroes began to yield to white men and women the right of way on the streets.”

The novel ends with a predictable satisfaction for the faithful readers. Elsie Stoneman joins Ben in his struggles. We see a happy ending for their romance.



Stoneman, who fears his son has fallen into the clutches of the Klan and been murdered, reveals to Dr. Cameron that he has been driven by hatred and malice. He was led astray by an evil spirit and by the wicked mulatto woman who inhabited his bed.

[Let's pause for a minute: This relationship is much differently in the film *Lincoln* where Thaddeus Stevens brings the Thirteenth Amendment home to read to his common-law wife as they rest together in bed. And in real life, Stevens was, by his request, buried in a Black cemetery].

In fact, unbeknownst to his father, Stoneman's son, Phil, had become a loyal member of the Klan. Out of devotion to Ben he had taken his place in prison but had been rescued by the Klan. He greets his grateful father accompanied by guards, or are they guardians, in Klan robes.

Later crosses burn from hilltop to hilltop. Elsie Stoneman, now fully convinced and even wearing Klan garb, tells Ben that victory or defeat, life or death, she is with him. She asks what the crosses mean. "It means that I am a successful revolutionist. That Civilization has been saved. And the South redeemed from shame."

The final scene in the film is very reassuring. It is a Sunday afternoon and people are out for a pleasant stroll. Everyone, white and Black, are dressed in their best. The Blacks are polite to the whites and the whites are polite to the Blacks. The Black impulses to disorder and destruction have been brought under control. Blacks are again happy and peaceful.

Just for the record, Dixon made a personal statement about Reconstruction: "When the darker days of Negro rule under Federal bayonets after the war threatened to extinguish white civilization, again her people led the way in successful revolution. North Carolina was the first Southern State completely to destroy every trace of the Negroid regime, root and branch, and reestablish the white race in its place."

Well, that is my summary of the book that shook the nation. And let me apologize again for reading to you some of the most awful passages you will ever encounter. If you stuck it out to this point, you get a gold star.

I wish I could tell you that this book is just a historic curiosity. But as Faulkner said, "the past is not even past." So much of this book's logic is still around. The core political issue that drove the Klan was Black voting, which they were determined to stop. And race war was at the core of the story. I myself have heard people say that another civil war is on the way, a war between Blacks and Whites. With Blacks the aggressors, supported by the government. How many politicians have you heard use code words, quoting Jefferson about how the roots of liberty need to be watered with blood? And have you noticed that Black protests are accompanied by a surge in gun purchases?

Before we end, let me share with you two curious factoids. They involve the cross and the robe. Both were introduced by Dixon in this story. The original Klan of the 1870s did not burn crosses. Dixon was of Scots heritage and incorporated an old Scots custom of burning a cross to rally the clans in the event of war. Likewise, the white robe was an old Scots custom that Dixon introduced into his narrative. When

the second Klan emerged in the 1920s, inspired by the movie, they adopted both of those symbols. Dixon was not happy. He was not friendly to the second Klan, and he did not like that they had appropriated his symbols.

Well, that's it.

Thanks for listening.