

BOOK REVIEWS

Nancy MacLean. *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan*. NY: Oxford University Press, 1994. 286 pp. \$30.00 (cloth) (Reviewed by J. Morgan Kousser)

Race, class, and ideology, claims Nancy MacLean, reduce to gender. More specifically, "concerns about gender and sexuality animated" the Klan of the 1920s. (xi). Its anti-Semitism was only symbolic, she thinks, for Jews "stood surrogate . . . for large capital," representing men who allegedly sought to use their financial power to lure white Protestant women away from the clutches of their petit bourgeois husbands or fathers. The KKK's anti-black racism was just as unreal and irrational: African-Americans were merely symbols of "the propertyless population" who threatened to symbolically undermine the Klansmen's shaky class position by raping their women (146). Communism, hardly a threat in America, especially in the South, in the 1920s, symbolized for Klansmen "a challenge to their dominion over the women of their group" (119). As for the Klan's anti-Catholicism, "A wife and children were among the pieces of property a man had a right to control; the horror of Catholicism was its alleged interference with this control" (119). As she sums up her thesis, "Beleaguered by conflicts of class and gender that their sensibilities left them ill-equipped to explain, Klansmen displaced these conflicts onto imagined racial Others . . ." (127).

Because she can hardly be expected to produce statements from Klansmen (she largely ignores *Klanswomen*) saying that they were metaphorically transferring their neuroses about gender and power into antipathy toward blacks, Jews, workers, and Catholics, MacLean's argument is necessarily indirect. Logically, she needs to show: first, that Klansmen were particularly, if not peculiarly likely to be petit bourgeois; second, that members of this class at this time and in the places where the KKK flourished, and not elsewhere or at other times, were especially concerned with issues of gender and sexuality; and third, that some well-developed and widely-accepted psychological theory would predict not only that people displace these sorts of conflicts onto out-groups, but that they do so onto groups that are present in the immediate area in tiny, as well as in large numbers. (There were only very small numbers of Catholics and Jews, but many blacks, in the place that she studies.) MacLean ignores the second and third points, but she does address parts of the first.

Although she draws statements about Klan ideology from throughout the nation, MacLean focuses her sociological analysis on the small university town of Athens, Georgia, where various rosters of KKK members survive (xiv). Curiously, for a local case study of an organization, she provides no narrative of events in the group's history and does almost nothing to place the KKK in the economics, society, and politics of Clarke county or the state of Georgia. Despite the fact that the one Klan event that she does describe, an effort to enforce alcohol prohibition laws in 1924, resulted in the temporary suspension of the Athens Klavern's charter and evidently in a split among its members (111), MacLean treats anyone who joined the Klan at any time during the 1920s as an equal member for the purposes of her prosopographic analysis. If this analysis is flawed, if the character of the Klan was not exceptionally petit bourgeois, then the fulcrum of MacLean's argument collapses.

Unfortunately, MacLean makes elementary mistakes that have long been recognized by sociologists and historians. Most fundamentally, she has no control group. Were Athens

Klansmen more or less likely than members of some anti- or non-Klan group (such as the Masons, Elks, Shriners, Odd Fellows, etc.) to be clerks or small proprietors? As MacLean points out, at least 120 of her sample of 418 Klansmen in Athens were also members of another fraternal order (7). Indeed, it is possible that one or more of these other organizations was *more* dominated by policemen, salesmen, small businessmen, etc. than the Klan was. How, then, can MacLean infer that it was their insecure, middling class position that led men into the KKK or that the tenor of the organization especially reflected that socioeconomic grounding? Why wouldn't the activities or ideas of the Woodmen of the World, say, be a more accurate reflection of the tensions of lower-middle class male life than those of the Klan were? Or suppose that the ideals of one organization clashed at some point with those of another. Lacking evidence on the thoughts and actions of someone who held dual memberships, how could MacLean attribute to him the views of the Klan?

A second obvious problem is that not all Klansmen were equally dedicated to all of the noxious notions that the Klan put forward. Some may have been ardent prohibitionists or anti-Bolsheviks or just habitual joiners of every organization that came along, but not anti-Semitic, anti-feminist, violent, or even especially anti-black. Such men might have left the Klan when it emphasized actions or ideas that they disagreed with. But, since MacLean makes no effort to determine the longevity of membership or the intensity of participation by men in her sample, we cannot know what the class composition of activists, as opposed to nominal members or drop-outs was. MacLean's one offhand remark on this issue is not reassuring. She notes that her sample draws more heavily on the late than the early 1920s, after upperclass men elsewhere in the country had "tended to drop out" (191). If she had a fuller list or one weighted by activity level, it is quite possible that the center of socioeconomic gravity in her sample would have shifted, undermining her class and thereby her gender theme.

Third, the Athens Klan was probably not representative of Georgia, much less the whole U.S. or of right-wing movements around the world, to which she extends her analysis in a highly speculative concluding chapter. As she notes, only about ten percent of Athenians joined the KKK, a far smaller percentage than elsewhere (9). Although hardly a metropolis, Athens was much more urban than most of the rest of Georgia. How can MacLean generalize so confidently on the basis of what she admits is not a representative sample?

Fourth, as MacLean points out, many important political leaders in Georgia, including a Governor, State Supreme Court judges, and the mayor of Atlanta joined the Klan, while three U.S. senators and a congressman were often counted as sympathizers (17). Were these marginal men, threatened by gender role upheaval, tilting at symbols out of psychological delusion?

Fifth, in his 1956 book, *The Age of Reform*, Richard Hofstadter asserted that the early twentieth-century "progressives" were middle class men and women who had lost status, comparatively, in the U.S. and who entered politics in fear of those both above and below them on the social ladder. MacLean's thesis is, in a sense, Hofstadter's gendered. But the victims of what Hofstadter called a "status revolution" turned left, not right, toward maximum-hours laws, health and safety regulations, and restrictions on *laissez-faire*, and they were quite comfortable with the "new woman"—indeed, many progressives were female. How could the same psychological mechanism have led to such different outcomes as to produce progressives in the teens and Klansmen in the twenties?

MacLean's deployment of statements from Klan publications and speeches is no less

faulty than her analysis of social statistics is. Leaving Athens behind, MacLean roams the country picking out statements that fit her case that the Klan was radical and violent. If someone connected with the Klan claimed to be a devotee of the Constitution and only against lawbreakers, particularly those associated with Demon Rum, MacLean doesn't believe him, does not bother to examine his motives or statements, and does not herself set forth any rule of interpretation that enables one to determine when Klansmen were speaking from the heart and when they were dissimulating. Perhaps all their Main Street platitudes were self-conscious lies, but on what basis can we conclude that?

Unlike other American political or social movements that teemed with ideological and factional conflict ("progressive" vs. "stand-pat" Republicans, "gas and water" vs. revolutionary syndicalist Socialists, "wage and hour" vs. "reformist" trades' unions) the Klan, in MacLean's version, at least, had a seamless, entirely consistent ideology and an apparently united, top-down leadership. Selectively quoting, never seriously asking whether Klansmen's behavior contradicted or undercut what they said or wrote, MacLean presents a tidy picture of the Klan—much too tidy. In fact, the Klan's national and state leaders and organizers, professing hypermoralism, displaced one another in rapid succession as their scandalous or criminal behavior came to light. Its ideology was a bundle of contradictions—endorsing laissez-faire in economics, but strongly in favor of government intervention to police morals, especially drinking; exuding evangelical Protestantism, but glorying in elaborate rituals, constantly prating about the equality of all white males, but proposing the disfranchisement of Catholics or European immigrants; charging that large Jewish capitalists conspired both to monopolize the monetary system of the world and to bring about the Bolshevik Revolution. The Second Klan was fragmented, evanescent, full of opportunists, more a symptom of vague discontent than the powerful national organization that MacLean's inflated prose portrays, with a coherent ideology and the potential to grow as Hitler's Nazis did (179–184).

Asserting that "vigilante violence was Klan thought in action," (165) MacLean largely ignores nonviolent Klan behavior, the picnics, parades, electioneering, even governing that other recent scholars of the Second Klan have spotlighted.¹ Her view is directly contradicted by the available evidence. Originating in 1915, the KKK attracted few members until some longtime fraternal organizers took *de facto* power in 1920. Although the lynching of African-Americans continued in the South in the 1920s, a recent, painstaking study shows that the number in Georgia fell by 70% from the 1910s, to what was no doubt the lowest level since the antebellum period.² Even the vast majority of the lynchings, beatings, and floggings that did occur cannot be conclusively connected to the Klan. To put it crudely, southern whites did not need men in sheets to instruct them in racist and other violence.

MacLean's ploy in the face of such facts is to pronounce that "the gaps in the record appear rather as yet another illustration of the Klan's remarkable power" (169). Her argument is circular and ahistorical. It is circular because a lack of evidence is said to be proof of the Klan's power to suppress it, and that alleged power is then held to imply that there must in fact have been much more violence than there is evidence to support. It is ahistorical because the Klan's control over governments or media in the 1920s could not possibly have approached that of the perpetrators of violence during the antebellum era, Reconstruction, or the 1890s. By the 1920s, lynching was a national scandal, and the NAACP and northern or big-city southern newspaper reporters investigated it often. No doubt, much violence in the 1920s was hidden—but compared to earlier times?

The fact that this book has won two prestigious prizes raises a question: Does evidence count in history anymore?

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NOTES

1. For a survey, see Leonard J. Moore, "Historical Interpretation of the 1920's Klan: The Traditional View and the Populist Revision," *Journal of Social History*, 24 (1990), pp. 341-357.
2. W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p. 263, table 3.