

Journal of American Studies, 44 (2010), 2. doi:10.1017/S0021875810000812

Rory McVeigh, *The Rise of the Ku Klux Klan: Right-Wing Movements and National Politics* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, \$22.50). Pp. 244. ISBN 978 0 8166 5620 2.

The sociologist Rory McVeigh has built up a considerable reputation with his studies of the Klan. This book adds to that reputation. His aim is to point out that the recent trend for regional studies of the Klan only goes so far in explaining why “Klankraft” attracted between 4 and 10 million members in the mid-1920s, depending on whose figures you use. Through a variety of sociological theories which explain the success of right-wing movements, McVeigh concludes that the Klan’s triumph was a complex mix of all the socioeconomic reasons normally ascribed, added to the manipulative, power-greedy leadership preying on a gullible membership. So far, little new.

Where McVeigh is new is in his national approach. By analyzing the Klan’s national paper – the *Imperial Nighthawk* – he shows how the national leadership in Atlanta “stumbled upon a way of talking ... that appealed to many native-born white Protestant Americans during this specific historical moment” (50). The book examines the *Nighthawk*’s response to the decade’s huge, but unevenly distributed, economic growth. The threats to existing elites presented by the shift to unskilled labour, the growing use of ethnic minorities and women, and a national agricultural depression enabled Imperial Wizard Hiram Wesley Evans to position the Klan firmly in the middle ground. They fed his “American way” that rejected capital’s “mercenary motives ... importing 5 and 10-cent citizenship” (64) as well as the proletariat’s flirtations with communism.

In a sophisticated analysis McVeigh shows how the Klan assimilated the lessons of populism and progressivism, as well as concurrent European fascism. He shows how the Klan took machine politics out of the individual city and utilized it in a national context, justifying this as the only way to halt the devaluation of the vote to the “real American” (100). The Klan achieved the necessary cohesion via targeted enemies. These were not the foes of the Reconstruction Klan: blacks and Republicans. They were more the bogeymen of the populists and nativists: Catholics, radicals and immigrants. McVeigh’s Klan was not simply based on hatred, it sought allies – the nation’s majority ethnic, religious and racial groups. This Klan’s rhetoric especially appealed to the newly enfranchised American women with their campaigns over the sanctity of marriage, the protection of state education and the evils of booze.

However, ultimately, as a national organization, the Klan failed, and here McVeigh disagrees with the prevailing explanations for this failure. He rejects the theories of Richard Hofstadter, David Chalmers and Kenneth Jackson in particular, who argued that the Klan withered because it was no longer relevant to much of its grassroots support. He rejects the explanations of Wyn Craig Wade (although without mentioning him in this context) that the Klan sank because it attracted a populace destined for decline. A great part of these rejections stem from his contention that the national Klan set agendas, rather than following them, and that the organization’s membership was not drawn from the lower levels but was as diverse as US society itself. Of themselves these are not novel conclusions, but his statistical

evidence and lucid arguments make them compelling for his picture of a national Klan. Whether you agree or not, you need to read it.

University of Essex

KRISTOFER ALLERFELDT

Journal of American Studies, 44 (2010), 2. doi:10.1017/S0021875810000824

William H. Thomas Jr., *Unsafe for Democracy: World War I and the U.S. Justice Department's Covert Campaign to Suppress Dissent* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008, £31.50). Pp. xi + 251. ISBN 978 0 299 22890 3.

Ernest Freeberg, *Democracy's Prisoner: Eugene V. Debs, the Great War, and the Right to Dissent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008, £22.95). Pp. ix + 380. ISBN 978 0 674 02792 3.

The two books under review bring new perspectives to a problem that has long troubled historians of civil liberties – the way in which the United States government, in its first venture onto the world stage, trampled democracy at home. William Thomas's *Unsafe for Democracy* relies on painstaking research into the investigative reports of detectives in the employ of the Department of Justice's Bureau of Investigation (BI – the FBI's precursor). Findings summarized in a learned appendix indicate that these detectives were mainly middle-class in background. Thomas argues that progressives were enamoured of federal government action. For its enactment they placed their faith in bourgeois experts, and BI agents fell into that category. Stating that previous historians have concentrated exclusively on the overt prosecutions of anti-war protestors under wartime sedition laws, he stakes a claim to have struck a new narrative and interpretive lode, the "covert" ideology-enforcement activities of the BI's investigators. In a further and provocative correction to previous scholarship, he balances his viewpoint by suggesting that while progressive politicians and the BI may have benefited from the support of anti-"slacker" vigilantes, their preference for federal action meant that they actually disapproved of such private groups.

In an evidence-rich case study of Wisconsin that forms the core of his book, Thomas confirms the Justice Department's judgement that the Beaver State was a hotbed of resistance to American entry into World War I. Balloted in April 1917 on the issue, seventeen citizens of Sheboygan favoured US participation, but 4,112 opposed the war. The state's large German American population was against the war if also against the Kaiser (in spite of his Welsh surname and his account of Madisonian Richard Lloyd Jones's anti-war journalism, Thomas attempts an analysis neither of Wisconsin's significant Welsh American population, nor of other non-German ethnic groups). Milwaukee's socialists and a solid sprinkling of pastors also spoke up. BI agents recruited a host of informers and on the basis of tip-offs made "cautionary visits" to the homes of potential dissenters. Built on an examination of thirty-one such visits, Thomas's account yields a picture of an insidiously spread culture of involuntary patriotism based on fear.

With that fear at its height, the nation's greatest socialist leader, Eugene Debs, was charged with sedition and in June 1918 sentenced to ten years in Atlanta's federal penitentiary. *Democracy's Prisoner* is Ernest Freeberg's engrossing account of how