

Books of The Times

The Annals of the Ku Klux Klan

By RICHARD R. LINGEMAN

WHITE TERROR: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction. By Allen W. Trelease. 557 pages. Harper & Row. \$15.

One of the most striking cinematic images of our time is that long line of white-garbed Klansmen riding across the knife-edge of a hill. This was of course in D. W. Griffith's perverse masterpiece "The Birth of a Nation." The "nation" was, alas, a loose confederacy of nightriders, terrorists, bullies and rebels still hell-bent on secession. We may have forgotten, but the Klan was once romanticized, as Allen W. Trelease tells us in his very solid history of the Klan, "White Terror." Mr. Trelease, a northerner, a professor of history at the University of North Carolina, has delved into the voluminous documentation of the Klan's terrorism in the Reconstruction period, and he has come up with what can only be called



Allen W. Trelease

an indictment. The Klan was founded, amidst shrouded origins, in Pulaski, Tennessee, in 1866. It almost seemed a lark: the name was derived from the Greek *kuklos*, meaning a circle or band. There were fraternity overtones—Kuklos Adelphton was an old Southern fraternity founded in 1812—and apparently the founders did not envisage what the organization was inevitably to become.

At bottom was white supremacy; a South decimated by war, awakening to the new freedman status of Negroes, under the nominal government of the Radical Republicans, churning with racist hatreds. These were directed against the blacks, of course, and the Klan was in the vanguard of this inchoate reaction.

Proclaimed Idealism

What strikes one about the Klan—and perhaps this is what struck D. W. Griffith—was its proclaimed idealism. For Klansmen—at least the early ones—had ideals. They thought they were saving the South from foreign domination and an—to them—alien black uprising. The blacks were the enemy and—because they were black?—represented evil incarnate. But at bottom the Klan was a fraud. As Mr. Trelease says, "Their rhetoric in behalf of chivalry, humanity, mercy and patriotism has to be read in the light of their crusade for white supremacy and Negro subordination. Their advocacy of 'Constitutional liberty' and 'equitable laws' was for white men only. Their support of the Constitution and constitutional laws was premised on a belief that the 14th Amendment and the Recon-

struction Acts were unconstitutional. Words had different meanings for the Ku Klux Klan, primarily because they did not conceive of the Negro as a man."

What the Klan was was an unrelenting conspiracy to deny the black man his rights. All the high-flown rhetoric was so much show. Yet the Klan was a respectable organization, including many Confederate generals. What it did then was to give its imprimatur to secret violence, pandering to the racist hatreds that were alive at the time. Mr. Trelease quotes Eric Hoffer apropos this point: "There is no telling to what extremes of cruelty and ruthlessness a man will go when he is freed from the fears, hesitations, doubts and the vague stirrings of decency that go with individual judgment. When we lose our individual independence in the corporateness of a mass movement, we find a new freedom—freedom to hate, bully, lie, torture, murder and betray without shame and remorse."

White-Cloaked Galahads

Hate, bully, lie, torture the Klan did in good measure. Yet one can at least understand their actions within the context of the South of Reconstruction times. Those were violent times, ridden with crime that was not solely committed by or against the black man. It was a frontier society, and, as Mr. Trelease points out, the so-called carpetbaggers were mainly legitimate immigrants looking for new opportunity. As for the Negroes who managed to enter state and local governments, they were perhaps not as educated as their white compeers, who knew enough Greek to dredge up *kuklos*, yet they were not the grinning apes of "Birth of a Nation" memory.

The Klan myths died hard. I need only recall my father's memories of white-sheeted parades down Main Street in a slumbrous Indiana town, back in the twenties. Mr. Trelease points to the popularity of Thomas Dixon's romantic novel "The Clansmen," which was the basis for Griffith's "Birth of a Nation." The Klansmen suddenly became white-cloaked Galahads "who rode in silent procession, burned crosses and descended to physical violence only under extreme provocation and with the noblest motives."

Perhaps the nativism of the twenties with its antisemitic, anti-Catholic, anti-black biases was another thing. Still, it was cloaked in the white sheet—symbol of purity and Americanism now, not the lost cause of the Confederacy.

And again the Klan surfaced in the South during the civil rights agitation (and Mr. Trelease points out that even in its original days, the Klan came under many names). It seems clear now that the Klan has won a general disapprobation. For there is a new South now, one wrestling with its old racial problems, but now determined to face them by other means than terrorism.