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REVIEW ESSAY
Alfred I. du Pont: His Impact on Florida

by JERRELL H. SHOFNER

Alfred I. du Pont: The Man and His Family. By Joseph Frazier Wall. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990. ix, 685 pp. Foreword, acknowledgments, photographs, tables, notes, bibliography, index. $27.50.)

Through the pages of this large and well-written book, Joseph Frazier Wall delivers all that the title promises and much more. Beginning with the origins of the du Pont family in the eighteenth century and ending with an epilogue about Ed Ball's covetous management of the du Pont estate during the half century after Alfred's death, Wall not only portrays the huge du Pont family through a half dozen generations, but also says a great deal about the growth of business, industry, technology, and finance in the context of the history of the United States from its revolutionary inception in the late eighteenth century. The emphasis is on Alfred I. du Pont who may have been the rebel of the family, but who, as the author demonstrates, certainly was not a black sheep. Wall shows how the powder factory on the Brandywine grew into an enormous manufacturing conglomerate, how the du Pont family also grew from a close-knit group into a sprawling network of cousins and in-laws that more closely resembled "Dynasty" than "Dallas," and how the latter so forcefully and sometimes so disastrously influenced the former.

After writing the book which gave the *Physiocrats* their name, participating in the French Revolution, and authoring the French Constitution of 1791, Pierre Samuel du Pont, the founder of the family, came to the infant United States intent on cooperating with his brilliant elder son in founding Utopian communities on the new frontier. Almost as an afterthought, he gave his blessing to his second son, Eleuthère Irénéé, to build a

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black powder factory. Of the eight projects which Pierre Samuel planned, seven failed. To the father's surprise, the eighth became a great success. E. I. du Pont chose the banks of the Brandywine for his mills because the small river provided needed water power and because it was open country which isolated the dangerous powder works from population centers. The company fortunes waxed and waned as the demand for powder rose and fell. There was great growth during the War of 1812, followed by several lean years until the Mexican War brought another surge of prosperity.

In the meantime, the second generation of du Ponts had taken control of the company. Preceded in 1817 by his brilliant and visionary father, Pierre Samuel, Eleuthère Irénéé died in 1834, leaving E. I. du Pont de Nemours and Company to his numerous children. For years the triumvirate of Alfred Victor, Henry, and Alexis managed the company, but it was the younger Henry who emerged as the major figure of the second generation. Outliving his brothers, "Boss Henry," as he became known, ruled with an iron hand until his death at seventy-seven in 1889. During his reign, he was instrumental in forming a cartel of powder makers with the du Pont Company as the dominant member. The company also began producing smokeless powder and high explosives, but black powder remained the mainstay of the firm.

Alfred Irénéé du Pont was born in 1864, the first son of the first son of the founder of the company. His mother, suffering from severe mental problems, died at forty-one and his father followed her at age forty-nine. Alfred and his four brothers and sisters were cared for by the growing family, but only at a price. When told that they would have to give up their family home at Swamp Hall, the children armed themselves and resisted. A truce was agreed upon, and they were permitted to keep their home. At thirteen, Alfred was successful in his first rebellion against his family. He was not always so fortunate.

At MIT, influenced by his hedonistic Kentucky cousin, T. Coleman du Pont, Alfred chose not to take a degree, but only to pursue those courses in which he was interested. After his stint at college, he returned to the Brandywine where he soon gained a reputation as the best black powder man anywhere. He was as well a mechanical genius, a talented organizer, and a humane employer.

Alfred I. du Pont. Reproduced from *Alfred I. du Pont: The Man & His Family,* by Joseph Frazier Wall.

Alfred's second rebellion came in 1889 when the company was reorganized following Boss Henry's death. Customarily family members were not automatically employed or brought into management. Even as du Ponts, they had to be invited. Alfred had worked his way up until he was supervising production of black powder by 1889. When he was not invited to become a partner, custom dictated that he accept the decision. Alfred pounded on the door until a compromise permitted him to become a stock-holding partner.

During the 1890s under the leadership of Eugene du Pont, the company languished. Alfred fretted that it would not survive, and he almost was correct. The Spanish-American War brought a brief respite, but Alfred still was concerned about the obsolete mills in which he was producing black powder. Eugene du Pont's death in early 1902 forced his survivors to address the question of the future of the company. When all three of the senior officers declined to succeed the deceased Eugene and they refused to offer the position to Alfred, it was decided to offer the company for sale for $12,000,000.

When a sale was not immediately effected, Alfred offered to buy the company. After a bellicose discussion, the other partners agreed to give Alfred the opportunity. Alfred induced his old school friend, T. Coleman du Pont, and another cousin, Pierre S. II, to join him. Since Coleman's wealth and financial wizardry were essential to the venture, he demanded and received the largest portion of the stock as well as the presidency of the new corporation. When the transaction was completed, Coleman was the new president and major stockholder; Alfred and Pierre also had substantial blocks, and all the former partners retained smaller portions. Due to Coleman's financial prowess, all of the cash necessary to complete the arrangement was borrowed. The three cousins had gained control of a new $12,000,000 corporation without spending any of their own money. Best of all for Alfred, he was designated general superintendent of production in all the numerous du Pont plants scattered from Delaware to the midwest. It was a major undertaking, and Alfred's initiative had made it possible. Unfortunately, he found it necessary to make major concessions to his cousin Coleman in the process. Although Alfred and Pierre were exceptionally close at this period of their lives, Pierre, too, would become a problem in time.

Alfred's management of the company's production was a success, but his family life was a different matter. While he was busy modernizing his production facilities, he also was enduring an unhappy home life. His wife, Bessie, spent more and more time in France with their four children. In the meantime, an old childhood injury was causing Alfred to go deaf. In 1904, a hunting accident left him with only one eye. In 1905, he moved out of Swamp Hall. He was divorced the following year, and Bessie moved to France. During this difficult time, Alfred had befriended his beautiful cousin, Alicia, who had problems of her own. Not only was she married to an unfaithful husband, but her own father was denouncing her to other family members. Then, shortly after Alicia's divorce, she and Alfred were married. Most members of the family were outraged. Coleman asked Alfred to resign from the firm immediately. Even Pierre began to be cool toward his former ally.

Alfred lost his composure. Bessie became the object of his vindictiveness. He did not speak to his children for fourteen years. He razed Swamp Hall to the astonishment of the family, sued some of his relatives for their slanders of Alicia, and built the dazzling Nemours mansion for his new wife. This second marriage never was particularly happy, and it ended with Alicia's death in 1920.

During these early years of the twentieth century, the company experienced organizational problems. Ruled in violation of the Sherman Anti-trust Act, it was forced to reorganize. Having cooled toward Alfred, at least partially because of his personal life, Pierre now joined with Coleman to reorganize the company to the disadvantage of his cousin and former business associate. Alfred was removed from his supervisory role of production and left with no other duties except a position on the board of directors where he consistently would be outvoted.

Relieved of the responsibilities which he had thoroughly enjoyed, Alfred turned to other matters. He looked into the possibilities of expanding into cellulose nitrate and producing synthetic products for a market other than the military. Years ahead of his time, he later saw the company succeed enormously in this area but only after very difficult times following World War I. He formed a partnership with Dr. Howard Kelley of The Johns Hopkins to promote cancer research. In that capacity he bought four Colorado uranium mines and managed to produce a small amount of radium for Dr. Kelley.

Alfred seemed content to leave company affairs to his cousins, but they brought on one more battle which left him embittered toward his former ally, Pierre. Financially strapped by his New York investments, Coleman suddenly offered to sell his Du Pont stock to the company. Pierre, using his position in the company, secretly purchased the stock in his own name and emerged as the majority stockholder. Although Alfred pursued a successful lawsuit against Pierre for his breach of faith, the victory was a hollow one because the board of directors supported his cousin. Alfred never forgave him.

He was so angered that he went briefly into Delaware politics as a reform Republican. He unseated his uncle, Senator Henry du Pont, and ended the du Pont machine's hold on Delaware politics. For several years he kept his cousin, T. Coleman, from obtaining a coveted United States Senate seat, although the latter eventually went to Capitol Hill via a questionable appointment by the governor.

The Du Pont Company prospered enormously during World War I, although Alfred's only connection with it was his $6,000,000 annual income. He purchased huge amounts of Liberty bonds and financed from his own pockets the development of a sub-chaser in which he was able to incorporate some of the mechanical innovations he had devised over the years. Seeing the need for a major restoration of war-ravaged Europe after the war, he formed a company through which he intended to promote trade in much the same way as did the Marshall Plan after World War II. Since such an undertaking far exceeded even his great resources, Alfred almost lost his fortune in this enterprise.

Du Pont stock declined precipitately following the war at a time when Alfred was considerably over-extended, and it was some time before the company again prospered through its acquisition of General Motors and the diversification which Alfred earlier had envisioned. In the meantime, he struggled with a debt which led him to consider selling his Du Pont stock.

At this low point in his career, several things happened to change Alfred's fortunes. Soon after Alicia died, he married Jessie Ball, a member of a prominent Virginia family, whom he had met years earlier when visiting her parents' home on hunting expeditions. Approaching sixty years of age (the book is a decade in error, p. 444), Alfred found in 1922 the wife who would love and support him as neither Bessie nor Alicia had. He also gained a brother-in-law who would become a valuable

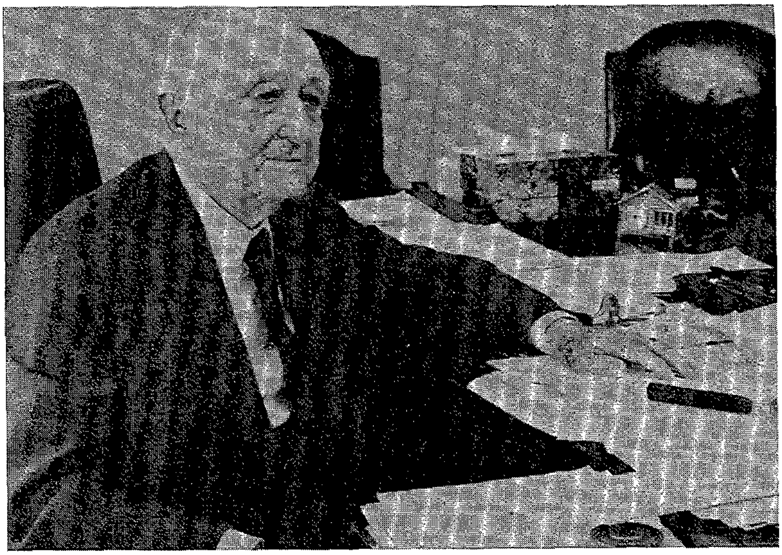
Jessie Ball du Pont. Reproduced from *Confusion to the Enemy: A Biography of Edward Ball,* by Raymond K. Mason and Virginia Harrison.

ally. Ed Ball left his position with a California furniture company and came to work for Alfred. Ball worked out several deals with Alfred's debtors which enabled Alfred to survive without selling his Du Pont stock. Alfred and Jessie began spending some winter months in Miami in 1924. While Jessie enjoyed the feverish activity of boomtime Miami, Alfred continually warned her of the impending financial collapse which he considered unavoidable. When his predictions came true, however, Alfred mused about doing for Florida what he had tried and failed to do for Europe after World War I. Jessie's enthusiasm for Florida and his own desire for good works may well have been sufficient for their relocation to the state, but the catalyst came from an ironic direction.

By 1926, Pierre du Pont had relinquished active leadership of the Du Pont Company and had reorganized General Motors to his satisfaction. Now in virtual retirement, he agreed to head the Delaware Tax Commission to make recommendations about tax reform. Alfred immediately interpreted this as a ruse. He was convinced that Pierre had accepted the position in order to gain access to his, Alfred's, personal financial records. Alfred immediately incorporated the St. Johns River Development Company in Florida and transferred to it all his property except the Nemours estate. He became a Floridian with residence in the Mason Hotel in Jacksonville until he could build the Epping Forest mansion which he and Jessie eventually made their home.

As Alfred told his two trusted employees, Ed Ball and William T. Edwards, "We are now in Florida to live and work. We expect to spend the balance of our days here. . . . Our business undertakings should be sound but our primary object should not be the making of more money. . . . Thru helpful works, let's build up good will in this State and make it a better place in which to live." (p. 486) To that end, he created Almours Securities, Inc., with capital assets of $34,000,000. It included all of his Du Pont Company stock, as well as his other investments.

Appalled at the degree to which banks had been involved in the speculative fever of the 1920s Florida boom and believing that recovery depended upon the restoration of confidence in the state's financial institutions, Alfred instructed Ball to acquire one of Jacksonville's three banks. Of the three– the Atlantic National, Barnett National, and Florida National– only the latter was available for takeover. Once he had acquired the Florida National, he then had to make sure that it survived. When the national economy tottered in 1929, following the collapse of the Florida boom, runs on banks became quite common. Ed Ball borrowed $15,000,000, using Almours stock as security, and stopped an expected run on the Florida National on July 25,



Edward Ball. Reproduced from *Ed Ball: Confusion to the Enemy,* by Leon Odell Griffith.

1929. Having weathered that crisis, Alfred established six other banks throughout the state.

Almost as soon as he arrived in Florida, Alfred began purchasing land in the severely depressed Florida panhandle. When Ball had difficulty finding roads to the areas so that he might inspect them, Alfred created the Gulf Coast Highways Association to promote road building. He proposed a "Florida Loop" comprising a paved road all the way around the perimeter of the state. He also called for completion of an inland waterway along the Gulf Coast. The latter was completed during the New Deal era, but the former had to await the Eisenhower administration.

Recognizing that such services as finance and transportation would not create a stable economy without an industrial base and that Florida's dependence upon tourism was not the answer, Alfred sought ways to provide that base. First, he instructed W. T. Edwards to see what could be done to make the citrus industry more productive. What Edwards found was that the growers, packers, and shippers were not interested in the kinds of quality control, cooperative marketing, and canning of unmarketable fruit that he and his employer envisioned. Just as the Du Pont Company eventually had begun the manufacture of cellulose products long after he had urged it to do so, Florida's citrus producers adopted, years later, Alfred's ideas about improved marketing. In the meantime, he looked elsewhere for ways to improve the Florida economy. The thousands of acres of pine land which he owned in west Florida received his attention. New research by Dr. Charles Herty had proved that younger pine trees produced pulp for paper which was equal to that from spruce trees which then were being used for newsprint in America. After negotiations with the Southern Newspaper Publishers' Association, construction was begun on a plant at Port St. Joe on the Gulf of Mexico. While the publishers agreed to purchase newsprint from the new plant, Alfred's plans soon changed. Ed Ball always had been more interested in making money than Alfred had suggested when forming the Almours Company. Ball pointed out that the profit margin on kraft paper was much greater than that for newsprint and, after a spirited discussion with W. T. Edwards in Alfred's presence, they agreed to proceed first with kraft paper. Newsprint would have to come later. An embarrassed Edwards was left to explain the change to the newspapermen.

During his early days in Florida, Alfred watched his paper wealth grow as the national and Florida economies skyrocketed. Stock splits had given him 582,000 shares of Du Pont stock which was valued at $200 per share. For once, Ed Ball gave his brother-in-law bad advice. When Alfred suggested that some of the stock be sold and the cash kept on hand, Ball adamantly opposed this idea. In October 1929, Alfred's wealth was reduced by about two-thirds to slightly less than $50,000,000.

Alfred du Pont possessed a social conscience and had been generous with his large fortune. He had provided for many less fortunate members of his family, as well as various friends. His commitment was to restoring Florida's economy instead of just increasing his own fortune. During the cataclysm of the Depression of the 1930s Alfred developed his great interest in helping crippled children. He continued support of these projects with sizable contributions. When Delaware legislators failed to enact an old-age pension law, Alfred personally underwrote the state's support for the aged for two years until the legislature acted. He was instrumental in gaining passage of Delaware's old-age pension law in 1931. To alleviate suffering during the winter of 1932-1933, while Herbert Hoover sat waiting for Franklin D. Roosevelt to replace him in the White House, Alfred organized a program to supplement Delaware's old-age pension program by providing assistance to retired and destitute teachers whose meager resources made them ineligible for the regular pension plan. He also instructed his staff to distribute blankets and overcoats to people suffering from the cold. In Jacksonville he hired a fleet of trucks to pick up unemployed men and gave them work cleaning up streets and parks at $1.25 each per day. His list of individual benefactors grew considerably during the latter years of his life, as did his support of crippled children's hospitals.

Alfred welcomed Roosevelt's inauguration in 1933 and approved most of his initiatives during the first 100 days of the Democratic administration. He expressed vigorous opposition to one program, however. When he heard of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, he wrote, "I am utterly opposed to any form of Federal guarantee of deposits, which, even to a layman, must show that such a law would put a premium on bad banking" (p. 542). He also adamantly insisted that the top "banking salary should be Fifty Thousand Dollars" (p. 543). That was what he was then paying Ed Ball. And, despite his initial approval of the NRA, the CCC, the CWA, and the FERA as necessary relief measures, Alfred soon became critical of the New Deal. In 1934 he wrote, "I do wish Roosevelt would let up on his experiments and scrap all his different NRA's and PDQ's and let business take care of itself once more. . . . The people of this country are rapidly drifting into a condition where they are willing to accept from the Government instead of living by the sweat of their brow" (p. 545).

Alfred and Jessie went south earlier than usual in the winter of 1934-1935. He was pushing the completion of the Port St. Joe paper mill, and he was revising his will. Neither Ball nor Edwards had ever seen him working so feverishly. He continued his correspondence with his huge family. Thanks to Jessie's initiative, he had become reconciled with his children. Despite his admonition that he had about as much use for social functions "as a dog would have for wax legs in Hell" (p. 581), he invited his children, several nephews and their families, and Jessie's sister to "a family excursion to Miami Beach" in March 1935.

The two-week cruise left him exhausted. Back at Epping Forest, he continued to work on the paper mill project and to keep up a heavy business and personal correspondence. But on April 24 he became ill, and he died four days later.

Alfred du Pont left an estate of more than $40,000,000. His will provided for numerous family members and for trusts to maintain the Nemours mansion and grounds for public use, and for a children's hospital. The bulk of it went to the Nemours Foundation to be managed by Jessie Ball du Pont, Edward Ball, Reginald Huidekoper (a family member), and a representative of the Florida National Bank in Jacksonville. Jessie died September 26, 1970. During her lifetime she concentrated on many charitable projects while leaving most of the decisions concerning the Nemours Foundation to her brother. The Florida National Bank representative followed her lead, and Huidekoper simply was outvoted. Ball, in effect, became the manager of the huge du Pont fortune. Unlike his brother-in-law, whom he had admired without reservation, Ball had little use for charity. He relished the business of turning a profit. Over the years the Florida National evolved into a chain of thirty banks. Another 1,500,000 acres of timber land was acquired to provide the 4,000,000,000 pounds of wood chips needed annually by the Port St. Joe paper mill, and the Florida East Coast Railway was acquired. The value of the Nemours Foundation exceeded $1,000,000,000 by the 1960s, and Ball had become one of the most powerful men in Florida. During the last years of his life he suffered some losses in the courts resulting from his failure to follow the rules of the trust, but he died June 24, 1986, with much, although not all, of his economic and political power still intact. Alfred du Pont had cast a long shadow although it may have been somewhat different from the one he had envisioned.

In the preceding pages some of the numerous features of this excellent book have been emphasized, but it is impossible to do it justice, even in a review. Joseph Frazier Wall, the author of this definitive biography, was provided complete access to Alfred's papers which at the time of his research were housed in a storeroom at the Florida National Bank Building, Jacksonville. Subsequently, the papers were transferred to Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Virginia, in accordance with the provision for their disposal stipulated in Mrs. du Pont's will. The author also had access to the papers of Jessie Ball du Pont, Ed Ball, and other members of the du Pont family. He conducted a number of oral history interviews with family members, friends, and business associates. Joseph Frazier Wall is professor of history at Grinnell College. His earlier biography of Andrew Carnegie received the Bancroft Prize in 1971. *Alfred I. du Pont: The Man and His Family* is an excellent work which should be read in its entirety. All who do so will be richly rewarded.