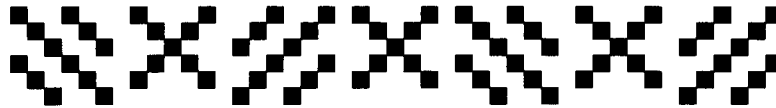


## History, Politics, and the Active Life: Jacob Piatt Dunn, Progressive Historian

*Lana Ruegamer\**



Jacob Piatt Dunn, Jr., (1855-1924) did not cut a large swath in the history of American historiography. Those who recognize his name at all do so either because of his work in Indian history (especially the classic *Massacres of the Mountains*, published in 1886) or because of his multivolumed contributions to Indiana history during his long service for the Indiana Historical Society. His name is not one that rings among those of the great historians of the nineteenth century who have sometimes been described as “romantic,” nor is he recognized as a colleague of Frederick Jackson Turner and Charles A. Beard, arguing the importance of sectional and economic interests in the interpretation of the early national period. He belongs neither to the tradition of the wealthy amateur belles lettrists nor to that of the first generation of Ph.D.s in history. If he fits any model, it is rather that of the historian cum politician, including such exemplars as Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and—nearer to home—Albert J. Beveridge and Claude G. Bowers. Dunn, of course, was far less prominent politically and—except for Wilson, who was a professional historian—more prolific a writer than these other political men of letters. His example suggests a model for the middle rank of historians who were considerably more numerous than the wealthy amateurs, the new Ph.D.s, or the famous politicians and whose obscurity on the national scene does not refute their local fame and usefulness. And the picture he left of the

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\* Lana Ruegamer, author of *A History of the Indiana Historical Society, 1830-1980* (Indianapolis, 1980), is working on a book about nineteenth century women reformers. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference held by the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic, Indianapolis, July 20, 1984.



early nation, though not informed by ambitious theses, deserves also another look.

Dunn was born in 1855 in Lawrenceburg, one of Indiana's pioneer towns on the Ohio River and just across the border from Ohio. His grandparents had helped to settle the Miami River valley; his parents moved to Indianapolis during the Civil War. They were a middling sort of people, prosperous enough to send their son to college at the Quaker school, Earlham, where he was graduated in 1874 at age nineteen. He took a law degree a few years later at the University of Michigan and found himself at the age of twenty-one ready to meet the world.<sup>1</sup>

Dunn was a handsome, genial youth with a clear head and a facile pen. He practiced law for a few years after college, but his interests ranged much wider than the law. He was especially attracted to history and natural history. Like many young men of his generation, raised on tales of pioneer courage and the military heroes of the Civil War, he also had a taste for adventure. His father sent him and two brothers to Colorado in 1879 to look after some investments in silver mines,<sup>2</sup> and Dunn stayed for five years, prospecting for silver and at the same time exploring Indian lore and Indian history with a passionate devotion to detail. He also worked for several Leadville and Denver newspapers and in covering the political scene became acquainted with the perils of corrupt city governments, which apparently inspired a lifelong interest in political reform.<sup>3</sup>

He was also inspired by the publication in 1881 of Helen Hunt Jackson's *A Century of Dishonor*, an emotional exposé of the injustices inflicted upon American Indians. It may have been Jackson's book that prompted Dunn to consider writing a thoroughly researched history of relations between whites and Indians in the Far West as a scholarly buttress to Jackson's plea for justice.<sup>4</sup> In any event, Dunn undertook extensive research in the history of the Indians in the Far West. He was among the first

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<sup>1</sup> The most extensive biographies of Jacob Piatt Dunn are Caroline Dunn, *Jacob Piatt Dunn: His Miami Language Studies and Indian Manuscript Collection* (Indiana Historical Society Prehistory Research Series, Vol. I, no. 2; Indianapolis, 1937); and Jacob Piatt Dunn, *Greater Indianapolis: The History, the Industries, the Institutions, and the People of a City of Homes* (2 vols., Chicago, 1910), II, 1255-57. See also Lana Ruegamer, *A History of the Indiana Historical Society, 1830-1980* (Indianapolis, 1980), especially chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Caroline Dunn, December, 1979.

<sup>3</sup> Jacob Piatt Dunn, *The Omitted Paper: Municipal Financial Pressure, An Address before the Second Annual Conference on Taxation in Indiana* (n.p., [1915]), 8.

<sup>4</sup> Jacob Piatt Dunn, *Massacres of the Mountains: A History of the Indian Wars of the Far West, 1815-1875* (New York, 1886), 147-50.





JACOB PIATT DUNN

Courtesy Indiana Historical Society Library, Indianapolis.

historians of this subject to base his narrative on government documents, which he used extensively.<sup>5</sup>

In 1884 Dunn returned to the practice of law and to Indianapolis, where he researched his book in the Indiana State Library, an official repository for federal publications. The resulting manuscript was published in 1886 under the sensational (and somewhat misleading) title *Massacres of the Mountains*. While the title suggests a cheap potboiler, what Dunn produced was an

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<sup>5</sup> John A. Hawgood, "Historical Forward," in *ibid.* (reprint, London, 1965), 1.



evenhanded, even sober-minded recital of a depressing series of events, with a thoughtful analysis of policies and personalities along the way. Not that *Massacres* was in any way dull; those who bought the book for the gory thrills of brutal Indian wars were probably satisfied that they got their money's worth. But along with the inescapable gore they received a large-minded view of the tragedy of the western Indians and a detailed analysis of the events and policies that led to the tragedy. The book turned out to be a classic, and it is still used and respected by scholars a century later.

Dunn did not distance himself from the events and policies he described; his was no Olympian view. He was capable of outrage and even outraged eloquence on the subject of injustice and stupidity. On the removal of the peaceable White Mountain Indians in 1875 from their homes on the orders of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Dunn wrote:

Search you now the history of the whole world and find a more wanton act of tyranny than the removal of these Indians from their homes. They would have saluted a Gesler's hat without a murmur; they would have paid a tax on tea without much remonstrance; a foreign lord might have lived in their Dublin Castle without making them desperate. It is almost questionable whether Nero would have been capable of treating his friends and allies as the humane gentlemen treated these unfortunate bands, and yet men ask why the Apaches cannot be made peaceable.

Dunn concluded: "There are some Indians into whose necks it will not do to grind your heels too far."<sup>6</sup> But the effectiveness of these outbursts comes from their relative rarity. In general, Dunn, while he set about parceling out blame and credit in his narrative, found few villains and few heroes—just victims of generations of bad policies on all sides.

While Dunn was clearly no tract writer in *Massacres*, he was concerned to affect policy. He made extensively argued cases against the Indian Bureau policy of concentrating more and more Indians onto smaller and smaller reservations and against the unchecked power of Indian agents. His narrative is filled with "lessons" to be learned from the errors of the past—some of which grate harshly on late twentieth century ears, as for example his advice that firmness is more important than kindness in dealing with Indians; his conclusion that it was essential to break the spirit of the Indians in order to "civilize" them; and his unquestioned goal of "Americanizing" Indians so that "the Indian will almost be lost in the American."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Dunn, *Massacres of the Mountains*, 736.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-26, 164, 726.



What makes *Massacres of the Mountains* a classic is its richly detailed narrative firmly based in documentary evidence and Dunn's clearheaded analysis of who did what to whom in hundreds of clashes between Indians and their white competitors for land and power in the Far West. While the book had neither great heroes and exalted narrative on the one hand nor a strong progressive thesis on the other hand, it was soundly researched and thoroughly readable history.

*Massacres of the Mountains* did very well for its thirty-one-year-old author. On the basis of it Houghton Mifflin invited Dunn to prepare the volume on Indiana in the publishing firm's prestigious *American Commonwealths* series; thus he joined such illustrious contemporaries as Reuben Gold Thwaites and Josiah Royce in the series list.

In the course of his researches both for *Massacres* and the Indiana volume Dunn found himself drawn willy-nilly into his home state's small historical society movement. When he first began to try to use the state library, he discovered the deplorable condition of historical materials in Indiana. In 1885 the library was temporarily housed in a few rooms downtown awaiting the construction of the new state capitol. There was no order to the federal publications Dunn used so extensively and no card catalog. A large number of the books, which supposedly numbered 23,000 volumes, were falling apart, and a significant percentage was composed of duplicates. The large pamphlet collection was nearly unusable because the pamphlets were unbound and uncataloged. The Indiana materials were especially pathetic; there was no complete set of state and territorial laws and only a fragmentary collection of other state publications. No state archives existed except the files of the secretary of state, which were inaccessible and incomplete.<sup>8</sup>

It was probably fortunate that Dunn was not the only person who found the situation burdensome. Several other local historians joined forces with Dunn to try to remedy the problems. One of them was a major figure in the state Democratic party (the Democratic nominee for vice-president in 1880, William H. English), another a Republican judge, Daniel Wait Howe. Their first strategy was to revive the moribund Indiana Historical Society, which had been organized in 1830 but had never managed to hold regular meetings for any length of time despite numerous attempts at reorganization and revival. Dunn was elected recording secretary in 1886 and was to be a major figure in the

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<sup>8</sup> Ruegamer, *A History of the Indiana Historical Society*, 80.



society's relative success in the ensuing thirty-eight years. Under Dunn's leadership the society was to be a major force in transforming the state library by the turn of the century with increased appropriations and, eventually, a librarian removed from politics. Dunn accomplished the remarkable feat of prying these funds from a notoriously non-book-minded legislature, he recalled, by a strenuous lobbying effort. He acquired the support of the Knights of Labor and a wide variety of agricultural organizations, such as "the State Board of Agriculture, Horticultural Society, Horse Breeders, Sheep Breeders, Short Horn Breeders, Hog Breeders, Bee Keepers, etc. . . . on condition that the literature of their various lines be put in the library . . . ."<sup>9</sup>

In 1888, the same year that the legislature increased its aid to the library, Dunn's *Indiana: A Redemption from Slavery* appeared. The study was based on published documents and early histories—some of which at least he no doubt found in the state library—with some use of archival materials in Canada and in Congress. Only a few Indiana manuscripts are cited. Dunn's acknowledgments suggest heavy reliance on librarians and copyists in Quebec, Toronto, Boston, and Washington, though he himself may have traveled to some of the libraries mentioned. Like *Massacres*, Dunn's *Indiana* was well researched and even-handed, though readers may have been disappointed that at the end of the 450-page book Dunn had brought them no further than statehood in 1816, seventy years before. (In the 1905 revision Dunn tacked on a fifty-page summary of the succeeding ninety years of Indiana history, though he used only six pages to summarize the forty years since the Civil War.)

Dunn's thesis was that Indiana politics since the Ordinance of 1787 had been shaped by the slavery issue and that, despite a complex heritage that inclined the territory to be "soft" on slavery (including a proslavery territorial governor, William Henry Harrison), "the men of Indiana," as he put it, emancipated the state by outlawing slavery in the first state constitution.<sup>10</sup> Dunn's book is heavy going in the parts where he traces the legal history of slavery in the Northwest Territory, and whenever he is trying to establish disputed dates, the text reads like a long, knotty footnote; but much of his work is unforgettable. His descriptions of the *coureurs de bois*, French settlers, and George Rogers Clark's famous expedition to Vincennes are

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-96; quotation is on p. 95.

<sup>10</sup> Jacob Piatt Dunn, *Indiana: A Redemption from Slavery* (American Commonwealths series; Boston, 1888), 444.



wrought with enthusiasm and care, and the author's respect for and delight in his material are obvious. Dunn contributes sure-footed leadership through complex political disputes of the territory, analyzing the work of obscure committees and petitioners to explicate the variety of interests that motivated pioneer politics. But most impressive is his chapter-long description of how personal politics operated in the territory, showing the face-to-face style of the very successful Jonathan Jennings, who was elected Indiana's first delegate to Congress in 1809 against the opposition of Harrison. Jennings's success, Dunn argues, had little to do with issues—though he was clearly antislavery—and everything to do with Jennings's attractions as a person. At strategic points in his campaign the twenty-five-year-old candidate pitched in and helped with logrolling and mowing, and he demonstrated his antiaristocratic style whenever possible.<sup>11</sup>

After the publication of two successful books in two years, one might have expected Dunn to make his living henceforward as a state historian, as his contemporary Reuben Gold Thwaites was to do in Wisconsin. There were two obstacles to this outcome, however: the first was the absence of a viable historical society with sufficient funds to support a director, and the second was Dunn's own incorrigible multiplicity of interests. Of these the more serious was probably the absence of an institution to offer him a job. In Madison, Thwaites had worked as a newspaper editor for ten years before being handpicked by Lyman C. Draper as his successor at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin in 1887. Thwaites inherited both Draper's livelihood and lifelong access to the splendid library of rare books and manuscripts that Draper had collected. Since the Wisconsin historical society was located in the same city as the state university, Thwaites was also able to encourage closer relationships between the institutions and to profit from access to professionally trained colleagues, including Frederick Jackson Turner. By contrast, in Indiana there was no great historical society, no great library, and the state university was located fifty miles away in Bloomington—and had no one like Turner in any event.

The closest thing to a position like Thwaites's in Indiana was that of the state librarian, a political job elected by the state legislature, and this Dunn was given for two terms, 1889-1892. Dunn accomplished a great deal for the library in his two terms with the funds he succeeded in prying loose from the General Assembly. He filled in broken sets of books, had damaged vol-

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 11.



umes rebound, worked diligently at the task of cataloging, and purchased historical books along with those on various kinds of animal husbandry that he had promised in return for support. Unfortunately, the relatively generous monetary support awarded to the library by the legislature during Dunn's terms turned out to be a brief interruption in an otherwise unbroken pattern of penuriousness. The General Assembly halved the state library's appropriation for 1893-1894, and it must have been clear to the enterprising young Dunn that there was no career in the state library.<sup>12</sup>

The career that Dunn settled upon was that of a political man of letters—a political journalist with frequent forays into political office, both elective and appointive. Though Dunn is remembered for his historical publications and his faithful service to the Indiana Historical Society, he made his living as a professional Democrat.

Dunn began writing occasional editorials for the Indianapolis *Sentinel*, the local Democratic organ, soon after his return from Colorado. He was on the staff of the Republican Indianapolis *Journal* for a year before his election as state librarian (while he was lobbying for increased appropriations for the library) and returned to the staff of the *Sentinel* after his terms were up. Even while he was serving in various offices, Dunn continued to write for newspapers.<sup>13</sup> Journalism was his primary source of income for most of his adult life, and most of what he wrote was partisan political analysis. In a day when both politics and newspapers played a larger role in most people's daily lives than they do now—politics surely was *the* major sport for most American men until World War I—"Jape" Dunn was a master of the shrewd and entertaining political editorial. Consider this typical example on paternalism—which he opposed—from 1894 (one of the few periods when Dunn was in charge of editorials for the *Sentinel* and when, consequently, it is reasonably certain that any given editorial was written by him):

How can you distinguish any demand that may come from any class of people, for government aid, from the grants of government aid that have been actually made during the past thirty years? . . . Suppose the inmates of the penitentiary

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<sup>12</sup> Ruegamer, *A History of the Indiana Historical Society*, 95-96; *Indiana State Library Report, 1889-1890*; *ibid.*, 1891-1892; *ibid.*, 1893-1894; *ibid.*, 1895-1896.

<sup>13</sup> While Dunn's autobiographical sketch does not mention his work for the Indianapolis *Sentinel* shortly after his return from Colorado, his obituaries specifically mention his early writing for that newspaper, and his sketch of the *Sentinel* for *Greater Indianapolis* confirms this. Dunn, *Greater Indianapolis*, II, 1255-57, I, 413; Indianapolis *Star*, June 7, 1924.



at Michigan City should ask the government to give them a bounty of \$20,000,000 a year, as the McKinley law gives to the sugar trust? Why not do it? They are just as law-abiding and just as useful people to the country as the controllers of the sugar trust. Indeed they are not nearly so demoralizing to public morals.<sup>14</sup>

His remarks about the powerful Republican Senator John Sherman struck a similar note.

The most discouraging thing connected with the rapid movement toward universal bimetallism is the fact that John Sherman announces that he favors it. This is prima facie evidence that there must be some awful financial fallacy involved in the matter, for John Sherman never voluntarily got on the right side of any currency question in his life.<sup>15</sup>

While his drollery was nearly always contentious and partisan, its style and tone place it firmly in the tradition of political humorists like Finley Peter Dunne and Will Rogers. Droll, combative, and sarcastic, Dunn needled his opponents and wheedled his fellow Democrats with great skill.

Dunn was, of course, a reformer, though he often spoke scornfully of reformers. He loathed anyone who seemed to be holier-than-thou; somehow reform was all right as long as the people making the rules did not pretend to be better than those who were breaking them. As Dunn saw it, reform was a matter of self-interest. Defending himself against fellow Democrats who objected to his attacks on Democratic malefactors, he wrote: "There is nothing to be gained by attempting to whitewash guilty or incompetent officials. The people are not fools. The democratic party in Indiana never prospered as it has since it inaugurated the policy of punishing its own rascals."<sup>16</sup>

By 1888 Dunn was assigned to the literary bureau of the Democratic State Central Committee and flung himself into the tariff question with a ninety-five-page tract entitled *Seven Percent Off: What the Democratic Party Demands from the Protection Monopolists*. He was an important factor in the successful campaign for the Australian ballot in 1889, making Indiana one of the earliest states in the nation to adopt this method of vot-

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<sup>14</sup> Indianapolis *Sentinel*, May 1, 1894. For evidence that Dunn was the editorial writer for the *Sentinel* in this period see Dunn, *Greater Indianapolis*, I, 414. Dunn was also in charge of the *Sentinel* briefly in 1888. Jacob Piatt Dunn, *Indiana and Indianans: A History of Aboriginal and Territorial Indiana and the Century of Statehood* (5 vols., Chicago, 1919), II, 744.

<sup>15</sup> Indianapolis *Sentinel*, May 5, 1894.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, May 24, 1894. See also Dunn's remarks on the "peace policy" in *Massacres on the Mountains*, 25-26, and his statement on "the fundamental principle of modern reform legislation," i.e., that while you cannot legislate morality, "you can sometimes prevent men from reaping the fruits of dishonesty." Jacob Piatt Dunn, *The New Tax Law of Indiana and the Science of Taxation* (Indianapolis, 1892), 35.



ing, and the Indianapolis city charter in 1891—both measures that had tremendous impact on the political history of the state. He was a strong influence in the major tax reform enacted in 1891 and was a member of the state tax commission that recommended revisions in the law in 1917. While Dunn occasionally published articles and pamphlets on national issues like the remonetization of silver and the tariff, most of his work dealt with local issues—either municipal problems like paving the roads and building local libraries or state issues like taxation and revision of the state constitution.<sup>17</sup>

Dunn became an expert on improving libraries during his tenure as state librarian and was appointed to the state public library commission at its inception in 1899. He served as its president until 1914 and was a member until 1919, diligently advising township officials how to claim their Carnegie library money and how to improve local libraries.<sup>18</sup>

Dunn was the Democratic candidate for Congress in his district in 1902, during the long period of Republican domination in state politics from 1894 to 1908. He lost, of course, but he was appointed city controller in 1903 and ultimately served two terms in the office.<sup>19</sup>

While Dunn was making his living as a politician and political writer, he continued to research and write history. Some of these projects were very large, so that one is continually amazed at his productivity. This part-time historian produced five monographs for the Indiana Historical Society and edited its first seven volumes of publications (each volume including numerous monographs). He contributed scholarly articles to professional historical and political science journals.<sup>20</sup> He wrote for extensive biographical publications like *Men of Progress: Indiana* (1899) and *Memorial and Genealogical Record of Representative Citizens of Indiana* (1912).

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<sup>17</sup> Dunn, *Indiana and Indianans*, II, 744-46; Jacob Piatt Dunn, "Discussion," in *Proceedings of a Conference on Taxation in Indiana* (*Indiana University Bulletin*, Vol. XII, no. 4; Bloomington, 1914), 34; Jacob Piatt Dunn, *The Goodrich Tax Law: Address before the Indiana Democratic Club, September 26, 1919* (n.p., n.d.), 1.

<sup>18</sup> Caroline Dunn, *Jacob Piatt Dunn*, 32; Clifton J. Phillips, *Indiana in Transition: The Emergence of an Industrial Commonwealth, 1880-1920* (Indianapolis, 1968), 402-403. For Dunn's own brief statement of the work of the State Public Library Commission see *Indiana and Indianans*, II, 920-21.

<sup>19</sup> Jacob Piatt Dunn, *Issues of the Campaign* (Indianapolis, [October 2, 1902]); *Indianapolis Star*, June 7, 1924. For Indiana politics in this period see Phillips, *Indiana in Transition*, 39, 45-49.

<sup>20</sup> For a partial bibliography of Dunn's writings see Caroline Dunn, *Jacob Piatt Dunn*, 55-59.





JACOB PIATT DUNN

Courtesy Indiana Historical Society Library, Indianapolis.

Dunn's monumental *Greater Indianapolis* appeared in 1910; and, while the biographies that comprise volume II are in the standard laudatory style of the period, the large first volume is intelligently written, well-researched, vivid local history. Anyone who has ever been obliged to plow through the standard city histories will be impressed by the contrast Dunn's work provides. He is that rarest of local historians: one who never "boosts" and never apologizes. And yet this resolute candor is not purchased at the expense of a social scientist's indifference. Dunn loved Indianapolis; it was just that he loved the town, warts and all. His opening remarks in the chapter on early schools are typical: "One who reads the early school legislation of Indiana is liable to get an exaggerated idea of the extent of the public schools. The provision for them was very full, on paper, but it



did not amount to a great deal in money.”<sup>21</sup> As he debunked these “paper” schools, Dunn also systematically deprecated the conditions historians often use to romanticize the pioneer period. In Indianapolis, according to Dunn, the Indians caused no trouble at all; the ague was no worse there than anywhere else; if the town was less lawless and more religious than average it was only because “it was not on any line of travel”; and, except for the first two years, “there was never any approach to general privation and hardship in Indianapolis . . .” His chapter on railroad development is muckraking history, arguing that the railroads and corrupt courts and state representatives defrauded the state. His is no dull paean; it is critical history at its liveliest—and with footnotes, no less!<sup>22</sup>

*Greater Indianapolis* is also a rather personal history, since in 1910 Dunn had been a resident of the city for more than half of its ninety-year existence, and a significant part of his story about city government after 1885 concerns events in which he played a conspicuous part. Dunn generally acknowledges his role in these controversies and seems fair in giving his opponents their due.<sup>23</sup> Dunn had an astute grasp of how institutions worked and an unparalleled knowledge of the local newspapers, so it is easy to imagine the work’s virtues.

*Greater Indianapolis* was followed nine years later by the even more ambitious *Indiana and Indianans* in five volumes, three of which are biographical. In contrast with his sharply focused *Indiana: A Redemption from Slavery* of thirty years before, in *Indiana and Indianans* Dunn addressed the whole range of Indiana history. The volume afforded Dunn an opportunity to incorporate recent scholarship on many of the events treated in the earlier history; it also provided him with a platform from which to defend himself against the criticisms of Theodore Roosevelt, who had attacked Dunn a few years earlier in *The Winning of the West* for describing George Rogers Clark as “the Hannibal of the West.” Roosevelt had written contemptuously of “the small western historians who have really damaged . . . [Clark’s] reputation by the absurd inflation of their language.” Dunn forcefully defended the appellation (which, he pointed out, was first used not by “a small western historian” but by John Randolph of Roanoke), wittily casting aspersions upon Roosevelt’s command of Latin. While Dunn’s *Indiana and*

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<sup>21</sup> Dunn, *Greater Indianapolis*, I, 121.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 64, 9, 82, 93, 254-67.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, especially chapters XXVI, XXVII, XXXII.



*Indianans* lacks the easy, wide-ranging familiarity that pervades *Greater Indianapolis*, its virtues are great and very like those of the earlier volume. Both works are indispensable sources for workers in Indiana history.<sup>24</sup>

In all these years of pursuing politics and local history, Dunn never lost track of his earliest interest, American Indians. He had demonstrated an interest in Indian languages even in *Massacres of the Mountains*, where he frequently translated Indian names and terms and called special attention to the fact that the Pueblos had apparently lost the art of writing their language, since a book of hieroglyphs that no one was able to read was reported to have been kept by them as a sacred relic.<sup>25</sup>

Dunn made some inquiries about the Miami language in preparing the *Indiana* volume for the *American Commonwealths* series between 1886 and 1888, and in 1888 he corresponded briefly with fellow Hoosier James Mooney of the Bureau of Ethnology on the value of studying Indian customs and languages.<sup>26</sup> (It is tempting to speculate that Dunn, who was still a young man looking for his place in the world, may have been trying to drum up a position with the bureau). But it was not until 1905 that Dunn began regular study of the Miami language. Perhaps he simply needed respite from the pressures of office—he was Indianapolis city controller at the time. Dunn had revised his *Indiana* volume for the *American Commonwealths* series the previous year, and this may have turned his attention again to the rapid disappearance of all evidence that Indians had once occupied Indiana. Gabriel Godfroy (1834-1910), described by Dunn as “the best Miami interpreter in Indiana,” was seventy years old in 1905, an aging and irreplaceable source of Indian lore and knowledge of the Miami language. Godfroy’s family were among the few Miamis left in Indiana when the tribe was moved to Kansas, and Godfroy grew up near Peru on a half section of land that had been left to the family. By 1905 most of his property had been sold to help other Indians in the community, and he was a respected, pleasant, good-hearted old man. Another important source was the even older Kilsokwa, a granddaughter of Little Turtle reputed to be in her nineties in 1905.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Dunn, *Indiana and Indianans*, I, iii, 163-69, 246-51; Theodore Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West*, Vol. II: *From the Alleghanies to the Mississippi, 1777-1783* (New York, 1900), 82n. Dunn’s criticisms of Roosevelt’s treatment were largely supported by Clark’s biographer. James A. James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark* (Chicago, 1928), 474-94, especially pp. 475, 493-94.

<sup>25</sup> Dunn, *Massacres of the Mountains*, 58.

<sup>26</sup> James Mooney to Jacob P. Dunn, November 17, 1888, Jacob Piatt Dunn Papers (Indiana State Library, Indianapolis).

<sup>27</sup> Caroline Dunn, *Jacob Piatt Dunn*, 34, 36-37; Dunn, *Indiana and Indianans*, I, 43-44; quotation is on p. 43.



Dunn's Miami language study led him naturally to make comparisons wherever possible with other, affiliated languages. He researched Potawatomi words with native speakers of the language in 1905, and he also made extensive use of earlier published lists of Miami words by François Volney (recorded in 1798) and Charles N. Handy (1850).<sup>28</sup> There were two major outcomes from Dunn's early Miami language work: first, he published a series of articles on Indian lore in 1907 and 1908, which were collected in a volume entitled *True Indian Stories* in 1908; second, he was actually hired by the Bureau of Ethnology to continue the work on Miami and Peoria languages begun by a German scholar in linguistics, Albert Samuel Gatschet, who died in 1907 after twenty-eight years with the bureau as an expert on Indian languages. Because of Dunn's work on the Miami and Potawatomi languages, Gatschet's annotated collections of texts and vocabularies were made available to Dunn, and he was commissioned in 1908 and 1909 to check Gatschet's texts with Gabriel Godfroy and an Oklahoma Miami woman, Sarah Wadsworth.<sup>29</sup>

In order to do the work Dunn traveled to Oklahoma to consult Miami Indians there. After his trip in April-May, 1909, Dunn was struck with the urgency of recording the language, since it was nearly extinct, and urged the bureau to support Miami verb studies especially. Meanwhile he collected texts from Miamis and forwarded them, with interlinear translations, to the Bureau of Ethnology, along with a report on Miami verbs. Dunn returned to Oklahoma for more visits in 1910, 1912, 1913, and 1914, and he was visited in Indianapolis from time to time by some of his Miami sources. From 1911 to 1913 the bureau commissioned Dunn to work on making a Miami-English dictionary based on an early eighteenth century Peoria-French dictionary compiled by a priest in the Illinois country. He completed only the sections from "Abbaizer" to "Bercher" before the bureau's support for the project ceased.<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps the bureau was reluctant to continue to support a linguistic amateur. Perhaps Dunn's political career seemed an obstacle to these researches—he was appointed city controller again in 1914 and served two years in that position during an

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<sup>28</sup> "Potawatomi word list, as secured from Thomas Topash, 1905," "Potawatomi word list as secured from Quashma, July, 1905," "Comparative vocabularies," Dunn Papers. The titles are listed in Caroline Dunn, *Jacob Piatt Dunn*, 45.

<sup>29</sup> Caroline Dunn, *Jacob Piatt Dunn*, 33, 37-38.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-40; lists of manuscripts in the Dunn Papers are in *ibid.*, 46-48, 50.



especially disputatious period in Indianapolis politics, since both the Democratic mayor and the defeated Democratic senatorial candidate were indicted for election fraud during his term.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps the bureau simply had more urgent uses for its limited budget.

In any event Dunn was not to receive further support for his Miami studies, though he tried unsuccessfully in 1916 to organize a Society for the Preservation of Indian Languages. He continued to work on the dictionary when he could spare the time, and he wrote several more articles on Indian languages and lore for national magazines.<sup>32</sup> He was also an enthusiastic supporter of national efforts to identify and preserve Indian prehistory through archaeological sites in Indiana. In 1920 Dunn urged the annual Indiana History Conference to support the systematic county-by-county archaeological surveys proposed by the National Research Council. He recommended that the surveys "be undertaken by a trained person under the direction of the Conservation Commission" and—always aware of the realities of Indiana politics—he moved that a committee be appointed to lobby for appropriations to fund the work.<sup>33</sup>

Though Dunn did not live to see his language studies published and recognized for the major piece of scholarly rescue that they were, his work has been preserved. The dictionary was edited by a major linguistic scholar, Carl F. Voegelin (later distinguished professor of anthropology at Indiana University) and published in the Indiana Historical Society's *Prehistory Research Series*, funded by Eli Lilly, in five numbers between 1938 and 1940. Voegelin praised his predecessor Dunn for his bold and sensible orthography and used Dunn's work with little editing.<sup>34</sup> Thus, while the Miami language died as a spoken language, Dunn succeeded in preserving it as a cultural artifact and a tool for anthropological researchers.

Dunn, the personal man as distinguished from the Democrat and the historian, has an independent appeal one can scarcely resist mentioning. His daughter recalls him traipsing around in rather baggy clothes, mushrooms tucked in his pockets. He was a dedicated mushroom gourmet, forever searching

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<sup>31</sup> Phillips, *Indiana in Transition*, 125, 384.

<sup>32</sup> Caroline Dunn, *Jacob Piatt Dunn*, 40-42.

<sup>33</sup> *Proceedings of the Indiana History Conference, 1920*, pp. 21-24.

<sup>34</sup> Carl F. Voegelin, *Shawnee Stems and the Jacob P. Dunn Miami Dictionary, Part I, Stems in p-* (*Indiana Historical Society Prehistory Research Series*, Vol. I, no. 3; Indianapolis, 1938), 63. The manuscript dictionary, arranged alphabetically by Dunn, remains in the state library and has been used by descendants of the Miamis.





JACOB PIATT DUNN WHILE HE WAS CITY CONTROLLER  
AS DEPICTED IN A GAAR WILLIAMS CARTOON  
IN THE INDIANAPOLIS *NEWS*

Courtesy Indiana Historical Society Library, Indianapolis.



out inky tops (he braised them with steak), puffballs (fried them in batter) and morrells. He also carried his notes around with him in his pockets, and he interviewed his sources with such a warm interest and at such length that it seriously delayed his work. He was a naturalist and often formed study groups of youngsters to go exploring the countryside on the interurbans. His domestic life seems to have been remarkably pleasant—either because of or despite the fact that he was surrounded by women. His household consisted of a wife, a mother-in-law, a sister-in-law, and two daughters—all very capable, articulate women. Caroline Dunn (his daughter, the former librarian of the Indiana Historical Society Library) remarks with a smile that she always thought he was very easygoing to put up with all this.<sup>35</sup>

Still, one wonders whether the adventures of Jape Dunn's old age do not reflect his desire to escape from this female-dominated home into an unambiguously masculine world. In December, 1921—when he was nearly sixty-seven years old and still quite a vigorous man—Dunn went to Haiti to look for manganese. His trip was arranged by one of his wife's relatives, the president of the Haitian-American Sugar Company. Dunn, a rather droll man, let it be thought that he was going to Santo Domingo to look for Christopher Columbus's lost mine. In his several-month stay in Haiti he apparently did not find manganese, but he did find himself intrigued by Haitian dialects and collected material for later articles about the subject.<sup>36</sup>

Returning in February, 1922, from one adventure, Dunn embarked again on a political campaign that led to another adventure. He worked as private secretary for former governor Samuel M. Ralston in Ralston's quest for the United States Senate. Ralston defeated Albert J. Beveridge in November, and he took Dunn with him to Washington, D.C., as his most trusted friend and political confidant. Dunn had an exciting period as a Washington insider before he began to receive warnings that his adventures were nearly over. He had apparently been infested by some tropical disease during his months in Haiti, and he had several bouts of illness and acute jaundice before he died in 1924.<sup>37</sup>

While Jacob Piatt Dunn is undeniably a "minor" historian, his career reflects the importance of such workers in historical

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<sup>35</sup> Interview with Caroline Dunn.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*; a bibliography of Dunn's writings is in Caroline Dunn, *Jacob Piatt Dunn*, 55-59; *Indianapolis Star*, June 7, 1924. The *Star* dated his Haitian trip, incorrectly, in 1920.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Caroline Dunn.



vineyards. On the national level he did yeoman work among government documents and official reports to sort out Indian-white relationships in the Far West both before and after the Civil War. He preserved a record of the Miami language unique in its extensiveness and careful research. If Indian history and culture are important, then Dunn's work is important. On the local level he prepared long and ambitious narratives of Indianapolis and of Indiana, filled with vivid characterizations and shrewd analysis based on tenacious research and a sensitive use of a multiplicity of sources. It must remain for another historiographer to place Dunn authoritatively within the larger community of local historians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. An impressionistic survey of roughly contemporary, similar-sized histories of American cities, however, suggests that *Greater Indianapolis* is rare indeed in its combination of readability, scholarship, and critical spirit. If local history is important—if the state and the city are worth remembering and attempting to understand—then Jacob Piatt Dunn was an important historian.

Without professional training in history, without the support apparatus of a university or historical society appointment, without bold theses or exalted narrative, Dunn wrote historical works that still are used and respected from sixty to nearly a hundred years after they were written. One could regret that Dunn never found (and perhaps never even sought) a career as a full-time historian. Perhaps with a Ph.D. he would have ranked among the great names of that first generation of professional historians. Alternatively, one might regret that Dunn was not born into great prominence and wealth, so that he could have been Indiana's Henry Adams or Henry Cabot Lodge. But many of the virtues demonstrated in Dunn's work—his knowledge of the workaday world and of how politics and society worked in the early nineteenth century—were presumably acquired by leading the fully engaged life of a journalist and a politician. Perhaps neither an ivory tower nor the cushion of power and wealth would have produced the special perspective of a Jacob Dunn.

So, one has to wonder—at least tentatively, and in a quiet voice—whether the professionalization of history has brought unmitigated benefits. Dunn's life and work show the value of the historian engagé—in the middle of life, taking his knocks and giving as good as he got. Insofar as history is the art of understanding how human beings in specific societies have dealt with the urgent issues of their day and how they made decisions and how institutions worked, surely there is value in the historian's wide knowledge of the real world, outside the cloister of the college



and the university. Dunn in his modest way poses a challenge to a profession in which many lack both breadth of education and a firsthand knowledge of what work and politics and social institutions are like outside the profession.

Finally, it is striking that as acrimonious a partisan as Dunn was in his political writing, he was a fair-minded historian, both of the remote and of the more recent past. In some ways Dunn's histories seem characteristically "progressive": he tended to be legalistic in evaluating issues, and he allotted economic issues a large role in his analyses of both Indian policy in the Far West and the slavery controversy in the Indiana Territory. He sometimes asserted pride in his state and section, as when he expressed his conviction that western men—Indiana men—rejected slavery without direction from Congress. And in his historical writing as well as in his editorials he sometimes allowed himself to be exasperated with the evasion of responsibility and frequent stinginess of the Indiana legislature.

Yet there was little of the muckraker in Dunn's histories: his work is notable for his ability to understand and sympathize with the motivations of both sides of most disputes. Moreover, he does not reflect the tremendous confidence in the possibilities of progress that one expects from progressives: there is a feeling for tragedy in Dunn. He expresses a sense of hopelessness, for example, in contemplating Indian-white relationships. He rails against injustice, claims that the situation has possibilities for improvement, but he also comments with resignation that the discovery of gold was "a greater evil [for the Indians] than any other one event in the history of America, except the discovery of America itself. Gold," he admits, "is a magnet that draws with irresistible force. No power has yet been found able to counteract its attraction."<sup>38</sup>

Dunn believed deeply in the importance of preserving historical records and cultural artifacts. While he rarely had a strong thesis to advance, he had tremendous respect for the past and an almost tender desire to preserve the memory of individuals, events, and institutions. For Dunn, clearly and intuitively, his job was to capture and communicate the past "wie es eigentlich gewesen," a goal dismissed as both impossible and unworthy by Progressive historians like Turner and Beard. However unrealistic and naive the Rankean goal, its virtues are impressively clear in Dunn's work, where his sensitive respect for his material often allows the reader a brief, forceful encounter with the past.

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<sup>38</sup> Dunn, *Massacres of the Mountains*, 125.