

REVIEWS

Jonathan Jennings *Indiana's First Governor*

By Randy K. Mills

(Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2005. Illustrations, notes, select bibliography. \$19.95.)

Jonathan Jennings (1784-1834) is best remembered as Indiana's first governor and a five-term member of Congress, but he was also one of two top leaders in the Indiana Territory—his rival William Henry Harrison was the other. But Jennings has not fared well with historians over the years; instead, as Randy Mills has noted, the politician's reputation has plummeted from its pinnacle, when he was treated as the one who kept slavery out of Indiana, to his current status as a “mediocre” leader or, worse, “a weak-willed alcoholic” (pp. xi-xii).

Neither extreme, of course, is accurate, and in this work, an early volume in the *Indiana Biography* series recently launched by the Indiana Historical Society Press, Mills provides the first full biography of a still enigmatic figure in the tumultuous world of Indiana frontier politics. The author skillfully weaves his way through the limited historiography

on the man, supplemented by deep and thorough research into many relevant contemporary sources—news-papers, published correspondence, memoirs, and travel accounts (but not manuscripts)—and offers a useful, sympathetic portrait of a politician whose intemperance (also an aspect of frontier politics) eventually ended his career prematurely.

Along the way we learn of Jennings's arrival (from Pennsylvania) in the Indiana Territory in 1806, his legal training, and his introduction to the public life of Vincennes, then dominated by the Harrison group of Virginia aristocrats and slave owners. Soon, however, Jennings withdrew to Charlestown, in the eastern half of the state, where he rather improbably became the leader of the territory's anti-slavery faction. As such he defeated Virginian Thomas Randolph in an upset (and officially challenged) election for territorial delegate to

Congress, where he remained until the adoption of Indiana's petition for statehood. Jennings continued in his leadership roles back home, serving first as the president of the Constitutional Convention in Corydon in 1816, and then as a two-term governor, 1816-1822. His public service, which also included his controversial participation in negotiating the 1818 Treaty of St. Mary's (also known as the New Purchase Treaty), concluded with election five times to the House of Representatives, where he served from 1822-1831.

Regrettably, however, there are a few flaws in the book—the curious omission of important details, some problems with chronology, and frequent incomplete, undated citations to the published correspondence. Even the date of Jennings's death, when first given (p. xxvi), is off by two years, and there are at least two garbled sentences and well more than two misspellings and grammatical errors. The omissions include the place of both Jennings's birth and death, and information about his formal education. More significant, though, is the lack of context or basic information (for example, about territorial government) that is necessary for an appreciation of the role that Jennings played in it. Similarly, although Mills provides ample detail about the conduct of political campaigns on the frontier, once he gets Jennings into office—either as governor or member of Congress—we learn almost nothing about the issues

of the day or any actions taken by the incumbent beyond plans for the next “canvass.”

On the positive side, *Jonathan Jennings: Indiana's First Governor* provides an excellent introduction to the difficulties and dangers of life on the frontier (especially chapter 2), and it offers fresh insights into the characters of Harrison, “a calculating politician” (p. 42), and of the fussy, insecure John Badollet, the land registrar at Vincennes. But the portrait of Jennings remains indistinct and blurred; the man's personality, wracked by what Mills terms the “disease” of alcoholism, and his achievements, once acknowledged by all, remain unexplored. This book neither proves nor disproves Donald F. Carmony's comment, in his magisterial *Indiana, 1816-1850: The Pioneer Era* (1998), that Jennings was Indiana's “architect of statehood” (p.1).

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