

Pelley, William Dudley ^[1]

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Pelley, William Dudley

by H. G. Jones, 1994

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William Dudley Pelley, journalist, novelist, promoter of mystical and political teachings, and founder of the Silver Shirt Legion and the Christian party, was born in Lynn, Mass., the son of William G. A. Pelley, a Methodist minister, and Grace Goodale Pelley. He dropped out of high school and worked in his father's tissue paper manufacturing company until he was twenty-one; he then was associated with a succession of small newspapers in New England. After receiving considerable notice for his short stories published in popular magazines, he was commissioned during World War I by the Methodist Episcopal church to survey foreign missions in the Far East and to write a series of reports for the church's publications. While in the Orient, he was sent by the International [YMCA](#) ^[2] to eastern Russia and Siberia to scout for locations for proposed canteens. Thus he was in Russia as troops from several nations sought to contain the Bolsheviks. Concluding that the entire World War I had been a result of machinations of the Jews to establish Russia as a Jewish homeland, Pelley dated his anti-Semitism from his Siberian experiences.

Upon his return to the United States, Pelley resumed his literary career; this led to the editorship of at least fifteen magazine titles, a dozen books, and hundreds of short stories, articles, and religious and political tracts. His second book, *The Fog* ^[3] (1921), is said to have sold nearly 100,000 copies; the third, *Drag* ^[4], was made into a motion picture featuring Lon Chaney. For several years Pelley lived near Hollywood, writing movie scripts and investing in several business ventures. He claimed that on the night of 29 May 1929, while lying in his cottage on the side of the Sierra Madre Mountains, he suddenly felt himself "quitting" his body and for seven minutes he communed with departed friends "behind the beyond." When he returned to his mortal body, he found that he could receive messages from "clairaudient voices." He later reported that while he was on a train passing through the Mohave Desert, Christ appeared to him and promised to give him wisdom as the circumstances demanded. From that time on, Pelley called Jesus "My Elder Brother."

His story, "[Seven Minutes in Eternity—Amazing Experience That Made Me Over](#)" ^[5], caused a sensation when it appeared in *American Magazine* (March 1929). Some readers were offended by what they considered a hoax; others believed his story and became followers when he established the League of the Liberation and began publishing his mystical teachings through the *New Liberator*, organ of the league. Reportedly, 476 assemblies or study groups sprang up around the country. In search for an appropriate location for a college at which he could impart his "renovated Christian religion," Pelley moved to [Asheville](#) ^[6] in 1932, chartered the Foundation for Christian Economics, and started Galahad College, a sort of "spiritual clinic for people troubled by religious and psychical problems." The school operated only one summer, after which Pelley published his lectures and enrolled hundreds of persons in a correspondence course.

Increasingly, Pelley's magazine and other publications assumed a political and racial tone. The anti-Semitism and anticommunism expressed during World War I again was asserted, and he viewed the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt (whom he called a "Dutch Jew") as evidence that "Dark Forces"—which he now identified as Jews and communists—were conspiring to set up a dictatorship in the United States. On the day following Adolf Hitler's induction as chancellor of Germany, Pelley announced formation of the Silver Shirt Legion of America (chartered the following year in Delaware), an "American Aryan Militia" ostensibly to "foster, promote, and develop political patriotic principles." It is probable that the league—whose members wore a silver shirt with the letter "L" (for liberation) on the shoulder, a tie, blue corduroy trousers, a service hat, and leggings—reached a membership of no more than 25,000 at any one time until it disbanded in 1940. The press and congressional committees, however, exaggerated its strength, and Pelley, who was investigated for pro-Nazi activities beginning in 1934, gloried in his notoriety. The league was strongest in California and Washington State.

In 1935 Pelley formed a political arm for the Silver Shirts, the Christian party, which espoused establishment of a "Christian Commonwealth" in which the assets of the nation would be taken over and run as a giant corporation. Each newborn would be given one share, and individuals could earn additional shares by contributing significantly to the welfare of the nation. One city in each state would be set aside as a "Beth-Haven" in which Jews would reside. The next year the Christian party was admitted to the ticket in only one state, Washington, where the chief of the Silver Shirts and his running mate, Willard M. Kemp, received only 1,598 votes. Pelley charged that a Jewish-instigated conspiracy plugged the handles of the voting machines in many Washington polling places and blocked his party from the ballot in the other states.

From 1932 to 1941 Pelley maintained his headquarters in Asheville, from where he shipped tons of materials to followers around the country. His business and publications were conducted under a confusing number of names, and following his payment of a fine and acceptance of a suspended sentence in 1935 for violating North Carolina's blue-sky laws relating to the sale of stock, an increasing number of persons suspected his motives. He had little following in North Carolina and was virtually ostracized in Asheville, so in 1941 he moved his operations to Noblesville, Ind. On several occasions the state of North Carolina had attempted unsuccessfully to jail him for violating his parole by publishing pro-Fascist materials, but in 1942 he was convicted of sedition in a federal court and sentenced to fifteen years in prison. Following his parole in 1950, he returned to Noblesville and devoted the remainder of his life to writing on psychical phenomena, extrasensory perception, and reincarnation, and to publishing and distributing these materials to the membership of his Soulcraft Fellowship, of which 104 local study groups were said to have been organized. He was buried in Noblesville Cemetery.

Pelley married Marion Harriet Stone in 1911, and they had three children: Harriet, who died in childhood; Adelaide, who married Melford Pearson; and William Ernest. After divorcing Marion in 1936, Pelley married Helen Hansmann. That marriage also ended in divorce, and in 1956 he married Agnes Henderson, who survived him.

Additional information from NCpedia editors at the State Library of North Carolina:

According to Pelley's memoir, *The Door to Revelation: An Autobiography*, his mystical experience took place on May 29, 1928 (p. 287-288), not 1929 as indicated in the original version of this article by H.G. Jones.

--Kelly Agan, NC Government & Heritage Library

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Origin - location:

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