

*The Grand Old Man of Purdue University and Indiana Agriculture  
A Biography of William Carroll Latta*

By Frederick Whitford and Andrew G. Martin

(West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2005. Pp. xiii, 385. Illustrations, appendices, notes, sources, index. \$29.95.)

The land-grant universities made their mark in agricultural education during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although the Morrill Act authorized the land-grant educational system in 1862, agricultural educators had little to teach and farmers generally resisted book learning, preferring the received knowledge passed from fathers to sons. In 1869, Indiana became the twenty-first state to accept the Morrill Act and the twenty-fourth to locate a site for the university. In 1874, Purdue University became the thirteenth land-grant university to open its doors to students. Little agricultural instruction occurred, however, until 1882 when William Carroll Latta, a new graduate of Michigan Agricultural College with a Masters of Science degree in agriculture, joined the university. At Purdue, Latta played a major role in curriculum development, and he earned a reputation as the spokesman for agricultural education in Indiana. He also helped organize Farmers' Institutes, at whose forums university experts explained new agricultural methods to farmers, based on scientific research generated at the state experiment station. In 1907, Latta became director of the Farmers' Institutes, a position that he held until retirement fourteen years later. By the

end of his career, Latta was a generalist in a new age of scientific specialization.

Frederick Whitford and Andrew Martin, both in the Cooperative Extension Service at Purdue, have written a laudatory biography that emphasizes Latta's professional career at the university. By so doing, they provide a glimpse of the efforts to improve farming and agricultural education through applied research and education. The authors portray Latta as the quintessential extension agent prior to the official creation of the position by the Smith-Lever Act in 1914. In this tributary account, Latta is a man ahead of his time, someone who never gets angry, makes a mistake, or takes issue with university administration (which, in 1888, rejected him for director of the state experiment station and requested his resignation because the president did not believe that Purdue could have more than one professor of agriculture).

Latta was, of course, similar to many agricultural specialists at the land-grant universities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—men with practical experience and some graduate training who dedicated their lives to improving agriculture and farm life. The nation

owes much to the quiet workings of these individuals. Yet if Latta had any shortcomings, no reader will learn about them here.

Long block quotes and itemized lists of various sorts give this book a style and format that most historians no longer use. Still, anyone interested in learning about the history of agriculture at Purdue will find the book useful. Agricultural historians may find it helpful for some matters of detail, particularly in relation to the operation of Farmers' Institutes. Vis-

itors to Purdue's College of Agriculture will find it a useful introduction to a man who helped the university to become a center of agricultural research and education.

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### *William Dudley Pelley*

#### *A Life in Right-Wing Extremism and the Occult*

By Scott Beekman

(Syracuse, N. Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2005. Pp. xvi, 269. Notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95.)

On December 7, 1940, the *Noblesville [Indiana] Ledger* announced that a new business was coming to town. Only later did townspeople learn that the firm, a printing plant, was associated with William Dudley Pelley, a controversial figure known as the "High Priest of American Fascism."

Pelley's path to Indiana was a snaking one, along which he had seemingly reinvented himself several times. Scott Beekman expertly unravels the twists in Pelley's life in *William Dudley Pelley: A Life in Right-Wing Extremism and the Occult*.

Born in Massachusetts, Pelley's father was variously a Methodist minister, cobbler, businessman and journalist. The younger Pelley was intensely proud of his "pure English

blood" (p. 2). His first success came in one of his father's failed careers, journalism. After several years spent editing newspapers, Pelley became a short-story writer and novelist, winning two O. Henry Awards for his stories. This led him to Hollywood, where he wrote screenplays, including some for Lon Chaney, Sr., who became a friend. It was in California that Pelley underwent a conversion experience that was the dividing line in his life. His so-called "Seven Minutes in Eternity" and what the author describes as "his ego and overarching desire for public recognition" (p. xv) would move him to the outermost fringes of American society.

One day in May 1928, believing that he was dying, Pelley (as he later