

The Birth of a Nation

The second of a series of articles in which Scribner's is reconstructing fragments of our neglected past in the light of their contemporary meaning

MILTON MACKAYE



Cowboys swathed in 25,000 yards of white sheeting made up the Ku Klux Klan. An entire county (rent: \$10,000 a day) was used in filming their wild rides

ON a cold day in early January, 1915, Theodore Mitchell stepped out of his Bandbox Theater in New York, turned up his coat collar, and set out unhappily through a young blizzard to keep an appointment at Twenty-third Street and Sixth Avenue. He had no idea that he was about to see history made.

Mitchell was known at the time as one of the most gifted publicity men in the theater; somewhat earlier, his literary efforts and connivings had been consecrated to the career of Miss Lillian Russell, and he had helped to make her a very famous lady indeed. In 1915, however, he was dabbling in high art, and had installed in the playhouse he owned a serious acting group called the Washington Square Players, later to be known as the Theater Guild.

His interest in serious art made Mitchell somewhat impatient with his mission downtown. He had been asked to help exploit a motion picture, and he had a rather low opinion of motion pictures in general. He was ushered into the projection room of the Mutual Film Corporation, and after hurried introductions sat down to watch for the first time a film which had just been rushed from California to New York. A man with a Roman nose and a dimple in his chin sat beside Mitchell in the darkened room. His name was David Wark Griffith. The picture was *The Birth of a Nation*.

Out of that silent showing in the little room—silent except for the whir of the projector and Mitchell's sotto voce query to his neighbor, "Who in the hell is this man Griffith?"—grew a chain of events of tremendous social significance. Mitchell himself was to spend several years with the enterprise and to show the picture to Presidents and Supreme Court Justices and Prime Ministers, to the King and Queen of England. Griffith was to achieve fame as the greatest director in the world. Actors were to become stars and stockholders were to make fortunes. Controversies were to arise the bitternesses of which are still not forgotten. The whole course and direction of the entertainment world was to be changed by a bloodless revolution.



Director D.W. Griffith lines up a big battle scene as cameraman Billy Bitzer makes ready and players Lillian Gish and Wallace Reed (seated) look on

The Birth of a Nation was the first film to run twelve reels, the first to be shown at a \$2 admission price. It earned larger profits than any picture before or since. H. E. Aitken, president of the company which financed the venture, estimates that the gross income was \$18,000,000, and the profits somewhere in the neighborhood of \$12,000,000 or \$13,000,000. Today, rarely even an outstanding picture grosses as much as \$2,000,000.

The Birth of a Nation ran forty-seven weeks at the Liberty Theater in New York, a record unsurpassed until *The Covered Wagon* and *The Big Parade*. It earned \$500,000 at the Liberty and as much in Brooklyn. It ran almost a year in both Boston and Chicago.

And this at a time when motion-picture entertainment was considered by intelligent people as only a cut above the peep show, and when the general public had been accustomed to a ten- or fifteen-cent admission fee! For three years the picture toured the key cities of the United States, of Europe, and South Africa and Australia; sometimes there were as many as twenty units simultaneously on tour. The picture's longevity is still unequalled. For a year or so after the original tours it was shown at lower prices in regular motion-picture houses. And then the endless revivals began. In 1924 it was revived in Chicago at the Academy of Music and smashed all records for that house. And it was shown continuously in the Southern states for fifteen years. Five or six years ago the silent film was reinforced with a musical sound track, but this rather sad venture lost money for the promoters. The film had been abbreviated, and the sound track was only a tinny and unhappy echo of a beautiful score once played with the picture by traveling symphony orchestras.

Few of those concerned with the production had any idea that they were creating history. Even Griffith, belabored by ill luck and money troubles, could not anticipate the enthusiasm that rolled around the world. But in the memories of millions of Americans the picture is still an outstanding event. The War and full, tempestuous years stand between, but they still cannot forget the emotional impact which it made upon them. The recollection of the notes of the Ku Klux Klan's bugle call still sends a shiver along the spine. And who can forget the death of the chums on the battlefield? Or Mae Marsh's crooked, bleeding mouth when she has thrown herself over the precipice? *The Birth of a Nation* belongs to the nostalgic treasure house of American memories that will not be emptied into laps of the professors and documenters until the very last of a currently lively generation has been booted into the sunset.

A great many legends—some spawned by press-agentry and authenticated by repetition—have grown up about *The Birth of a Nation*. Many people believe that it was the first picture to be "road-showed." Actually, two Italian-made productions had been road-showed previously here. D'Annunzio's *Cabiria*, a financial failure, and the nine-reel Italian production of *Quo Vadis*, which was a tremendous success. Likewise, it is erroneously



Northern Congressman Austin Stoneman (Ralph Lewis) bitterly demands that Southern leaders be hanged termed the first picture with a synchronized musical score. (Actually as early as 1908 Saint-Saëns did the music for a French picture called *L'Assassinat de duc de Guise*.) And even our motion-picture histories blandly relate that the film cost \$500,000, that 18,000 people played in it, that it took a year to produce. Actually the cost was between \$90,000 and \$100,000; there were as many as 600 people on the payroll part of the time; and, though the preparations required some months, the "shooting" occupied nine weeks.

Whatever the legends, the modern motion picture was born when *The Birth of a Nation* was produced. Griffith and other early directors had steadily been increasing the capacities of the camera and attempting to polish the crudities and clumsiness of the one- and two-reel films then being shown in the shabby nickelodeons of the country. Griffith had evolved much of his technique piecemeal before his classic burst upon a wondering world, but there for the first time was the scope for amalgamating and elevating a brilliant virtuosity into art.

II

DAVID WARK GRIFFITH came up out of Kentucky in the early 1900's to seek a livelihood in New York. Sometimes he was an actor, sometimes a reporter, a concrete worker, or a day laborer. He sold a few short stories; in 1906 or 1907, he wrote a play called *The Fool and the Woman*. Griffith recalls that, twenty years before the sulphurous *What Price Glory?*, his dialogue was sufficiently forward-looking to include the phrase "God damn." James K. Hackett opened the play in Washington but it never reached New York. Griffith then began submitting scenarios to the movies under a variety of names, earning \$5 for short ones (400 or 450 feet) and \$15 for long ones (800 or 900 feet). Finally the Biograph Company agreed to let him direct a picture himself. It was called *Dolly's Adventure*.

Griffith had found his medium. He was the first to realize that the conventions of the stage were not suitable to the screen. He was the first to realize the need for new and resilient talent, not hardened in stage technique. In the face of the elaborate histrionics of the day Griffith sought naturalism in acting.

He helped Biograph become the most successful company in the business and then left it for Mutual at a salary of \$1000 a week and with a contract that permitted him to make two independent productions a year. With Griffith went most of the Biograph stars—Mae Marsh, Henry B. Walthall, Blanche Sweet, George Siegmann, Miriam Cooper—and Griffith's favorite cameraman, Gottlieb Wilhelm Bitzer, better known to history as Billy Bitzer. From the East they all went to Los Angeles, where H. E. Aitken, a businessman from the Middle West, had set up the Mutual Film Company with a national distribution company which would provide theaters with their entire programs. But what Griffith had in mind all along was the production of the biggest picture the world had seen, and he began to lay his plans while turning out short fodder for the trade at the rate of five pictures a week.

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All America smiled as this lovesick Union soldier (Freeman) gazed at Elsie Stoneman (Lillian Gish)

In 1914, Frank E. Woods, a scenario writer, called Griffith's attention to a novel and play by Thomas Dixon—*The Clansman*—which dealt with Reconstruction and particularly with the Ku Klux Klan. Dixon, a former clergyman, was an embattled Southerner, and a dramatization of his novel had toured the country for five years, outraged the exponents of race equality, and made a great deal of money. Griffith had heard the story of the Civil War and Reconstruction from his father, Colonel Jacob Work [sic] Griffith, brevet brigadier general and commander of the 1st Kentucky Cavalry. He had a burning desire to compel the country to listen to the Southern version (the true version, he thought). In *The Clansman* he found the nucleus for his ambitious idea.

When Griffith and his backers took a \$2500 option on the story, it was agreed that Dixon was to receive \$10,000. But there was no cash available. In the end, Dixon agreed, somewhat sadly, to take a twenty-five per cent interest in the picture. This resulted in the largest sum any author ever received for a motion-picture story. Dixon made more than \$1,000,000.

The memories of those directly concerned with production of the picture are not particularly romantic. They recall principally the unending struggle for money. Aitken had advanced \$25,000 from the coffers of Mutual; the company directors at once concluded that his move was madness, and demanded that he take over the investment himself. Aitken did so, set out to raise more funds. He and Griffith were gamblers on the unprecedented. Costs mounted. The picture required many horses; the World War had begun, and Griffith's agents were forced to bid against German and Allied agents scouring the country for horseflesh. Long before the production was finished, the payroll money from the East became intermittent, and finally, says Griffith, remittances ceased entirely. The members of Griffith's repertory company, not one of whom was under contract, were loyal to a man. They went without salary. Indeed some of them offered their own funds to Griffith. Lillian Gish remembers that she and her sister, Dorothy, had \$300 in the bank and that they offered this to Griffith. Knowing it was all they had, he refused. This sum, it turned out, would have made the Gish family some \$30,000.

In the end, Griffith was passing the hat in Pasadena and Los Angeles, rising at 5:30 to go on location, spending the evening going over the "rushes" and rainy days seeking finances. John Barry, his secretary, was the money scout; when he believed he had a good prospect for a "touch," Griffith would drop his work and attempt to close the deal. Griffith finally encountered William Clune, owner of Clune's Auditorium, the finest theater in Los Angeles. Clune was inordinately proud of his theater, but even prouder of his thirty-piece orchestra. Griffith was desperate for money, and he plunged his last dollar on a very pretty tableau. For Clune's benefit he rehearsed the scene, a memorable one in the picture, where the Confederate soldiers march down the village street—off for the war. Walthall led the procession on a fine charger. The soldiers hadn't been paid, the scampering pickanin-

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Battle scenes were photographed near Universal Ranch not far from Los Angeles

nies hadn't been paid, even the rental on the charger hadn't been paid. Griffith, with God knows what extravagant promises, had been able to engage a reasonably unmusical brass band to play *Dixie* as the procession marched.

Clune watched intently. He saw Walthall pass; he saw the swinging rifles, the farewells of weeping wives and sweethearts, the flutter of the Stars and Bars.

"That's a pretty bad band," he said.

"But think how that tune would sound if your orchestra played it," said Griffith.

"I've got the best orchestra west of the Mississippi," said Clune. Then he turned to convince Griffith. "That tune would sound great played by *my* orchestra in *my* theater."

And that's the story of why William Clune invested \$15,000 in *The Birth of a Nation*.

III

PICTURE-MAKING in those days was a much more hardy business than it is today. Artificial lighting had not yet come into existence; and fifteen-year-old actresses knew sadly that under the harshness of noonday light they would appear to be hags at eighteen. There were no set designers; when he wanted a Southern mansion or a village street, Griffith simply told Huck Wortman, a tobacco-chewing stage carpenter, and Wortman did the job. There were no wardrobe mistresses or hairdressers or maids. Lillian Gish recalls that her mother made many of her costumes and that she came every day to the studio with quantities of parcels and bags. It was, in fact, her monstrous equipage which gave rise to one of the most famous scenes in the drama.

In the picture Miss Gish is visiting a Union hospital where the Little Colonel (Walthall) is a patient. A soldier on duty, leaning on his rifle, gives her a lovesick and wistful glance. This tiny tile in the mosaic of the picture was a tremendous and international laugh; it still is. Thousands of letters were written asking the name of the extra who played the lovesick soldier, and apparently not even Griffith was able to supply it. But Miss Gish still remembers. He was a sailor named Freeman who had taken a job as an extra. Every morning he helped Miss Gish with her parcels and bags, and there was no secret about the fact that he was fond of her. One morning when both were in costume Griffith saw Freeman's wistful and yearning glance. "Get that," he shouted to Billy Bitzer, and Sailor Freeman was immortalized in celluloid. Wherever he is, may he take comfort in it.

The story told in *The Birth of a Nation* covers a tremendous canvas. The first half deals with the Civil War, weaving in a double love story engaging a Northern girl and a Southern man, and a Southern girl and a Northern man. The second half deals with Reconstruction in the South and resolves the love stories. Griffith had as his source *The Clansman*, but anyone who has read the novel or seen the play realizes that there is more Griffith than Dixon in the picture. There was no written scenario. Griffith carried his story in his head. Often his actors had no idea of the ultimate effect they were expected to achieve; Griffith described to them a single scene, and the emotions the scene should evoke.

Griffith's method was an integral part of the film's success and his method, therefore, warrants more extended comment. Griffith bought stories, but inevitably the printed word was only the cornerstone around which he built a drama which would be effective in pantomime. Grif-

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Men who knew Lincoln checked Joseph Henabery's make-up

fith was visual-minded; he had to see. And so he wrote his pictures on rainy days. The camera stopped, but the actors didn't. They were called to rehearsal. There Griffith outlined stories which he hoped to make in the future (many of them were never made) and the lesser members of his company acted them out. Griffith, with his marvelous sense of story line, constructed his intricate scenarios as the actors went through their paces. This looked true; that looked false. It was such a rehearsal which won Lillian Gish her place in the cast. She was rehearsing the scene where Elsie Stoneman faints after Lynch, the mulatto, attempts to force marriage upon her. The part of Elsie Stoneman was assigned to a better-known actress; Miss Gish was, in effect, her stand-in. As Lynch hoisted Miss Gish to his shoulder, her long blonde hair fell down her back and Griffith's camera eye at once caught the emotional possibilities of that contrast between black villainy and blonde innocence.

The filming of the mass scenes presented a different problem altogether. Griffith's research men had made sure of the facts for the battle scenes, but it is one thing to rehearse professional actors and quite another to hold a group of extras in line. Griffith worked the matter out by appointing captains and straw bosses among the extras. He called in the straw bosses, told them what he wanted, and let them rehearse their own men. During the actual photographing of the battle scenes, Billy Bitzer, his camera, and Griffith were located on a sixty-foot tower which gave a panoramic view of the field, and Griffith announced his orders through a primitive amplifier.

For the thrilling rides of the Ku Klux Klan, Griffith engaged most of the well-known cowboys in California. Many of them were circus and rodeo riders out of work because of the season. The cowboys beneath the Ku Klux sheets did a spectacular job of riding. In the mob scenes they reared their horses and ploughed through multitudes without one person being hurt. They were perfect except for one weakness—they wanted their salaries on time.

The picture opened, properly enough, at Clune's Auditorium. It was still known then as *The Clansman* and always was shown in California under that title. But when Thomas Dixon first saw the film in a private projection room in New York, his excitement conquered pride of authorship. He shouted to Griffith across the darkened room: "This is bigger than *The Clansman*. It needs a more inclusive title." And it was Dixon who thought of the title which made the picture famous.

Griffith himself conceived the idea of a musical score to heighten the emotional impact of the picture. He engaged Joseph Carl Briel to do a synchronized score. There were many adaptations: Negro folk songs, passages from *Rienzi* and *Die Walküre*, from *Norma*; the thrilling rides of the Klan were done to the strains of *In the Hall of the Mountain King*. Griffith was responsible for the Klan call, which was superimposed discordantly on the other music. The Klan call obviously is borrowed from *Die Walküre*. Briel borrowed even more from Wagner: he chose a *leit motif* for the various characters and the various moods of the play. Many of these motifs were composed by Briel. One later achieved a sardonic immortality over the radio: the love *motif* of the picture—now you'll recall it—is the air signature of Amos 'n' Andy.

IV

THE picture was created by Griffith, but the exploitation was manufactured by more mercenary fellows. Dixon suggested, once he had seen the picture, that J. J. McCarthy, later vice-president of Fox Films, be called

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Lee (Howard Gaye) surrenders to Grant (Donald Crisp)

into consultation. McCarthy had handled Dixon's play *The Clansman* on tour and he drafted Ted Mitchell to handle publicity.

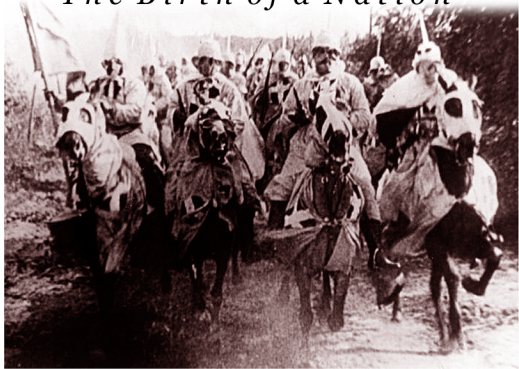
It was obvious that the picture could not be distributed through the movie theaters. Most of them charged a fifteen-cent admission. Mitchell says that it was he who, over Dixon's bitter protest, advised the audacious \$2 admission fee. Mitchell and McCarthy now let loose with tremendous broadsides of billboard and newspaper advertising in New York. The campaign cost more than \$47,000 and, according to Mitchell, the whole thing was done "on the cuff." There wasn't any cash to spend.

At the climax of the ballyhoo, *The Birth of a Nation* opened at the Astor on March 6, 1915. All the first-line dramatic critics were there, and their reviews were ecstatic. The picture immediately became the talk of New York. For 280 performances it was sold out. Everyone wanted to see it. Mitchell remembers meeting Mrs. O. H. P. Belmont in the lobby one night. She had brought Harry Lehr along, but a ticket broker, instructed to reserve two tickets, had neglected to do so. Not even Mrs. O. H. P. Belmont could buy a seat. Mitchell finally found an extra chair and placed it at the rear of an aisle. Lehr stood up. They were still there at the end of the two-hour-and-forty-five-minute showing, but Mitchell noticed that the usually impeccable Harry had slipped off his evening pumps and was standing in his stocking feet.

Nothing could keep the picture off the front pages. Because of its treatment of the race question, there had been efforts to prevent the opening in New York, but, in the end, everything was peaceful there. Boston was a different story. In Boston, birthplace of the Abolitionist movement, there were riots, and there were riots and continual legal difficulties in many other cities. Cynical showmen have often wondered if Mitchell and McCarthy were entirely innocent of encouraging, for publicity purposes, the spectacular opposition to the picture.

The Boston branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People issued a pamphlet attacking the film and sent it to Negro leaders in all parts of the country. Charles W. Eliot, president of Harvard, charged the picture with tending to pervert white ideals. Jane Addams was "painfully exercised over the exhibition." Francis Hackett in *The New Republic* called Thomas Dixon a "yellow clergyman." Oswald Garrison Villard in *The Nation* said that the picture was a "deliberate attempt to humiliate 10,000,000 American citizens and portray them as nothing but beasts." Booker T. Washington wrote indignant letters to the newspapers.

The truth is that *The Birth of a Nation* was not precisely a letter of recommendation for the Negro race, but neither, on the other hand, was it a bitter indictment. It told a story that was accurate enough, but one-sided. It attempted to fasten upon white carpetbaggers the blame for the scallawaggery of Reconstruction, but one cannot escape the fact that the emotions roused by the dramatic incidents give the audience a definite feeling of



Negro depravity and white virtue. Albert Bigelow Paine summed up the picture in its racial aspects: "It is within the facts," he said, "but hardly within the proprieties."

The Clansman had inspired Griffith; it had also, says Terry Ramsaye in his history of the motion-picture industry, inspired an obscure gentleman named Joseph Simmons, who was looking for a lodge to promote. Originally he planned to call his white-robed order "The Clansmen," but discovered that the name had been pre-empted; as a result he formed the Ku Klux Klan of recent unhallowed memory. Says Ramsaye: "In subsequent years they [the film and the Klan] reacted upon each other to the large profit of both. The film presented predigested dramatic experience and thrills; the society made the customers all actors in costume."

There was trouble everywhere, much of it venial. The threat of Negro opposition was used by many politicians in a futile effort to "shake down" the management. In Chicago it was shown under a permanent injunction restraining the police from interference after the management had agreed not to admit children under eighteen. There were legal difficulties in that city even when the picture was revived in 1924. Aitken remembers that Harold Ickes was retained by the city to prosecute two of the twelve jury trials and that, after a courtroom excoriation of the drama, Ickes turned to him and said, behind his hand, "Best picture I ever saw in my life."

V

THE camera has learned many lessons since Billy Bitzer (his associates called him "Eagle Eye" and said he could focus on a pin at the end of a room) photographed *The Birth of a Nation*. Camera work has become soft and, at times, surpassingly beautiful. Yet without today's artificial light and with the rudest sort of technical equipment (Bitzer had to carry a bicycle lamp on location to keep his camera warm), *The Birth of a Nation* still stands up as a great picture. The harshness of the light gives it an authenticity that all the soft camera work of today cannot equal. The panoramic battle scenes are tremendous; they have no smell of artifice, but, instead, seem to be photographs of actual war. I have never seen a more moving or significant shot than the one utilized by Griffith to tell the story of Sherman's March to the Sea. The camera "irises in" (Griffith invented the iris by focusing the camera through a hole in a cigar box) on a starved mother with two crying children hanging to her skirts. Then the perspective enlarges; the mother and children are on a hill-top. The camera shifts, and with the mother's eye we look down into a broad valley where in far distance an army column shaped like a scythe moves along while haystacks and houses burn.

There are flaws, to be sure—times when the pantomime is oversimplified, when the actors "act" too generously.

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And the continuous movement quite definitely is strange to eyes conditioned to the more deliberate pace of sound films. Yet the old magic is not lost. An epic story has never been told better—so far as technique is concerned.

Twenty-two years have passed since *The Birth of a Nation*, unforeseen and unprecedented, burst before a wondering world. Today Griffith makes his home in Kentucky. For the moment, at least, he is retired. Thomas Dixon, seventy-three, not particularly affluent, is living in North Carolina, where he recently was appointed to a Federal court clerkship. The actors Bobby Harron, Henry Walthall, and Wallace Reid, who had his first part in the picture, are dead. Lillian Gish, a first lady of the screen, is now one of the first ladies of the stage. Mae Marsh lives in Los Angeles and has three grown children. Miriam Cooper married Raoul Walsh, the director. Joseph Henaberry, who played the part of Lincoln, is now head of the Vitaphone Studios in New York. Elmer Clifton, who was cast as Phil Stoneman, later directed one of the most beautiful silent pictures ever made, *Down to the Sea in Ships*. George Seigmann and Walter Long are still playing parts in Hollywood. Ted Mitchell, incapacitated several years by illness, now is manager of the Majestic Theater in Brooklyn. Billy Bitzer, no longer young, still photographs an occasional film in the East Coast studios.

VI

WOODROW WILSON saw *The Birth of a Nation* at a private showing in the White House and paid the picture its finest tribute. The President had lived in the Carolinas as a child during Reconstruction days. When the two hours and forty minutes of camera reporting at last were over, he rose from his chair and wiped his eyes.

"It is," he said, "like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true."

SCRIBNER'S