

## Indiana Historical Society

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James Truslow Adams in his review of a recent book, *Old Tippecanoe*, by Freeman Cleaves, in the *New York Times Book Review* of November 26 (page 3), gives a text for the December column allotted to the Indiana Historical Society. After expressing surprise at the fact that no satisfactory general biography of William Henry Harrison had been published before Mr. Cleave's excellent work appeared and asserting that Harrison's death after only a few weeks in the office of president of the United States may account for lack of interest in him and lack of well known biographical material, he continues: "There is, of course the 'political biography' of him written in 1926 by Mrs. Goebel and which is excellent in the phases covered but which was published by a historical society and is largely unheard of by the general reader. . . . Both historians and the public generally should be grateful to Mr. Cleaves for supplying them with a readily obtainable and scholarly Life."

The "political biography" written in 1926 by Mrs. Goebel happens to be Volume 14 of the *Indiana Historical Collections*, published by the Indiana Historical Bureau. While appreciating Mr. Adams' commendation of this work, one is given pause by the opinion expressed that it is to be taken for granted that books published by a historical society are largely unheard of by the general reader and are not readily obtainable. The correctness of Mr. Adams' opinion cannot be truthfully challenged. One is led, however, to reflect upon the reasons for this state of affairs and to search for ways of improving the circulation of material published by historical organizations.

One reason why historical publications are not more widely advertised than they are has been the deprecation of their quality. Whether this judgment is fair or not is an open question. One is inclined to think that it is largely due to the fact that historical society writings, in so far as they reach readers, find a more critical reception than the books issued by commercial publishers with a highly favorable "blurb" accompanying them. Leading members of societies are often the most critical of the activities of their organizations. Such was Worthington C. Ford in the paper which

he read at the Indianapolis meeting of the Conference of Historical Societies in 1928, "Historical Societies—Living and Dead," printed in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* for December, 1929, and reprinted in a separate by the Conference. His helpful diagnosis might easily be mistaken for condemnation in such sentences as this, "At least one-half of what is printed by societies could better be left in manuscript." It was not a condemnation, but rather a self-searching appeal for improvement. Historical societies do actually discourage the publication of much material that is not worth publication; that they do publish much that need not be put into print is true, but this is probably no more true of them than of most publishing agencies. The demand for their publications is probably as strong, relatively, as that for doctoral dissertations and privately printed books.

The relatively small circulation of historical society publications is inherent in the very theory of the activity of such an organization. Books which make a general appeal and have the promise of sales which justify advertisement and the use of sales organizations ought to be published by commercial publishers. Historical societies generally limit their publications to works which are thought to be worth while, but do not hold the promise of such extensive sales as would give a commercial publisher returns necessary for a profitable business. This is only another way of restating Mr. Adams' inference as a generality.

The only problem involved is that which arises when a historical society publication, which perhaps has been or would be refused by a commercial publisher, meets a general demand. Since the society has no paid advertising expert and no sales organization, the distribution of such a book is apt to be as limited as that of more technical or less interesting publications. All of them are probably noticed in the book trade journals, but few of them are given the publicity which commercial publishers secure by glowing reviews in magazines and in literary supplements of newspapers; nor are they displayed in bookstores—indeed, the decline of bookstores themselves in the last thirty or forty years is one of the causes both for the swollen tide of "best sellers" and the relatively small circulation of scholarly and scientific works.

What can be done about it? In the first place, members of historical societies ought to serve as advertising agents

for meritorious publications of their organizations. The membership of such societies should be much larger than it is and their activities should be made known by word of mouth, as well as by the efforts, often ineffective, of the officers of the society to secure alluring printed notices. In the second place, concerted effort ought to be made to secure fair recognition in popular magazines and in newspapers for publications which deserve it, whether issued by friendly commercial publishers and advertisers or by publishers in organizations outside the charm circle. Then the public also should be better educated than it is in discriminating between worth-while publications and worthless ones. This must necessarily be the work of schools and colleges. It is a practical goal that educators might well set themselves to train their students in powers of discrimination and in methods of securing for themselves objects of enduring value, rather than in taking what is thrust upon them by high-powered salesmanship.

It may be observed also that people interested in historical reading ought to subscribe to historical magazines and read them. They are for the most part sent to members of the historical societies which publish them and may be obtained by membership in those societies—a membership which is open to all respectable citizens. Those who have read the *Indiana Magazine of History* would certainly know about Mrs. Goebel's *William Henry Harrison*.

In addition to this work, a few of the recent "best sellers" published by the Historical Bureau might be cited: *Solon Robinson, Pioneer and Agriculturist*, Selected Writings, edited by H. A. Kellar, 2 volumes \$4.00

*Moravian Indian Mission on White River*, edited by Lawrence H. Gipson, \$2.00

Among recent publications of the Indiana Historical Society, for which the demand has been greatest, are:

*The Village at the End of the Road, A Chapter in Early Indiana Railroad History*, by Wylie J. Daniels, 75 cents

*Sons of the Wilderness, John and William Conner*, by Charles N. Thompson, clothbound \$2.00, paper-covered \$1.50

*Prehistoric Antiquities of Indiana*, by Eli Lilly, \$10.00