

9-2019

Review: 'Notre Dame vs. The Klan: How the Fighting Irish Defied the KKK,' By Todd Tucker

William Vance Trollinger
University of Dayton, wtrollinger1@udayton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/hst_fac_pub



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), and the [History Commons](#)

eCommons Citation

Trollinger, William Vance, "Review: 'Notre Dame vs. The Klan: How the Fighting Irish Defied the KKK,' By Todd Tucker" (2019). *History Faculty Publications*. 145.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/hst_fac_pub/145

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of History at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

Notre Dame vs. The Klan: How the Fighting Irish Defied the KKK. By Todd Tucker. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018. 312 pp. \$20.00

Todd Tucker's book is an easy and enjoyable read. And the author has a great story to tell, about the three days in May 1924 when Notre Dame students clashed with members of the Ku Klux Klan on the streets of South Bend. Notre Dame alumni will particularly enjoy it, as Tucker (a 1990 graduate) has written what is in effect a love letter to his alma mater, replete with details about the author's experience as a student (as well as additional autobiographical information).

The book follows a clear and compelling chronological narrative. The first two chapters set the stage with background information on the main characters as well as a summary of Notre Dame's early years. This is followed by the 1915 birth of the "second" Ku Klux Klan and its rapid growth after World War I, Fr. Matthew Walsh's ascension to the Notre Dame presidency in 1922, and D.C. Stephenson's path from salesman to Klan recruiter to Grand Dragon of the powerful Indiana Klan. All of this leads to the dramatic May 1924 altercations between Klansmen and Notre Dame students, which, contrary to what the book's title suggests, turned out to be a public relations victory for the Klan, as the students came off as the aggressors. *Notre Dame vs. The Klan* concludes with a celebratory chapter ("The Ascent of Notre Dame") on the football team's 1924 national championship – as might be expected from an enthused alumnus, football and Knute Rockne get a good deal of attention in this book – and a chapter on the horrific crime that led to Stephenson's conviction on charges of murder.

Tucker tells a compelling tale. But there are real problems here. For one thing, and contrary to the information at the top of this review (and absent from the book's copyright page), *Notre Dame vs. The Klan* is not a new book. This 2018 Notre Dame Press publication was originally published in 2004 by Loyola Press. More than this, it seems apparent from a comparison of the table of contents for both editions that, except for a preface, the 2018 edition is identical to the 2004 edition (a point that certainly should have been made clear in the later book). In this regard, it has to be said that there has been some very good scholarship on the "Second" Ku Klux Klan in the fourteen years since the original publication of *Notre Dame vs. The Klan*.

But then, this book is not a work of historical scholarship. This is not to say that Tucker did not do historical research; to the contrary, he examined Klan and South Bend newspaper accounts, looked at materials in the Notre Dame archives, and made some use of secondary sources. However, and as he forthrightly notes in his prologue, Tucker creates a "composite" or fictional Notre Dame student – with his own "thoughts and feelings" – who "had participated in the riot" (xxvii). The author also assigns thoughts and feelings to Fr. Walsh and Stephenson, invents dialogue and other details, and sometimes "extrapolate[s] historical events in order to bring out the drama of the situation" (xxvii-xxviii).

As entertaining as it is, *Notre Dame v. The Klan* should absolutely include the disclaimer, "loosely based on actual events." This book is historical fiction. This is fine, of course, but it is also true that the best historical fiction is thoroughly steeped in the best historical scholarship. And that is not always the case here. I will give just

one example. In discussing the 1915 film *Birth of a Nation*, Tucker notes that while “reviewers and audiences were overwhelmingly awed by [D.W.] Griffith’s achievement, . . . black leaders . . . saw an attempt to resurrect old hatreds and reopen only recently healed wounds” (54).

What? This was the era of Jim Crow, with segregation, whites-only voting, and the omnipresent threat of lynching. African Americans were not protesting *Birth of a Nation* because they feared that hatred would return and wounds would reopen. They knew very well that the hatred and the violence had never gone away. They were protesting because this film – in its revisionist take on Reconstruction history – further reinforced the reign of white supremacy in America.

WILLIAM TROLLINGER

University of Dayton