

FIGHTING A VICIOUS FILM: PROTEST AGAINST *THE BIRTH OF A NATION*

Boston Branch of the National Association
for the Advancement of Colored People
1915 __ EXCERPTS

[PREFACE]

A VICIOUS PLAY WITH VICIOUS METHODS

In its advertisement we are told that *The Birth of a Nation* is founded on Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman*; that it is a war play¹ "that worked the audience up into a frenzy"; that "it will make you hate."

In an interview with a Boston Editor, Thomas Dixon said "that one purpose of his play was to create a feeling of abhorrence in white people, especially white women, against colored men"; "that he wished to have all Negroes removed from the United States and that he hopes to help in the accomplishment of that purpose by *The Birth of a Nation*."

In furthering these purposes the producers of the film do not hesitate to resort to the meanest vilification of the Negro race, to pervert history and to use the most subtle form of untruth — a half truth.

Well knowing that such a play would meet strong opposition in Boston, large sums of money were spent in the employment of Pinkerton detectives and policemen to intimidate citizens, and the managers of the theatre refused to sell tickets to colored people. To soften opposition, the impression was given that the President of the United States had endorsed the play and that George Foster Peabody and other distinguished people favored it. One method of working up support was to pass cards among the auditors [audience members] asking them to endorse the play. These cards were circulated, signed and collected at the end of the first act and before the second act in which appear the foul and loathsome misrepresentations of colored people and the glorification of the hideous and murderous band of the Ku Klux Klan.²

The indignation against the play grew in intensity. The colored people of greater Boston rose in mass



¹ The words *film*, *play*, *photoplay*, and *motion picture* are used throughout the publication to refer to the film *The Birth of a Nation*.

² Part One of *Birth of a Nation* deals with the Civil War, Part Two with Reconstruction and the Ku Klux Klan. See the film at Internet Archive.

against it. It was opposed by many distinguished citizens including Governor Walsh, Lieutenant Governor Cushing, Mr. Moorfield Storey, Hon. Albert E. Pillsbury, Hon. Samuel W. McCall, Rev. Samuel M. Crothers, D.D., Dr. Alexander Mann of Trinity Church, a majority of both branches of the legislature and many religious and civic organizations. A series of public meetings, remarkable for the spirit of unity and brotherhood and a very pronounced desire to save every group of our varied citizenship from insult and indignity, resulted in securing a new Censor Law for the City of Boston as follows:— . . .³

Disregarding this law, plainly intended to stop the play, two of the censors refused to revoke its license and the Executive Committee of the Boston Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which led the fight against the play, as a protest against the action of the censors, adopted these resolutions:—

Resolved: That we record our profound regret that the newly created Board of Censors for the City of Boston in disregard of the plain intent of the legislature have refused to revoke the license of the photoplay [film] *The Birth of a Nation*.

We deplore this decision as a rejection of the just claims of our colored fellow citizens to be protected against a malicious misrepresentation of their race in a play involving a perversion of our national history and a glorification of lynching.

We deplore the insidious influence of this play in the manner of its presentation — before audiences whose judgment is misled and whose passions are inflamed by a most clever combination of spectacular and musical art, with the inevitable result of increased racial and sectional antagonism, at a time when the whole world is longing for peace.

We deplore the sinister circumstances connected with the controversy over this play in Boston — the enormous capital invested in its preparation; the lavish use of advertising space in newspapers whose editorial columns with very few exceptions have been silent; the extraordinary police protection employed to prevent anticipated outbreaks at the performances; all these things revealing the formidable commercial interests involved — while the opposition to the play, with no unworthy motive, has sought only to further justice, truth and peace.

While deploring the decision of the Board of Censors, we congratulate ourselves on the great increase of interest in the cause of human rights, as advocated by our Association, which has been aroused by the recent discussions and we earnestly appeal to all fairminded people, here and throughout the country, to use every effort to counteract the malign influence of this play, through its legal suppression, through a better acquaintance with the truth of our national history, and through more friendly and helpful relations between the colored and white citizens of our land. And we would especially emphasize the fact that this is not a matter involving the welfare of the colored race alone, but one in which all races composing our cosmopolitan citizenship have a vital interest.

³ The Censor Law, passed in May 1915, required businesses of public entertainment to acquire a license from the city, which could be revoked by city officials "at their pleasure."

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EXTENT OF THE PROTEST

The failure of the Censors to stop *The Birth of a Nation* would have been a very grievous disappointment if the agitation against it had not brought good of a very deep and satisfactory kind. To learn that on a question of decency and self respect they could get together and in a dignified, law-abiding manner resent, as one man, the insult offered to their race by this play was a wonderfully heartening result to the twenty thousand colored people of greater Boston. Add to this the fact that the moral enthusiasm, love for liberty, and a genuine feeling of brotherhood which swept over the country in Abolition days seemed to be reawakened; that where for years stood a thin heroic line of the old guard, growing fewer and more pathetic in their demand that the faith of the fathers be kept, that the Constitution be the palladium of the liberty of all the people and not of a chosen few, there now stand thousands, recruited from the ranks of the various race groups composing our citizenship, demanding fair play and justice for all men, and the compensation far outweighs the failure to stop this one infamous play. With a view to giving some idea of the scope of the agitation and the spirit in which it was conducted a few of the many letters, resolutions and speeches produced by the opposition to the play in April are put in permanent form [in this volume] with the further purpose of aiding other communities in opposing this and all such productions.

ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY

(FRANCIS HACKETT in *The New Republic*)

If history bore no relation to life, this motion picture drama could well be reviewed and applauded as a spectacle. As a spectacle it is stupendous. It lasts three hours, represents a staggering investment of time and money, reproduces entire battle scenes and complex historic events, amazes even when it wearies by its attempt to encompass the Civil War. But since history does bear on social behavior, *The Birth of a Nation* cannot be reviewed simply as a spectacle. It is more than a spectacle. It is an interpretation, the Rev. Thomas Dixon's interpretation, of the relations of the North and South and their bearing on the Negro. . . .

. . . On the one hand we have "the poor bruised heart" of the white South, on the other "the new citizens inflamed by the growing sense of power." We see Negroes shoving white men off the sidewalk, Negroes quitting work to dance, Negroes beating a crippled old white patriarch, Negroes slinging up "faithful colored servants" and flogging them till they drop, Negro courtesans guzzling champagne with the would-be-head of the Black Empire, Negroes "drunk with wine and power," Negroes mocking their white master in chains, Negroes "crazy with joy" and terrorizing all the whites in South Carolina. We see the blacks flaunting placards demanding "equal marriage." We see the black leader demanding a "forced marriage" with an imprisoned and gagged white girl. And we see continually in the background the white Southerner in "agony of soul over the degradation and ruin of his people." . . .

Having painted this insanely apprehensive picture of an unbridled, bestial, horrible race, relieved only by a few touches of low comedy, "the grim reaping begins." We see the operations of the Ku Klux Klan, "the organization that saved the South from the anarchy of black rule." We see Federals [Union veterans] and Confederates uniting in a Holy War "in defense of their Aryan birthright," whatever that is. We see the Negroes driven back, beaten, killed. The drama winds up with a suggestion of "Lincoln's solution" — back to Liberia — and then, if you please, with a film representing Jesus Christ in "the halls of brotherly love. . . ."

Whatever happened during Reconstruction, this film is aggressively vicious and defamatory. It is spiritual assassination. It degrades the censors that passed it and the white race that endures it.

