

Keeping Canada British

The Ku Klux Klan in 1920s Saskatchewan

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Introduction

Despite its American origins, the Ku Klux Klan in Saskatchewan in the 1920s was a distinctly “British” organization. Its central goal was to keep Canada British, which, to the Klan, meant building and preserving a white Protestant nation of British racial stock. It spurned lawlessness and violence, abandoned the wearing of robes and hoods, and severed all ties with its counterpart in the United States. Ironically, its opponents, especially Saskatchewan premier James Gardiner, denounced the Klan as un-British. He maintained that tolerance and respect for minority rights were at the core of the British political tradition and that, by rejecting these values, the Klan lost all credibility as a British organization. The Canada that Gardiner believed in had room for what today we would call multiculturalism, as long as it was expressed within the context of British institutions and loyalty to the Crown. Both pro- and anti-Klan forces in the province wanted to keep Canada British, but they had different ideas about what that meant and how it might be achieved. “Britishness” in 1920s Saskatchewan was an open, fluid concept, the meaning of which was highly contested.

The Klan debate was part of a larger discussion about national identity that took place after the First World War. The war was a rite of passage, a cataclysmic event that helped transform Canada from colony to nation. However, this did not mean that Canada ceased being British. On the contrary, despite the changes to Canada’s legal and constitutional status, the country remained British in the cultural sense and in the way it imagined itself. Canadian nationalism was a complex emotion. Many Canadians felt that they were both British and Canadian at the same time. They did not feel that they had to choose between one and the other. Thus, the Klan campaign to keep Canada British resonated with the wider society. It was part of the national discourse, albeit at an extreme end of it.

The battlefield victories of the Canadian Corps in the Great War inspired a surge of national pride and self-confidence. Canada had won a place

for itself on the world stage, a seat at the table of nations. Prime Minister Robert Borden attended the Paris Peace Conference as part of the British Empire delegation, and he signed the Treaty of Versailles. Canada was also accorded membership in the League of Nations, the international body that was supposed to enshrine collective security and prevent another war. Throughout the 1920s, as John Darwin writes, Prime Minister Mackenzie King waged “relentless bureaucratic war against any form of words that bound Canada to the chariot of British foreign policy.”¹ He asserted Canada’s right to negotiate and sign a separate treaty with the United States (the “halibut” treaty of 1923), and he supported the resolution of the Imperial Conference in 1926 that recognized the dominions as “autonomous communities within the British Empire,” a principle ratified by the Statute of Westminster in 1931.² The phrase “British Commonwealth,” which had been used from time to time since the 1880s, now came into common usage, at least as it related to Britain’s association with the white dominions. For the non-white colonies, “Empire” was still the preferred term.

However, the dominions were not fully independent, and Mackenzie King’s strategic ambition in the 1920s “fell far short of self-sufficient Canadian nationalism.”³ There was no desire for Canada to make a clean break with Britain or, indeed, a break of any kind.⁴ Canadian national feeling in this period was a “distinctive blend of national status and Imperial identity.”⁵ Mackenzie King declared in 1927 on the occasion of the visit of the Prince of Wales that Canadians had never been happier in their relations with the British Empire or more loyal to the Crown. The visit of the prince, the prime minister said, brought to mind “an allegiance to the Crown, a devotion to British institutions and British ideals, enjoyed in common by the peoples of the empire in all parts of the world.”⁶ The prince, for his part, said that he did not consider himself to be primarily a Briton and only secondarily a Canadian. “On the contrary,” as he wrote in a letter to his father the king, “I regard myself as belonging to Great Britain and Canada in exactly the same way.” When the monarch admonished him that if he called himself a Canadian in Canada, he would have to be an Australian in Australia and a New Zealander in New Zealand, the prince replied, “And why not? Of course in India there would be no question.”⁷ In Calgary he expressed the view that it was up to the Empire, and particularly to the United Kingdom, to make sure that the population of the Prairies was “British and not alien!” (exclamation mark in original).⁸ On this point at least, he was in agreement with the Ku Klux Klan.

The British Empire was on display at the Wembley Exhibition in north London during the summers of 1924 and 1925. More than 25 million visitors passed through the grounds. King George V set the tone in his opening address when he said that the exhibition “represent[ed] to the world a graphic illustration of that spirit of free and tolerant cooperation which has inspired people of different races, creeds, institutions and ways of thought to unite in a single commonwealth and to contribute their varying gifts to one great end.” He spoke of the Empire as a “family” of nations, a brotherly association of diverse peoples. He then sent a telegram to himself that went around the world along the “All Red Route” and returned to him in London less than two minutes later, a fitting demonstration of the modern communications system that linked the various parts of the Empire.

Canada’s pavilion at Wembley featured an exhibition of Group of Seven paintings, which won high praise from British art critics. Members of the group were self-conscious Canadian cultural nationalists. One of their maxims was: “The great purpose of landscape art is to make us at home in our own country.”⁹ A reviewer for the *Toronto Mail and Empire* wrote: “The work of these young artists deserves enthusiastic recognition and support. In their work the spirit of young Canada has found itself.”¹⁰ The group articulated the need for an authentically Canadian form of artistic expression, one that caught the character and spirit of the Canadian landscape, separate and distinct from the cultural traditions of Britain and Europe.¹¹ However, the response of the Canadian public to members of the Group of Seven in the 1920s was distinctly underwhelming. Their first exhibition in May 1920 attracted only two thousand visitors, and only three of their works were sold, apart from the painting purchased by the National Gallery.¹² At the second exhibition in 1921, there were no sales at all, again with the exception of those to the National Gallery. Neither private collectors nor the public at large were much interested. The fame of the members of the Group of Seven as Canadian cultural icons came later. By mid-century, reproductions of their work graced schoolroom walls, and during the Second World War copies were hung in barracks overseas to remind soldiers of the country they were fighting for. In 1967, stamps were issued featuring their portraits and paintings. But in the 1920s, the Group of Seven had not yet fully captured the public imagination.

The highlight of the Canadian pavilion at Wembley, or at least the exhibit that garnered the most attention, was a life-size sculpture of the Prince of Wales made out of butter. He stood beside his horse against the

backdrop of his Rocky Mountain ranch in Alberta. The tableau, which used up more than three thousand pounds of butter, served as a fitting advertisement for the Canadian dairy industry and the wonders of modern refrigeration. (A young English visitor was heard to say that one of the prince's ears would "keep us a week.")¹³ Thus, Canadians chose to represent themselves to the world through the symbol of their butter-prince rather than a national hero who had been born and raised in Canada.¹⁴

The celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of Confederation on 1 July 1927 on Parliament Hill in Ottawa throws additional light on Canadian nationalism at the time. Liberal senator Thomas Chapais gave a patriotic address extolling Canada's virtues and glories, without once mentioning the British Empire. He dwelt instead on Canada's identity as a "wholly autonomous North American nation." "Our country is not beyond the seas," he proclaimed, "it is here, on this blessed, Christianized, civilized soil – a soil enriched by our pioneers, our missionaries, and our martyrs. Our country is Canada, the land of the maple, of the St. Lawrence, of lofty mountains and giant lakes."¹⁵ L.P.D. Tilley of Nova Scotia, a descendant of one of the Fathers of Confederation, addressed the gathering in a somewhat different manner. He said that Canada was "a nation within a nation," by which he meant an entity within the larger family of British nations. His Canada was "the powerful right arm of the British Empire." Hugh Guthrie, the leader of the Opposition in Ottawa, took the same view. He reminded the audience that the Fathers of Confederation had been thoroughly loyal to "British ideals, British institutions, British forms of government, and the maintenance of British Imperial ties."¹⁶

By this reckoning, a Canadian was a type of Britisher, just as a Scotsman was a type of Britisher. It was not really a matter of "wearing two hats at the same time" since each "hat" was fully implicated in the other. As Andrea Benvenuti and Stuart Ward put it: "The hats were conceptually interwoven in such a way that it made it difficult to conceive of them as distinct, self-sufficient ornaments."¹⁷ British Canadians were not British one moment and Canadian the next; rather, they were both at the same time. Their Canadianism was infused with Britishness.

Normally, we think of "colony" and "empire" as antagonistic terms. If a colony does not evolve to independent nation status, it is assumed that there is something wrong with it. It is not doing the job that history has assigned it to do. However, in the case of the white dominions, the paradigm breaks down because the dominant populations were British emigrants or

the descendants of British emigrants, who identified strongly with the mother country and considered themselves to be part of British civilization writ large. The British nation was not found only in the British Isles; it extended to the far reaches of the globe. The British, said French statesman Georges Clemenceau, were “un peuple planétaire.”¹⁸ When the members of the Ku Klux Klan said they wanted to keep Canada British, they meant they wanted to maintain this “greater” British nation of which they considered themselves to be an integral part. For them, “empire” and “nation” were not opposite categories: they fused into one. In this respect, the Saskatchewan Klan in the 1920s was neither exotic nor marginal. It was a somewhat more extreme version of what most people thought.

The term “Greater Britain” originated in 1868 when Englishman Charles Dilke published a book with that title. He had just completed a round-the-world tour in which he visited only countries in which English was the dominant language. His book celebrated “the grandeur of our race, already girdling the earth, which it is destined, perhaps, eventually to overspread.”¹⁹ John Seeley embellished the theme in *The Expansion of England* (1883), in which he argued that the British Empire was not a “congeries of nations held together by force” but, rather, “a global federation of the English diaspora” united by bonds of race and culture.²⁰ A cultural network, centred in London and held together by books, newspapers, mail, and (later) film and radio, created a web of words and images that bound the Empire/nation together.²¹ British imperialism was ubiquitous in popular culture, represented in the mass media, post cards, music hall entertainment, sheet music, textbooks, school maps, and the packaging of consumer goods.²²

For the mass of the population, imperialism was not so much an explicit subscription to a political ideology as a way of looking at the world and the British nation in it. The ordinary person may not have given much thought to the Empire in her or his daily life, but it was always there, if only subconsciously, a type of immersion in the imperial cultural soup. In the words of James Belich: “The concepts ‘British Empire’ and ‘British Commonwealth’ conceal a virtual nation, an ephemeral second United States, Britain-plus-Dominions, whose Dominion citizens considered themselves co-owners of London, the Empire, and Britishness in general.”²³ The homesteader in Saskatchewan on the periphery of Empire was as much a part of this “Greater Britain” as was the Londoner at the metropolitan centre. Certainly, the dominions fought for the Empire as though

they owned it. In the Great War, the white dominions enlisted 1.3 million soldiers, of whom 144,000 were killed. They increased the size of the British army by 20 percent, an extraordinary asset to the Empire in a time of crisis.²⁴

After the war, as we have seen, there was a surge of Canadian nationalism, but it was of an equivocal sort. It coexisted with the belief that Canada was still a British nation in some formulation of the term. For example, the Association of Canadian Clubs, which had been founded in Hamilton, Ontario, in 1892, flourished in the 1920s. From 1926 to 1928, the number of clubs increased from fifty-three to 115. Their self-proclaimed purpose, according to the new constitution adopted in 1926, was “to foster and encourage a national public opinion and spirit, to stimulate intelligent citizenship, to awaken an interest in public affairs, and to cultivate an attachment to the institutions and soil of Canada.” But this was balanced by an equal determination, also spelled out in the constitution, “to establish a faith in the position of the Canadian nation in association under the Crown with other nations of the British Commonwealth.” As Mary Vipond explains, the members of the Canadian Club believed in Canadian nationhood, “but they still saw Canada as a British nation.” Their sense of Canadian nationalism “was not much different from that combination of nationalism and imperialism which had imbued the imperial federationists of the 1890s.”²⁵

Another prominent Canadian nationalist organization of the 1920s was the Native Sons of Canada. Founded in Victoria, British Columbia, in 1921, it had a peak membership in the 1920s of 120,000, though records are scanty and such numbers should be taken with a dose of salt. The organization published a magazine entitled *Beaver Canada First*, with a reputed circulation of 34,000.²⁶ To join the Native Sons, one had to have been born in Canada or to have resided in Canada from an early age and have Canadian-born parents. It was explicitly intended as an alternative to Old Country fraternal organizations, like the Sons of England or the Sons of Scotland, which provided social activities as well as material benefits for their members, such as preferential employment or business contacts. In addition, the Native Sons put forward a nationalist program that included adoption of a distinctive Canadian flag, elimination of the practice of granting British titles to Canadians, appointment of a Canadian (instead of a British aristocrat) to the post of governor general, recognition of “Canadian” as a distinctive nationality on the census form, abolition of legal

appeals to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, and, more generally, the advancement of Canadian history, art, literature, and culture.²⁷

The Native Sons believed that it would be impossible to properly assimilate non-English-speaking immigrants as long as Canadians lacked true patriotism and were uncertain and confused about their own identity. “How are we going to Canadianize the Galicians and Doukhobors who come to make their homes in Canada, if we can’t Canadianize ourselves?” asked Walter McRaye at a joint meeting of the Native Sons and the Canadian Daughters League (the female counterpart of the Native Sons) in Moose Jaw in 1927. “The pride that should take first place in the heart of the people born in Canada is Canadian pride,” he stated, “Canada should harbour no man or woman who will not or cannot become a Canadian; and all Canadians should cultivate a pride in their entire country and cease the sectional quarrelling and rivalries.”²⁸

There were limits to the inclusiveness of the Native Sons. Only the “best stocks” were desired in Canada, not “immigration tending to make Canadians a mixed or coloured race, or which tends to lower standards of living, education or morals, or which brings in the physically, mentally or morally unfit.”²⁹ Despite the organization’s generalized racism, Aboriginal peoples were recognized as Canada’s true native sons. In 1928, Dr. J.H. Cotton, president-elect of the organization, was inducted as an honorary Cree chief at a ceremony at the Regina exhibition grounds. Chief “Red Dog,” of the File Hills Agency, placing a blanket over Cotton’s shoulders and a feather bonnet on his head, conferred on him the title “Big Beaver Chief.” Cotton, in turn, invited the Aboriginal people to join the Native Sons, “for no one was more deserving of the title or more eligible for membership than they, who were native sons in the truest sense of the word.”³⁰ The Klan, on the other hand, never mentioned Aboriginal peoples. It was as though they did not exist: they were thought to be a “vanishing” race of no interest or relevance.

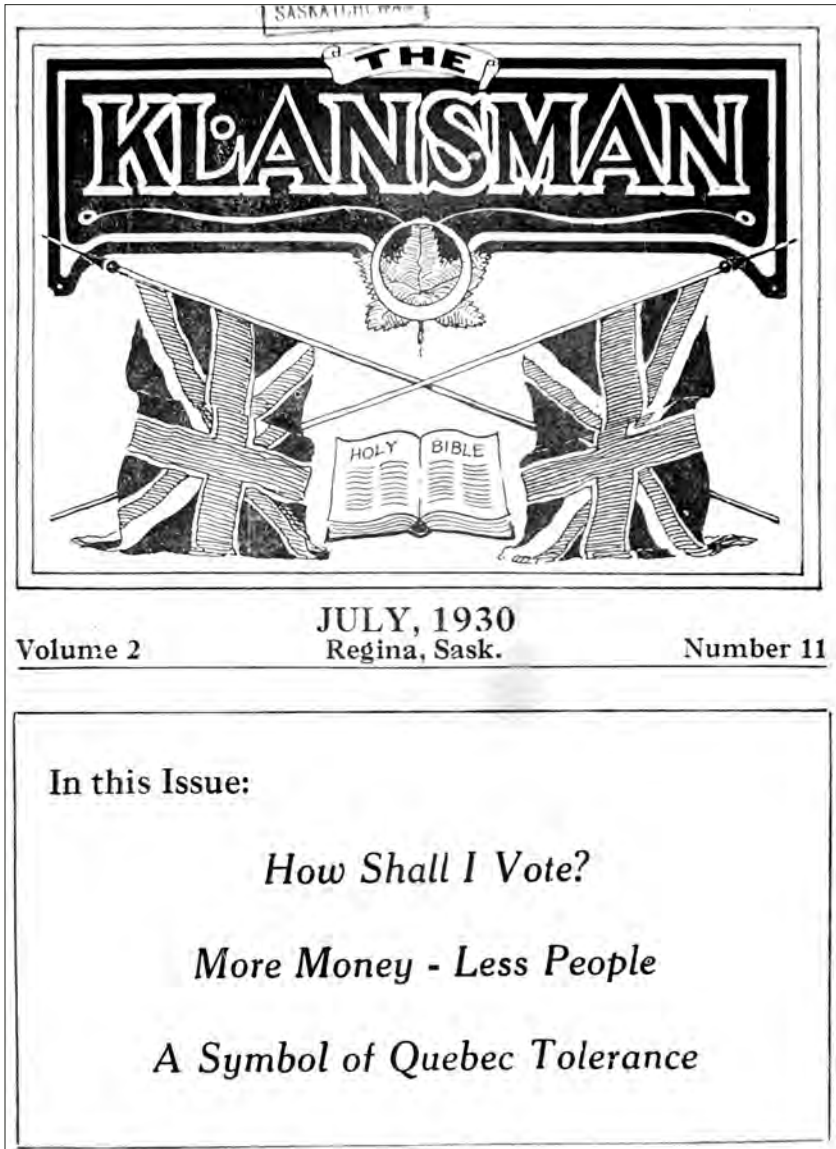
Despite its robust Canadian nationalism, the Native Sons did not want to sever Canada’s relationship with Britain. “Canada,” Dr. Cotton declared, “was a trust for the Native sons born in a unit of the British Empire.”³¹ At the banquet held in Regina on the occasion of the national convention of the Native Sons in 1928, Mayor James McAra extended words of welcome. The mayor was a Great War veteran, a Conservative, and a British loyalist. He said the Native Sons were patriotic Canadians, adding quickly that that did not make them “one whit less British.”³² Thus, even the

members of the Native Sons, the most Canadian of organizations in the 1920s, thought of themselves as belonging to the British community of nations.

In 1928, the Native Sons congratulated Percy Williams on his victory in the one-hundred-metre race at the Olympic Games in Amsterdam. The convention expressed delight that the Red Ensign, not the Union Jack, had been flown at the awards ceremony.³³ This comment provoked an angry letter from J. Cox, Regina secretary of the Ku Klux Klan. He said that the Union Jack was Canada's flag and must always remain so. The only possible excuse for flying the Red Ensign occurred on those rare occasions, such as the Olympic Games, when it was necessary to differentiate Canada from the other dominions. Otherwise, the Union Jack must be flown, and certainly not any "so-called Canadian flag," such as the Maple Leaf flag.³⁴ Cox said that the Union Jack embodied Canadian history, traditions, and ideals. It was the flag for which the United Empire Loyalists had risked their lives and sacrificed homes and property to live under the British Crown. To abandon the Union Jack was to dishonour their memory. Further, the Klan denounced the practice, apparently growing in popularity, of singing "O Canada" in place of "God Save the King" at public events and gatherings. To the Klan, "O Canada" was merely a patriotic song, not the national anthem, and, even as a patriotic song, it left much to be desired since it had been composed for a "religious festival" in Quebec. If a patriotic air were to be sung, "The Maple Leaf Forever" was vastly preferred, though not, of course, as a substitute for the national anthem.³⁵

The cover of the *Klansman* (the Saskatchewan Klan's official publication) in December 1929 displayed a Klansman, garbed in white robe and hood, mounted on a horse. The horse reared up dramatically, while the rider held aloft a standard bearing the Union Jack fluttering in the breeze, which he pointed in the direction of a glowing cross.³⁶ The cover for July 1930 depicted two crossed Union Jacks over an open Bible surmounted by a maple leaf, an ensemble of symbols that perfectly represented the Klan's brand of British Canadian nationalism sanctified by Protestant Christianity.

Cox summed up the Klan's general orientation when he described the order as follows: "[It is a group of] red-blooded Canadians and loyal Britishers, who view with alarm conditions in our Dominion, and are endeavouring by constitutional methods to assist in every way possible to bring about a better and brighter outlook for Canada, but we feel that



Cover of *The Klansman*, July 1930, juxtaposing the Maple Leaf and the Union Jack. This shows that, for the Klan, Canadian nationalism was a form of imperialist loyalty and British patriotism. *Saskatchewan Archives Board, RA12981*

we will never accomplish that purpose by withdrawing ourselves in every way possible from the Mother Country, to whom we owe so much.”³⁷ Although there was no reason to think that Canada was on the verge of leaving the Empire, the Klan “viewed with alarm” certain troubling signs, such as the increased popularity of the Red Ensign and the singing of “O Canada.” Klansmen were not mollified by the fact that the Canadian Red Ensign included the Union Jack in the upper left-hand corner. Nor were they comforted by the knowledge that normally “O Canada” did not replace “God Save the King” but, rather, was sung along with it. Typically, “O Canada” was sung at the beginning of a meeting or event and “God Save the King” at the end. However, the Klan viewed with deep suspicion all such developments. It did not want any weakening of the bond with Britain, and it was ready to challenge all tendencies in that direction, however innocuous they might seem.

The Klan as an After-Shock of the Great War

Over sixty thousand Canadians were killed in the First World War. Close to five thousand of these were from Saskatchewan, the great majority, of British ancestry.³⁸ After the war, their families and friends had to come to terms with the loss. Part of the grieving process is “acceptance.” This requires facing up to memories of the deceased and accepting that they will never come back. It is enormously helpful for a grieving person to see the body and, in that way, to acknowledge the death. This is an important step “on the road to recovery from the trauma of bereavement.”³⁹

For Canadians after the First World War, it was impossible to view the bodies of their loved ones since the dead were buried overseas in cemeteries close to where they had fallen in battle. Moreover, many of the bodies were never identified. The Vimy Memorial has the names of eleven thousand Canadian dead in France, whose remains were never found or could not be identified. The names of those who died in Belgium are listed on the Menin Gate at Ypres. In Regina, Saskatchewan, a cenotaph (lit. “empty tomb”) was unveiled in the centre of the city in Victoria Park on 11 November 1926. War widows and other family members of the deceased now had a place where they could mourn, a substitute for the grave they could not easily visit. In subsequent years, a representative of the Ku Klux Klan, along with members of other community organizations, laid a wreath at the annual observance ceremony.

As Adrian Gregory suggests, another element of grieving is overcoming survivor guilt, and this is best done by finding meaning and purpose in

what has happened. It is necessary to construct a story that makes sense of the death and finds some good in it. This was accomplished after the First World War through the erection of memorials, the commemoration of Remembrance Day, and the ritual wearing of the poppy. The language of memorialization “drew heavily on the pre-war rhetoric of God, Empire, King and Country, on notions of sacrifice and on presenting the war in terms of a crusade for human dignity and liberty.”⁴⁰ It was easier for the victors in the war to construct such stories than it was for the losers. In Germany, the tendency was to insist that Germany had not really lost the war but, rather, had been “stabbed in the back” by socialists and Jews. The losers were embittered by war memories rather than consoled by them, and this led to the rise of right-wing movements that sought to “punish” the traitors who were blamed for the nation’s defeat and humiliation. This prepared the ground for the rise of Hitler and the Nazis.

In a certain sense, members of the Saskatchewan Klan saw themselves as being on the losing side in the war. They thought the war had been fought to keep Canada British, but now, in the postwar period, foreign immigrants were arriving in Saskatchewan in such numbers that the country was ceasing to be British. What had been won in the trenches of France and Belgium was being lost on the plains of Saskatchewan. Only a relatively small number of non-British people from Saskatchewan had served in the Canadian Corps. Un-naturalized immigrants from enemy countries, such as Germany and Austria-Hungary, had not been allowed to enlist; others were placed in internment camps because they were deemed security risks or were unemployed and unable to support themselves. However, the majority did not go into internment camps but, on the contrary, did rather well out of the war. The price of wheat skyrocketed, and wages for unskilled labour reached record heights. Non-British farmers bought more land and expanded their farms. Of course, British farmers prospered, too, but they also sent their sons to war. On balance, wartime sacrifice fell much more heavily on the British than on the non-British.

The 1931 census showed that, for the first time since the province was formed, people of non-British origin formed the majority of the population. In the late 1920s, when the Klan took hold, people could sense that this was happening. They knew that the demographic composition of the province was changing and that the British were in danger of losing control of “their” province, at least to the extent that their dominance was related to numerical preponderance. It was as though the outcome of the First World War was being reversed. From the Klan perspective, the First World

War was not really over. The fight was still being waged, and the fate of the nation hung in the balance. The rise of the Ku Klux Klan was a continuation of the First World War by other means.

J. Cox, Regina Klan secretary, concluded his letter to the *Leader* in October 1928 with a poem about the Union Jack:

We use it to show our devotion to our king, country and laws.
 It is the outward and visible emblem of advancement in Liberty's cause.
 You may say it's an old bit of bunting.
 You may call it an old coloured rag,
 But thousands have died for its freedom;
 And shed their blood for the flag.
 And if we break faith, they will not sleep in Flanders Fields.⁴¹

The last line is a reference to John McCrae's poem *In Flanders Fields*. The implication is that the war dead will not rest in peace if those who have survived fail to pick up the torch and uphold the ideals for which the war had been fought – that is, if they failed to keep Canada British.

An article in the *Klansman* in 1929 posited three types of Canadians: those who wanted Canada to leave the British Empire; the fence-sitters, who were content to stay in the Empire as long as Canada kept on gaining more powers of self-government; and the true-blue loyalists, who wanted no change in Canada's relationship with Britain. According to the author, it was those in the last category who had courageously stepped forward in 1914 to defend "the glorious old flag," and they would do so again if the occasion arose.⁴² A poem published in the *Klansman* juxtaposed two distinct events, one historical and the other hypothetical. The first was "Der Tag" ("the day") Germany had invaded Belgium and started the First World War. The second was the day, not yet arrived, when an attempt would be made to haul down the Union Jack and replace it with a "so-called" Canadian flag. For the Klan, the two events were closely related and of equal significance. Both were critical incidents in the struggle to keep Canada British, arousing the ardent patriotism of true Britishers.

The Germans drank their damned toast
 Der Tag, Der Tag;
 The war drums rolled staccato notes
 On guard, on guard;
 The Empire's Sons and Daughters

They rallied round the flag
 On far-flung fields and gory
 Responding to Der Tag.

There's those today in Canada
 Would change our flag;
 We need no drum's staccato notes
 For we're on guard;
 The Empire's Sons and Daughters
 Still love the dear "old rag,"
 And ready aye to guard her fame
 They fly the Empire's flag.⁴³

In another sense, too, the Klan was an after-shock of the First World War. As John Herd Thompson has shown, the war gave a boost to social reform movements, such as women's suffrage and prohibition. Both had existed before the war but had failed to achieve their respective objectives. During the war they rode to triumph on a wave of patriotic feeling and the spirit of sacrifice. Women's rights were profoundly unsettling for members of the Klan, who wanted to maintain the traditional gender order. Women in their eyes were expected to fulfill the role of wives and mothers. The chivalric duty of men was to guard and protect them from all who might do them harm, much as soldiers allegedly protected the womenfolk in wartime. The Klan idealized women and put them on a pedestal. They were to be kept safe and pure, especially against the threat of alleged non-white male predators. There was an obvious link with the purity of the white race since, if women were kept pure, the race would be kept pure also. The "new woman" of the 1920s, with her bobbed hair and short skirts, was anathema to the Klan. She would obviously not make a suitable mother and gave every indication of sexual promiscuity.

The war also saw the triumph of the prohibition of beverage alcohol in Canada. Spurred by the desire to make sacrifices commensurate with those of the soldiers in the trenches, reformers succeeded in closing down bars and liquor stores. After the war, prohibition began to unravel, and by 1925 the Saskatchewan government had reopened its liquor and beer stores. The moral reformers did not give up their hard-earned war-time gains without a fight. The 1920s was a long series of battles between dries and wets, which kept the province in a continual state of agitation and turmoil. Anti-prohibitionists demanded the sale of beer by the glass,

which the prohibitionists stubbornly resisted, until finally losing the battle in 1935.

The Klan placed itself on the side of moral reform. Indeed, its initial success in the province was based on a “clean-up” campaign in Moose Jaw directed against bootleggers, drunks, gamblers, prostitutes, and other evil-doers. The Klan saw itself as shoring up the moral order that had been undermined by the upheaval of the First World War. This helps explain the fact that a large number of Protestant ministers joined the Klan. They tended to be in the forefront of the moral reform movement, while Roman Catholics were less enthusiastic about it. For example, Quebec, with its large Catholic population, embraced prohibition reluctantly and only for a brief time. This confirmed the Klan’s opinion that Catholics were not sound and reliable either as to morals or to patriotism. Foreigners and Catholics were stigmatized as the primary culprits (and victims) of the drink traffic. They were also suspect because of their alleged allegiance to the pope above the Crown. When the Klan said it wanted to keep Canada British, it was British Protestant Canada it had in mind.

Klan Historiography

Little original research has been done on the 1920s Ku Klux Klan in Saskatchewan since the 1960s and 1970s. William Calderwood’s 1968 master’s thesis is still the only extended treatment of the subject, but other works deal with the Klan in a substantial way. These include John Patrick Kyba’s master’s thesis on the 1929 provincial election and David E. Smith’s history of the Liberal Party in Saskatchewan. Martin Robin discusses the 1920s Klan as part of his larger study of right-wing movements in Canada.⁴⁴ The gist of this literature is to portray the Klan as an eruption of hatred and prejudice. It was as though Saskatchewan went berserk for a while, until it settled down to being its normal, tolerant, multicultural self. Like an unknown virus, the Klan invaded the province, wreaked its havoc, and then suddenly and mysteriously disappeared. The Klan is depicted as exotic and marginal. This was far from being the case. As we have seen, it was part of the larger national identity debate that was under way in the 1920s. Moreover, its racism did not differ greatly from what most people in Saskatchewan (and Canada) believed at the time. The Klan was not something alien to Saskatchewan; it *was* Saskatchewan. The Klan belongs in the mainstream of Canadian history, not in the gallery of curiosities.

While little recent work has been done on the 1920s Klan in Canada, American historians have been active in pursuing new lines of research.

John Moffat Mecklin's *The Ku Klux Klan: A Study of the American Mind* (1924) dominated the field for decades. He argued that the success of the 1920s Klan was based in large part on long-standing American traditions of anti-Catholicism and hostility to non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants. Klan members, Mecklin suggested, felt threatened by the rapid social change brought about by industrialization and urbanization. They were essentially back-country, low-status, marginalized individuals living in small towns and rural areas, who feared modernity and the big city and thought that history was passing them by. They were natural haters, frustrated and unhappy, resentful of anything that was strange to them, and also a bit pathetic as they looked for a bit of colour in their otherwise drab lives. William E. Leuchtenburg's *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-1932* (1958) followed this line of interpretation but also emphasized the violence of the organization. Wherever the Klan entered, he wrote, "in its wake came floggings, kidnappings, branding with acid, mutilation, church burnings, and even murders." David M. Chalmers's *Hooded Americanism: The First Century of the Ku Klux Klan, 1865-1965* (1965) continued in this vein, characterizing the Klan as "emotional rather than rational, defensive rather than constructive."⁴⁵

These matters rested until the early 1960s, when new work began to appear that undermined the reigning consensus. Kenneth T. Jackson's *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915-1930* (1967) calls attention to the fact that city dwellers made up approximately half the total Klan membership. He analyzes a sample of membership rosters and finds that most Klansmen he studied were non-union, blue-collar workers in large businesses and factories, a segment of the work force that he labels "lower middle class." The urban Klan was largely non-violent and chiefly concerned about the influx of immigrants to the United States from southern and eastern Europe and the movement of African Americans from the southern United States to northern cities. In 1974, building on Jackson's work, Robert A. Goldberg published a study of the 1920s Klan in Madison, Wisconsin, where the Klan was non-violent and interested in "rational" responses to local issues, such as the problem of law enforcement. His *Hooded Empire: The Ku Klux Klan in Colorado* (1981) focuses on the City of Denver and four other Colorado communities. Klan members were, for the most part, "ordinary, law-abiding citizens motivated by a sincere desire to improve local society." They were neither richer nor poorer than white Protestants generally and were not the "marginal men" about whom Mecklin and others had written. The nature of Klan activism varied from place to place,

which led Goldberg to the conclusion that the order could not be fully understood apart from its diverse local contexts.⁴⁶

Like Goldberg, William D. Jenkins, author of *Steel Valley Klan: The Ku Klux Klan in Ohio's Mahoning Valley* (1990), sees the Klan in eastern Ohio as "largely nonviolent and drawn from the socioeconomic mainstream." Likewise, Christopher N. Cocoltchos's doctoral dissertation on the Klan in Orange County, California, portrays Klansmen as "decent, respectable citizens" who opposed "a booster-oriented view of local affairs, fostered by the anti-Klan elite, that stressed economic growth to the exclusion of the moral aspects of community development." Larry Gerlach identifies some incidents of 1920s Klan violence in Utah, mainly directed against immigrants, but the organization in that part of the country was for the most part law-abiding. It consisted mainly of non-Mormon Protestants who were resentful of the political and economic power wielded by the Mormon elite, especially in Salt Lake City. The Klan held demonstrations and sponsored candidates for municipal office but did not make much headway in the face of the dominant Mormon establishment.⁴⁷

Shawn Lay's *War, Revolution, and the Ku Klux Klan: A Study of Intolerance in a Border City* (1985) looks at the Klan in El Paso, Texas, which had a population that was 60 percent Hispanic and Roman Catholic. The Klan largely ignored the Hispanic majority, rejected violence, and spent most of its time challenging the city government on such issues as public education, fair elections, and road improvement. Overall, Lay concludes that the Klan was a "medium of progressive civic action" and resembled earlier popular reform movements in El Paso's history. Lay followed up this study with an in-depth examination of the 1920s Klan in Buffalo, New York. It had a higher percentage of members in the high and middle non-manual categories and lower percentages in the semi-skilled/service and unskilled classifications than did the native white-male working population as a whole. The order's activism centred on civic issues, especially the perceived lack of adequate enforcement of the vice and prohibition laws. According to Lay, the Buffalo Klan desired "a more orderly and law-abiding community, one in which traditional values and standards would continue to prevail." In pursuit of this goal, it refrained from using physical violence against its opponents, although the Klan itself was sometimes the victim of violence and intimidation.⁴⁸

Leonard J. Moore's *Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921-1928* (1991) is of particular interest since the organizers who started the Klan in Saskatchewan hailed from Indiana. Like Lay, Moore found that

the Klansmen he studied were a representative cross-section of the white Protestant population and that they included many non-evangelicals. There was almost no correlation between religious fundamentalism and Klan membership, notwithstanding the many assertions of historians to that effect. Moore argues that racial and religious tensions were not the main source of the Klan's success in Indiana. Far more important was widespread disillusionment with the political elites (reminiscent of the Tea Party today), who were perceived as self-serving, incompetent, and corrupt. Moore interprets the Indiana Klan as essentially a middle-class populist movement that reflected the discontent of white Protestants with the conduct of public affairs and, more generally, with the adverse impact of industrialization on traditional community life. They were concerned above all with the enforcement of prohibition, law and order, eradication of state and local political corruption, as well as a variety of other reform issues that were specific to the individual towns and cities in which they established a foothold. The Klan swept the state elections in 1924, throwing out the old, entrenched political establishment in a manner that anticipated what was to happen in Saskatchewan in 1929.⁴⁹

The new Klan historiography in the United States throws light on what happened north of the border. First, American historians emphasize that the Klan cannot be properly understood without paying attention to the local context in which it operated. The Klan was not the same everywhere. It took on the colour of the community. While there was an overall commitment to white supremacy, Protestantism, and conservative social values, there was no fixed agenda. When Klan organizers moved into an area, they listened to what was bothering people and worked on that. If the town was afraid of labour unions, the Klan emphasized the threat posed by socialist-inspired strikers. If prohibition was the issue uppermost in people's minds, the Klan insisted that it alone had the determination to deal with the bootleggers. If immigrants were the problem, the Klan stood solidly for "100 percent Americanism."⁵⁰ And so it went. The Klan was infinitely responsive to local enmities. This helps to demystify the otherwise unlikely scenario in which Americans come to Canada and teach Canadians how to be British.

However, it must be said that this turn of events is still something of a puzzle. A partial explanation may be found in the specific chronology of the Klan in Saskatchewan. The organizers arrived at just the right time, when there was a profound absence of organized, effective opposition to the Liberal government of the day and, more generally, to the established

political and cultural order that had dominated the province since 1905. The Klan offered hope to those who despaired of ever removing the Liberals from office or of stemming the tide of foreign immigration that seemed to be engulfing the province. When the organizers from Indiana stole the money they had collected in membership fees and fled the province, the Saskatchewan Klan reconstituted itself as an organization even more thoroughly “British” than it had previously been. It cut all ties with the American Klan, adopted a new constitution, declared itself against violence, and abandoned the wearing of Klan regalia.

Still, we have to ask ourselves, “Why the Klan?” Why did not some other organization, such as the Orange Lodge, take the lead and give expression to the pro-British, anti-immigrant feeling that was rampant in the province? The answer may lie in the membership of the Klan, which was mainly lower middle class and skilled working class. Such people were disenchanted with the traditional, elite formulations of British nationalism found in the Orange Lodge and the Conservative Party. The Klan represented a boisterous, vibrant, populist type of British nationalism. Its orators were charismatic, entertaining, and funny. There was something vulgar about the Klan, and this helps account for its popularity. It was a bottom-up, grassroots version of British Canadian nationalism that empowered lower middle-class and upper working-class individuals, who suddenly rose to prominence as Imperial Wizards, Grand Dragons, King Kleagles, and other such exalted offices.

Some US historians contend that the 1920s Klan constituted a civic action group of middle-class reformers who were seeking to bring about social improvement and reform local government. This has been referred to as the “civic activist school” of Klan historiography.⁵¹ While it is difficult to portray Saskatchewan Klansmen as progressive social reformers, the idea is not entirely without foundation. The Klan attracted support from Progressive Party voters in the province as well as Liberals, not just Conservatives. In addition, it lent support to moral “clean-up” campaigns, such as prohibition, which were regarded as “progressive” at the time. Most important, the Klan assisted in the overthrow of the Liberal political machine, whose operations were thought to be an affront to democracy and, as such, un-British. Thus, even in this respect, the Klan was faithful to its self-declared mission of keeping Canada British.

This book seeks to understand the Ku Klux Klan in 1920s Saskatchewan in all its strange complexity. It has been wisely said that the major task of

the historian is not to judge but to understand.⁵² However, it does not follow that to understand all is to forgive all. The Klan was a hateful organization, even in its relatively moderate Saskatchewan incarnation. It eschewed violence, followed constitutional methods, and rejected robes and hoods. Its primary goal was to keep Canada British, a goal that was shared by the majority of Canadians of British origin at the time. It arose in the aftermath of the First World War at a time when Canadian national identity was in a state of flux. Canadians were trying to sort out what it meant to be Canadian, what it meant to be British, and what it meant to be both at the same time. The Klan was part of that debate, not disconnected from it. From the Klan point of view, the war had been fought to defend British civilization, and it saw its campaign against foreigners and Catholics as a follow-up of that crusade. The Klan was racist, but so, too, were most Canadians of that era. It was a slightly more extreme version of what then passed for “normal.” This book “de-exoticizes” the 1920s Klan, showing how it differed from other versions of the Klan, such as that found in the American South, where African Americans were beaten, tortured, and lynched. Such violence did not occur in Saskatchewan, where it was considered un-British to take the law into your own hands.

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