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**History as Story, History as My (Family’s) Story: Life of a Klansman: A Family History in White Supremacy (2020) – Book Review**

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History as Story, History as My (Family’s) Story: Life of a Klansman: A Family History in White Supremacy (2020) – Book Review

Book Reviewed:

Life of a Klansman: A Family History in White Supremacy, 2020, a book that caught my attention the moment I saw it advertised in the “Legacies Links for November 28, 2022: News from CIC Members and Other Curated Links” blog,1 together with the author’s first book on the subject, Slaves in the Family (2014 for the Kindle Edition). I read both books as an American Studies researcher working on slavery, and, on a more personal level, as a descendant of two landowner families, whose lands were worked by peasants, in Interwar Romania.

Both books are narrative histories, and both speak openly about the author’s family, first as big slave-owners—25 rice plantations, thousands of Blacks enslaved, on his father’s side and second, as a Ku-Klux-Klan member great-great-grandfather, on his mother’s side.

I was very much interested both in the books as such, and in the author himself, a very courageous and gifted writer, in my view. Not only does he expose a family past that others (would) have chosen to let unknown, but his narrative plus well documented prose style makes the reading easy and interesting. So, who is this author?

According to his website,2 Edward Ball was born in 1958, in Savannah, Georgia, and raised in New Orleans, Florida, and Charleston, South Carolina. His father, Reverend Theodore Porter Ball, was an Episcopal clergyman, “a Charlestonian who moved about the South on a succession of Episcopal parish assignments” (Duke 10). His mother, Janet Rowley Ball, was a bookkeeper from New Orleans. When Edward was 12, his father committed suicide, suffering from a brain tumor. After that, the family moved to his mother’s birthplace, where they “lived modestly on her earnings” (Klein 40). With scholarships and loans, Edward attended Brown University, where he studied history for two years. He didn’t like it, he chose to abandon it, became a waiter in New Orleans, then went “hitchhiking in Europe” (Klein 40), and then returned to the same Brown University to study semiotics, film, and mass media. He continued with film, as an MA, at the University of Iowa. He worked as a proofreader in New York, where he also wrote book reviews and articles on film, art, and architecture. He has taught non-fiction writing at Yale University, benefited from fellowships awarded by the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard and the New York

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2 https://www.edwardball.com/
Public Library’s Cullman Center. He also received a Public Scholar award from the National Endowment for the Humanities ("A Note about the Author" 320).

It was at the Village Voice that he published an essay called “White Like Who? Notes on the Other Race” on May 18, 1993, where he talked about his having grown up in the Deep South and having read "a book called Recollections of the Ball Family of South Carolina and the Cominigtee Plantation, to read about my ancestors and the people they enslaved" (Ball, “White” 24). Thus, a memoir written by a relative in his grandparents’ generation made him think for the first time about “whiteness” as being an “other,” the same as “blackness” (Ball, “White” 24). And here he encountered the “familiar” “decorous talk about the ‘negroes’,” the “good negro” stereotypical image, and the standard white version of “the patriarchal life.”

With utmost gentility, she [the relative] described the warm emotions that accompanied the act of putting people in chains: “On all of the Ball plantations were certain families of negroes who seemed above the average: intelligent, faithful, trustworthy, and much attached to their masters and their families, which latter returned their devotion by the fullest confidence, respect, and consideration. (24)

Remembering this reading of his family memoir, Edward Ball, now an adult and a journalist, notices the pleasure whites take in talking about and describing other people. This was in March. In June the same year he attended a big family reunion organized by his Ball relatives, to commemorate their first ancestor in America and slave owner, Elias “Red Cap” Ball. Elias had come “in the Carolina colony from England in 1698 to claim his inheritance from a half-uncle: a 2000-acre portion of a plantation called Cominigtee. In the 167 years that followed the first Ball’s arrival, the evergrowing Ball clan amassed a dozen plantations along the Cooper, where thousands of their slaves worked the fields” (Duke 10).

First the essay, then his June family reunion he perceived as “a kind of indoctrination seminar,” full of stories about the good white masters and the family’s longevity and ability to hide their silver from the Yankees, during and after the Civil War, as a “pernicious nostalgia that some whites have about the old South” (Duke 13), and we have the two key moments that signaled his preoccupation with race, whiteness, blackness, slavery, and his own family history. A preoccupation which turned into deep research in the archives, those of his family and in several libraries in the South, and into his first book, Slaves in the Family. The book received press coverage (radio, TV, newspapers), all of which can be accessed through the author’s website, and the National Book Award for Nonfiction in 1998. Six books later, in August 2020, we have his mother’s family history, the Ku-Klux-Klan, which also received positive press coverage. This he wrote after he inherited his mother’s aunt’s papers, after his mother’s death, and he also read plenty of other types of documents from that period.

The book has a “Prologue: Our Klansman,” and seven parts: “Part I: The Ku-Klux Act,” “Part II: Grand blancs/Big Whites,” “Part III: Tribes,” “Part IV: Introduction to an Atrocity,” “Part V: White Terror,” “Part VI: Petit blancs / Little Whites,” and “Part VII: Redemption.” To these add “A Note on Sources,” “Acknowledgments,” “Illustration Credits,” “Also by Edward Ball,” “Praise for Life of a Klansman,” “A Note about the Author,” and “Copyright.”

The “Prologue,” a dialogue between Edward Ball and his mother, introduces us to a “sweet and bitter” story of one great-great-grandfather, Polycarp Constant Lecorgne, a Catholic who “was not a saint” like Saint Polycarp, a man with a beautiful name but who... “too bad he got up with that White League [...] The business with the Ku-Klux” (7). Then he introduces the family on his mother’s side: his mother’s mother Edna Lecorgne, a granddaughter of Polycarp Constant; uncle Albert who “belonged to the line of Lecorgne carpenters” started by the Klansman; Bertha Lecorgne—“Aunt Bert”—and, most important, Maud Lecorgne—“Aunt Maud”—the actual “caretaker of the Klan story” (9). Finally, Edward Ball confesses to having known about the Klansman since childhood, but “I have been afraid of this
story” (9). Asked during an interview why this fear, Edward Ball admitted to have experienced quite a painful and hard time reading and writing about the “white terrorist” in his family (cf. Interview, Aug. 17, 2020).

A lot has been and could be said about this book. Still, what most surprised and shocked me was to find out what a monstrous group the Ku-Klux-Klan actually was, with no trace of the positive, if secret, *Gone with the Wind* portrait. Coming from a landowner’s family destroyed by Stalinism-Communism, I used to watch the movie together with my grandmother, born and raised during her father’s prosperity years, and whose life had been totally changed by Communism. We both loved the movie for its romance, for its beautiful images of an aristocratic past, and Scarlett for her determination in keeping her dear Tara and fight the “dirty Yankees.” Well, my grandmother may have actually preferred Melanie, the real “lady” in the movie. I knew it was fiction and the Southern point of view, produced in 1939, White supremacy period. With such a mental and cultural-familial background on my side, Edward Ball’s history of, and the massacres perpetrated by, the Ku-Klux-Klan and its variants—The Knights of the White Camellia and the White League—shocked me. Two hundred Black men killed on July 30, 1866, during the Mechanics Institute massacre! A fight between two “tribes,” as Edward Ball calls them, the White tribe and the Black tribe, where the White tribe was fighting for the Whites to remain with the same rights and privileges as before. It is really impressive how the author identifies with the White tribe, assuming this past and legacy, while totally condemning them at the same time:

> Constant Lecorgne is one of my people. He is one of my family. How can I respond to the discovery of what he seemingly did? In several ways. I do not feel responsible for the crimes he seems to commit—I mean, legally responsible—for the reason that the living cannot control the acts of the dead. In the frame of the law, I do not feel culpable for the Mechanics Institute massacre. However, as a matter of conscience, I feel implicated. I feel associated with this cruel and merciless festival of violence. I feel a part of it. Because he acts on behalf of his family—our family, if you like—I have a feeling of wretchedness and shame. (162)

Speaking of which, I was fascinated by the book’s psychological dimension. One idea that surfaces here and was repeated during the same interview is the actual impossibility of us, today’s liberals, to compare ourselves with our ancestors in order to prove we would not have made their mistakes, we would have acted better had we lived in their times, an idea also found in African American Isabel Wilkinson’s *Caste*, right from the first chapter, “The Man in the Crowd.” Another idea is his understanding that we, as White people, do not perceive ourselves as “part of a racial group.” Therefore, his book is “trying to make White racial identity as visible, as conspicuous to us as African American racial identity is conspicuous to us” (Interview, Aug. 17, 2020). In Isabel Wilkinson’s terms, Africans don’t perceive themselves as Black until they come to America. ⁴

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³ “In a totalitarian regime such as that of the Third Reich, it was an act of bravery to stand firm against an ocean. We would all want to believe that we would have been him. We might feel certain that, were we Aryan citizens under the Third Reich, we surely would have seen through it, would have risen above it like him, been that person resisting authoritarianism and brutality in the face of mass hysteria. We would like to believe that we would have taken the more difficult path of standing up against injustice in defense of the outcaste. But unless people are willing to transcend their fears, endure discomfort and derision, suffer the scorn of loved ones and neighbors and co-workers and friends, fall into disfavor of perhaps everyone they know, face exclusion and even banishment, it would be numerically impossible, humanly impossible, for everyone to be that man. What would it take to be him in any era? What would it take to be him now?” (pp. xvi-xvii)

⁴ “A young man emigrated from Nigeria at the age of seventeen to attend college in the United States. His father paid the tuition, and at the end of the first semester, the young man went to pick up the refund at the bursar’s office. ‘You speak very good English,’ the clerk told him. The Nigerian man excoriated the clerk. ‘Of course I speak
As the author was saying back in 1994, he is “trying to understand how my own identity is connected to catastrophic events of the past in American history—slavery. And rather than merely acknowledging the fact and mourning it... I’m trying to act on that component of my identity and transform it, I guess, make use of it in a way that’s productive” (Duke 25).

A ‘productive reckoning,’ so to speak, means for Edward Ball to dig deep into his family’s archives and into documents, diaries, and newspapers from the past, find Black people descended from his family’s slaves and discover the difference between the family lore and the actual cruelty of slavery on his father’s side. And not exactly a hero, as his mother’s family would have it until the 1970s, but the real atrocity of the group their “hero” had belonged to.

Identity and reckoning means to publicly or privately apologize to two different slave families on the Ball side, a gesture that divided his family in a few pros and many cons. And it means to have assumed the willingness to face this “white terrorist” as his ancestor and speak about him in a book and in public interviews. One important point here, which Ball reiterates in several interviews, is his great-great-grandfather’s social position. Constant Lecorgne was not among the rich or the intellectual elite of New Orleans. He was a French carpenter “who built houses for plain people, and worked on boats, and he hammered many other things” (Ball, Klansman 10), the most modest, perhaps, among his brothers, one of whom did own a slave plantation. He was married and had several children, some of whom died, and actually worked side by side with a Black slave sent by his mother, to help build a house, before the Civil War. Next, he went to fight as a Confederate and enrolled in one fire brigade at the end of the war. The war cost him all his fortune: money and his few slaves. Thus, his rage turned towards the Negroes who, as Ball explains, were also his competitors as a carpenter. This ordinary White man situation makes him, in the author’s view, only one of maybe half of all White Americans at the time who could not accept the idea of Black citizenship and the possible equality between the two races. In the author’s words, “Fifty percent of whites can claim a family link to the Ku-Klux. Perhaps the gentle reader of these words is one. If not, someone near you” (13).

The author’s personal style, that of trying to bond with his distant relative, made me think about my own Interwar family and feel grateful for who they were and how they behaved. They did not own, sell, or buy people—slavery had been abolished in the nineteenth century. They had land, 250 hectares on my paternal side, worked by peasants to whom my great-grandfather gave fifty percent of the crop, plus the straws. He sold his fifty percent—grains—abroad, via a Danube village-harbor. This great-grandfather of mine was born in 1881, in a village, as a freeholder peasant. He studied Law at the University of Bucharest. He was a prefect, for two years, for the Dolj county, from the People Party, probably in 1926. He met and helped, as a lawyer, one famous politician, Constantin Argetoianu. He had the money to build a house in the center of Craiova, and to send my grandmother and her brother to England, to high school. He loved the land, and he loved the peasants. This was the most important...
lesson from his moral legacy. A lesson that also came from my mother’s side: to respect people’s work and to be a truly fine person. He lost it all in 1949, when his life was brutally disrupted by the Communist regime, imposed by the USSR, and resulting in the dispossession and, in too many cases, long prison sentences and the killing of innocent people declared ‘enemies of the people’ for no other reason than owning land, lawfully obtained and carefully tended to. Now, he saw himself as a ‘beggar without the black clothes,’ living his old age in a little house at the outskirts of the city, in poverty.

The end of Edward Ball’s story seems deeply ironic to me, a kind of retribution, perhaps. In a world where White supremacy had triumphed and segregation was installed, Constant’s wife....

In a public school, Gabrielle finds work as a “portress.” A portress is a door keeper; also, some of the time, a female porter. Gabrielle is hired by a primary school at 926 Berlin Street, on the corner of Camp Street. The job is full-time, and the pay is slender, but the work comes with an important benefit, housing. Gabrielle, Corinne, and the three children move into an apartment in the back of the school. It is cramped, and the building is loud from the swarm of students during the day.

Gabrielle the portress greets the schoolchildren, keeps attendance, and makes sure the students stay in class all day. And, like a porter, she picks up a mop and broom. [...] To Gabrielle’s consternation perhaps, it is a black public school. Everyone agrees the tribes are to be kept apart. But the black tribe needs portresses, just like the white. Gabrielle works at a black school, lives with black children all around her, every day. She is glad to have the work, to take care of her own. Or maybe she is disgusted to have work, when it is work of this kind.

Gabrielle must be glad that her husband is dead. [...] It is 1905. She is seventy years old, then older. She works and works, and does not stop. She reaches for her mop to swab the floor, cleaning up after the black children. (286)

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