John Brown Dillon
The Father of Indiana History

It is eminently fitting that we should begin this magazine with a sketch of the man who not only ranks as Indiana's first and best historian, but whose ideals, methods, character and accomplishment we deem worthy to keep continually in mind as a model to follow in historical work.

John B. Dillon may fairly be called "the father of Indiana history," for he was the first to enter that field with any seriousness of purpose, and his contributions exceed in value any that have come after. His real merit is best appreciated by those who seek historic truth and accuracy—who want facts authenticated by the evidences of thorough, conscientious research, and who like the same told in simple, direct language, with no sacrifices for the sake of a popular style. The sense of his perfect honesty and trustworthiness continually grows upon one that has occasion to use him much, and the student of the period and locality with which he deals inevitably comes to use him as the most satisfactory authority. No higher compliment than this can be paid to a historian. Bancroft, Parkman, Prescott, Motley were not more devoted to their chosen course than Dillon, nor brought to their tasks riper qualifications, and had he wrought in the broader field his name might have ranked with theirs in the world's estimation. He had certain noble ideas, severe and simple, as to the office of the historian, and no artist was truer to his art than he to this ideal. They were not ideas that catered in any sense to that popular taste that demands the picturesque whatever may be the fate of truth. It is quite safe to say that he would not, if he had been able, have heralded his works with a blast of trumpets; and that, perhaps, is why even his own friends, as has been affirmed, did not read his books and why he died in poverty.

Mr. Dillon, as a man, was modest to shyness, and so little disposed to talk about himself, even to his nearest friends, that something like a mystery seems to hang over his life. According to the best authority he was born at Wellsburg, West Virginia, in the year 1808. He learned the printer's trade when a lad, and drifted to Cincinnati, where he remained ten years, working at the case. During this period he brought himself into notice as a poet by verses contributed to
Flint's Western Review, the Western Souvenir, the Cincinnati Gazette and other western periodicals; but this disposition evidently wore off with his youth. A few of these poems, among them "The Burial of the Beautiful," have been preserved in Coggeshall's collection of western poets. In 1834 he migrated to Logansport, Ind. Here he studied law and was admitted to the bar, but law was not to his taste, and he never practiced.

About this time he seems to have taken up with his historical studies and to be laying plans for his future "History of Indiana." His first work was issued in 1843 and was called "Historical Notes of the Discovery and Settlement of the Territory Northwest of the Ohio." This was introductory to and contained much of the material for a riper and more ambitious volume which, in 1859, appeared under the title of "A History of Indiana," from its earliest exploration to the close of the Territorial government in 1816; to which was added a general view of the progress of public affairs in the State from 1816 to 1856. It is this work on which Dillon's fame chiefly rests. The fruit of the next twenty years was a small volume entitled "Notes on Historical Evidence in Reference to Adverse Theories of the Origin and Nature of the Government of the United States," and a thick 8-vo. on the "Oddities of Colonial Legislation." These four volumes, together with a few addresses* and a little miscellaneous writing, represent more than forty years of research.

Few historians escape the charge of occasional mistakes, and Mr. Dillon, doubtless, was not an exception to the rule; but, as we have before said, a sense of his trustworthiness grows upon the student, and the seeker after authentic information learns to regard him as the most satisfactory authority on early Indiana affairs. It is not easy to define the quality that begets confidence in a historian—it is, indeed, somewhat akin to the mystery of personality. Suffice to say in this connection that Dillon's work throughout bears the internal evidence of immense industry, unflagging perseverance and an ever-present purpose to find and state the truth. Of his industry and its breadth of scope, too, we have other evidence. In the preface to his "Historical Notes" he refers to "many official documents, * * * a very great number of printed authorities, and many thousand pages of old manuscript records and letters;" and

*One of these addresses. "The National Decline of the Miami Indians," was delivered before the Indiana Historical Society in 1848, and is published in its collection.
in the preface to his History he speaks of "historical researches which for a period of about twenty years have been perseveringly extended over a very large field," and adds this paragraph:

"For the privilege of examining valuable and interesting private collections of manuscripts and other documents relating to the early civil and military affairs of Indiana, my public thanks are due to Hon. John Scott Harrison, of Ohio; Hon. William G. Armstrong, of Clark County, Indiana; the family of Capt. Robert Buntin, of Indiana; Elihu Stout, esq., of Knox county, Indiana; the family of Gen. Hyacinth Lassel, of Indiana; and the family of Gen. John Tipton, of Indiana. For the use of various important manuscripts and other valuable documents, and for many interesting verbal statements concerning the public affairs of Indiana, my acknowledgements have been tendered to General Marston G. Clark, Major Ambrose Whitlock, Mr. Joseph Barron, Prof. Bliss, Dr. Ezra Ferris, Hon. Wm. Polke, Gen. Walter Wilson, Hon. John Law, Mr. Pierre Laplante, Hon. Williamson Dunn, Dr. Azra Lee, Gen. Robert Hanna, Samuel Morrison, esq., Mr. Zebulon Collings, Hon. Isaac Naylor, Major Henry Restine, Hon. Dennis Pennington, Col. Abel C. Pepper, Hon. William Hendricks, Henry Hurst, esq., Col. John Vawter, Col. William Conner, Hon. Stephen C. Stevens, Hon. John Ewing, Samuel Merrill, esq., Hon. John Dumont, John Dowling, esq., Hon. Albert S. White, Calvin Fletcher, esq., Hon. Oliver H. Smith, Hon. John H. Thompson, Major Alexander F. Morrison, Dr. James S. Athon, Hon. Isaac Blackford, Samuel Judah, esq., Hon. Abner T. Ellis, Lawrence M. Vance, esq., Hon. Wm. J. Brown, Col. William Keyburn, and many other gentlemen who have, at different periods, manifested a friendly interest in the progress of my historical researches in the west. In the course of an examination of various old French manuscripts relating to the early affairs of the country lying northwest of the river Ohio, I have, at different times, received essential assistance from Rev. A. M. A. Martin, Dr. Luke Munsell, James W. Ryland, esq., and Col. John B. Duret."

To one familiar with the names of early Indiana notables this quotation is of interest as showing that Dillon was widely in touch with the men who were active in the history of the young commonwealth, and it appears that he diligently improved his opportunities. In this respect he had the advantage over all historians of a later day, for not only did there exist for him, as the pioneer, the wealth of a virgin field, but the venerable men then nearing their ends intimately knew the beginnings of the Territory and State.* Even

*In the preface to the Historical Notes he says: "A list of the persons from whom I have received rare and valuable manuscripts, and aid and encouragement in the midst of perplexing difficulties, shall be published in the form of an appendix at the close of the second volume of this work." In his subsequent History no such appendix exists, and the paragraph above quoted evidently takes its place. In the preface of the first book he mentions Rev. Mr. Martin, of Vincennes; J. W. Ryland, Esq., of Cincinnati; J. B. Duret, Esq., of Logansport, and Dr. Munsell, of Indianapolis, as having rendered assistance in the examination and translation of French documents. In this preface, also, he gives an extended list of works consulted.
the mass of the "manuscript records and letters" alluded to, which might have been preserved for future students, seems to have passed away, and in view of this loss we are doubly indebted to Dillon, who ferreted them out and made such good use of them. General John Coburn's sketch of Dillon,* which is the best published source of information, states that when the latter was secretary of the State Historical Society he prepared and issued many circulars to people in various counties asking questions bearing upon all the prominent facts in the history of different important localities. Answers were received and filed away, and a large amount of data preserved for future use, but this, Mr. Coburn tells us, "has been stolen or destroyed; no trace of it remains." According to this writer Dillon had supervision of the historical material contained in the large State and county atlas of Indiana, published by Baskin, Forster & Co., in 1876.

Mr. Dillon manifestly lacked either the disposition or the tact to adapt himself to the work that promised most. The writing of the "History of Indiana Territory" would easily and naturally, one would think, open the way to a history of the State, especially as that field was entirely new ground. If he had so directed his energies he would, doubtless, have supplied a real and much-felt need far more adequately than any who have since attempted it. Of the two volumes he produced instead, the "Notes on Historical Evidence," and "Oddities of Colonial Legislation," it might be said that he could hardly have chosen subjects less inviting to the popular taste. On the other hand they are conceded to have a distinctive value. The first-mentioned is searching and fundamental in its aim, and touches the origin and nature of the United States government, and the relations of State to Federal authority. Concerning the "Oddities" it will suffice to again draw upon Mr. Coburn, who describes it as a work "so full of information and so unique in character, bearing such indubitable evidences of authenticated and conscientious research that it is without a parallel in American literature, and will be the perpetual text-book upon this subject. Here may be found rare specimens of the vain, ridiculous and laughable efforts of the legislators to patch up the ills of society, as quack doctor's medicines are invented, put on the market and rejected." This book

*Published in the collection of the Indiana Historical Society.
was his last work, being, indeed, unfinished at the time of his death. It would seem that he found a purchaser for his manuscript before its completion, for it is said that he received for it some three hundred dollars—and this was his pecuniary return for years of labor!

Mr. Dillon was one of the many in the world's history who have not prospered according to their deserts. He clove to his work with that unflagging passion which should distinguish the true worker in the exercise of his natural talent, but his books brought him little remuneration. Unworldly, simple-minded and idealistic, with little regard for self, he was ill qualified to contend for the world's rewards. A few stanch friends, who were drawn to him by his ability and worth and beauty of character, exercised over him a sort of paternal care, and through their efforts he was appointed to various public offices which for thirty years afforded him a living. From 1845 to 1851 he was State Librarian, then assistant Secretary of State and Secretary of the Board of Agriculture, and after that an appointee to a clerkship in the Department of the Interior at Washington City, where he lived twelve years. The last four years of his life he spent in Indianapolis, poor almost to the verge of want, his friends afterward suspected, although, with characteristic reserve, he kept that fact to himself. There are many who remember the retired, gentle old man with the never-absent side-glasses concealing his eyes. Being unmarried and entirely alone as regarded blood ties, he occupied a poorly-furnished room by himself in the top of the old Johnson block, where the State Life building now stands. Here he died on the 27th of February, 1879. Not until his effects were examined was it known that he was so poor. His very books had gone one by one to the second-hand store, like household treasures to the pawn-shop, and his friends agree in believing that the fear of want hastened his end.

Forty years of honest, conscientious devotion; four books that people would not buy, and death in a lonely garret face to face with grim poverty because he wrought for the love of truth and not for dollars—this is the life-story of John B. Dillon. He is buried in Crown Hill, just west of the soldiers' graves, and the friends who were kind to him in life have erected a fitting monument to his memory. That he lies beside the heroic dead is well, for he, too, gave his life to a cause and did his country a service.

G. S. C.