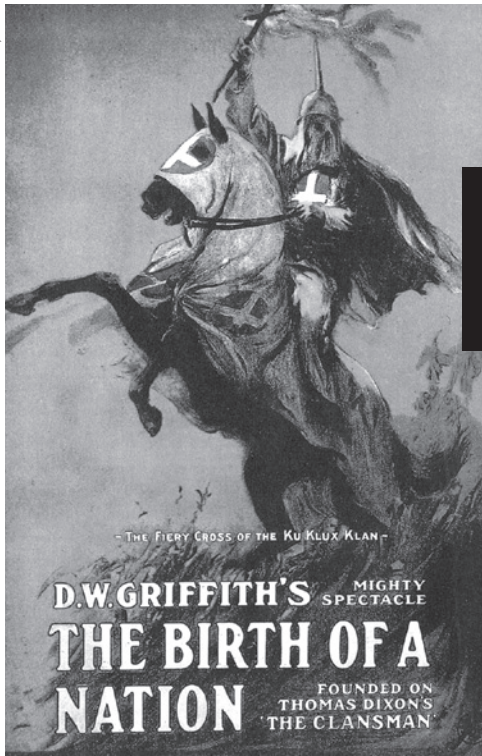


EPOCH PRODUCING CORPORATION, 1915



# THOMAS DIXON, FILMMAKER

by Anthony Slide

This essay is derived from but also builds upon Chapter 5: *The Fall of a Nation* in ANTHONY SLIDE's book *American Racist: The Life and Films of Thomas Dixon* (University Press of Kentucky, 2004). Slide's other books include *The American Film Industry: A Historical Dictionary* (Greenwood Press, 1986), named outstanding reference source of the year by the American Library Association; *The International Film Industry: A Historical Dictionary*, named outstanding academic book of the year by *Choice*; *The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville* (Greenwood Press, 1994), named outstanding academic book of the year by *Choice*, best reference book of the year by *Library Journal*, and outstanding reference source of the year by the American Library Association; *Silent Players: A Biographical and Autobiographical Study of 100 Silent Film Actors and Actresses* (University Press of Kentucky, 2002); and *Inside the Hollywood Fan Magazines: A History of Star Makers, Fabricators, and Gossip Mongers* (University Press of Mississippi, 2010).

In 1941, D.W. Griffith wrote to Thomas Dixon, comparing *The Birth of a Nation* (Griffith's 1915 film, based on Dixon's 1905 novel *The Clansman*) with *Gone with the Wind*: "It seems to the general public that *Birth of a Nation* is still the yard stick by which all pictures are measured. Little did we know, twenty-six years ago, that if we never did another thing, we would still gain quite a slice of immortality. You for the story, and I for the direction."<sup>1</sup> How Thomas Dixon responded to Griffith's letter is unknown. He should, perhaps, have been grateful that the director gave him credit for the story, despite half of the film not being based directly on Thomas Dixon's writings. But perhaps Dixon was slightly envious that it was Griffith rather than Dixon who received the lion's share of the credit for the production and that the production's success was firmly attributed to Griffith's direction and storytelling powers rather than to Dixon, who had also worked resolutely to promote and publicize the film. Thomas Dixon was a master showman who could organize screenings of *The Birth of a Nation* for both the President of the United States and the Supreme Court and who could successfully persuade a Boston mayor to go ahead with showings of the film in the face of threatened riots. D.W. Griffith made *The Birth of a Nation*; Thomas Dixon "sold" it to the nation.

ABOVE Movie poster for *The Birth of a Nation*, adapt. of the novel *The Clansman* by Thomas F. Dixon, Dir. D.W. Griffith, Prod. David W. Griffith Corp., Perf. Lillian Gish, Mae Marsh, and Henry B. Walthall

BACKGROUND Illustration from Thomas Dixon's novel *The Fall of a Nation*

<sup>1</sup> D.W. Griffith letter to Thomas Dixon, 30 March 1941, Anthony Slide collection.