

Reviews and Notices

Sons of the Wilderness: John and William Conner. By Charles N. Thompson. Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, 1937. Pp. ix, 283.

This volume, Indiana Historical Society *Publications*, XII, as the "Foreword" tells us, was written as a memorial to the author's wife, Julia Conner Thompson, of most pleasant memory to the members of the Society of Indiana Pioneers. Mrs. Thompson was a great-granddaughter of John Conner and a great-grandniece of William Conner. She felt that the efforts and influence of her pioneer ancestors should be better understood, and their characters, deeds and public service entitle them to the recognition which this volume accords. Mrs. Thompson, before her lamented death in 1928, had collected some materials on the Conners, and she became the inspiration for the worthy achievement of her husband in the production of this volume.

Mr. Thompson's interest in the early life of Indiana was promoted by his activities in the Society of Indiana Pioneers, of which Society he was the honored President for many years. He is a graduate of DePauw University, a member of the American Historical Association, of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, and of the Indiana Historical Society. He has been an intelligent reader of history. He is a lawyer, who approaches the writing of history like a trained historical student. As he knows the principles of evidence in a court of law, so he understands the difference between tradition and historical evidence. He knows the difference between "hearsay" and the documentary evidence upon which all true history is based—a distinction frequently illustrated in the pages of his book. Any conclusion which he draws from tradition is given only on the law of probability, and herein lies the historical value of this volume.

Mr. Thompson's work gives us more than the personal, pioneer life of the Conners. It records more than a hundred years of the history of the frontier as influenced by European policies and Indian affairs. From birth to mature manhood, the Conners lived among the Indians. They came to know their customs, manners, and several of their languages, and they came to be trusted interpreters of the United States in making Indian treaties. *They married among the Indians and raised*

half-breed families. Later they broke off their Indian ties and affiliated with their own race and became potent factors in the growth of early Indiana, as legislators, road-makers, town-builders, merchants, farmers, and men of affairs. Connersville and Noblesville owe their beginnings to the Conners.

To lead to an understanding of these frontier lives, the author found it necessary to examine the historical background of the Ohio Valley for more than a century. He makes known the distribution of Indian tribes in Ohio and Indiana, and describes the work of the early Moravian Missions among the Indians. He strikes the high points in Northwestern history from 1750 to the battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794 and the Treaty of Greenville of the following year. The father of these pioneers, Richard Conner, "was in the heart of the Ohio country from 1767 to 1782; their mother, Margaret Boyer, was from childhood a captive of the Shawnee Indians. These parents of John and William were preserved to become two of the earliest settlers of central Indiana. Thus they figured in the great struggle between Indian civilization and the oncoming tide of the white race.

Richard Conner and Margaret Boyer, the long lost captive girl of Lehigh Gap, were married in a small Indian village in a trackless wilderness. David Zeisberger, the devoted Moravian missionary, appears upon the scene. He founds the town of Schoenbrunn ("Beautiful Spring"). Here was established the first Protestant church in America west of Pennsylvania (1772), and here was the first school house in the United States north and west of the Ohio.

The story is told of how the Moravians, who formed a christian settlement of pious men, were dispossessed of their settlement and holdings and carried to Detroit for trial for anti-British activities, a charge on which they were acquitted. We read how ninety christian Indians were foully murdered by Pennsylvania and Virginia militia, which reminds us that there were frequent provocations for Indian forays and massacres.

In 1803, John Conner visited Washington, where he met President Jefferson. He saw better ways of living, and from this time it was his intention to ally himself with the forces of organized society. He acquired land in a region where the Indian title had been extinguished. His store in the White-water valley became a landmark for Indians and settlers. He

became one of the principal fur traders in all the region round about. He knew the prices of skins and how they were dressed—the beaver, otter, raccoon, mink, muskrat, skunk, wildcat, martin, panther, deer, and bear—and from these sources he acquired a measurable affluence in wordly goods.

The Conners knew the secrets of the forests. The tracks of beasts, the flight of birds, the changing colors of woods and waters, all had meaning for them. The boys left the settled life of agriculture for the more open life of the Indian trapper and trader. They preferred the western wilderness to the “sodden centres”, or forts, like Pittsburg and Detroit. The results of their lives vindicated their choice. The volume tells us of the splendid Indiana woods—made up of walnut, poplar, maple, oak, linden, cherry, sycamore, and other specimens. The soil had been fertilized for centuries by the decomposing of vegetation—nature had been enriching the earth.

General Harrison, the Territorial Governor, in his treaty-making with the Indians for land cessions, realized that he must have for scouts and interpreters men of integrity and judgment. The Conners were at hand. The services they rendered were noteworthy. Their influence over the Delawares in keeping them loyal to the government relieved General Harrison of much trouble.

A chapter is given to the Ohio Valley in the war of 1812. After that war, a tide of immigration began pouring into Indiana Territory. In 1812, there were not 35,000 people there. By the end of 1815 there were over 63,000, and the territory was ready for statehood. This immigration came from Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, Virginia, Kentucky, and the Carolinas. These people had heard of the defeat of the Indians and their British allies at Tippecanoe and at the Thames, and they knew that the white settlements were safer in the Northwest:

They are coming with their wives and children their baggage and their cattle, in wagons and on foot, on horse back across mountains and plains, on rafts down the Ohio. There are native Americans and European immigrants, for the most part substantial people, sober, industrious, kindly, democratic. Some are Quakers and practically all, even those from the southern States, are opposed to slavery.

Counties were being organized and towns were rising. An immigrant asked to be directed to Connersville. “My friend, you are right in the heart of the town”, said John Conner, who was engaged in building his cabin.

John Conner was elected from Franklin county to the first State Senate, Fayette County not having yet been laid out. He rode horseback over the trace to Corydon, when "three notches on a tree" indicated the highway. We have a description of Corydon and the conditions in the new state at that time. John Conner became the first sheriff of Fayette County. His interests were now chiefly local. He became interested in better roads, in libraries and seminaries, which indicated how his mind was broadening. He came to know such political leaders as James Noble, William Hendricks, and Jonathan Jennings,

The career of William Connor is also told in detail. These men

were courageous in the midst of danger, they were impervious to physical discomforts, . . . they knew when to be silent and when to speak. The wisdom of their counsel had been proved more than once. They had been a significant economic factor in the lives of the Delawares, for with other traders they had provided a market for furs and in return had supplied articles necessary to the personal comfort and satisfaction of the Indians. They had influenced this peaceful tribe against participation in war. . . . It is probably true that they charged the Indians high prices for their merchandise, and undoubtedly they exchanged whisky for their furs. That was the custom of all Indian traders. Currency was little used as a medium of exchange. Goods, trinkets, and liquor met this need. They gave no credit.

Connersville settlers went to the Noblesville area. It took nineteen days to make the trip with ox teams. Wolves and wildcats killed their domestic animals. The transition from village life to forest life came hard. They suffered from ague and fever. Travel was hard. What was thought to be a road turned out to be a furrow of mud, then a trace for foot travelers. Taverns were infrequent. The night silence was pierced by the hooting of owls and the howling of wolves. Such was life as experienced by the early pioneer.

In William Conner's cabin, the Commissioners met. They were charged with the task of choosing a site for the new state capital in 1820. A full account of their work is given. Tipton tells in his *Journal* of "the landing of the first boat that ever was seen at the seat of government."

The half-breed children of William Conner, six of them, went with their mother when the Delawares left Indiana for Missouri and Oklahoma. These children shared in the activities and prosperity of their new country. They re-visited

Indiana and gave testimony to the fair dealing and high character of the Conners. Similar testimony was given by men of prominence among Indiana pioneers.

William Conner now married Elizabeth Chapman, a white girl thirty years younger than he, though he was yet more Indian than white from experience. He was turning a new page in his life, coming back to his own race. Long years of his life were ending, a new life was beginning. There was no honeymoon nor wedding trip. The bride and groom ferried across White River, or forded it, and rode horseback to Conner's cabin.

Mr. Thompson describes William Conner's new house, the fine brick mansion of 1823. After this house had fallen into some decay, it was bought and restored in 1935 by Dr. Eli Lilly, President of the Indiana Historical Society. There is a fireplace in each room, upstairs and down, and cupboards with dishes and glassware of the Conner era. The house is now a landmark in central Indiana, for which thanks are due to Mr. and Mrs. Lilly and Mr. Thompson.

Mr. Thompson mentions, though he does not credit, the tradition that James Fenimore Cooper visited Conner in his Indiana home in a search for Indian lore. Governor Cass of Michigan felt that Cooper was "gilding" the Indian character, and he wrote an article for the *North American Review* "bent on destroying this romantic conception of savage life". Cass directed Charles C. Trowbridge of Michigan, to visit Conner, whom Trowbridge found to be "an intelligent gentleman and an excellent interpreter." At that time, Indianapolis had a population of 300. Trowbridge found wheat selling at twenty-five cents a bushel and corn at from six to ten cents. "The Indians", said Trowbridge, "supplied us all winter with turkeys at six cents each". Such were other aspects of the frontier.

Professor Baynard R. Hall was a guest of William Conner in his mansion home. The writer of this review edited the Princeton edition of Hall's *New Purchase* more than twenty years ago. If he had known then as much about the Conners as this book reveals, he would have corrected the "Key" by identifying "Redwhite" with William Conner instead of John; and he might have added a note of caution to the reader to beware of Hall's extravagance in his description of the feast which he enjoyed in Conner's home.

William Conner was a part of the early movement for

the improvement of common schools in Indiana. In 1831 there was a convention in Indianapolis of the "friends of education". Conner was associated in this cause with well known men of the time—David Wallace, Stephen C. Stevens, Ratliff Boon, Samuel Merrill, Calvin Fletcher, John Law, William W. Wick, Oliver H. Smith, John Wishard, Isaac Coe, John Tipton, and Jesse H. Holman. In 1833 the "Association for the Improvement of Common Schools" met at Madison, with Senator William Hendricks presiding. President Andrew Wylie of Indiana College was there, along with Miles Eggleston and Benjamin Parke. A committee appointed to nominate new members recommended that eleven be chosen from different parts of the state; among these were Governor Noble and James M. Ray of Indianapolis, James Whitcomb of Bloomington, afterwards Governor and United States Senator, and William Conner of Hamilton county.

In politics, William Conner was first a National Republican and then a Whig. He was a delegate from Hamilton County to a state convention of Clay "National Republicans", in November, 1831. The author notices the "national convention of Anti-masons in 1831", followed some months later "by a convention of the National Republicans supporting Clay", and, in May, 1832, by a "Democratic national convention [that] nominated Van Buren". To the unknowing reader this may be misleading. The author means that Van Buren was nominated for *Vice President* in 1832. No convention nomination was necessary for Jackson; he was accepted by the party and the country as the presidential nominee before the convention met.

In 1837, William Conner began closing his career as legislator and fur trader. He sold his large collection of fur to the American Fur Company. He helped in the project of a railroad from Indianapolis to Noblesville, which succeeded in running a train over the distance of twenty-two miles in an hour and a half. William Conner owned 3,000 acres of good land, including tracts in several counties. He died on August 28, 1855.

John Conner had died in 1826. His funeral sermon was preached by the Rev. George Bush of Indianapolis, "a scholarly and eccentric Presbyterian minister." Bush was one of the characters in Hall's *New Purchase*. He went to New York and became a Swedenborgian.

Of William Conner, we are told that he was "a large man, straight as an arrow, with a homely sense of humor and justice; wholly self-educated; of kindly disposition; generous to his friends and to strangers; implacable to his few enemies—an Indian characteristic; held in popular esteem; modest, seldom spoke of his life's adventures, committed nothing to paper." He lived forty-seven years with the Indians, and was not detached from that life until 1820.

The volume contains a map of early Indianapolis, with a "Key", indicating public and private buildings. There is a good index and a bibliography that is extensive, if not exhaustive. The author, like a careful student, cites the authorities for his statements, and many of them are authorities that are original and rare. These citations and notes are not in footnotes but are in the "appendix," and, in many cases, they contain very interesting reading—as interesting as that in the body of the text itself. This is saying a good deal, as the volume is written in clear, concise, readable English, with a narrative of continuous interest. The whole book with its inviting topics will prove especially attractive to all who have any interest in the frontier life of early Indiana. The volume is a credit not only to its author but to the Indiana Historical Society which has many valuable publications on its list. For this, its latest production, and one of its best, we owe Mr. Thompson a debt of gratitude.

JAMES ALBERT WOODBURN.

Oliver Pollock: The Life and Times of an Unknown Patriot.

By James Alton James. D. Appleton-Century Company, New York, 1937. Pp. 376, illustrated, \$4.00.

Though the life of *Oliver Pollock* has come from the press not long after the retirement of Dean James from active teaching in Northwestern University, it can hardly be called a fruit of his retirement. He has been collecting material and writing about Pollock for many years. It dovetails into his *Life of George Rogers Clark* and his two volumes of *George Rogers Clark Papers*. It stands side by side with these other books as a notable contribution to our understanding of the American Revolution in the West.

Oliver Pollock, while not entirely an unknown patriot, has not hitherto received the recognition to which the importance of his work entitles him; he has neither been the