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Abstract

Although the congressional report from the 1871 Ku Klux Klan Hearings has featured prominently in the historiography of Reconstruction, the insight it offers into its witnesses' religious experiences has gone largely unnoticed. Using the testimony of Arad Simon Lakin, a Northern Methodist preacher who ministered in Alabama following the Civil War, this article seeks to fill in the gaps. Lakin's work and the violent resistance he encountered is understood as a microcosm of the Christian life in the Reconstruction South. Building on analyses of the Ku Klux Klan as the embodiment of apocalyptic rhetoric in Southern evangelicalism, I argue that its persecution of Lakin and other Northern Methodists fits into its broader efforts to hasten the coming of God's judgment, which ultimately found success with Redemption.

Keywords

Reconstruction, Alabama, Methodism, evangelical, Ku Klux Klan, apocalypse, terrorism

"Immortal until his work is done": Northern Methodists and the Klan in Reconstruction Alabama

By Christopher Lough

When the Reverend Arad Simon Lakin first rode into Alabama in the fall of 1865, the scene he encountered was one of sociopolitical upheaval. For decades the Methodist Episcopal Church, in which he served as a “minister of the gospel,” had been displaced below the Mason-Dixon Line by a pro-slavery schism; now, at the dawn of Reconstruction, it stood as one of many Northern institutions sent to ensure the South’s conformity with the Union. To that end, Lakin heard firsthand how elite planters bore the loss of “their property, their reputation... and, last and worst of all their sufferings,” watched their former slaves take hold of a nascent equality.¹ Yet as ex-Confederates channeled their suffering into violence, resentment against the emerging social order and influx of Yankee philanthropy proved a potent force. Lakin’s testimony before the congressional Ku Klux Klan Hearings in June 1871 reveals the extent to which life in postbellum Alabama was marked by this tragedy. As a victim of Klan intimidation and a witness to the persecution of his fellow

¹ *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy: Testimony Taken by the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States*, vol. 8 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), 111-12.

Northern Methodists, his place within the Hearings' report provides an instructive microcosm of the exchange between evangelical Christianity and Southern society.

Although the *Report of the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States* (RJSC) has featured prominently as a source in secondary literature, few have used it to understand the religious experiences of those within its pages. The present study seeks to fill in the gaps. The historiography of Reconstruction in Alabama spans more than a century, so the findings of its successive eras stand in need of distillation to properly analyze the RJSC. In two surveys from 1914 and 1915, pioneering religious historian William W. Sweet furnished demographic statistics on Methodism in the South, and Eugene Portlette Southall analyzed Southern Methodists' ministry to blacks in an article from 1931. Sweet and Southall largely stood apart from the Dunning School, the dominant mode of interpreting Reconstruction in the early twentieth century. In Ta-Nehisi Coates' summation, Dunning School historians maintained that "Reconstruction was a mistake brought about by vengeful Northern radicals" who used the promise of equality for their own political advantage and exaggerated accounts of black oppression. Theirs was a project that sought to justify Jim Crow as its regime solidified across the

nation, and many of the works from this period must be sifted accordingly.²

By the 1950s, traditional narratives were increasingly questioned by revisionist historians critical of Southern racial conservatism. In 1954 Ralph E. Morrow laid much of the blame for Northern Methodists' mixed evangelistic success on Southern recalcitrance, and in 1966 Lewis M. Purifoy looked similarly askance at the motives latent in the Methodist schism over slavery. The works most relevant here fall under the revisionist mantle while moving beyond it in certain respects. Since the 1980s, Michael W. Fitzgerald has lucidly examined the economic landscape of Reconstruction Alabama as well as the era's racial prejudices. His scholarship, along with the essays in Edward J. Blum and W. Scott Poole's 2005 anthology on religion and Reconstruction, has been indispensable to my research. These sources add to Lakin's testimony before Congress in shedding light on Northern Methodists' experience as Republicans and as Christians in an often hostile environment. They also help demonstrate that if Klan violence was catalyzed by white

² William W. Sweet, "The Methodist Episcopal Church and Reconstruction," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 7, no. 3 (1914): 147-65; "Methodist Church Influence on Southern Politics," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 1, no. 4 (1915): 546-60; Eugene Portlette Southall, "The Attitude of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, Toward the Negro from 1844 to 1870," *The Journal of Negro History* 16, no. 4 (1931): 359-70; Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Hillary Clinton Goes Back to the Dunning School," *The Atlantic*, January 26, 2016.

resentment, it was legitimized by evangelical rhetoric of the apocalypse and ultimately victorious with Redemption—the return to Democratic rule and unchallenged white dominance.³

Methodist Missions, Southern Conversions

Reverend Lakin was no Southerner. Hailing from Indiana, he served as a chaplain to the 39th Indiana Regiment Infantry through four years of war.⁴ A witness in the RJSC cited rumors that Lakin had previously led “a very dissolute and erratic life as a lumberman,” but converted to Christianity and became a preacher after attending a Methodist revival.⁵ Whatever the origins of his ministry, he was sent to North Alabama in late 1865 to “organize the Methodist Episcopal Church, and build up her interests” by Bishop Davis Clark of Cincinnati.⁶ His mission fit within the broader context of his church’s pre-war schism and of Northern humanitarian outreach during Reconstruction. Like most every Protestant denomination in antebellum America, Methodism split

³ Ralph E. Morrow, “Northern Methodism in the South during Reconstruction,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 41, no. 2 (1954): 197-218; Lewis M. Purifoy, “The Southern Methodist Church and the Proslavery Argument,” *The Journal of Southern History* 32, no. 3 (1966): 325-41; Michael W. Fitzgerald, “The Ku Klux Klan: Property Crime and the Plantation System in Reconstruction Alabama,” *Agricultural History* 71, no. 2 (1997): 186-206; “Radical Republicanism and the White Yeomanry During Alabama Reconstruction, 1865-1868,” *The Journal of Southern History* 54, no. 4 (1988): 565-96; Edward J. Blum and W. Scott Poole, eds., *Vale of Tears: New Essays on Religion and Reconstruction* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2005).

⁴ *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy*, 8:125.

⁵ *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy*, 8:619.

⁶ *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy*, 8:124.

along entirely sectional lines in 1844: The Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) retained John Wesley's passionate opposition to slavery in the North, whereas the departing Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS) found its own ways to accommodate the peculiar institution. After Lee's surrender, Northern Methodists felt it their duty to reconcile rebellious whites to their communion and tend to newly-free blacks in a land ravaged by war. In the words of Bishop Davis, wherever the MEC was planted there would follow "the cause of good morals and good government."⁷ Taking up residence in Huntsville, Lakin set out to do God's work.

If Lakin and his brother preachers "regarded the whole world [their] parish," then the MEC should have expected great success among whites in the region he called his new home.⁸ Alabama's variegated geography gave rise to a unique political landscape in the nineteenth century. White yeoman farmers were the primary demographic in the upper half of the state, covered by the Appalachians and their foothills, with planters mostly concentrated in the south-central Black Belt. The northern yeomanry was far removed both physically and socially from the planter classes, and therefore had little interest in defending their cause of sectional war. One witness told Congress of a "most

⁷ Davis W. Clark, Cincinnati *Western Christian Advocate* (April 18, 1868), in Morrow, "Northern Methodism in the South," 200.

⁸ *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy*, 8:124.

decisive and aggressive” Unionism in the Tennessee Valley and its environs, estimating that “five or six to one” had opposed secession in Madison County alone.⁹ North Alabamians bore the brunt of Confederate conscription and the devastation of battle throughout the war, and their grudges persisted after Appomattox. Returning home from combat in 1865, Union General George E. Spencer described “about ten percent” of people in the area as being “loyal [to the Union]... and they are intensely loyal.”¹⁰

This disposition made the mountain poor a prime target for Northern evangelism. In Lakin’s telling, Unionist Methodists were “very much displeased and dissatisfied” with the MECS over its support for the Confederacy.¹¹ He had no need to “create the necessity or the demand” for reconciliation with the Northern church; “by their feelings and views, and their knowledge of the Methodist Episcopal Church, they naturally came to her as their choice.”¹² In one town he even incorporated the leading Baptist congregation, which refused any minister who supported rebel “bushwackers [*sic*], house robbers, and horse thieves.”¹³ The MEC made inroads outside loyalist strongholds as well, doubling its number of members across the former Confederacy in just four

⁹ *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy*, 8:592.

¹⁰ Fitzgerald, “Radical Republicanism,” 570.

¹¹ *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy*, 8:130.

¹² *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy*, 8:126.

¹³ Lakin to Rev. J.F. Chalfant (March 13, 1866), in Fitzgerald, “Radical Republicanism,” 571-72.

years. Many converts were recouped from the MECS and two-thirds were black.¹⁴ The MEC's Alabama conference, one of ten established in the South, was organized at Talladega in October 1867.¹⁵ There Lakin was also appointed presiding elder of the Montgomery district, expanding his ministry to the central part of the state. The "roving commission" that Bishop Clark had charged him with was quickly taking on new forms.¹⁶

Mounting Resistance, Mountain Resistance

Unionists, Methodist and otherwise, nonetheless faced opposition as the MEC sank its roots into the South. Along with Northern evangelical churches, loyalists primarily made their voices heard through local chapters of the Union League, a secret society dedicated to Republican Party activism. Before the League became synonymous with the Freedmen's Bureau as a vehicle for black political mobilization, thousands of North Alabama whites filled its ranks in the months after war's end. This mode of political organization proved too much for Southern conservatives to bear. As membership grew, paranoia over clandestine League activity provoked anti-loyalist jury selections in Calhoun and Marshall Counties, and tax discrimination in Jackson County.¹⁷ Some forms of retaliation were pitiless. For example, inadequate

¹⁴ Sweet, "Methodist Church Influence on Southern Politics," 548.

¹⁵ Sweet, "The Methodist Episcopal Church and Reconstruction," 153.

¹⁶ *The Ku Klux Conspiracy*, 8:112.

¹⁷ Fitzgerald, "Radical Republicanism," 574.

harvests in 1865 and 1866 produced famine-like conditions in North Alabama, poverty-stricken and war-torn as it remained. The Huntsville *Advocate* summed up the Democratic response: “the people reported to be starving” were the “political brethren of... Radicals,” and so deserved no assistance from their fellow Southerners.¹⁸ Conservative local officials put their fear into practice, and withheld ration allotments from suffering Unionists across the region.

White loyalists never posed a real political threat to the Democrats, but persecution was not the only factor to blame for their impotence. The yeomanry’s support for Radicals peaked in the spring and summer of 1867, as Congress pushed ahead with its Reconstruction platform and state Republicans grew in self-

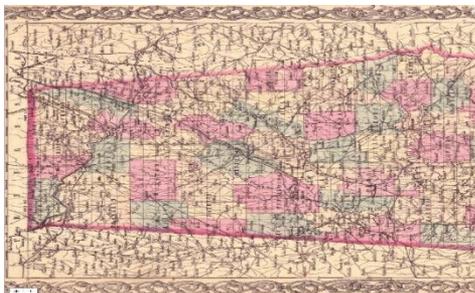


Figure 1. The counties of central and northern Alabama as they appeared at the time of Lakin’s testimony before Congress. Huntsville is the seat of Madison County. George Woolworth and Charles B. Colton, *Colton’s Alabama* (1871). Courtesy of the University of Alabama Historical Map Archive.

¹⁸ Huntsville *Advocate* (May 26, 1866), in Fitzgerald, “Radical Republicanism,” 572.

assurance. Radicals became confident enough to sharpen their appeals for black civil rights and biracial political alliances. Ironically, this was the seed of the party's own undoing in the mountain counties. Despite their hatred for Confederates, Unionists retained the fullness of Southern racial prejudice, which stymied progress toward any coalition they may have been able to form. Better yields in the 1867 corn harvest and stays on debt collection from local Democrats further disincentivized support for Radicals. The result was a kind of white flight from the Union League and a marked decline in Republican votes between October 1867 and February 1868, especially in the poorest and most concentrated areas of loyalist sentiment.¹⁹ The MEC suffered from the electoral shift as well. Governor Robert B. Lindsay, elected as a Democrat in 1870, stated in his congressional testimony that “some two or three churches” around Winston County had “abandoned their connection with the Northern conference” after having been organized by Lakin.²⁰ Though Lindsay was uncertain of its veracity, his report is consistent with the documented retreat attendant upon loyalist racism.

Northern Methodists in Alabama met the same fate as Republicans generally as a result of ideological sorting. Membership in the MEC had meant support for the Northern cause since at least the schism of 1844, and the MECS identified no less

¹⁹ Fitzgerald, “Radical Republicanism,” 591.

²⁰ *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy*, 8:180-81.

thoroughly with Southern interests; in Governor Lindsay's summation, "the Northern Church belongs to the republican party, and the Southern Church to the democratic party."²¹ It is little wonder, then, that Lakin reported a "politico-religious feeling and bitterness" on the part of the MECS towards the MEC.²² Southerners by and large regarded MEC missionaries as meddlesome Yankees who preferred political agitation to spreading the gospel, and their native followers as traitorous scalawags. James Holt Clanton, a Confederate general and post-war chair of the state Democratic Executive Committee, complained that they "profess to be emissaries of Christ, they seem also to be emissaries of the radical party; they preach their religion and their politics at the same time."²³

Clanton's perception was not entirely unfair. The MEC indeed allied Republican activism to its Southern mission, and ministers were frequently accused of preaching political sermons. Lakin himself received "peremptory" orders from his bishop "not to mingle in the political arena at all," and claimed never to have "advanced a political idea in the pulpit."²⁴ Notwithstanding, he had a reputation for partisanship outside Sunday mornings. According to Lionel W. Day, a Union veteran and United States

²¹ *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy*, 8:180.

²² *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy*, 8:125.

²³ *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy*, 8:238.

²⁴ *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy*, 8:125.

Commissioner in North Alabama, Lakin's "repeated political acts were the subject of general comment, and were said to have been attended with very considerable ability. In other words, he is said to have made a first-class stump speech."²⁵ He often delivered these speeches at meetings of the Union League, for which he worked as an organizer.²⁶ The white defection reported by Governor Lindsay was not the only adverse effect of the MEC's political engagement. In the eyes of those committed to the Southern status quo, the church was as guilty as the mountain loyalists of provocations that could not be suffered to go unpunished. Yet retaliation against Lakin and other preachers differed in a key respect: it issued not from the desks of state officials, but arrived on horseback and under hood.

III. The Pastor and the Knights

Lakin was aware of the Klan's existence before it came to impact him directly. During his visitations to other MEC elders "through the mountains and valleys, permeating almost every portion of Northern Alabama" from late 1867 to early 1868, he claimed to have "put up with some of the leading men of the State." From them he learned of "an organization already very extensive" that would rid them of the "terrible calamity" of black

²⁵ *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy*, 8:612.

²⁶ Fitzgerald, "Radical Republicanism," 572.

equality and economic dispossession.²⁷ Alabama, in fact, was likely the first state to witness the KKK's expansion after its founding in Pulaski, Tennessee.²⁸ Despite its loose organization, the Alabama Klan managed to exploit the same resentments that had endeared the mountain yeomanry to the Union, and channel the racial grievances of the lower classes into supremacist terrorism.²⁹ Activity was strongest in the northern counties, exactly where loyalist sentiment was most pronounced in the immediate aftermath of the war, and to a lesser extent in the Black Belt.³⁰ It goes without saying that the persecution of blacks and their Republican allies was the Klan's *raison d'être*.

Lakin's first encounter came as a result of his extraministerial affairs. His evangelistic success had been mixed with disappointment. In addition to the parish defections in Winston County, he grappled with a "general apathy and indifference in regard to Religious Matters" in Huntsville, and a "prejudice of the masses against all northern men" outside the yeomanry. Klan intimidation had also forced the closure of a freedmen's school established under his watch.³¹ Nevertheless, by the summer of

²⁷ *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy*, 8:112.

²⁸ William Dudley Bell, "The Reconstruction Ku Klux Klan: A Survey on the Writings of the Klan with a Profile and Analysis of the Alabama Klan Episode, 1866-1874" (Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University, 1973), 206.

²⁹ Fitzgerald, "The Ku Klux Klan," 187.

³⁰ Bell, "The Reconstruction Ku Klux Klan," 206-08.

³¹ Lakin to Rev. J.F. Chalfant (December 14, 1865), in Paul Harvey, *Freedom's Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War*

1868 he had made enough of a name for himself for the University of Alabama Board of Regents, identified by one witness as being two-thirds Republican, to elect him the school's president.³² The decision was controversial from its inception. When he attempted to take possession of university premises in Tuscaloosa along with Noah B. Cloud, a Montgomery-area reformer and the first "superintendent of public education" appointed by the state's Republican administration, he faced something of a succession crisis. Interim President Wyman refused to cooperate with a board controlled by political outsiders in a such "radical, negro-loving concern," and so withheld from Lakin the keys to the university.³³

The situation grew dramatically worse with the Tuesday, September 1 issue of the Tuscaloosa *Independent Monitor*. It featured a crudely drawn political cartoon so shocking that it later bore reprinting in Republican newspapers across the country: two white men hanging from a tree limb, one carrying an "Ohio" bag, while a donkey emblazoned with the letters "KKK" walked out from underneath them. It was a warning, a "Prospective Scene in the City of Oaks, 4th of March, 1869." The accompanying article explained the cartoon represented "those great pests of Southern society—the carpet-bagger and the scalawag," who risked lynching

through the Civil Rights Era (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 32.

³² *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy*, 8:427.

³³ *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy*, 8:112-14.

if they did not leave town by the prescribed date. It specified that the men depicted were indeed “Cloud, of Montgomery, and Carpet-bagger Lakin, of nowhere,” the former being a “radical jockey [*sic*]” and the latter a “negro-loving jackass.” Reaction to their appointment, the paper boasted, was “moving onward... with the crash of an avalanche, sweeping negroism from the face of the earth.”³⁴ Lakin got the message, and did not wait for spring to flee the city. Three days later he was back on the road to Huntsville.

Even as he was denied his post at the university, Lakin found no more peace at home in Madison County. His next run-in came just a few weeks after the Tuscaloosa affair. In mid-October 1868, a day after the Klan had disrupted a Republican rally in the lead-up to the presidential election, Lakin decided to pay a visit to a friend. On the way home, he encountered three men standing at a corner, calling his name and shouting, “God damn him, he ought to have had his old radical heart shot out of him last night.” As if in

³⁴ Tuscaloosa *Independent Monitor* (September 1, 1868), in *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy*, 8:113-14.

A PROSPECTIVE SCENE IN THE CITY OF OAKS, 4TH OF MARCH, 1869.

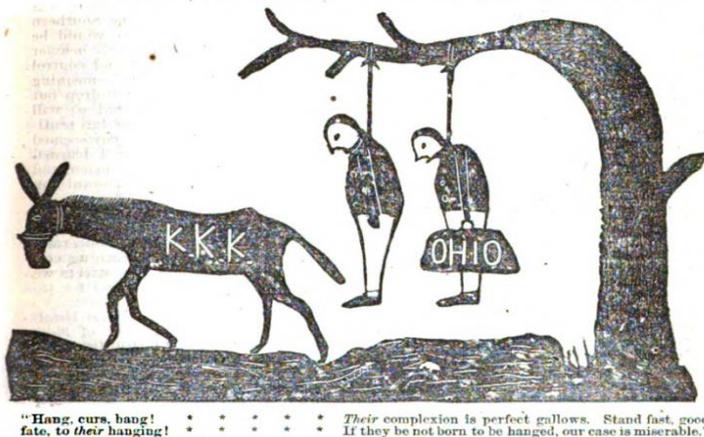


Figure 2. Political cartoon threatening the lynching of Cloud and Lakin. Although he hailed from Indiana, Lakin is mistakenly identified as a native of Ohio, a quintessentially Northern state. *Tuscaloosa Independent Monitor* (September 1, 1868), in *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy* 8:114.

fulfillment of the curse, “sixteen buck-shot passed through the shutters, the window, and the curtains” of his house a few nights later, narrowly missing his family as they sat at dinner. Within an hour, it was reported around Huntsville that “old Parson Lakin was killed.” If the shooting were not proof enough, another friend relayed in the same week that he was wanted by the KKK. Once again Lakin fled, this time for the mountains of Winston County, where he remained as a “refugee for two months.” He claimed to have suffered all of this while obeying his bishop’s charge to stay out of politics.³⁵

³⁵ *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy*, 8:114-16.

Lakin had similar stories dating to the Grant administration. At a Blount County camp meeting in October 1870, men brandishing bowie knives threatened to cut out his “damned old radical heart.” Several days later the revival was interrupted again by dozens of armed men, “all dressed in white pantaloons,” who demanded that Lakin preach so he could “pray for them.” It had been decided that another minister should conduct the day’s services after the first threat on Lakin’s life, so he remained in his quarters when the mob came looking.³⁶ On another circuit the following February, he was sheltered by the people of Marshall County over the course of several weeks. One rainy night, the alarm warning of an imminent Klan attack was raised, and “ten men came in... with their guns and pistols and axes, and barricaded the doors” where Lakin was staying. Luckily the “fierce thunder-storm... raised the stream over which the attack was expected to be made,” and no blood was shed. Commenting on this remarkable series of events at the Ku Klux Klan Hearings, Representative Philadelph Van Trump (D-OH) inquired, “Do not these frequent deliverances... look a little like you had been miraculously preserved?” Lakin replied with his conviction that “man is immortal until his work is done.”³⁷

Northern Methodists in the Crosshairs

³⁶ *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy*, 8:117-21.

³⁷ *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy*, 8:121.

Lakin was only one victim in the Klan's campaign against Northern Methodists in Alabama. After his two months of asylum in late 1868, Lakin began keeping a record of KKK violence in his diary. Claiming to log only those reports he believed to be authentic, at his hearing he counted a staggering 323 cases with forty deaths just in the mountain counties of Blount, Jackson, Limestone, Madison, Marshall, and Morgan.³⁸ These figures stand in contrast to the 258 individual incidents and 103 deaths listed over Alabama's two thousand pages in the RJSC. Though this discrepancy can have a number of explanations—the fact that Klan activity is recorded in many sources outside the RJSC chief among them—readers should not discount Lakin's propensity for exaggeration.³⁹

This caveat highlights the fiercely partisan nature of the Ku Klux Klan Hearings. The RJSC reads like a political Rorschach test, with either party seeking to further their respective interests. Democrats defended their cause by downplaying the Klan's very existence, and Republicans theirs by magnifying Klan atrocities to the greatest possible degree. As regards Lakin, Democrats consistently spoke against his character in order to discredit his testimony. Governor Lindsay, who knew of Lakin only by reputation, claimed that he looked "at everything through a jaundiced eye... small events that would not be noticed by other

³⁸ *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy*, 8:134-35.

³⁹ Bell, "The Reconstruction Ku Klux Klan," 368-69.

men his imagination and fancy work into terrorism.” Moreover, he was a “zealot in his cause” of drawing blacks away from the MECS.⁴⁰ General Clanton called Lakin a “man of very bad character,” notorious as “a mischief-maker and a stirrer up of strife;”⁴¹ even Nicholas Davis, a cantankerous old-time Whig from Limestone County, labeled him “trash,” “an old ruffian,” and a “disgrace.”⁴² The consensus from both Democrats and Republicans was that the Reverend had, at the very least, violated his oft-cited orders of political nonintervention.

Bearing in mind the question of Lakin’s credibility, his attestation concerning other MEC ministers must not be dismissed out of hand. Several of his accounts are corroborated with official documentation or by other witnesses before Congress. The attack on Moses B. Sullivan, a white man, is a case in point. While preaching on a Madison County circuit in May 1869, Sullivan was ambushed in his sleep by “disguised men,” and “beaten with rods” so severely that he was left an invalid. The assailants then burned down a Northern Methodist church in the vicinity and “whipped” several local blacks. Summarizing the case’s affidavit, attached in full to his testimony in the RJSC, Lakin quoted the Klansmen as telling Sullivan that “they would kill his presiding elder [Lakin]; that he must preach for the Methodist Episcopal Church South; that

⁴⁰ *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy*, 8:180.

⁴¹ *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy*, 8:238.

⁴² *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy*, 9:784-85.

there should be no church south of Mason and Dixon's line, than the Methodist Episcopal Church South."⁴³ The Klan targeted Sullivan precisely because he was *not* a minister of the MECS, handmaid of the old Slave Power.

Another case with an affidavit attached to Lakin's report was that of George Taylor, a black MEC preacher from Colbert County. Early in 1869, Taylor was "taken from his bed by a band of disguised men and whipped... whipped till his back was scarified; he was punched in the head with their pistols... and then, with a knife, his body and legs and thighs were punctured all over." This barbaric assault was followed by the lynching of three black men from a bridge in Tuscumbia, one of whom was a member of the MEC.⁴⁴ Among yet other ministers visited by the Klan, Lakin also mentioned Dean Reynolds of Morgan County, a black preacher "beaten and left for dead, with both arms broken, one of them in two places" in 1868; Jesse Knight, a "local preacher, shot in his own house, in Morgan County, in 1869, and died a few days later;" and a certain Reverend Johnson, "of Fayetteville, shot dead in the pulpit while preaching in 1869."⁴⁵ The Klan was indiscriminate in its attempt to rid Alabama of Yankee scoundrels, white or black.

⁴³ *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy*, 8:123-24.

⁴⁴ *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy*, 8:128-29.

⁴⁵ *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy*, 8:127-28.

The Violence of Apocalypse

As the savagery of its violence attests, the motives that drove the Klan were more profound than partisan concern. A major debate in the historiography of Reconstruction over the last several decades has contested the Klan's status as a mercenary arm of the planter class. While either group certainly shared an interest in keeping blacks in their place, plantation owners often expressed frustration with the militants often supposed to be in their service; they went too far, creating such a climate of terror that blacks were literally unable to work.⁴⁶ What is more, the Klan peaked across Alabama between 1868 and 1870, *after* Republicans and Union Leagues had reached the height of their popularity in the mountain counties, and was most active in the areas where loyalist sentiment had once been strongest.⁴⁷ Were the KKK primarily concerned with Democratic hegemony, one would expect it to have shored up its efforts as Radicals came into their own. This is not the case. Rather, Klansmen were driven by a more esoteric conception of society, on a crusade blessed by the mirror image of the Northern Christianity they fought.

Religious rhetoric in the South took on a new form after the war. With their assurance that God would lead them to victory crushed, white Southerners turned inward to grapple with their undelivered exodus. Out of their attempt to accept defeat came the

⁴⁶ Fitzgerald, "The Ku Klux Klan," 194.

⁴⁷ Bell, "The Reconstruction Ku Klux Klan," 252.

first strains of Southern apocalypticism, a gloomy, embittered pondering of what God might yet have in store for His people. Predictions of the end of days and the revelation of divine judgment had been commonplace in Northern evangelicalism for decades, but Southerners turned toward the eschaton only after their sons had marched to their deaths in vain. In this new mode of thought, their oppressors—the blacks striving for equality and the Yankees that abetted them—were literally satanic. They were forces that arose from the very depths of hell, which God alone could defeat. The dreadful intensity of their speculation was thereby imputed to the temporal, transforming political struggles into a battle between transcendent good and evil.⁴⁸

Though the majority of Klansmen were poor country folk who lacked access to confessional literature, the apocalyptic spirit circulated among their believing neighbors and emanated from the pulpits of their churches. Their propaganda accordingly highlighted that Manichaean struggle shared by all white Southerners. In the same article denouncing Cloud and Lakin, the Tuscaloosa *Independent Monitor* boasted, “The happy day of reckoning approacheth rapidly... Each and every one who has so unblushingly essayed to lower the Caucasian to a degree even beneath the African race will be regarded as *hostis sui generis*

⁴⁸ W. Scott Poole, “Confederate Apocalypse: Theology and Violence in the Reconstruction South,” in *Vale of Tears*, 36-52.

[unique enemies].”⁴⁹ This style of religiously bloated prose was widespread enough for some Republicans to mimic it. The Huntsville *Advocate* printed one anti-Klan notice in 1868 that warned, “Overmuch hath the Serpent hissed... His pestilential breath is stenchful, even in this remote and peaceful abode. By permission of the Great Ruler, we have girt out armor and resume the Earth Field... we are defenders of innocence—*avengers* of bloodguiltless—Deputies of Destiny...”⁵⁰ Passion was found on either side, but only one could parody the overwrought zeal of the other.

More importantly, the Klan reified the abstract of apocalypse through its use of ritualized violence. The deeper significance of its activity did not go unnoticed in its own day. John A. Minnis, a United States Attorney for North Alabama, detailed a method of Klan youth recruitment in 1872: “A proposition is made to them to go to see a little fun. Unsuspectingly they agree to it, and start with a crowd not knowing or suspecting anything wrong, get off to some old field or woods, all halt, some disguise themselves... In this situation a negro is whipped, or in some instances killed.” Once made accessories to murder, boys would be compelled to keep quiet and

⁴⁹ Tuscaloosa *Independent Monitor* (September 1, 1868), in *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy*, 8:114.

⁵⁰ Huntsville *Advocate* (August 7, 1868), in Bell, “The Reconstruction Ku Klux Klan,” 216-17.

enroll as Klansmen, whether they wanted to or not. “In this way your sons have been,” Minnis added conspicuously, “drawn into this most diabolical conspiracy.”⁵¹ The torture of blacks in this context is almost liturgical, complete with the donning of specialized vestments and the initiation of youth. Arguably the most shocking report in Lakin’s own testimony was the attack on George Taylor, the black MEC preacher who was methodically stabbed, beaten, and whipped. If Christians have traditionally understood the liturgy to be both a participation in the heavenly worship and an anticipation of eternal communion with the Trinity, then the sadism that marks these incidents points beyond a merely political terrorism. Klansmen were indeed Christian soldiers, and that in a twofold sense: they exacted revenge on God’s enemies in the here-and-now, and simultaneously hastened the arrival of His judgment.

In order to perceive the eschatological nature of the KKK, it is necessary to separate apocalypticism from modern misunderstanding. Today the term “apocalypse” typically implies the end of the world, some cataclysm that will sweep away creation either with a bang or a whimper. The original Greek has no such meaning. Rather, *apokalypsis* more properly means “unveiling” or “revelation,” as when the Gospel of Luke describes the Child Jesus as *phôs eis apokalypsin ethnôn*, a “light for

⁵¹ Bell, “The Reconstruction Ku Klux Klan,” 223.

revelation to the Gentiles.”⁵² It is in this spirit that the Klan was apocalyptic—not that it sought to bring about the Second Coming per se, but rather God’s manifestation of Himself in the subjugated South. Its effort to bring about the Kingdom of God at home was in keeping with the general tenor of Southern apocalypticism, which ignored the numerical predictions of Christ’s return as practiced by Northern divines and focused instead on the discernment of God’s vindicating justice. As Lakin’s testimony demonstrates, the Klan persecuted some Northern Methodists because they were black, some because they were Yankees, and some because they were Republicans. All of them were targeted because they were agents of the Antichrist, a belief legitimized by Reconstruction’s religious milieu.

Conclusion: Lakin and the Christ-Haunted South

The Klan was disbanded in Alabama by 1873, its decline matching the Democratic Party’s triumphant return to power across the South.⁵³ Whites hailed the conservative restoration as their Redemption; in the words of James Mallory, a Southern Methodist farmer from Talladega County, it was “deliverance from our cursed rulers.”⁵⁴ The use of explicitly religious terminology here is

⁵² Luke 2:32.

⁵³ Fitzgerald, “The Ku Klux Klan,” 205.

⁵⁴ James Mallory, 26 November 1874, in Paul Harvey, “‘That Was about Equalization after Freedom’: Southern Evangelicalism and the Politics of Reconstruction and Redemption, 1861-1900,” in *Vale of Tears*, 75.

not coincidental. “Redemption” signifies the translation from a state of sin and disorder to one of wholeness and fulfillment. The state-by-state demise of Radicalism throughout the 1870s was just such a vindication in the eyes of Southern evangelicals. Moreover, the reversion to the status quo antebellum, which saw blacks return to slavery in everything but name, was the very apocalypse that Klansmen had awaited. Even if God had preserved the Union, they ensured that He still manifest His saving presence to the white race.

Flannery O’Connor held that the South, while “hardly Christ-centered,” was “most certainly Christ-haunted.”⁵⁵ The theological conception of man that she believed to prevail in the South was even more pervasive in Reverend Lakin’s century than in her own. However, a Christian anthropology was unable to prevent the nation from tearing itself apart over slavery, or the racist cruelty that persisted throughout Reconstruction and Redemption. The Protestantism that provided a common cultural foundation on either side of the Mason-Dixon Line was just as fractured as society at large, and in the South, it actually sanctioned the brutality detailed at the Ku Klux Klan Hearings and in the RJSC. Based on his correspondence with other Northern Methodist leaders, Lakin deemed the “very general opposition”

⁵⁵ Flannery O’Connor, “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” in *Flannery O’Connor: Collected Works*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Library of America, 1988), 818.

met by the MEC in Alabama to be the state of his church across the South more broadly.⁵⁶ The preponderance of Unionist sentiment in North Alabama was ultimately incidental to the MEC's fate there, and in this regard Lakin's mission was perhaps always doomed to fail. Yet he provides his readers today a much-needed window, however imperfect, into religious life during Reconstruction. His testimony continues to shine a light on the South, a land still haunted by the Lord he served.

⁵⁶ *The Ku-Klux Conspiracy*, 8:130.

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