

## REVIEWS

### *Herman B Wells* *The Promise of the American University*

By James H. Capshew

(Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press and Indiana Historical Society Press, 2012. Pp. xxi, 463. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00.)

Larger than life, surrounded by an aura of guarded omniscience, and armored with a genial affable style, Herman B Wells reinvented Indiana University as a significant participant among the nation's public research universities. The story of this twenty-five-year transformation has been ably told in the third and final volume of Thomas D. Clark's fine institutional history, *Indiana University: Midwestern Pioneer, Years of Fulfillment* (1977), but the full biography of its prime mover has, until now, remained something of a mystery.

Wells, president from 1937 to 1962 and university chancellor until his death in 2000, proved remarkably adept at deflecting close observation of his personal life by continuously living in public spaces, working for multiple and distinct groups in different places, and often managing multiple assignments and responsibilities at the same time. Out of this incredi-

bly active existence, Wells developed a seemingly limitless and dynamic network of friends, colleagues, acquaintances, and collaborators who insulated him from most close observation, with the possible exception of perhaps a few confidants with an admirable commitment to discretion. These characteristics make the challenge of a biographer especially difficult. Fortunately, James H. Capshew's *Herman B Wells* brings exhaustive research, careful analysis, sympathetic but clear-eyed assessment of his subject, and a deep understanding of Indiana University to this challenge.

Although Wells's biography has its beginning in small-town Indiana, by 1930 the narrative quickly becomes the story of the university, the man, and their unbreakable and symbiotic relationship. It tells of how Wells, before even completing his graduate work, had leveraged his rapidly expanding network of colleagues and

associates from his IU undergraduate days, his extensive banking connections, and his graduate experience at the University of Wisconsin into a faculty appointment in the school of business. From that moment on, Wells never permitted his ambitions, enterprises, or interests to break that organic and sustaining connection between man and institution. His focus always remained on Indiana University, and once appointed president in 1937, his campaign to bring IU into a degree of parity with the better institutions of the upper Midwest succeeded because his strategy for personal advancement relied on and sustained a complementary strategy for the institution's advancement.

Capshew's thorough account allows us to recognize that both man and institution came from provincial small-town Indiana backgrounds. By the time their histories merged, both had created successful, locally focused reputations as effective, charming, and reliable servants of the political and economic interests of the Hoosier state. Part of Herman Wells's genius lay in his recognition that a Bloomington base for himself and his university would be insufficient to sustain his and the institution's ambitions. For IU to take a significant position within the community of major universities, the university and its president required, in addition to a strong Hoosier foundation, a substantial involvement in activities of national and international significance. For the university, it meant finding, attract-

ing, and sustaining a faculty of national academic distinction. For the president, it meant creating the opportunities to serve in significant roles not just on state but especially on national and international commissions, agencies, and organizations. Through the exceptionally focused, energetic, and effective pursuit of institutional distinction and personal engagement, Wells drove his university and himself to unprecedented heights of achievement.

This biography, respectful of the man and his legacy, provides a fine account of the joint transformation of the university and its leader. Wells's own autobiography, *Being Lucky: Reminiscences and Reflections* (1980), in its graceful self-effacing reinvention of the past, nonetheless underscores the core message of this biography. Wells and his university enjoyed a fortuitous combination of conditions and circumstances that made this story possible. Absent any element, the magic would have dissipated.

First, and always, there was the man himself. Wells's talent for effective, focused, and practical work on behalf of many groups and organizations built both a reputation for utility and a wide network of appreciative coworkers, collaborators, and patrons who frequently mobilized to support, manipulate, and lobby on their colleague's behalf. Wells left little to chance and personally pursued the people, issues, and policies necessary for success. Although clearly a man with a keen appreciation of his own

worth, he always found a means of giving others an honored place at the table. As this biography shows, Wells consistently sought participation and leadership in successful enterprises that related to or provided leverage for Indiana University.

These personal qualities coincided with a moment in IU's history when the institution and its board, along with many of the university's constituencies, recognized that the long presidency of William Lowe Bryan (1902-1937) had left the university a good undergraduate institution but behind the levels of quality visible in the expanding graduate programs and research focus of its mid-western competition. The strong, flexible, and even indulgent support that Wells enjoyed from his board throughout his long term facilitated a rapid reconstruction of faculty talent and positioned IU to capture significant advantages from the processes and consequences of World War II.

Although Wells articulated a philosophy of a faculty- and student-centered institution, Capshew's biography shows that his management relied on strong presidential authority delivered primarily through trusted associates who would fight the retail battles of academic management. Wells, in the meantime, travelled the state, country, and eventually the world with the message of IU's significance and distinction, personified by its genial, charming, and effective president. Wells and his associates personally recruited the faculty and selected the

administrators, deans, and department chairs who would give new direction and energy to the university. He consulted widely but kept the ultimate decisions on priorities, policies, and people in his own hands. Wells's knack for attracting loyal and competent colleagues to manage his plan for institutional development left him time and space to assume national and international roles. By making himself indispensable, he built the reputation and visibility IU needed to maintain and improve its position among its competitors. This fine biography, when read with Clark's more institutionally focused history, provides a truly comprehensive picture of the inner workings of the institution and of the exceptional leadership role of its president.

Herman Wells lived in an era in which respect for academic leadership, a political and social commitment to the expansion of research university capability, and a strong recognition of a common purpose of university and national achievement thrived. Perfectly adapted to his time, and aided by good fortune and his own talents, he succeeded beyond his dreams and became an IU icon. Wells and his university ultimately set an unbeatable standard for transformational accomplishment.

This biography, with its depth of research and its careful analysis, provides Indiana University's admirers with a clear understanding of the man and his complex engagement with his university. Capshew's work relies on

an extraordinarily thorough exploration of documents, oral histories, interviews, and related books and articles. He gives readers a clear view of Herman Wells's trajectory through academic and public space. His careful work allows us to see the president's values expressed through his actions, policies, and decisions, and provides us with a remarkably detailed understanding of Wells's skillful management of potentially controversial issues, careful cultivation of individuals, and strong defense of academic values.

Wells wrote little that could be called personal introspection. The record contains dictated messages—each with a carefully thought-out purpose—prepared to achieve intentional results. His exceptional charm and warm personality led people to believe they knew him well, but everyone believed he was their personal friend. Capshew's close reading of the documentary and oral history record provides many remarkable insights into Wells's personal life, his commitment to his fraternity, his personal engagement with the defense of Alfred Kinsey's controversial enterprise, his

careful but steadfast efforts to improve race relations on campus, and other similar issues of the era. Sometimes the most telling comments appear in the valuable and extensive footnotes. Even so, I wish that Capshew would have attempted an even closer interior analysis of his subject's motives and personal opinions, but perhaps the man was so completely his public self that such speculation would not help us understand him better. In any event, Capshew's work is a fine biography of an extraordinary individual, and we are in his debt for this definitive perspective on Herman B Wells.

JOHN V. LOMBARDI is Professor of History at Louisiana State University and co-editor of *The Top American Research Universities* (2000). He is president emeritus of the University of Florida; former chancellor of the University of Massachusetts Amherst; former president of the Louisiana State University system; and has served as dean of International Programs, dean of Arts and Sciences, and faculty member of the History Department at Indiana University (1967-1987).



### *Blood and Smoke*

*A True Tale of Mystery, Mayhem, and the Birth of the Indy 500*

By Charles Leerhsen

(New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011. Pp. xiv, 273. Illustrations, appendix, note on sources, index. \$26.00.)

The first Indianapolis 500, held May 30, 1911, ranks as one of the most

significant moments in the history of automobile racing. In this page turn-