

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

recounted) felt himself pulled into a blue mist. He awakened on a slab, where he was attended by two kindly figures, one of whom, "William," explained to Pelley that "everyone . . . lived hundreds of times before" and that "earth was a classroom" for souls moving up the hierarchy. From the experience, Pelley developed a metaphysical, pseudo-religious philosophy known as "Liberation doctrine," which the author characterizes as "mixing spiritualism, Theosophy, Christianity and pyramidism into a potent concoction" that earned him adherents in both anti-Semitic and metaphysical circles (pp. xii-xiii).

Pelley's anti-Semitism led him to form a group called the Silver Shirts in 1933. He used the group to enter politics, pushing his anti-Semitic and anti-Communist agendas (both of which had been fermenting since his travels through Russia in 1918-1919). Like similar extremist groups, the Silver Shirts were more sound and fury than substance, but they brought Pelley recognition, even among the many detractors who viewed him as a Hitler wannabe. During the same decade, Pelley also formed the Christian Party of America, running for president in 1936. All the while, he was eyed suspiciously by a public and government (particularly the Dies Committee) wary of extremists.

By the time he arrived in Indiana, Pelley had disbanded the Silver Shirts, claiming that he wanted to concentrate on publishing his philosophical ideas. But unable to eschew politics,

he published "anti-Roosevelt and pro-Axis material" in his new religious publication *Galilean*. Ultimately this led to his arrest and conviction for sedition in trials in both Indianapolis and Washington, D. C.

Pelley was sentenced to a term at the Federal Prison in Terre Haute, Indiana. Released in 1950, he returned to Hamilton County (as a condition of his parole) and continued to promote his metaphysical ideas, with a dash of UFO interests thrown in. He called his new philosophy Soulcraft, and his Soulcraft Press published his numerous writings, which found few adherents. Pelley faded from the public gaze and died in Noblesville in 1965. The night before his burial a cross was burned in front of the funeral home.

Beekman has written a coherent, readable study. His epilogue, in particular, offers an excellent overview of the life and legacy of a man now seen as a hero by some current extremist groups.

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