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Return to Ella Gaddis Barnett
Etta Moten Barnett

"BIRTH OF A NATION" -- PROPAGANDA AS HISTORY

by
John Hope Franklin
1977

The fact that certain scholars specialize in studying the past does not mean that the past as an area of serious inquiry is beyond the reach of the layman with even the most modest intellectual and professional equipment. One must respect the efforts of anyone who seeks to understand the past; but it does not follow that one must respect or accept the findings of all who inquire into the past. Nor does it follow that the curiosity seekers of one brand or another can speak for those who by training and commitment devote their major attention to a study of the past. The decades and centuries that have receded from contemporary view are too important to all of us to leave their study to those who do not bring to the task all the skills available and present their findings with a clear understanding of what history means to the present and to the future.

The study of the past may mean many things to many people. For some it means that the effort to reconstruct what actually happened in an earlier era demands an honesty and integrity that elevate the study of history to a noble en-

terprise. For some it means that the search for a usable past provides instruction that may help to avoid the errors of their forefathers. It is not necessary to enumerate each of the many uses of the past, but it is worth noting that not all quests into the past are characterized by a search for the truth. Some of the most diligent would-be historians have sought out those historical episodes that support some contemporary axe they have to grind. Others look for ways to justify the social and public policy that they and like-minded persons advocate. Others even use the past to hold up to public scorn and ridicule those who are the object of their own prejudices.

The era of Reconstruction after the Civil War is an excellent example of a period that attracts historians -- laymen and professionals alike -- who seek historical explanations for certain contemporary social and political problems. And Thomas Dixon, Jr. is a peerless example of a historian -- in his case a layman -- who has mined the era of the Reconstruction to seek a historical justification for his own social attitudes and who has exerted as much influence on current opinions of Reconstruction as

any historian, lay or professional. Born in 1864 in a farm house near Shelby, North Carolina, Dixon was eight years old when he accompanied an uncle to a session of the state legislature in South Carolina where he saw in that body "ninety-four Negroes, seven native scalawags /white South Carolina Republicans/ and twenty-three white men /presumably carpetbaggers from the North/." The impression on young Dixon of blacks and unworthy whites sitting in the seats of the mighty was a lasting one and ostensibly had a profound influence on his future career.

Dixon's reconstruction experience was not unlike that which he had in 1887 when he heard Justin D. Fulton speak in Boston's Tremont Temple on "The Southern Problem." He was so outraged at Fulton's strictures against the South, based on a visit of six months, that he interrupted the distinguished minister midway through his lecture to denounce his assertions as "false and biased." It was on this occasion that Dixon decided to tell the world what he knew about the South first-hand; and thus he began seriously to study the Civil War and Reconstruction.

The road that led Dixon to write about the Reconstruction era took him on a long and eventful journey. It led to Wake

Forest College, where he was a superior student and leading debater. Then, for a brief sojourn he was at the Johns Hopkins University, where he became friendly with a graduate student, Woodrow Wilson, with whom he would later exchange favors. At the age of twenty young Dixon was a one-term member of the North Carolina legislature, which he quit because he was sickened by the conduct of the politicians whom he called "the prostitutes of the masses." Incidentally, the number of black members of the Assembly was so small in 1884 that they could not possibly have been the cause of Dixon's disillusionment. Successively, this restless and talented young man became an actor, lawyer, clergyman, essayist, and lecturer. None of these pursuits satisfied Thomas Dixon as long as he was consumed with the desire to "set the record straight," as he would put it, regarding Reconstruction. Consequently, he forsook his other activities and proceeded to write the first volume of his Reconstruction trilogy. He called it <u>The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden</u>. The title was derived from the Biblical question "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?"

Dixon sent his first novel to his old Raleigh, North Carolina friend, Walter Hines Page, then a partner in the publishing house, Doubleday, Page and Company. Page accepted it immediately and optimistically ordered a first printing of fifteen thousand copies. The success of the work was instantaneous, and within a few months more than one hundred thousand copies had been sold, and arrangements made for numerous foreign translations. Highly touted as a general history of the racial problem in the South and especially in North Carolina from 1885 to 1900, The Leopard's Spots established Dixon as an authority whom many were inclined to take seriously. His "luxuriant imagination" gave him the power to create "human characters that live and love and suffer before your eyes," a critic in the Chicago Record-Herald exclaimed. If there were those who were adversely critical -- and there were -- their voices could scarcely be heard above the din of almost universal praise.

Fame and fortune merely stimulated Dixon to greater accomplishments. He was in constant demand as a lecturer and writer; and soon his tall commanding figure was on the platform in many parts of the country, constantly pressing his

case as if in an adversary relationship with his audience. Within a few years he was ready to begin the second of his works on the Reconstruction, and thirty days after he began the writing he completed The Clansman; An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan. Two years later, in July 1907, he finished the last of the volumes in the Reconstruction trilogy which appeared under the title of The Traitor: A Story of the Rise and Fall of the Invisible Empire.

The great success of The Clansman as a novel caused Dixon to consider its possibilities as a drama. In a matter of months, in 1905, Dixon had converted his first Reconstruction novel into a dramatic play whose script won the praise of John Hay, the Secretary of State, and Albert Bigelow Paine, who was to become the literary executor of Mark Twain. When the play went on tour, it was acclaimed as "The Greatest Play of the South ... A Daring Thrilling Romance of the Ku Klux Klan...." and it drew enormous crowds even though some critics thought it a bit excessive in its strictures against blacks and the way in which it aroused emotions and animosities that many hoped were abating. But The Clansman remained as thrilling on the stage

as it had been as a best-selling novel.

On a voyage from Europe in 1912, Dixon, proud of what he had accomplished, began once more to think seriously about his future. By that time he had completed his trilogy on Reconstruction as well as a trilogy on socialism. The Clansman had been a success on the stage, and everywhere he was acclaimed as a near-genius. He began to wonder if he should return to acting, but he rejected such a career as being too prosaic. Likewise, he rejected the idea that he should remain a playwright on the thoroughly defensible ground that the endless repetition of plot and scene before relatively small audiences was not a very effective medium for the dissemination of ideas. Books, likewise, were limited in their appeal, and although Dixon would continue to write them, they would never claim all of his attention.

By this time, however, there was a new medium, called "motion pictures," just becoming known. This novel method of communication lured Dixon "like the words of a vaguely-heard song," as his biographer put it. If this new medium, still scorned by most actors, most religious groups, and

many "respectable" people, could be dignified by some great statement -- like a historically vital story -- would it not be the means of reaching and influencing millions of people? This could be an exciting, new venture, and this adventuresome man answered his own question in the affirmative.

In the months following his return from Europe, Dixon tried to persuade some producer in the infant motion picture industry to take on his scenario of The Clansman, but none would accept the offer. The movies were popular only as low comedies, light farce, and short action sequences with little plot. All producers whom Dixon approached insisted that The Clansman was too long, too serious, and too controversial. Finally, late in 1913, Dixon met Harry E. Aitken, the head of a small company, and through him he met David W. Griffith who had enough daring and imagination to turn from his one-reel productions at least to consider the possibility of producing a large work like The Clansman. When Griffith's own company, The Epoch Producing Corporation, was unable to pay Dixon the ten thousand dollars he asked for his work, the author had to content himself by accepting

a 25% interest in the picture. Armed with Dixon's blessings and thousands of his suggestions, Griffith set out for Hollywood to find a cast and to proceed with production. The actual filming occupied nine weeks, between July and October, 1914.

Prior to this time the motion picture had been composed of a series of stilted poses taken at random distances and tagged together with little continuity. The motion, not the play, was the thing. Griffith now introduced principles of shooting that were to make the motion picture a new and important art form. "His camera became a living human eye, peering into the faces of joy and grief, ranging over great vistas of time and space, and resolving the whole into a meaning flux, which created a sense of dramatic unity and rhythm to the story." It was this living human eye that gave the Reconstruction story a new dimension.

It has been suggested that the film was more Griffith than Dixon. This is patently not the case. To be sure, Griffith was from Kentucky, and he had a certain sympathy for the Southern cause. And in the flush of success, Dixon would say, on opening night between the acts, that none

but the son of a Confederate soldier could have directed the film. But Griffith's knowledge of history was scant, and he was much too occupied with the technical aspects of filming the picture to interpose his views regarding its content. Even a casual comparison of the texts of The Leopard's Spots and The Clansman with the film itself will convince one that "Birth of a Nation" is pure Dixon, all Dixon!

When the twelve-reel drama was completed, a musical score was composed for it by Joseph Carl Breil, who made adaptations from Negro folk songs and from passages from Wagner's "Rienzi," and "Die Walkure," and Bellini's "Norma." In February, 1915 there were private showings in Los Angeles and New York. Dixon first saw the film at the New York showing. He sat in the balcony alone, fearing that he would be hooted and jeered by the seventy-odd people on the first floor. There was no such likelihood. Dixon said that his own experience of seeing the film was "uncanny." "When the last scene had faded," he later recounted, "I wondered vaguely if the emotions that had strangled me were purely personal. I hesitated to go down to the little group

in the lobby and hear their comments. I descended slowly, cautiously, only to be greeted by the loudest uproar I had ever heard from seventy-five people." It was at that time that Dixon shouted to Griffith across the auditorium and exclaimed that "The Clansman" was too tame a title for such a powerful story; "It should be called 'The Birth of a Nation,'" he exclaimed.

There is a great deal of overlap in the characters and plots of the works in the Dixon Reconstruction trilogy, but Birth of a Nation draws more heavily on The Clansman than on the others. The first part of the film introduces the Stoneman brothers, Phil and Tod, from Pennsylvania who are visiting their school friends, the Cameron brothers in Piedmont, South Carolina. They are the sons of Austin Stoneman, a member of Congress. Phil falls in love with Margaret Cameron, while Ben Cameron falls in live with Elsie Stoneman. When the war erupts, the Stonemans return north to join the Union Army while the Camerons enter the Confederate Army. During the war the two younger Cameron brothers and Tod Stoneman are killed. Ben Cameron is wounded and is nursed by Elsie Stoneman as he lies a prisoner of Phil

Stoneman in Washington. Meanwhile, Elsie and Phil's father, Austin Stoneman -- in real life Thaddeus Stevens, the North's most unreconcilable radical -- is busy urging Southern blacks to rise up against the Southern whites. Dixon does not fail to make the most of the fact that Stoneman has a mulatto housekeeper; and, because of Stoneman's power as leader of Congress and the alleged intimacy of Stoneman and his housekeeper, Dixon in The Clansman dubs her "The First Lady of the Land."

As the story of Reconstruction unfolds there is, of course, much corruption, much black presumption and arrogance, much humiliation of whites by black troops, and much looting and lawlessness. In order to avenge the wrongs perpetrated against his people, Ben Cameron becomes the leader of the Ku Klux Klan. It is not in time, however, to save his younger sister from the advances of Gus, a Negro roustabout, from whom she escaped by jumping from a cliff to her death. There are other would-be interracial trysts. When Elsie Stoneman asks Silas Lynch, a leader in the Black League, to save her brother Phil from the Negro militia that had besieged him in a log cabin, Lynch demands that

Elsie marry him. The situation is resolved when the clansmen, under the leadership of Ben Cameron, put the black militia to flight, free Elsie from Lynch, and kill Gus. Then, a double wedding takes place between the Stoneman and Cameron families, symbolic of the unification of the North and South. Thus, the long, dark night of Reconstruction ends, and the white people of the South take on an optimistic view of their future as the nation, Phoenix-like, arises from the ashes of war and reconstruction.

The euphoria that Dixon and his friends experienced at the New York theater in February, 1915, was not sufficient to sustain "The Birth of a Nation" in the face of strong opposition from unexpected quarters. Despite strong criticism of his earlier works on Reconstruction Dixon had been able to cope with it. When The Leopard's Spots appeared, Kelly Miller, the black dean of Howard University, wrote to Dixon, "Your teachings subvert the foundations of law and established order. You are the high priest of lawlessness, the prophet of anarchy." Sutton E. Griggs, the Arkansas black lawyer, asserted that Dixon "said and did all things which he deemed necessary to leave behind him the greatest

heritage of hate the world has ever known." Dixon countered by saying "My books are hard reading for a Negro, and yet the Negroes, in denouncing them, are unwittingly denouncing one of their best friends."

The opposition to Birth of a Nation was more formidable. Oswald Garrison Villard, editor of the New York Evening Post, and Moorfield Storey, President of the American Bar Association, were both founders and active leaders in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. They were representative of a large number of Americans, black and white, who thought that the film was a travesty against truth as well as an insult to an entire race of people. (Villard called it "improper, immoral, and unjust.") They were determined to prevent the showing of the film and began to work assiduously to bring about its doom. But they had not assayed the resourcefulness of Thomas Dixon, Jr., who was equally determined to secure a nation-wide showing of his masterpiece. He proved to be a formidable and, indeed, an invincible adversary.

If the President of the United States should give his approval to the film, Dixon thought, perhaps the opposition

would be silenced. And so, in February 1915 Thomas Dixon decided to call on his old schoolmate, Woodrow Wilson, who now occupied the White House. When Dixon called Wilson was pleased to see his old friend. The two were soon reminiscing about their days at the Johns Hopkins University and about the manner in which Dixon had been instrumental in securing an honorary degree for Wilson at Wake Forest College. When Dixon told Wilson about his new motion picture, Wilson immediately expressed an interest, but indicated that since he was still mourning the death of his wife he could not attend the theater. Wilson said, "I want you to know, Tom, that I am pleased to do this little thing for you, because a long time ago you took a day out of your busy life to do something for me. It came at a crisis in my career, and greatly helped me. I've always cherished the memory of it."

Wilson then suggested that if Dixon could arrange to show the film in the East Room of the White House he, his family, and members of the cabinet and their families could see it. On February 18, 1915, "The Birth of a Nation" was shown at the White House, and at the end of the showing

President Wilson is said to have remarked that "It is like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true."

Dixon's next scheme was to show the film to the members of the Supreme Court. With the help of Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels of North Carolina Dixon secured an appointment with Chief Justice Edward D. White. The Chief Justice told Dixon that he was not interested in motion pictures, and indicated that the members of the Supreme Court had better ways to spend their time. As Dixon was taking his leave he told the Chief Justice that the motion picture was the true story of Reconstruction and of the redemption of the South by the Ku Klux Klan. Upon learning this, the Chief Justice leaned forward in his chair and said, "I was a member of the Klan, sir," and he agreed to see the picture that evening. Not only were members of the Supreme Court at the ballroom of the Raleigh Hotel to see the picture that evening but many members of the Senate and House of Representatives were also there with their guests.

When the opposition persisted, Dixon let it be known that the President, the Supreme Court, and the Congress had

seen the film and liked it. When this was confirmed by a call to the White House, the censors in New York withdrew their objection and the film opened there on March 3, 1915 and played for forty-seven weeks at the Liberty Theater. Although the picture showed to huge audiences in New York and in every city and hamlet across the country, there was always great opposition to it. In New York Rabbi Stephen Wise, a member of the city's censorship board, called "Birth of a Nation" an "indescribably foul and loathsome libel on a race of human beings.... The Board of Censors which allowed this exhibition to go on is stupid or worse. I regret I am a member." In Boston a crowd of 25,000 persons, including firebrands such as William Monroe Trotter, demonstrated on the grounds of the state capitol, demanding that the governor take steps to ban the film. A bill to that end was rushed through the lower house of the legislature only to be found unconstitutional by the judiciary committee of the upper house.

The President of Harvard University said that the film perverted white ideals. Jane Addams, the founder of Hull House, was greatly disturbed over the picture and wrote

vigorously against it. Booker T. Washington denounced the film in the newspapers. Branches of the NAACP protested its showing in cities across the nation. But the film was seldom suppressed anywhere, and the critical reviews were almost universally favorable. Burns Mantle said that there was an "element of excitement that swept a sophisticated audience like a prairie fire in a high wind." Hector Turnbull of the New York Tribune called it a "spectacular drama" with "thrills piled upon thrills." But Francis Hackett's review in the New Republic conceded that as a spectacle "it is stupendous," but its author was a yellow journalist because he distorted the facts. The film, Hackett insisted, was aggressively vicious and defamatory. "It is spiritual assassination." That may well be, Dixon seemed to think, but to the charges that he had falsified history, Dixon offered a reward of one thousand dollars to anyone who could prove one historical inaccuracy in the story.

I do not know of any person's having proved to Dixon's satisfaction that there were any inaccuracies in the film. I do know that many critics besides Hackett, convinced that it was filled with distortions, half-truths, and outright

falsifications, challenged the truth of "Birth of a Nation." Francis J. Grimke, distinguished Negro minister in Washington, published a pamphlet entitled "Fighting a Vicious Film" that was a virtual line-by-line refutation of the Dixon-Griffith work. Crisis Magazine, the official organ of the NAACP, ran a series of monthly criticisms under the heading "The Calumny of a Race." The film soon became the object of scathing criticism in mass meetings held by Negro religious, educational, and civic groups across the nation. The only concession that Dixon made after the film had been running for several months, was to add a reel on the industrial work being done by blacks at Hampton Institute in Virginia. And for cooperating with Dixon in this undertaking, the white President of Hampton was bitterly criticized by the same blacks who had so severely criticized the film.

It is not at all difficult to find inaccuracies and distortions in "Birth of a Nation." Ostensibly a first-hand account of the events that transpired between 1865 and 1877, it could hardly have been first-hand when one recalls that Dixon was one year's old when Reconstruction began and

was only thirteen when the last federal troops were withdrawn from the South in 1877. That was one reason, though not the principal reason, for Dixon's failure to include anything on Reconstruction in the South between 1865 and 1867, when not one black man had the vote, when all Southern whites except the top Confederate leaders were in charge of all Southern state governments, and when white Southerners enacted laws designed to maintain a social and economic order that was barely distinguishable from the antebellum period. There is not a shred of evidence to support the film's depiction of blacks as impudent, vengeful, or malicious in their conduct toward whites. As has been pointed out by Francis B. Simkins, a Southern white historian who specialized in Reconstruction in South Carolina where most of "Birth of a Nation" takes place, the freedmen manifested virtually no hostility toward their former masters. The evidence is overwhelming, although not necessarily commendable, that the vast majority of the freedmen worked obediently and peacefully on their former masters' plantations during the entire period of Reconstruction.

The film makes a great deal of the alleged disorder-

liness, ignorance, and mendacity of the blacks in the South Carolina legislature. It also depicts Silas Lynch, the black lieutenant governor, as an audacious, arrogant, cheap politician whose only interest in life was to marry the blonde daughter of Austin Stoneman, who is the prototype of Thaddeus Stevens, the Pennsylvania Radical leader in Congress. It did not fit Dixon's scheme of things to acknowledge that the most important black political leader in South Carolina was Francis Cordozo, a graduate of Glasgow University, or that blacks were never in control of the machinery of government in the state. Nor did it matter to Dixon that the two black lieutenant governors of South Carolina during Reconstruction were Richard Gleaves, a Pennsylvania business man who enjoyed a reputation as an excellent president of the Senate, and Alonzo Ransier, a shipping clerk in antebellum Charleston who was never accused of dishonesty, arrogance, or of harboring any antipathy toward whites. Which of these men, the only two available, did Dixon use as a model for his Silas Lynch? In any case, there was no black lieutenant governor in the closing years of Reconstruction when Dixon gloats over black lieutenant governor

Silas Lynch being killed by the Ku Klux Klan for making advances to blonde Elsie Stoneman.

If Southern blacks had a competitor for the most degraded and depraved place in "Birth of a Nation" it was Austin Stoneman, a very thin disguise for Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania. As the member of Congress most deeply committed to racial equality, Stevens was the most hated Northerner in the South. Dixon was so determined to use Thaddeus Stevens for his purposes that he committed every possible violence to the facts of Stevens' life. First, he presented Stoneman (Stevens) as a widower, though Stevens was never married. This was necessary in order to provide Stevens with a son and a daughter. That would set the stage for a North-South reconciliation through the double wedding of his son and daughter with two young Southerners. This, in turn, was necessary in order to make Stevens' conversion to Southern principles complete when his black protegé sought to marry his daughter.

Secondly, Dixon presented Stevens as being intimate with his black housekeeper, although there is no evidence to support it except that they lived in the same house.

For the ultimate proof, Dixon could have had Lydia Brown become pregnant by Stevens as, for example, Sally Hemings on occasion became, when she encountered Thomas Jefferson in Paris or Washington or Monticello. Apparently this would have interfered with some of the other contrivancies. Finally, Dixon was not content until he had Stevens travelling to South Carolina at the climax of Reconstruction in order to experience the ultimate humiliation both from the black lieutenant governor Silas Lynch who attempted to marry his daughter and from the Ku Klux Klan who rescued his daughter from Lynch.

It seems unnecessary to add that Thaddeus Stevens never went to South Carolina and had, indeed, died in 1868, when Dixon was four years old and several years before the high drama of South Carolina Reconstruction actually began. Even so, Thomas Dixon could write as follows: "I drew of old Thaddeus Stevens the first full length portrait of history. I showed him to be, what he was, the greatest and the vilest man who ever trod the halls of the American Congress." This was followed by his customary challenge: "I dare my critic to come out ... and put his finger on a single word, line,

sentence, paragraph, page, or chapter in "The Clansman" in which I have done Thad Stevens an injustice."

Were it not for other considerations "Birth of a Nation" would be celebrated -- and properly so -- as the instrument that ushered the world into the era of the modern motion picture, a truly revolutionary medium of communication. Mantle called the pictures "wonderful;" to Charles Darnton Griffith's work was "big and fine;" while the New York Times called it an "impressive new illustration of the motion picture camera." There were, however, other considerations. By his own admission Dixon's motives were not to discover the truth but to find a means by which to make a case for the South that, regardless of the facts (one is tempted to say, in spite of the facts) would commend itself to the rest of the country. "The real purpose back of my film," Dixon wrote in May 1915 to Joseph Tumulty, Woodrow Wilson's secretary, "was to revolutionize Northern sentiments by a presentation of history that would transform every man in my audience into a good Democrat!... Every man who comes out of one of our theatres is a Southern partisan for life." A few months later he wrote President Wilson,

"This play is transforming the entire population of the North and West into sympathetic Southern voters. There will never be an issue of your segregation policy."

Thus, Thomas Woodrow Wilson, twenty-eighth President of the United States and, I am ashamed to say, a professionally trained historian, lent the prestige of his high office and the hospitality of the Executive Mansion to promote this unseemly piece of propaganda as history. Dixon was never interested in the truth in history. He was interested in "selling" a particular promotion piece as history. That in itself is not the supreme tragedy, bad as it is. The supreme tragedy is that in The Clansman and in "Birth of a Nation," Thomas Dixon succeeded in using a powerful and wonderful new instrument of communication to perpetrate a cruel hoax on the American people that has come distressingly close to being permanent.

In the same year, 1915, "Birth of a Nation" was showing to millions across the United States, the Ku Klux Klan was reborn. When the film opened in Atlanta that fall, William J. Simmons, who had considered a Klan revival for several years, sprang into action. He gathered together nearly two

score men, including two members of the original Klan of 1866 and the speaker of the Georgia legislature. They agreed to found the order, and Simmons picked Thanksgiving eve for the formal ceremonies. As the film opened in Atlanta, a local paper carried Simmons' announcement next to the advertisement of the movie. It was an announcement of the founding of "The World's greatest Secret, Patriotic, Fraternal, Beneficiary Order." With an assist from "Birth of a Nation" the new Ku Klux Klan, a "High Class order of men of Intelligence and Order" was launched. It would spread all across the South and into the North and West in the 1920's and spread terror among Jews and Catholics as well as among blacks. And in the fall and winter of 1915-1916, thousands of Southerners thrilled to the stirring scenes of Birth of a Nation. "Men who once wore gray uniforms, white sheets and red shirts wept, yelled, whooped, cheered -- and on one occasion even shot up the screen in a valiant effort to save Flora Cameron from her black pursuer." They were ripe for enlistment in the new Ku Klux Klan. Thus, "Birth of a Nation" was the midwife in the rebirth of the most vicious terrorist organization in the

history of the United States.

When Dixon was writing The Clansman, several others were actively competing with him for the title as the most uncompromising racist writer to appear on the American scene. In 1900 Charles Carroll published The Negro A Beast, a scurrilous attack on the nature and immorality of blacks which was expanded two years later in his The Tempter of Eve; or the Criminality of Man's Social, Political and Religious Equality with the Negro. In 1902 William P. Calhoun continued the attack in The Caucasian and the Negro in the United States. In 1907, two years after Dixon's The Clansman appeared, Robert W. Shufeldt published The Negro, A Menace to American Civilization.

These, however, were mere books, as The Clansman was; and Dixon had already concluded that books were limited in their appeal. The diabolical genius of Dixon lay in his embracing the new medium, the motion picture, and thus using that medium to persuade and even to convince millions of white Americans, even those who could not read books, that his case against Negro Americans was valid and irrefutable. It was not merely that illiterate and unthinking Americans

were convinced by Dixon's propaganda. It was also that vast numbers of white Americans, searching for a rationale for their own predilections and prejudices, seized on Dixon's propaganda, by his own admission propaganda that was designed to win sympathy for the Southern cause, and transformed it into history as the gospel truth.

As one reads The Tragic Era, published in 1929 by Claude Bowers, surely one of the country's most respected journalist-historians, one is impressed if not awed by its faithful adherence to the case as argued in "Birth of a Nation." It is all there -- the vicious vindictiveness of Thaddeus Stevens, the corruptibility of every black legislator, and the nobility of the Ku Klux Klan in redeeming a white civilization threatened with black rule. It was the scum of Northern society that inflamed "the Negro's egotism," said Bowers, "and soon the lustful assaults began. Rape is the foul daughter of Reconstruction," he exclaimed. And even Dixon must have been forced to concede that an inflammatory book like The Tragic Era that was selected by the prestigious Literary Guild was in a position to wield enormous influence. The Tragic Era remained the most widely

read book on Reconstruction for more than a generation, thus perpetuating the positions taken in "Birth of a Nation."

If one seeks a more recent Dixonesque treatment, he can read The South During Reconstruction, published in 1948 by E. Merton Coulter, the Regents Professor of History at the University of Georgia and the first president of the Southern Historical Association. Once again, it is all there -- the unwashed, drunken, corrupt black legislators; the innocent disfranchised whites; and the resort to desperate measures by the Klan in order to save the South from complete disaster. There are, moreover, Alistair Cooke's recent book and television programs that, even in their polish and sophistication, follow, to an incredible degree, the argument set forth in "Birth of a Nation." Pick up almost any elementary or secondary textbook in American history used in our schools and you will discover much about corruption, white oppression by blacks, and the overthrow of Reconstruction by the socially responsible and morally impeccable whites in the South. You will not find there as you will not find in Bowers, Coulter, or Cooke and certainly not in "Birth of a Nation" anything about the op-

pression of freedmen by Southern whites, the reign of Southern white terror that followed the close of the Civil War, the persistence of white majority rule even during Radical Reconstruction, and the establishment of the first public schools and other social institutions during the period.

Obviously, one cannot place all the blame for our present view of Reconstruction on "Birth of a Nation." There were too many others who shared Dixon's views when he wrote and too many who have held to those views since that time. As an eloquent statement of the position of most white Southerners, using a new and increasingly influential medium of communication, and as an instrument that deliberately and successfully undertook to use propaganda as history, the influence of "Birth of a Nation" on the current view of Reconstruction has been greater than any other single force.

There have been many revivals of "Birth of a Nation," and through them the main arguments Dixon set forth have remained alive. The film is shown in many places today as a period piece. It has achieved the status of an antique and its value is supposed to be in what it tells us about the evolution of the technique of film making. But as one sits

in a darkened hall viewing this period piece in 1977, one is a bit perplexed by the nervous laughing and scattered applause as the Klan begins its night ride. One can only surmise and hope that these reactions are to "Birth of a Nation" as a period piece and not to "Birth of a Nation" as a powerful instrument in promoting propaganda as history.