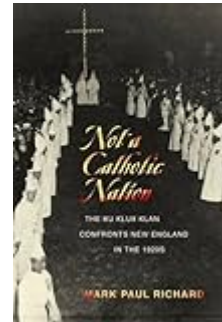


Mark Paul Richard. *Not a Catholic Nation: The Ku Klux Klan Confronts New England in the 1920s.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015. 278 pp. \$28.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-62534-188-4.



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By virtue of one presidential candidate in particular, the United States's primary season has shown that immigration, even when legal, remains an issue of concern to a large segment of the American electorate. To historians, inflammatory remarks concerning Muslims and migrants of Hispanic heritage recall immigration restrictionists's long past whose jingoist rhetoric might have seemed buried for good. As scholars and general readers seek to contextualize this revival of xenophobic sentiment, Mark Paul Richard enters the conversation with a serious study of Ku Klux Klan activities in New England. Billed as "a regional story of national phenomena" (p. 6), *Not a Catholic Nation* appears at an opportune moment and, though it eschews lofty claims, promises to shed light on more recent tensions.

The former chair of Canadian Studies at the State University of New York in Plattsburgh, Richard is an accomplished historian whose work has appeared in numerous Canadian and American journals. His first book, *Loyal but French: The Negotiation of Identity by French-Canadian Descendants in the United States* (2008), grew out of graduate research, begun under historian C. Stewart Doty, on Franco-American life in Lewiston, Maine. His latest work adds to a distinguished record of scholarship in interethnic relations and acculturation.

Crucially, it also adds much-needed emphasis on Americans of French Canadian descent, for whom researchers have shown too little interest in the last two decades.[1] That problem is partly historiographical, considering paradigms that privilege transoceanic migration. But it is also methodological. Surviving documents written by Franco-Americans remain inaccessible to most scholars by virtue of the language barrier. This was no impediment to the author, who consulted surviving French-language newspapers published in the 1920s—from *Le Messenger* in Lewiston to *La Tribune* in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, and all in between. His narrative also rests on local and regional English papers and state legislative documents. Further investigation will require some focus on the resources of New England's Catholic diocesan archives.

Franco-Americans are central actors in *Not a Catholic Nation*, yet Richard is careful to situate them on a broader canvas of anti-Catholicism. Moving geographically, in nine chapters, through each of the New England states, he depicts the development of Ku Klux Klan chapters, their local concerns and the causes which they brought to state legislatures, and the acts of physical violence and intimidation that accompanied their fiery nativist rhetoric.[2] Catholics in New Hampshire and Vermont

were spared the worst of KKK activity; in other states, Franco-Americansâ situation was at times hindered and at times ameliorated by the efforts of their Irish coreligionists.

Richard in fact highlights the value of interethnic solidarity in halting KKK inroads. For years Mayor James Curley of Boston effectively kept the KKK at bay. In Rhode Island, the *Sentinelle* affairâa controversy stemming from a Catholic bishopâs appropriation of parish funds for bilingual educationâand a Franco-Americanâs presence on a Republican gubernatorial ticket undermined a Catholic Irish-French rapprochement against a common foe. Richard thus shares a long-standing narrative in American Catholic history that presents the 1920s as a period of continued trials and tribulations for the Catholic Church, which the failed presidential bid of Alfred E. Smith epitomizes. There is, however, a caveat. The KKK challenged the church not because it was weak, marginal, and hopelessly divided against itself, but because âCatholic powerâ was real (p. 3). Successful counterattacks in Boston and elsewhere are a testament to this interpretation.

Though New Englandâs Ku Klux Klan quickly receded in numbers on the eve of the Great Depression, Richard ends his discussion of racial politics in the region in more recent decades. The very forces which had given rise to the organization in the 1920s returned in the 1970s, but by then the lines of prejudice had shifted. Among those who joined a revived KKK were Catholics of Franco-American descent. This is a testament to the changing self-conception of white ethnics beginning in the 1950s and 1960s and accentuated by the civil rights movement. Richard does not fully explore the process of acculturation by which Franco-Americans moved from the margins to the mainstream: he looks past a period of fifty years that still raises questions and could, even if briefly presented, have anchored the bookâs last substantive chapter.

This approach owes to Richardâs focus on the Ku Klux Klan specifically and serves his overall argument on recurrent revivals of prejudice. The rise and fall of the Know-Nothings, the American Protective Association, and several incarnations of the KKK suggest attention to the cyclical return of ânativism, religious prejudice, and class differencesâ in modern American history (p. 5). This is an important contribution to studies of the KKK in New England: this was not merely âa civic organization that advocated for such causes as municipal reform, public schools, Bible reading, English-language

legislation, and prohibitionâ (pp. 202-203). Nor did it grow primarily as a fraternal association. The KKK was premised on ethnoracial and religious bigotry and this hostility, even barring the revival of the 1970s and 1980s, has left a profound legacy of shame and sense of inferiority among those of Franco-American heritage.

In this way Richard accounts for the accelerated acculturation of Franco-Americans through the middle decades of the twentieth century. (Less clear is whether they saw the KKK as different from the hostility they had encountered in prior decades from their Irish coreligionists.) Though Franco-Americans resisted and responded to the prejudice of Anglo-Saxon supremacists, economic opportunity and social acceptance demanded concessions to the dominant group. This is an important scholarly contribution, but the greatest value of Richardâs research may lie elsewhere.

Two points in particular are salient. First, this study of anti-French and anti-Catholic discrimination forcefully shows that New England was not immune to prejudices shaking other parts of the country. The considerable strength of the KKK in New Englandâmembers constituted over 30 percent of the regionâs old-stock white population at one time (p. 4)âcalls for additional work on interethnic dynamics even as the period of mass immigration ended.[3] Second, Richard points his scholarly readers in the direction of borderland studies by highlighting the part of Anglo-Canadians in KKK growth and the day-to-day battle for acceptance that eventually led Franco-Americans to sever ties to their historical homeland.

In these varied ways, Richard has taken on the necessary task of asserting the relevance of Franco-American history beyond the genealogical interest of New Englanders. âFrancosâ were and are part of a national storyânot just Catholic, but American. Their relevance to larger narratives is made especially clear in the context of Hispanic immigration and current debates concerning the United Statesâ southwestern borderland.[4] The prejudice then felt in one minority community is today felt in another and in a different region of the country. Richardâs *Not a Catholic Nation* provides much-needed perspective on a perennial problem.

Notes

[1]. See, for historiographical context on Franco-American history, Sacha Richard, âAmerican Perspectives on *La fiÃvre aux Etats-Unis, 1860-1930: A Historiographical Analysis of Recent Writings on the Franco-*

Americans in New England,â *Canadian Review of American Studies* 32, no. 1 (2002): 105-132.

[2]. The extensive activities of the KKK in Maine, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island and the Catholic reactions elicited in those three states merits each of them two chapters. Richard quantifies KKK membership, but the relative weight he gives each state derives from incidents recorded by the contemporary press. The nativism that Richard depicts is sometimes vague; nonetheless, it includes the tenets explicated by John Higham in his classic survey: antiradicalism, anti-Catholicism, and Anglo-Saxon racial supremacy. See Higham, *Strangers in*

the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1955; 2002).

[3]. This occurred with the Immigration (or Johnson-Reed Act) of 1924, which imposed strict national quotas on immigration originating outside of the Americas.

[4]. George J. Sanchezâs transnational study of the southwestern borderland reveals tensions stemming from factors similar to those that prevailed in New England at a time of mass immigration. See Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican-American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

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