

Raymond Allen Cook, Fire From the Flint: The Amazing Careers of Thomas Dixon
(1968)

Young Dixon was born at the tail end of the war in Shelby, North Carolina. His father was virtually wiped out by the dislocations of the war. . . .

Dixon's earliest childhood memories were of Reconstruction in North Carolina. . . . He recounts waking one night and seeing the KKK pass by under his window, He was terrorized by the silent ghostly procession. But he was assured by his mother that these men were protecting them

Dixon's father and his uncle, Colonel Lee Roy McAfee were members of the North Carolina Klan

Cook's views of Reconstruction are typically Dunning. . . . They are an unrelieved assertion of all the Dunning school myths about Reconstruction in the South. . .

His youth spent on a hard scrabble farms in North Carolina. . . . Little schooling and hard work was his lot. . . The family was not not well off but the farm did support tenant farmers. . .

Cook describes Dixon's university education at Wake Forest . . . A Methodist University established to give the poorer North Carolinians educational opportunity that was denied them by the elite-oriented North Carolina. . . .

After scholastic successes at Wake Forest Dixon went onto to graduate school at Johns Hopkins. . . .

It was at Hopkins that he was befriended by Woodrow Wilson, his senior by about 7 years. Apparently Dixon gave up Hopkins to go into dramatics in New York. . . . He gave this up to return to NC to study law and enter politics.

In this chapter on Hopkins Cook says nothing about the kind of education Dixon was exposed to. . .

6. Pulpit and Platform

Dixon enters the Baptist ministry This was the career he hit upon after his marriage. . .

Dixon's church at Glasboro and then at Raleigh He was asked to take over a church in Boston . . . The challenge was accepted. . . . He won a reputation as a fire and brimstoner at this church. . . . A notable success for a man only 23-24 years of age.

His growing reputation as a dynamic pulpit personality led to an invitation from Wake Forest to give the 1888 commencement address . . . Dixon made an impression and was offered a Doctor of Divinity from the School. . . But he did not feel an honorary degree was his bag. . . He suggested instead another applicant -- a young scholar he knew from Hopkins -- Woodrow Wilson. The Wake Forest Board of Trustees was apparently impressed enough with Dixon's description of Wilson's credentials that they awarded the future president an honorary degree of Doctor of Laws degree. . .

This was WW's first public recognition. . .and he received a good deal of press coverage. . .How did he repay Dixon . . .

Dixon was invited to take over a Baptist church in Manhattan. . . .He left and went to New York. . . .Here he became close to the problems of the great "godless" city life of urban America. . . .He satyed on at this church for about 5 years. . . .But wanted to get to the great masses of the indifferent and unchurched in New York. . . .

Dixon's attraction to US imperialism. . . .During the fall of 1896 Dixon became vitally interested in the cause of Cuban IndependenceWhen Dixon spoke on the subject before NY audiences he drapped the stage with American and Cuban flags. . . .By this time he had given up his NY church. . . and was holding services in a new interdenomination church that met at the Academy of Music' spacious auditorium

The Academy of Music became the center for the national revolutionary HGers for the Cuban cause. . . . Dixon was in great deamdn as a speaker on the subject. . . . despite his fee of a \$1000 for each speech . . . From 1898 until 1901 Dixon toured the nationThe Chautaugua tours were perhaps the most famous aspect of his acreeer at this time.He was reputed to be one of the most sought after speakers of this period.He commanded large fees and became rather wealthy

He bought the great Elmington estate in Gloucester county, Virginia. . .and lived like a true southern gentlemanThe old manor was built by slaves before the Civil War. . . .Dixon had the outside refurbished in the classic Greek motif. . .and had Wannamaker's furnish the 35-room interior.

These years of travel and lecturing were to take Dixon all over the nation Eventually he gave up the People's Church in New York. . . .and with this he turned his career to writing.He would set forth in literature the South's story of Reconstruction. . . .Cook presents the major motive here was Dixon's determination to correct the view of Reconstruction in the North set forth in Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin.

5. His Luxurient Imagination

Dixon's idea was a trilogy on the Reconstruction South. . .His idea grew out of contact with Henry Sinckowitz's trilogy of the Poles under the Teutonic Knights. The idea of an extended literary statement like this appealed to Dixon who believed that the southern white was also a suppressed peoples under Black Reconstruction . . .

His first work, The Leopard's Spots(1902)was an instant success. . .and would sell over 1,000,000 copies. . . .

The next work in the trilogy was the Clansman. . .Dixon wrote this at a feverish pace. . .writing sometimes 17 hours a day. . .The manuscript was finished in one month and sent off to Doubleday. . . .

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The publishing house of Doubleday was staffed by Walter Hines Page. . . Page was an old friend of Dixon . . .

In the Clansman Dixon has incorporated a full-length fictional account of Thaddeus Stevens (Austin Stoneman in the novel). . .

The Clansman sold more copies than the Leopard's Spots. . . .

Cook deals with Dixon's theatrical experiment by adapting the Clansman for the theatre. . . "The Greatest Play of the South". . . He deals with the reactions of the south and the northern audiences to the drama. . . .

Much of Dixon's wealth as a result of his literary endeavor was being pumped into the stock market. . . And he was to lose most of it in the 1907 panic. . . .

It was only then that he moved to write the third volume of the Reconstruction trilogy -- The Traitor: A Story of the Fall of the Invisible Empire (1907-8)

7. Writing History with Lightning

In 1915 Dixon went one step further to get his "message" to the masses. . . and increase his personal fortune to be sure. . . .

He searched for a studio who would make his Clansman into a movie. . . The genre being new it was dealing only in comedy and low farces. . . . The Clansman was simply too ambitious and expensive and absurd for the nascent industry. . . .

But Dixon came across an unknown in the young profession of movie-making by the name of David Wark Griffith . . . Griffith was a Kentuckian now in NY. . . G was turned on by the scenerio of the Clansman for the movie. . . .

The two men worked close together in a dirty loft in Union Square putting together the scenerio . . . They started a new production company called ~~The Epoch Production~~ The Epoch Producing Company. . . Then G went to Hollywood to shot the film.

The film ran into all sorts of problems. . . There was difficulty getting horses with the war on . . . The use of so much cotton sheeting presented a problem because cotton was being used in the war. . . Funds were low and ran out repeatedly . . . The length of the picture and the dimensions of the cast were draining the Company. . . Actors and actresses surrendered their salaries so the shooting of the film could continue. . . The Gish sisters contributed their own savings of \$300.00 to the effort. . . After 9 weeks of shooting the film was ready. . . Griffith tried all new kinds of techniques -- close up, the fade out, the cutback, the iris dissolve, the soft focus close-up. . . all were innovations in the trade. . .

There was opposition to the showing of the film because of its racial content. Oswald Garrison Villard, editor of the NY Evening Post and the president of the American Bar Association, Moorfield Storey (were they both members of the NAACP)

Since the Epoch Producing Company did not have funds to fight this opposition the film seemed doomed from the start. . . . It was this contretemps that persuaded Dixon to try and get Woodrow Wilson to see the film and give it his personal sanction . . .

Wilson knew Dixon from Hopkins and did not forget the honorary degree from Wake Forest that was Dixon's doing. . . So he agreed to a private showing of the film in the East Wing of the White House. . . It was WW who after seeing the film remarked "It is like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true."

Dixon now tried to get an audience with the Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court. . . Justice Edward Douglas White. . . White was a bear who remained secluded in his library at home. . . But Dixon got an audience from Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels (North Carolinian). . .

White was curt and indifferent at seeing a movie. . . But when it was explained that it had to deal with the Klan's redemption of the South the Justice changed his tune. White admitted that he was in his youth a KKK himself. . .

The upshot was a private showing at the Raleigh Hotel to the justices of the Court and the members of the Senate and the House. . .

This proved a sharp move by Dixon. . . Because 48 hrs before the film was to make its first public appearance opposition to the film was so vigorous that the authorities in NY were planning to close the theatre on the opening night. . .

When the NY magistrate court called the White House to check and see if the first family had seen the film and it was appraised that it had. . . all opposition to the film dropped.

The reaction to the film in the north. . . On the second evening of the showing in NY a riot erupted in the theatre. . .

In Boston thousands of demonstrators urged the Mayor of the city to prevent a showing. . . Moorfield Storey of the NAACP led the fight in Mass. . . When the Mayor failed to take action the Governor of the state was petitioned and he agreed to ban the film. But his decision was ruled unconstitutional. . . When the film went on there was a pitched battle between police and a throng of about 10,000 demonstrators around the movie house. . . that lasted for about 24 hours. . .

There were similar reactions in other northern and western cities. . . The film drew down upon itself some \$100,000 in law suits. . . But it was never prevented from being shown. . .

Cook ends the chapter with comments on the groundbreaking aspects of the film. . . pointing out that now Hollywood would emerge as the cultural-shaping force of the American people. . .

Some facts : the film employed about 600 people and cost about \$90,000. . . the tickets cost \$2 a piece at a time when general admission was about \$.15 and the film may have earned the highest profits in motion picture history. . .