

The Second Coming Of The Invisible Empire: The Ku Klux Klan Of The 1920s

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Review

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Rawlings, William *The Second Coming of the Invisible Empire: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s*. Mercer University Press, \$29.00 ISBN 9780881465617

Invisible Empire's Visible Reach in Georgia

The Ku Klux Klan, a terrorist group with its origins in the Reconstruction era after the Civil War, reemerged as a wildly popular organization in the 1920s. The Klan's ability to enroll millions of dues-paying Americans in its ranks owed much to the sophisticated marketing techniques the group developed, but its popularity also reflected existing nativist, racist, and patriotic sentiments that were part of mainstream white American culture in the time period.

The Second Coming of the Invisible Empire examines the second phase of the Ku Klux Klan, focusing in particular on the decade of the 1920s. William Rawlings generally follows a chronological approach in the work, beginning with the emergence of the Klan during Reconstruction and ending with the 1944 Internal Revenue Service actions that led to the dissolution of the Klan as a corporate entity. The last fifty pages of the book consist of supplemental material such as biographical sketches of Klan leader, a glossary of Klan-related terms, and chapter notes.

Rawlings trained and worked for many years as a physician, and it was later in life that he developed interests in writing history. He is the author of a number of novels in addition to his work in history. As a developing historian, Rawlings understands methodology well enough, though at times his overall grasp of history can leave something to be desired.

The author's brief three-page chapter on the rise of fraternal organizations would benefit from additional discussion of the importance of fraternal organizations in an era before the emergence of social safety nets: fraternal organizations typically offered members death and/or disability benefits, allowing them the ability to provide for their families in case of misfortune. In

his chapter notes, though, Rawlings sums up the decline of fraternal organizations that began to appear by the 1930s somewhat flippantly: “folks simply got tired of them” (p.293). This statement discounts the connection between the decline of fraternal groups and the emergence of government programs such as workers’ compensation, unemployment benefits, and Social Security, formal structures that replaced these private benefits.

The coverage Rawlings devoted to the 1925 kidnapping/rape/ murder trial of D.C. Stephenson is puzzling. Rawlings argued that “the death of Madge Oberholtzer had nothing whatsoever to do with the Ku Klux Klan” (p.240), since Stephenson left the national Ku Klux Klan in May 1924. Rawlings seems to discount the fact that Stephenson simply created his own rival Klan organization. Rawlings acknowledged that public perception of Stephenson as a Klan leader meant that the trial reflected poorly on the Klan, but regardless of whether Stephenson was a national Klan leader or a renegade Klan rival, this event was a key factor in the declining power of the Ku Klux Klan, a trend that began to accelerate in 1925.

Rawlings unfortunately spent relatively little time discussing the 1924 national elections, which occurred at the height of Klan power and influence. The author devoted a mere paragraph to the 1924 Republican National Convention, while the highly contentious Democratic National Convention – where the Klan figured prominently in the creation of the party’s platform - received only a few pages of coverage.

Yet Rawlings does provide significant coverage of Klan influence on Georgia politics in the decade of the 1920s. One of the strengths of the book is the detailed analysis of the role of Klan leaders in Georgia affecting state and local electoral outcomes. Rawlings uncovered fascinating information about the 1922 gubernatorial election in Georgia that sent Clifford Walker to the governor’s mansion in Buckhead.

In this work Rawlings incorporates newspaper accounts from the 1920s that have not been used in existing historical literature related to the second phase of the Klan, and specialists in the field should find some of this material valuable. The book contains a wealth of contemporary images – including photographs and scanned copies of Klan documents – that may be of interest to historians, as some of the images came from private collections.

Rawlings views the Klan from a top-down, almost Great Man perspective. The author argued that the “avowed tenets of Christianity, patriotism, white supremacy, the rule of law, and the rejection of things foreign were fundamentally secondary to the accumulation of wealth and power by its leaders” (p.4). This is likely true for the small circle of leaders, and it is certainly true for the sales-oriented Kl eagles who traveled the country to enroll new members and to help create new Klaverns, but for the millions of Americans who joined the Klan in the 1920s, ideology and issues mattered. People joined the Klan because they believed the group would address the problems they believed that existing government structures could not (or would not) fix, and they joined the Klan because its nativist and racist ideologies appealed to them.

This reader left with the impression that the book views the national Klan of the 1920s from a Georgian perspective. In his research Rawlings draws heavily from newspapers and documents created in Georgia and nearby states, and much of the book is well grounded in primary source research from archives in Georgia and Tennessee. Yet at times Rawlings attempts to generalize about the Klan as a national phenomenon while relying on regional source material. The challenge with this approach is that the Ku Klux Klan often modified its approach to adapt to local conditions, and the issues that were important to Klan members in Georgia at times diverged from the issues embraced in other regions of the country.

For general readers, this book provides a solid overview of the rise and fall of the second phase of the Klan. The background information – while brief – nonetheless brings readers unfamiliar with the topic up to speed in a concise fashion. The book is highly readable, and Rawlings footnotes both source information as well as helpful discursive dialogue that will aid non-specialists.

Michael E. Brooks teaches history at Bowling Green State University. He recently published The Ku Klux Klan in Wood County, Ohio [History Press, 2014], and he continues to research the history of the Ku Klux Klan in the Midwest. He can be reached at mebrook@bgsu.edu