

J. W. Bailey. "Thomas Dixon," Library of Southern Literature.
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THOMAS DIXON, JUNIOR

[1864—]

J. W. BAILEY

THOMAS DIXON, JUNIOR, was born in Cleveland County, North Carolina, January 11, 1864. His career suggests the significance of the time, for in his personality are the storm, the lightning and the swift changes of war. Born in the midst of the great civil struggle, he reached his most impressionable period in the stern hours of the Reconstruction, was a college student when the New South called for a new generation, and entered manhood during that wide readjustment, North and South, that has brought forth a nation. He was sensitive in the highest degree, endowed with rare genius for expression, passionately fond of the tragic and heroic, and drew from his environment the essence of the Old South both in its glory and its doom.

His father, yet active, although more than eighty years old, has been a Baptist minister all his life. He has confined his activity to rural churches within a small field, having been pastor of one church for more than fifty years. His bearing is that of a gentleman of the old school, yet in a time when those about him opposed education, he advocated it: when others were sending their sons to the plough, he sent his to college. And in the midst of provincial prejudices he breathed the spirit of progress and broad sympathy with an onward generation. And in a time and in a calling of poverty he accumulated a comfortable estate. Mr. Dixon's mother was no less unusual—a woman of intense spirit, brilliant mind and pronounced individuality. Such parents must be reckoned with in any estimate of Dixon's genius.

The author's boyhood was passed in Cleveland County among a sturdy people in the trying years that followed the war. He graduated from Wake Forest College, North Carolina, at the age of nineteen, having achieved greater distinction than any other of the thousands of students who have enrolled in that institution. Later he pursued his studies in history and politics in Johns Hopkins University. He was elected member of the General Assembly of North Carolina in 1884, was licensed to practice law in 1886, and in the same year married Miss Harriet Bussey of Montgomery, Alabama. In that year also he entered the ministry and became

pastor of a Baptist church in Goldsboro, North Carolina. He has filled other pastorates, in Raleigh (1887), in Boston (1888), and in New York (1889). There he remained ten years, the excitement of his ministry in that great city satisfying his restless spirit. At length, however, he severed his denominational relations and founded an independent church. This he soon abandoned—reputing his ministerial title—and yet under fifty, now devotes his time to lecturing and to the production of books and plays.

Mr. Dixon's first novel was 'The Leopard's Spots' (1902), and seldom has an author's initial volume been so widely read, so violently criticised, and so little defended. The North abhorred it, the South did not praise it—but both read it. In the general storm, Mr. Dixon was quick to defend his own. The following extracts from a letter to the press explains his view-point:

"I have not sought to arouse race hatred or prejudice. For the negro I have the friendliest feelings and the profoundest pity. What I have attempted to show is that this Nation is now beginning to face an apparently insoluble problem.

"I claim the book is an authentic human document, and I know it is the most important moral deed of my life. There is not a bitter or malignant sentence in it. 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.

"The only question for a critic to determine when discussing my moral right to publish such a book is this: Is the record of life given important and authentic? If eighteen millions of Southern people, who at present rule, believe what my book expresses, is it not well to know it? . . . If it is true, is it not of tremendous importance that the whole nation shall know it?"

Manifestly 'The Leopard's Spots' is a realistic and quasi-historical novel with an overshadowing purpose. The author made the nation to hear his and not a few to know. Within a year one hundred thousand copies were sold, and so great was the sensation produced that numerous editions were printed in the European tongues, and the author's fame became international. He was regarded as the exponent of a doctrine with regard to the races in the Southern States of the United States, a subject in which modern civilization has maintained a peculiarly extensive and curious interest.

Mr. Dixon's next work was a novel—'The One Woman'—designed to expose socialism in its light (or, as Mr. Dixon would say, in the true light and according to authentic facts). It is want-

ing in literary interest and value, and fell rather flat, after an enormous sale of the two hundred thousand copies.

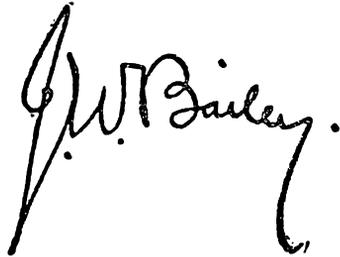
Within a remarkably brief period Mr. Dixon's third and fourth novels, entitled respectively 'The Clansman' and 'The Traitor,' appeared. The first treats of the Reconstruction period in the South, with especial reference to the part played by the Ku Klux Klan in restoring to the Southern people their rights: the second, in the nature of a sequel, narrates the decline of the Ku Klux. 'The Clansman' at once took rank as the author's best work: 'The Traitor' as his least meritorious.

'The Clansman' is historical. It is not without its manifest purpose, but that purpose is not obtrusive. With vigorous dramatic power Dixon portrays the cruel facts of Reconstruction history, and his characters live in his pages as they lived in that time that tried men's souls. Whether the true South would care to have its woes recited is not the question, but that 'The Clansman' does recite those woes is beyond dispute: and it cannot be but well that the truth is worthily told. Certainly 'The Clansman' has had no mean part in helping the Northern people to a better understanding of the South. With genuine insight its pages preserve the life of the Southerner of the old school and the son of the new time; the ante-bellum darkey and the ambitious negro of those latter days when emancipation and sudden citizenship and association with unscrupulous white politicians led to outrage after outrage. If he has failed at all in this work, Mr. Dixon's failure is in the portrayal of his women, but they serve him excellently in his chamber of horrors. He says that Chapter XII, Book II of 'The Clansman' is "the best chapter I ever wrote and every word cost me a tear." The failure of 'The Traitor' may indicate that Mr. Dixon has been in too great haste, or perhaps that he has exhausted his material and that his style has cloyed. For he has but one resource—the woes of the South in Reconstruction; and his style has but one note—the tragic.

Further of Mr. Dixon's style not much can be said. It is crude. One of his friendly critics, the late John Charles McNeill, says of him, "he paints with a broom." His realism is the realism of the open sore; his art the art of the billboard. His dramas are not developed, but scene after scene is thrust upon the stage, each with its direct and heart-rending—or hair-raising—impression. He claims only in his own behalf that the "record of life" that he has made is "important and authentic." 'The Leopard's Spots' reveals only half the truth, and this half at least is important and authentic. The other two volumes disclose only the fact that Mr. Dixon's triumphs

depend upon his skill in selecting the story rather than upon the art of its exposition.

Whether Mr. Dixon has produced literature or not, and whether the future will have use for his books, are questions not lightly to be answered. Our generation is reckoning with 'The Leopard's Spots' and 'The Clansman.' Few modern books have been so widely read or so extensively discussed. They have voiced the long-dumb South's protest, not in the noble restrained spirit we ascribe to the South, but in strident reproach and defiant challenge and naked disclosure. One may say it were better had the South gone on in silence, another that it is good the facts have been given living forms; but everyone must recognize the genius that understood the situation and commanded the ear of civilization. He has interpreted in his own passionate way the life about him. This is Mr. Dixon's distinction, and it is the only claim of himself and his works to fame.



AN EXPERIMENT IN MATRIMONY

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NELSE was informed by the agent of the Freedman's Bureau when summoned before that tribunal that he must pay a fee of one dollar for a marriage license and be married over again.

"What's dat? Dis yer war bust up me en Eve's marryin'?"
"Yes," said the agent. "You must be legally married."

Nelse chuckled on a brilliant scheme that flashed through his mind.

"Den I see you ergin 'bout dat," he said as he hastily took his leave.

He made his way homeward revolving his brilliant scheme.