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Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s

Kathleen M. Blee

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Ignorant. Brutal. Male. One of these stereotypes of the Ku Klux Klan offer a misleading picture. In *Women of the Klan*, sociologist Kathleen Blee unveils an accurate portrait of a racist movement that appealed to ordinary people throughout the country. In so doing, she dismantles the popular notion that politically involved women are always inspired by pacifism, equality, and justice.

"All the better people," a former Klanswoman assures us, were in the Klan. During the 1920s, perhaps half a million white native-born Protestant women joined the Women's Ku Klux Klan (WKKK). Like their male counterparts, Klanswomen held reactionary views on race, nationality, and religion. But their perspectives on gender roles were often progressive. The Klan publicly asserted that a women's order could safeguard women's suffrage and expand their other legal rights. Privately the WKKK was working to preserve white Protestant supremacy.

Blee draws from extensive archival research and interviews with former Klan members and victims to underscore the complexity of extremist right-wing political movements. Issues of women's rights, she argues, do not fit comfortably into the standard dichotomies of "progressive" and "reactionary." These need to be replaced by a more complete understanding of how gender politics are related to the politics of race, religion, and class.

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