

Beyond Redemption: Race, Violence, and the American South after the Civil War

By Carole Emberton

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013. Pp. 285. Illustrations, notes, index. Clothbound, \$50.00; paperbound, \$24.50.)

Beyond Redemption provides a broad meditation on masculinity and racial violence during the Civil War era. One of Carole Emberton's central arguments is that Radicals promoting civil rights were in a double bind: They depicted resistance and military service as establishing the manhood of enslaved people, but had to avoid raising the specter of racial barbarism. Their rhetoric initially worked, but Emberton argues that it empowered reactionaries whose resort to terror was sanctified by effective use. Thus the era's "militarized notions of freedom and citizenship, and a hypermasculine, aggressive political style" eventually eased the retreat from Reconstruction (p. 8).

This is a sensible line of thought, the evidence broadly sustains it, and the era's violence merits reexamination in such terms. Given these underlying strengths, the dutiful reviewer falls back on secondary criticisms. Emberton's title concept raises questions, in view of her notion that "the narratives of redemption that guided both Radical Reconstruction and Redemption were strikingly similar" (p. 214). This makes a shared terminology bear a lot of interpretive freight, given that Democrats using the term were seeking a pogrom rather than extolling white martyrdom. Radicals highlighting black wartime patriotic sacrifice held the theological high ground, and

the common wording masks that. The more pressing issue is with the book's tone, which seems somewhat censorious toward racial egalitarians. Men like Frederick Douglass had few cards to play in shaming northerners into protecting the ex-slaves, and spread-eagle patriotism was the best shot. If that strategy was doomed to failure, nothing else was likely to work better given prevailing racial attitudes. Similarly, the "images of beaten, raped and terrorized black bodies" prevalent in press depictions may well have "reinforced the social distance" between northern sympathizers and the victims of terror (p. 39). But what else were anti-racists supposed to do?

The skycam level of political analysis has another liability, in that it masks regional variation. However violent the Reconstruction South, much of the black population lived concentrated in areas where sheer numbers provided some protection, most of the time. Furthermore, this violence occurred in the midst of a massive labor transformation, and Emberton clearly intends to distinguish her work from the abiding themes of scholars like Eric Foner and Steven Hahn. The term "sharecropping" appears only once in the index, and it is somewhat vaguely used on the cited page (p. 59). Even given the focus on the public sphere, the text of-

ten deplores discourse as racist without explaining what is going on. For example, the author spends several paragraphs deploring the criticism of General Philip Sheridan in Louisiana in 1875, without making clear that the issue was his stationing of Union soldiers in the legislative chambers to deter a coup (pp. 201-204). The criticism was probably wrong and enabled by resurgent racism, but fears for civil liberties encouraged a frosty press response. The author's abstract

level of political analysis lends itself to ready moralizing.

That said, this is a reasonable, well-researched, and mostly persuasive look at an important topic. Emberton's broad characterizations seemed interpretively correct and original to this reviewer. All good books raise questions, and in this case they are fruitful ones.

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White Robes, Silver Screens: Movies and the Making of the Ku Klux Klan

By Tom Rice

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. Pp. xx, 302. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Clothbound, \$80.00; paperbound, \$28.00.)

Tom Rice's book begins with a description of the 1915 opening of *The Birth of a Nation* in Atlanta. In celebration of the film, Klansmen marched down Peachtree Street and staged a rifle salute outside the theater. On the surface, the Klan's appearance before the film resembled the performance of hooded nightriders at the movie's Los Angeles premiere. But, as Rice explains, the Klansmen in Los Angeles were actors; in Atlanta, they were actual members of the newly formed white supremacist organization. Was this a case of art imitating life? Rice's study of the complex, mutual development of the modern Ku Klux Klan and the American film industry, visual culture, and politics is a benchmark

example of the contribution film studies can make to our understanding of American history.

Rice tracks this history from Thomas Dixon's play *The Clansman* (1905), which served as a basis for *Birth*, to the social problem films of the 1930s. Nearly four decades after federal policies drove the Reconstruction-era Ku Klux Klan underground, William Simmons formed a new iteration of the terrorist organization in 1915. The modern Klan exploited popular culture depictions of the organization in productions such as *Birth* to establish its legitimacy and bolster its membership. The modern Klan was not formally connected to the earlier version of the organiza-