

Kelly J. Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan: The KKK's Appeal to Protestant America, 1915-1930* (Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 2011) ISBN: 978-0700617920

Kelly J. Baker's *Gospel According to the Klan: The KKK's Appeal to Protestant America, 1915-1930* delivers an intriguing new approach to the standard account of the Ku Klux Klan's reincarnation in the Jazz Age. Instead of providing a narrative of the Klan's brief existence, Baker, a religious studies professor at the University of Tennessee, borrows from the field of ethnography to reconstruct the mentality of a citizen of the Invisible Empire. Baker presents the America of the 1920s through the eyes of a Klansman - covering practically every aspect of the Klan's ideology, from their conceptualizations of nationalism to the role they ascribed to women. Throughout the study, Baker makes the case that the Klan's commitment to Protestantism defined practically every other part of their mentality and ideology, a daring yet substantiated claim. To back up her arguments, Baker has completed a thorough analysis of the Klan's official and national weekly, the *Imperial Night-Hawk*, and its replacement, the monthly magazine *The Courier*.

Although there are notable exceptions, the results of Baker's analysis are, for the most part, rather underwhelming. Her account of the mentality of the 1920s Klan is intended to be a break from the dominant trends in Klan historiography that recently have centred on microstudies at the state and county level; studies that emphasize the heterogeneous and 'populist' nature of the Invisible Empire. Though this bold departure from the dominant conventions is certainly a refreshing and welcome change to the subject, Baker has not addressed the issues that brought the historiography of the Klan to the microhistorical level in the first place. This microhistorical perspective has accounted for the substantial regional variations between Klans across the country, with detailed case studies by Shawn Lay or Leonard Moore showcasing the regional

identity of the various Klans.¹ Baker disregards this approach, explaining that these variations are more indicative of regional character than anything else, but neither her research nor her evidence can really back up her case. Baker fails to address why the Klan was so different, for instance in Indiana in comparison to Texas; her account does not even outline the noticeable transformation the Klan underwent with the leadership coup of Hiram Wesley Evans in late 1922. *Gospel According to the Klan* fails to recognize the complexity of the Klan, perhaps because its research is predicated on only two of the Klan periodicals and neglects the wealth of evidence from other popular Klan newspapers, such as *The Fiery Cross* that held sway in the Klan strongholds of the Midwest.

Baker's study is not entirely inadequate; it certainly provides a useful synthesis of the musings of Klansmen and Klanswomen for readers new to the subject. Understanding how the Invisible Empire's citizens saw the world can be an arduous task, but Baker's account provides an accessible account of the matter, freeing the reader from having to trawl through pages of repetitive Klan literature. More importantly, the anthropological methodology applied in this study has certainly produced an innovative account. Baker uses these methods to introduce the reader to the uncomfortable mentality of the Klan in an honest and uncompromising manner that allows the Klansmen and Klanswomen to speak for themselves, without dismissive or distortionary commentary on behalf of the historian.

Overall, Baker's study is disappointing. Her anthropological approach seems promising, but the overall account offers little new to the subject. Basic mistakes, such as repeatedly referring to historian Stanley Coben as Stanley Cohen, or implying that General Nathan Bedford Forrest (1821-1877) was an officer in both the Reconstruction and 1920s Klan, certainly raise questions

¹ See Shawn Lay, ed. *The Invisible Empire in the West: Toward a New Historical Appraisal of the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s*, Paperback ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Leonard J. Moore, 'Historical Interpretations of the 1920's Klan: The Traditional Review and the Populist Revision', *Journal of Social History* 24, no. 2 (1990), 341-57.

about the quality of the research in this study.² Hopefully, the merits of this book will arouse curiosity in Baker's field of religious studies and widen interest in the history of the intriguing Ku Klux Klan.

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² Kelly J. Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan: The KKK's Appeal to Protestant America, 1915-1930* (Lawrence University Press of Kansas, 2011), p.246

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