Dixon's The Leopard's Spots: A Study in Popular Racism

Maxwell Bloomfield

The Catholic University of America, Columbus School of Law

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Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots*: A Study in Popular Racism

The first fourteen years of the twentieth century constituted a major reform period in American history. In politics, economics and the arts new ideas and practices emerged to shatter nineteenth-century preconceptions. Crusading journalists led the way in calling for a revitalized democracy to bridge the dangerous gulf separating the very rich from the very poor. Increasingly public opinion was directed toward the elimination of class barriers by absorbing both laborer and capitalist, immigrant and old-stock native, into an expanded form of democratic state which should minister to the welfare of all.

Yet during these same years, when mass audiences responded to the idealism of class solidarity and human brotherhood, relations between Negroes and whites in America grew more embittered and violent. By 1909 the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People had been organized to combat a mounting wave of race riots and lynchings in both North and South. What caused this upsurge of racial intolerance in an otherwise reform-minded era? A study of the most popular anti-Negro propagandist in pre-World War I America suggests that middle-class liberalism was by no means incompatible with attacks on allegedly “inferior” racial groups.

Thomas Dixon Jr. was thirty-eight years old in 1902, when his first novel, *The Leopard's Spots*, made him a best-selling author overnight. In his earlier years he had followed a variety of occupations, each of which contributed in recognizable fashion to his development as a propagandist. Born on January 11, 1864, in the village of Shelby, North Carolina, he grew up during the turbulent Reconstruction era, when black-and-tan governments dominated state politics with the aid of federal troops. One of his earliest recollections was of a parade of the Ku Klux Klan through the village streets on a moonlight night in 1869. As the white-hooded riders swept past his window in ghostly silence, young Dixon shivered with fear. But his mother reassured him: “They're our
people—they're guarding us from harm.” ¹ Later he learned that his maternal uncle, Colonel Leroy McAfee, was chief of the Klan in Piedmont, North Carolina. The romantic colonel made a lasting impression on the boy's imagination, which was equally influenced in another direction by his father, the Reverend Thomas Dixon, a well-known Baptist minister.

At the age of nineteen Thomas Jr. graduated from Wake Forest College and secured a scholarship to Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, then the leading graduate school in the nation. As a special student in history and politics he undoubtedly felt the influence of Herbert Baxter Adams and his circle of Anglo-Saxon historians, who sought to trace American political institutions back to the primitive democracy of the ancient Germanic tribes. The Anglo-Saxonists were staunch racists in their outlook, believing that only latter-day Aryan or Teutonic nations were capable of self-government.²

After a year's study at Johns Hopkins Dixon remained undecided about a future career. He thought briefly of becoming an actor but a disastrous experience with a traveling Shakespearean company soon changed his mind. The group, whose specialty was Richard III, found itself stranded in the backwoods settlement of Herkimer, New York, when the manager slipped off into the woods with the cash box. Thereafter Dixon returned to North Carolina and took up the study of law, a profession which offered considerable scope for histrionics without the hazards of one-night stands.³

While attending classes at Greensboro Law School (1884-86) he engaged actively in local politics and was elected to the North Carolina Legislature. His maiden speech aroused the interest of Walter Hines Page, editor of the Raleigh State Chronicle and a prominent spokesman for the "New South," who reported on Dixon for his readers. By 1886 the fledgling lawmaker seemed destined for a promising political career. Within a matter of months he graduated with honors from law school, got married, and was admitted to the state bar. Then abruptly he changed his mind. Displaying what one early biographer termed a "characteristic restlessness," he abandoned the law in October 1886 to become a Baptist minister like his father.⁴

³ “Chronicle and Comment: Thomas Dixon,” Bookman, XX (February 1905), 498-500.
The crowded years of preaching and traveling which followed (1887-99) marked a watershed in Dixon’s life. During this time he built up a stock of basic ideas which he continued to endorse, without serious modification, until his death in 1946. He also achieved remarkable success as a platform personality. Toward the close of his ministry he was reportedly attracting larger congregations than any other Protestant preacher in the country. While this personal acclaim did not prevent him from deserting the pulpit after 1900, it did indicate that he had already gained some invaluable experience in the art of mass persuasion.

Certainly his rise to prominence as a churchman was spectacular enough. He began his preaching career in Goldsboro and Raleigh, but within a year he was invited to occupy a Baptist pulpit in Boston, Massachusetts. Then, in 1889, he accepted a call to become pastor of the Twenty-third Street Baptist Church in New York City. Here his audiences soon outgrew the church and, pending the construction of a new People’s Temple, Dixon was forced to hold services in a neighboring YMCA. A vivid impression of his platform appearance at this time has been recorded by the journalist A. C. Wheeler, who attended one of the YMCA meetings:

It was Sunday evening. I found the large hall with its old-fashioned gallery choked with the congregation that had outgrown its church edifice proper and taken refuge here. After the preliminary musical services a young man came down to the front of the platform, and made an extemporaneous prayer and read a portion of the Scriptures from a small Bible which he held in his hand. In the view which I had of him he appeared to be six feet three in stature and almost weirdly gaunt. He did not stand erect in the parade sense, and his long limbs betokened an enormous sinewy power rather than grace or symmetry. His dark, spare, close-shaven face, his plentiful coal-black hair, carelessly pushed backward from his temples, his strong, almost cadaverous jaw, and his black, deep-set, and scintillant eyes made up a personality that arrested my interest at once. It was a type of man especially forged for hard, earnest, fearless work in some direction.5

Dixon’s personal magnetism accounted, in some degree, for his increasing fame as a metropolitan preacher. But more important was the gospel he brought to his hearers. In the name of the urban masses, he attacked the stand-pat Christianity of well-to-do churchgoers. True religion, he insisted, was a matter of conduct rather than of pious formulae. Christ’s “creed was His life.” And Christ worked to save all men, not merely a

favored few. Dixon aligned himself with the liberal reformers of the Social Gospel Movement in demanding justice for the immigrant, the slum-dweller, the “weak and helpless.” He called for an active commitment to human brotherhood and warned that the continued indifference of city churches to the plight of the lower classes might lead to eventual social revolution in America:

I hear the coming tread of a generation of men who not only know not the name of Jesus Christ, but who do not even know the name of the government in which they were born; who do not know the flag under which they are supposed to march as citizens, who one day may stand before a staggering State and challenge it to make good its own life before the stern tribunal of the guillotine, the dagger, the torch, and the dynamite bomb! Those children growing up in those districts without Christ or the knowledge of truth, or the influence of civilization, cannot be left alone with impunity. If you do not love them they will make you look after them to save your own life, bye and bye. . . . The time will come in the life of the men who tear up their churches and move them to the grand boulevards of the north, when a heavy hand may knock at their barred doors and ask of them the reason for their existence.6

Nor could this grim reckoning be sidestepped by any appeal to self-regulating economic laws. While Dixon accepted the theory of evolution, particularly as interpreted by Herbert Spencer and John Fiske, he refused to recognize any of its deterministic implications. The material universe, he argued, was a free world. “It was created by the free play of divine law upon matter.” God, a “superior intelligence,” set the forces of nature to work in a uniform way, but the outcome of the evolutionary process depended upon the creative action of man.

Alone of all animals, man possessed free will, which gave him the power to transcend his environment and to control the brute struggle for existence in the interest of the weak and the oppressed. Without such human intervention there could be no genuine “survival of the fittest.” This concept, which Dixon regarded as the vital force in evolution, had for him a specialized meaning quite different from that espoused by conservative Darwinists. Dixon defined “fitness” in moral terms, rejecting mere strength or physical endurance as a criterion. Human progress he traced to the development of character in man; that is, to man’s free choice of good in the face of evil. But character, as the measure of an individual’s right to survive, could not be monopolized by any limited

class. Every man had the power to choose between good and evil, because every man was endowed with free will. Thus, in Dixon's hands, the theory of evolution took on a broadly democratic form, implying the preservation and uplift of the masses.7

"Jesus declared that weakness shall rule strength," Dixon observed in 1892. "Now the only history of the world is the history of the weak—the dark, vulgar crowd that used to have no history." Together religion and science were working to democratize the world, bringing the benefits of self-government and self-discipline to the lower classes everywhere. The spread of political democracy, rooted in the idealism of Christian brotherhood, seemed "resistless." Democracy was "a race movement . . . an age movement . . . the first manifest destiny of the world." 8

In none of his early writings did Dixon display any hostility toward the Negro or even hint that the blessings of democracy should be restricted to white men only. As late as 1896, in his most influential religious polemic, The Failure of Protestantism in New York and Its Causes, he declared: "... I thank God that there is not to-day the clang of a single slave's chain on this continent. Slavery may have had its beneficent aspects, but democracy is the destiny of the race, because all men are bound together in the bonds of fraternal equality with one common Father above." 9

Within the next few years, however, this sympathy for the black man gave way to quite different feelings, as Dixon found himself caught up in the expansionist enthusiasm that accompanied the Spanish-American War. The defeat of Spain opened new areas in the Caribbean and the Pacific to American control, including the Philippine Islands. But it also posed a novel governmental problem: What should be the relationship between American democracy and a backward colored race like the Filipinos? To Dixon and other staunch imperialists the answer seemed clear: democracy was unsuited to a semibarbarous people who lacked the judgment and self-control to manage their own affairs. At the same time the United States could not abandon its newly acquired possessions without violating a moral duty to help civilize the inhabitants. So the Filipinos and other backward natives must be governed without their consent until such time as they proved capable of absorbing the white man's culture and utilizing his political institutions.

7 Dixon on Ingersoll, pp. 84, 86-87, 160-61. See also: Thomas Dixon Jr., Living Problems in Religion and Social Science (New York, 1889), pp. 50-70.
8 Dixon on Ingersoll, p. 124; Dixon, Failure of Protestantism, p. 51.
9 Dixon, Failure of Protestantism, p. 52. For a similar viewpoint, expressed several years earlier, see: Dixon on Ingersoll, p. 150.
Inevitably the assertion of white supremacy in the new dependencies led to disturbing afterthoughts about race relations in continental America. By 1900 Dixon had re-examined the position of the Negro in American democracy and concluded that a racial crisis of national dimensions was in the making. Putting aside his earlier fears of a revolutionary immigrant mob, he resigned his pulpit in order to launch a nationwide nondenominational crusade against the "black peril." The moral fervor which had made him one of the foremost preachers in the country was now enlisted in the cause of Anglo-Saxon supremacy. As one Negro critic shrewdly charged, Dixon set out to "frighten a heedless world into the belief that the end is at hand . . . to warn your race to flee from amalgamation, as from the wrath to come." 10 The first fruit of the new gospel was The Leopard's Spots.

This novel was at once the earliest and greatest of all Dixon's propaganda works. Into its writing went the logic of the lawyer, the social criticism of the reformer, the zeal of the religious prophet and an actor's sense of dramatic incident and timing. Subsequent books, notably The One Woman (1903) and The Clansman (1905), reached an even wider audience, but none was so representative of the full range of the author's ideas and attitudes. Without exaggeration it may be said that all of the major themes which Dixon was to develop in a score of works scattered over the next forty years may be found, clearly outlined, in The Leopard's Spots. As a purveyor of ideas he drew upon a limited store which he saw no need to modify with the passing of time. To read The Leopard's Spots, then, is to apprehend the whole corpus of Dixon's work.

"I claim the book is an authentic human document and I know it is the most important moral deed of my life," he wrote. "It may shock the prejudices of those who have idealized or worshipped the negro as canonized in 'Uncle Tom.' Is it not time they heard the whole truth? They have heard only one side for forty years." 11 Dixon's side of the race issue presented the Negro under two aspects: as an historical problem peculiar to the South and, more importantly, as a contemporary menace to white civilization in every section of the country. He first sought to justify, as a matter of historical necessity, the suppression of the Negro as a political force in the South. Then he added a new dimension to the problem by carrying his readers northward for a look at the threat which the black race allegedly offered to an urban-industrial society. By the time he rested his case Southern racism had been lifted from its traditional

11 Harkins, Little Pilgrimages, p. 121.
context and made a vital component in the new American sense of world mission and imperial destiny. It was no accident that Dixon subtitled his story of racial tensions in the New World "A Romance of the White Man's Burden."

From cover to cover the book is permeated with a strong sense of national pride. "I love mine own people," declares the politician-hero Charles Gaston. "I hate the dish water of modern world-citizenship." Gaston speaks for a strong, centralized democratic state, the product of four years of bloody fighting between North and South. While the Civil War was ostensibly fought over the question of Negro slavery, in reality, according to Dixon, it represented a contest between two antagonistic forms of government—a democracy versus a republic.

The Old South stood for the aristocratic ideals of the Founding Fathers who had set up a union of republics dominated by the well-to-do propertied classes. In time, however, the laboring men of the North began to challenge this class government. As their numbers grew ever larger through continued immigration, Northern workers came to demand greater political power and a government more directly responsive to their interests. They set in motion a democratic revolution which the South was bound to resist, since it implied the eventual grant of equal rights to four million irresponsible Negroes "but yesterday taken from the jungle." Slavery, then, was but one aspect of the broader struggle of the masses against the classes—of democracy against aristocracy—in America. And in seeking to halt "the resistless movement of humanity from the idea of local sovereignty toward nationalism, centralisation, solidarity," the South courted inevitable defeat.

Dixon does not mourn the passing of the slaveholding aristocracy. He identifies himself with the new forces in Southern life: the rising industrialist, the reform-minded lawyer, the poor white farmer of the back country. These groups do not look to the past; they welcome the spread of middle-class democracy. And it is as a democrat par excellence that Dixon appeals to the reading public. Even the setting of his story, North Carolina, has a symbolic value in this respect. It was "the typical American Democracy" which "had loved peace and sought in vain to stand between the mad passions of the Cavalier of the South and the Puritan fanatic of the North."

Protected by its dangerous coastline from direct contact with the Old World, North Carolina had been an early frontier area, attracting the

14 Dixon, Leopard's Spots, p. 5.
most venturesome and freedom-loving spirits from neighboring colonies. Most of Dixon's heroes claim descent (as did he) from sturdy Scotch-Irish pioneers who fought all encroachments on their liberties and who led the way in declaring independence from Great Britain. They represent old-stock, hardworking, Protestant Americans, in other words, products of the same frontier conditions which shaped the thinking of their counterparts in every section of the Union. Dixon makes it clear, then, that his characters can not be dismissed as reflecting only "the Southern mind." What they have done to combat the "black peril," he insists, any genuine American would have done under similar circumstances.

The story purports to cover the effects of Negro emancipation in North Carolina over a thirty-five year period, from 1865 to 1900. Beginning with a long look at the evils of Reconstruction, Dixon paints a lurid picture of political and moral corruption, as carpetbaggers and scalawags join hands with Negro voters to seize control of the state government and to launch a reign of terror against the former white ruling classes. Crimes multiply against persons and property until the beleaguered whites introduce their own brand of terrorism to keep the Negroes from the polls and to rescue their state from "African barbarism." A localized struggle between two political parties thus takes on the aspect of an epic battle for racial survival.

In Darwinian terms Dixon describes the North Carolina Democrats as the defenders of Anglo-Saxon civilization, fighting for the prerogatives of white men everywhere. Their interests are identical with those of their Northern kinsmen, who can not appreciate the true state of affairs because of the lies being fed to them by radical Republican demagogues. Thaddeus Stevens and the other Radical leaders are bent upon destroying Southern civilization through a policy of racial amalgamation, which will enable them to perpetuate their control indefinitely over a degenerate mulatto race.

But of course the sinister plans of the Republicans come to naught, thanks to the efforts of those fearless fighters for racial integrity, the men of the Ku Klux Klan. As Dixon describes the Klan, it resembles a glorified Boy Scout troop beefed up with the romanticism of Walter Scott:

The simple truth is, it was a spontaneous and resistless racial uprising of clansmen of highland origin living along the Appalachian mountains and foothills of the South, and it appeared almost simultaneously in every Southern state produced by the same terrible conditions. This Invisible Empire of White Robed Anglo-Saxon Knights was simply the old answer of organised manhood to organised crime. Its purpose was to bring order out of chaos, protect the weak and defenceless,
the widows and orphans of brave men who had died for their country, to drive from power the thieves who were robbing the people, redeem the commonwealth from infamy, and reestablish civilisation.\textsuperscript{15}

It must be noted, however, that the Klan which Dixon so idealized was the original organization, and that only. He had no sympathy with later attempts to revive the Klan as an instrument for the persecution of racial and religious minorities other than the Negro. His novel, \textit{The Traitor} (1907), attacked the unauthorized use of Klan costumes and organizational machinery by a group of young firebrands who sought to carry out personal vendettas after the genuine Klan had been formally dissolved in the early 1870s. And in 1924, during the heyday of the white-robed Knights in their twentieth-century reincarnation, Dixon again issued a sharp protest against latter-day bigotry. \textit{The Black Hood} (1924) reworked much of the material on the downfall of the Klan which had previously appeared in \textit{The Traitor}; but this time Dixon took care to make one of his heroes a Christlike Jewish merchant. “Remember this, Nathan,” he wrote, in reference to the indiscriminate terrorism practiced by the “new” Ku Klux Klan. “You are an American citizen. If you are not safe, I am not safe. Freedom is a mockery. We have no republic—” \textsuperscript{16}

This concern for the rights of non-Negro minorities points up the peculiarly American framework within which Dixon developed his racist doctrines. For him “Anglo-Saxon supremacy” meant something quite different from what it meant to European agitators or even to racially-minded New England Brahmins. The onetime preacher to the urban poor never lost his concern for their welfare. Dixon drew no line between Slav and Teuton, between the “new” immigrant from southern and eastern Europe and the old pioneering stock from the northwestern areas. Like the most progressive minds of his generation, he believed that the American melting-pot was still capable of assimilating the most diverse ethnic strains without danger to the fundamental soundness of the national character. Only educate the newcomers to their obligations as American citizens, he urged, and all would be well. Here was no elitist cant, then, but a broadly democratic outlook which places Dixon squarely in the liberal tradition.\textsuperscript{17}

The Negro alone found no place in an “Anglo-Saxon” America. To understand why Dixon wished to exclude him is to grasp both the strength

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 150-51.
\textsuperscript{16} Thomas Dixon Jr., \textit{The Black Hood} (New York, 1924), p. 150; Thomas Dixon Jr., \textit{The Traitor} (New York, 1907).
\textsuperscript{17} Dixon dealt with the immigrant problem most extensively in his novel, \textit{The Fall of a Nation} (New York, 1916).
and the weakness of Progressive democracy. For Dixon was no isolated crank, but a representative spokesman of his time. However irrational and instinctive his negrophobia may have been, he sought to justify it on scientific and humanitarian grounds. He used liberal arguments to buttress a reactionary creed, and therein lay his appeal to a reform-minded generation.

The Reconstruction chapters of The Leopard's Spots serve as a mere prologue to the rest of the book, in which Dixon addresses himself to the larger issue: why does the Negro continue to pose as grave a threat to honest democratic government in 1900 as he did back in 1865? Or, to put it another way, why cannot education—the traditional liberal answer to the immigrant problem—transform the Negro as well into a responsible American citizen? Dixon's answer is that the black man is a hopelessly inferior type of being, closer to the jungle animal than to the white man who first uprooted him from his African home. No amount of training or good will can lift him from the lowest rung of the evolutionary ladder or make him the equal, in any respect, of the proud Anglo-Saxon. Between the two races stretches an unbridgeable gulf of thousands of years of antithetical race history. The real tragedy of the Negro does not lie in the years of slavery he endured on Southern plantations, morally indefensible as the ante-bellum regime may have been. Rather his backwardness stems from his "race's inheritance of six thousand years of savagery in the African jungle." During that immense time span, while the Anglo-Saxon was steadily enlarging his power over man and nature, the Negro remained sunk in barbarism. He could not progress in the evolutionary scale because he lacked the inner resources which Dixon's earlier forays into Darwinism had convinced him were the measure of racial fitness. As the Rev. John Durham, Dixon's alter ego in The Leopard's Spots, explains to a Negro critic: "You have shown no power to stand alone on the solid basis of character." 18

The Negro is an amoral creature, then, unable to discriminate between right and wrong. The power to make a free and intelligent moral choice has been denied to him by his Creator, leaving him a permanent cripple in the evolutionary struggle for existence. At his best he is a good child, for whom one may feel a genuine affection (as Dixon did) akin to the love of a master for a loyal dog. But just as a dog must be told what to do if he is to be of use in a human society, so the Negro must be guided and controlled by his Anglo-Saxon superiors, on whose shoulders rests

the burden of civilizing him, so far as his limited capacities will permit. Any attempt to reverse the laws of nature by artificially equalizing the relations between the two races can only lead to the disintegration of the white man’s world. The danger is particularly acute in a democracy such as the United States, where equality is a driving force which can not well be confined to a single area of racial contact, such as politics:

The beginning of Negro equality as a vital fact is the beginning of the end of this nation’s life. There is enough negro blood here to make mulatto the whole Republic. . . . You younger men are growing care-less and indifferent to this terrible problem. It’s the one unsolved and unsolvable riddle of the coming century. Can you build, in a Democracy, a nation inside a nation of two hostile races? We must do this or become mulatto, and that is death. Every inch in the approach of these races across the barriers that separate them is a movement toward death. You cannot seek the Negro vote without asking him to your home sooner or later. If you ask him to your house, he will break bread with you at last. And if you seat him at your table, he has the right to ask your daughter’s hand in marriage.19

Here was the ultimate horror, as far as Dixon was concerned: the prospect of eventual social equality for the Negro. For, however deficient the black man might be in the ways of civilization, he was plentifully endowed with a primitive sex appeal. In Dixon’s eyes the sex impulse was an irrational and elemental force common to man and animal alike. It represented the “herd instinct,” against which civilized man struggled to assert his individual will in defense of his home and family. Marriage, like evolution, was a test of character, and the African’s lack of moral scruples made him a peculiar danger to family life.

By way of illustration, Dixon pointed to the untamed passions of the Negro as the major cause of miscegenation in the South. In The Sins of the Father (1912) he explored this argument to its final absurdity as he recounted, through 462 anguish-packed pages, the pursuit of the noble Anglo-Saxon, Colonel Norton, by the voluptuous Cleo, a mulatto girl whose jungle antecedents are thrust upon the reader at every turn. Cleo is a “tawny young animal,” “a young leopardsess from an African jungle.” She is so feline that her eyes glow in the dark, a circumstance that occasions no surprise to the long-suffering colonel. He falls prey at last to her barbaric charms, but achieves a belated moral victory by taking his own life in atonement for his betrayal of racial purity.20

This frantic dread of sexual encounter, grotesque as it appears in Dixon's novels, did follow logically from his evolutionary theories. Once accept his personalized brand of Darwinism—

I happen to know the important fact that a man or woman of negro ancestry, though a century removed, will suddenly breed back to a pure negro child, thick lipped, kinky headed, flat nosed, black skinned. One drop of your blood in my family could push it backward three thousand years in history.21

—and the strict segregationist policy he outlined for the nation at large seems both necessary and forward-looking.

Why, he demanded, should the Negro continue to be treated as a ward of the federal government, now that his support was no longer needed to preserve the Union? The Spanish-American War had proved the loyalty of the South and restored a sense of Anglo-Saxon solidarity to the entire country, as rich and poor, Catholic and Protestant, immigrant and native, flocked to the colors. Overnight America had become a world power, called by God to join the other Anglo-Saxon nations in the great work of uplifting backward peoples everywhere through the exercise of a beneficent imperialism. The implications which this new-found racial mission entailed for the Negro were spelled out with Scriptural intensity:

We believe that God has raised up our race, as he ordained Israel of old, in this world-crisis to establish and maintain for weaker races, as a trust for civilisation, the principles of civil and religious Liberty and the forms of Constitutional Government.

In this hour of crisis, our flag has been raised over ten millions of semi-barbaric black men in the foulest slave pen of the Orient. Shall we repeat the farce of '67, reverse the order of nature, and make these black people our rulers? If not, why should the African here, who is not their equal, be allowed to imperil our life? 22

Self-preservation alone dictated that the Negro be recognized as an irresponsible force whose very presence endangered the stability of a democratic society. Immediate steps must be taken to deprive him of his constitutional rights as a citizen through the repeal of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. Then he must be held at arm's length until such time as he might be returned to his African homeland. Dixon thus proposed, as a final solution to the race problem, the old rallying-cry: "Back to Liberia!" He turned a deaf ear to critics who protested that, apart from all other considerations, Liberia could scarcely absorb such

21 Dixon, Leopard's Spots, pp. 393-94.
22 Ibid., p. 435.
a mass colonization project, being roughly equal in size and population to his own state of North Carolina. Even so, such geographical details could wait upon a future generation. What mattered at present was to persuade the American masses to undertake the great crusade against Negro equality and to “fight it out on this line, if it takes a hundred years, two hundred, five hundred, or a thousand.”

Dixon’s fire-eating sentiments attracted a wide audience at home and abroad. The first edition of *The Leopard’s Spots*, comprising 15,000 copies, was exhausted on publication. Thereafter sales continued to soar until reviewers classified the work as a “mob novel,” a category reserved for books whose circulation figures reached several hundred thousand. English and German editions brought the problem of the American Negro to still more readers overseas.

Wherever it appeared, *The Leopard’s Spots* aroused a storm of controversy, as responsible critics, both white and colored, attacked its pseudoscience in the name of human dignity and minority rights. They exposed the fanatical race hatred which lurked behind Dixon’s Darwinian pronouncements, a passionate negrophobia that did incalculable harm in aggravating racial tensions during the era of progressive reform. But they failed to note the significant relationship between Dixon’s vicious propaganda and the moralistic literature of the Progressive movement.

In an extreme form, Dixon’s novels dramatized one of the major unresolved dilemmas which plagued American reformers at the turn of the century: how to reconcile majority and minority interests within the framework of a democracy. The muckrakers, the most vocal exponents of reform, generally sidestepped the issue by assuming that they spoke for an undivided popular will. In their fiction and factual articles they attacked specific minority groups (or “vested interests”) in the name of a democratic majority. Favorite targets included: the big businessman, the white slaver, the paid lobbyist, the saloonkeeper, the labor agitator and the socialist firebrand. The battle lines were sharply drawn: on one side, the virtuous “people”; on the other, a sinister minority whose very existence threatened the “people” with some specific evil—political, eco-

23 Ibid., p. 439.


onomic or social. Looking forward to the advent of an exclusively middle-
class society, the muckrakers demanded either the extinction or strict
control of dangerous minorities.

And Dixon pursued a similar line in all of his racist novels. He, too,
was a muckraker in all but name, specializing in the “black peril” rather
than “Wall Street” or “the demon rum.” Like other publicists who
sought to exalt the majority will as an authoritative, quasi-religious sym-
bol, he had no sympathy for the give-and-take which must necessarily
characterize the genuine democratic process. But his muddled thinking
reflected the uncertainties of an entire generation, apprehensive about
American strength in world affairs yet intoxicated by the recent acquisi-
tion of far-flung colonial populations. For a brief moment racism could
be reconciled with the American dream of a middle-class millennium.
Then the moment passed; the dream shattered against the grim realities
of World War I; and the nation moved onward to new visions that were
less grandiose but better attuned to the true nature of man, whose limi-
tations no race—not even the proud Anglo-Saxon—could disavow.

Dixon found himself an anachronism in the postwar world. While he
continued to write, publishing some ten books in the 1920s and 1930s, he
never again made the best-seller lists. His arguments, reiterated over and
over again, took on the mildly comic flavor associated with the literary
relics of a bygone era. But in one respect his work possesses an enduring
value independent of his reputation as a writer. For Dixon was the first
“mob novelist” to dramatize the Negro problem as a national, rather than
a sectional, issue and to insist that its solution was a matter of grave con-
cern for all Americans. In this connection, the remarks made by one of
his critics half a century ago bear special meaning for a present-day audi-
ence:

A vital question: why is it that so many Northern readers are so
ready to accept today a line of argument which would have met with
instant rejection, throughout the entire North, a few years ago? The
answer is not far to seek. For good or for ill, that fine enthusiasm for
the doctrine of equal political rights for all who are called upon to
submit to the jurisdiction of our government is no longer a dominant
sentiment in any part of our country. George William Curtis unques-
tionably voiced the general feeling when he went from platform to
platform at the close of the [Civil] war, declaring amid wild applause
that this doctrine was “the immediate jewel of our national soul,” and
that its consistent acceptance was the most essential triumph of “the
Good Fight.” The shameful facts of a mismanaged Reconstruction
policy dealt that inspiring belief its first serious blow, but left it still
in possession of the field. Its effective extrusion came only when the
vicissitudes of a foreign war drove a popular administration into an attitude essentially irreconcilable with any such belief. The natural opponents of the policy which Mr. Dixon represents were thus disarmed. The psychological moment was at hand, and right shrewdly has it been turned to account, both by the political leaders, and by Mr. Dixon, their most effective literary apologist. It is a dangerous and ill-defined path which we have thus taken, and safe egress at the other side of the morass depends upon wiser leadership than we have as yet developed; but whether it was formerly so or not, the North must now bear with the South its equal share of responsibility for these dangers.26