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## REVIEW ESSAY

### **Jessie Ball duPont: A Gracious and Generous Lady**

by JAMES B. CROOKS

*Jessie Ball duPont*. By Richard Greening Hewlett. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1992. xvi, 357 pp. Acknowledgments, preface, photographs, illustrations, tables, appendices, notes, essay on sources, index. \$39.95.)

In September 1951 when Governor Fuller Warren asked Jessie Ball duPont to serve on the Florida Board of Control (forerunner of the Board of Regents), he spoke of her as “perhaps the state’s top taxpayer, [who] heads Florida’s biggest business-banking empire” (p. 201). The governor’s description exaggerated Mrs. duPont’s control over the St. Joe Paper Company, the Florida National Bank, and the Florida East Coast Railroad, but there was little question that she was one of the wealthiest persons in Florida. Mrs. duPont and her husband, Alfred I. duPont, had moved to Florida from Delaware in 1926 partly to escape family feuds, in part because Jessie preferred the warmer climate, and also because Alfred saw the potential for economic development in this changing state.

The early hopes of the Florida land boom began to collapse the year that the duPont’s arrived, and it was followed by the devastating hurricane that destroyed much of the southern coast of the state. In the northwest corner of Florida an impoverished Panhandle had never recovered from the Civil War. Only Jacksonville seemed to possess a solid economic foundation, and it was to that city on the St. Johns River that the duPonts moved.

In many ways Alfred duPont approached Florida like his predecessors Henry Plant and Henry Flagler. All sought to foster economic development. But duPont went further. His business colleague, William T. Edwards, subsequently remembered duPont telling him and his younger associate, Ed Ball: “Our business undertakings should be sound but our primary object

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should not be the making of more money— we have enough money for ourselves and any of these needs. Through helpful works, let's build up good will in this State and make it a better place in which to live. In my last years I would much rather the people of Florida say that I had been of help to them and their State— than to double the fortune I now have."<sup>1</sup>

DuPont essentially brought all of his wealth to Florida, creating Almour's Securities, Inc., capitalized at \$34,000,000 to hold his assets. These included his duPont stock and other securities and real estate, excepting his Nemours home in Delaware.

He next moved to restore confidence in Florida banking. Many banks had speculated in the recent Florida land boom and subsequently had collapsed. DuPont began buying shares in the Florida National Bank in Jacksonville, eventually securing 51 percent control. He next established branches in Daytona, Orlando, Lakeland, Bartow, St. Petersburg, and Miami to help restore banking confidence in those communities. When depositors made a run on the Florida National in the summer of 1929, duPont backed the institution with his own stock, and the bank survived. Within three years, duPont had established a major financial presence in Florida.

DuPont saw banking as the first step in his efforts to foster Florida's economic development. He was intrigued by the severe poverty of the state's western counties. Cotton shipments before the Civil War had brought prosperity to towns like Apalachicola and St. Joseph, but Civil War blockades and postwar agricultural poverty had left the region economically depressed. There were virtually no paved roads west of Tallahassee. DuPont's biographer, Joseph Frazier Wall, compared it to the poverty of the Appalachian region of Kentucky, Tennessee, and West Virginia.<sup>2</sup>

DuPont began to buy large quantities of pine land for development. He lobbied with both state and federal governments for road construction. He benefitted from a scientific breakthrough that created a new process to utilize southern pine, heretofore unfit for the manufacture of newsprint. While the rest of the nation suffered through the Great Depression, du-

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1. Quoted in Joseph Frazier Wall, *Alfred I. du Pont, The Man and His Family* (New York, 1990), 486.

2. *Ibid.*, 491.

Pont and his associates planned for a newsprint mill, later a Kraft paper mill, to provide jobs, utilize local natural resources, build transportation links, and revitalize the town of Port St. Joe. Like the New Deal, which created the Tennessee Valley Authority to the north, duPont envisioned developing the Florida Panhandle in a multifaceted way to enhance the quality of life in the region. Having come to Florida at the age of sixty-two when most wealthy migrants would have looked to retirement, duPont, like Flagler, embarked on a second career for the last nine years of his life.

Meanwhile, in Jacksonville, Jessie Ball duPont began to design, build, and furnish Epping Forest, the new family home overlooking the St. Johns River. The mansion, named after the home of her ancestor Mary Ball (George Washington's mother), became Jessie's showpiece. Ever since her marriage to Alfred in 1921 she had lived at Nemours, her husband's estate in Delaware, which had been built for Alfred's second wife. A handsome, baronial manor, Nemours had been designed and furnished by her predecessor, and Jessie was reluctant to change it. Epping Forest, in contrast, was Jessie's place, though she continued to spend summers each year at the Delaware estate.

Jessie Ball duPont came to her marriage with Alfred at the mature age of thirty-seven; her husband was twenty years older. They had known one another informally since Jessie was a child growing up in the Northern Neck of Virginia on the shores of the Chesapeake Bay between the Rappahannock and Potomac rivers. Alfred duPont had first arrived with a hunting party in the fall of 1899. He befriended the Ball family, including their fifteen-year-old daughter.

The Balls were impoverished gentry, descended from seventeenth-century colonial stock. Jessie's father, Thomas, had studied law at the College of William and Mary and had fought for the Confederacy. After the war, instead of rebuilding a run-down plantation, the father took his family west to Texas. He enjoyed brief success, followed by failure, and returned to Virginia in 1881. Ball settled down to a law practice in the Northern Neck, but he never flourished. The children grew up in limited financial circumstances. One son went to college. Jessie and a sister attended the State Female Normal School (now Longwood College). Jessie received her teaching certificate in 1902. She would have to support herself as an adult.

Jessie grew up an intelligent, attractive, strong-minded person in a difficult era for southern women. She taught elementary school briefly in the Northern Neck and then followed her older brother to California in 1908 where career opportunities were brighter. By 1916 "her abilities as an instructor and disciplinarian" led to her promotion to vice-principal of the largest elementary school in San Diego (p. 27). With no romantic attachments, Jessie appeared to be headed for a career in education.

About this time a correspondence that Jessie and Alfred had shared intermittently over the years picked up, following the death of Alfred's second wife. They met once again during Jessie's annual trip back east and were married a year later. The marriage was an extraordinary one. Both parties were deeply in love. Jessie made Alfred happier than he ever had been. She brought life and joy to Nemours. She reunited Alfred's estranged children from his first marriage, and he in turn fulfilled her romantic desire, which may have stemmed from her teen years when Alfred first came hunting in the Northern Neck.

But marriage was more than an intimate liaison. Jessie was also an extraordinary hostess, perhaps even too much of one in Alfred's later years. She learned and understood much about Alfred's finances, often assisting in business meetings because his hearing was severely impaired. Jessie also subscribed to his views on sharing the duPont wealth with people less fortunate than themselves. Early in his career Alfred had learned the maxim that "with great privilege must also come great responsibility."<sup>3</sup>

To this end Alfred established a private pension program in 1929 for all impoverished Delawareans over the age of sixty-five. With it he supported 1,200 people. During the Depression he created a private pension program for Delaware teachers. In Jacksonville duPont employed 300 men, both blacks and whites, to clear the walks and grounds of city parks and plant shrubs and flowers. In his will he created the Nemours Foundation "as a charitable institution for the care and treatment of crippled children, but not of incurables, or the care of old men or old women, particularly couples" (p. 106). Most of the income from his estate would fund the foundation. DuPont wanted the bulk to be used for the relief of human suffering.

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3. *Ibid.*, 513.

Jessie Ball duPont, meanwhile, had established her own charitable role with money from gifts, allowances, and investments. She helped impoverished Ball relatives and indigent neighbors from Virginia's Northern Neck. The scope expanded, and Mrs. duPont hired a private secretary to assist in the gift efforts. In 1928 she helped "alleviate the debt of a black congregation, . . . start a public library, pay off the debts of a deceased black physician who spent most of his career on charity cases, and provide winter clothes and shoes for a destitute child" (p. 55). Her efforts paralleled those of her husband. When he died in 1935, she began to give away both his wealth and hers.

Alfred duPont's holdings at his death included the Almour's Securities (largely duPont stock), Florida National Bank, the timberlands, railroad, telephone company, beach property in the Florida Panhandle, and real estate in Delaware and Florida. His 582,000 shares of duPont stock alone, at the depths of the Depression, was worth upward of \$50,000,000. Estate tax to the state of Florida eventually totalled \$2,900,000. Neither Richard Hewlett, Mrs. duPont's biographer, or Alfred's biographer, Joseph Wall, declare the exact size of the estate, but clearly it was substantial and continuing to grow.

Following Alfred's death Jessie's younger brother, Edward Ball, took over much of the responsibility for running the business and financial empire. Ball had begun working for Alfred duPont in 1922. Industrious, loyal, and effective, he earned Alfred's trust and greater responsibility. After the latter's death he controlled most of the business operations at the bank and in the developing paper mill.

Ball differed from his sister and her husband in one basic characteristic. Where the duPonts wanted to share their wealth, Ed Ball wanted to amass it. Increasing profits, controlling operations, and expanding the scope of the duPont empire were his goals. Where Alfred had talked about building homes for workers at the paper mill, Ball delayed and then derailed the plan following duPont's death. Ball acquired the bankrupt Florida East Coast Railroad and built it into a prosperous line, defying unions and governmental regulators. As a co-trustee of the Nemours Foundation, he welcomed additions to its capital but reluctantly approved spending its income for either crippled children or older adults. Eventually, Congress passed legislation that forced the Foundation to disburse all of its income—less

expenses and reserves— in a direct effort to break Ball's stranglehold. To a large extent the altruistic intentions of the duPonts, both Alfred and Jessie, were blocked by the narrow purposes of Ed Ball, who sought to maximize the family's wealth.

Ball's efforts, however, did not stop his sister from spending her own money or from using a portion of the Nemours Foundation to build a hospital for crippled children in Delaware. Jessie's annual income ran into the low millions, and she gave away a substantial proportion to colleges like Stetson, Hollins, Washington and Lee, and the University of the South, to hospitals like Jacksonville's Baptist Memorial, and to the Episcopal Church. She became a founder and major contributor to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and to the Robert E. Lee Memorial Foundation at Stratford, Virginia. She served on the governing boards of both institutions. Smaller gifts went to other religious denominations, to Cummer Gallery in Jacksonville, and to Jacksonville Junior College (later Jacksonville University). A possible weakness of the biography is that the extended discussion of her gifts gives only a fragmented sense of their extent and diversity.

Mrs. duPont gave to black industrial schools, but she vehemently opposed racial desegregation in the 1950s at both public and private schools and colleges. She cut off scholarship aid to any college admitting African Americans. Richard Hewlett candidly discusses Mrs. duPont's racial biases, considering her a product of her turn-of-the-century upbringing in rural Virginia. Where a Claude Pepper or Justice Hugh Black changed with the times, Mrs. duPont did not.

That same rural Virginia upbringing probably also influenced her political and social views. Her husband initially welcomed the New Deal, but she believed that FDR was moving Americans toward socialism, or worse. Following World War II she saw the country drifting towards communism, though here her views were not as intense as those of her brother, Ed Ball. A reader from another generation can see Jessie Ball duPont as a relic of the old South, cherishing memories of an ancestral line, achieving wealth and position through a fortunate marriage, living and entertaining sumptuously at Nemours and Epping Forest, and disliking the political, economic, and social changes of the twentieth century.

To say that Mrs. duPont represented only the South's "ancien regime," however, does her a disservice. Dr. Hewlett rightly points to the young Jessie Ball as an independent woman making her own career. He describes her developing interest in helping others through her charity and philanthropy. Her support for private higher education, church, and other institutions was quite exceptional.

But in the end, despite her many strengths and attributes, she remained a secondary figure to her husband during his lifetime and to Ed Ball, who dominated the duPont empire after Alfred's death. She had her own wealth, which she shared generously, but she gave only to certain individuals and institutions and usually with strings attached. Perhaps her greatest contribution was establishing the Jessie Ball duPont Religious, Charitable, and Educational Fund through her will. It began operations in 1970 with assets of more than \$42,000,000. Its works have made a substantial philanthropic contribution, particularly since the death of Ed Ball in 1981.

Richard Hewlett's biography of Jessie Ball duPont reads well, but its substance pales in comparison with Dr. Wall's biography of her husband. In part, it is that Alfred duPont was a more significant historical figure. In part, Dr. Hewlett perhaps focuses too much on the details of Mrs. duPont's life to see the larger picture. That picture does emerge, however, in his discussion of her role as a professional woman, as a product of the values of the first New South (1880s to 1920s), and in his attempt to focus on the shift from her charity to philanthropy in Mrs. duPont's later life.

Still, details get in the way. One reads much about the various reunions at Stratford and board meetings in Richmond but learns little about Mrs. duPont's role in the restoration of Lee's birthplace or the creation of the Virginia Museum, other than through her monetary gifts. Perhaps there was no other role. Her participation in the Florida Board of Control was barely noteworthy.

Another flaw in the book is the author's estimate of Ed Ball's political and economic power. Both Dr. Hewlett and Dr. Wall make references to it, but never with specific examples or citations. It apparently is part of the folklore of Florida political history, but the vagueness of the references raises at least this reviewer's skepticism.

Dr. Hewlett concludes by noting that none of the duPont fund's current governors knew Mrs. duPont, and one of the purposes of the book is to retrieve from the mass of letters, bank statements, photographs, and mementos "the essence of her life and career" (p. 287). Clearly, the life and career are well documented. Her generosity and vitality as a human being were exceptional. The author has written an engaging book of one of Florida's wealthiest residents who, with her husband and brother, helped to shape the history of this state.