

The Indiana Historical Society

By CHRISTOPHER B. COLEMAN

The Conference of Historical Societies has recently published a *Handbook of Historical Societies in the United States and Canada*, containing the addresses, officers, staff of, and brief general information about, each of the non-commercial organizations of a prominent character known to the Conference. The compilation has been made by the Secretary of the Conference, Dr. Christopher B. Coleman, Secretary of the Indiana Historical Society. It is distributed to Societies that are members of the Conference and is sold to libraries and individuals for \$1.50. Approximately eight hundred organizations are listed—a formidable array—not only numerically, but also as to resources and personnel. Even a casual reading impresses one with the amount of historical source material collected by historical societies and with the volume of publication.

Pungent criticism has been made, undoubtedly with justification, of the value and the standard of many of the publications of historical societies. It seems apparent, however, that there has been great improvement in this respect in recent years. As was pointed out by W. Stull Holt in the *Proceedings of the Middle States Association of History Teachers* (Vol. xxxii, 1935), historical writing in the United States has passed through three phases in the last two generations. Down to the beginning of this period, the larger part of the best historical work in the United States was done by men outside of educational institutions, or by persons loosely connected with them. George Bancroft, William H. Prescott and John Lothrop Motley, and most of the contributors to Justin Winsor's *Narrative and Critical History of the United States* were gentlemen of leisure, scholars who gave their time to literary work, and business or professional men who were interested in history as an avocation. There was very little specific instruction in history, as such, in the colleges, and there were very few professors of history.

Within the last sixty years, history has become one of the leading departments in all the universities, colleges and high schools of the country. Under the leadership of university professors, many of the earlier of whom were trained abroad, historical writing emanating from institutions of

learning became more of a scientific and technical character than was the case in the earlier work. The tradition of historical work in historical societies has been slow to take cognizance of the more modern and technical requirements developed in university circles. To be sure, there has been all along excellent and even great historical writing by men such as James Ford Rhodes, James Truslow Adams, and others whose connection has been chiefly with historical societies and only slightly with universities. It seems logical that the two fields should exercise mutual influence upon each other and such has probably become the case. University historical work, taken by itself, has tended toward meticulous, detailed writing upon episodes, personages of minor importance, and minute units of public affairs. Writers outside university circles are often careless, and sometimes ignorant, of the accepted canons of historical criticism; they deal with large subjects in a too cavalier and a too free method of work. The publications of many historical societies also tend to become too local, or often too personal, in the subjects with which they deal. Participation of university men in historical societies and contact of historical societies with universities is doubtless tending toward improvement in all these respects.

The *Handbook of Historical Societies* furnishes a text for reflection on this and other phases of historical work. It is certain to be also a convenience to students doing historical research by making it easier for them to correspond with, or visit, the societies which may be helpful. It should also improve the morale of what might be called the weaker societies by showing the extent of organizations of similar character.

The Indiana Historical Society, together with the New York Historical Society and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, gave subventions to the *Handbook of Historical Societies* which made its issuance possible. It can be procured at the office of the Indiana Historical Society, State Library and Historical Building, 140 North Senate Avenue, Indianapolis; price \$1.50.