

Indiana's Amateur Historians

*Richard E. Banta**

Having recently joined in completing a biographical and bibliographical encyclopedia of the first century of Indiana writers some of us know what many have suspected—there has been much writing done in the state of Indiana!

In quality much of it was average—pretty good grist for the average publisher's mill, some of it was bad and colorless (which is a depressing kind of badness—but by no means limited to Indiana), and a little of it was of an inspired and masterful kind of badness which some enjoy very much. The third category of Indiana writing was that which was exceedingly good—and there was an astonishing amount of it. There has been variety of form and subject matter a plenty.

Sometimes it seemed that the bulk of all Hoosier output had been poetry. An analysis would scarcely prove this to be the case, but one would not have been surprised, had it turned out so—for every true Hoosier, when he isn't busy playing politics or cussing the weather, tries his hand at poetry. (Most likely that is because James Whitcomb Riley made it all look so very easy.)

At any rate, there was much verse ranging in quality and subject matter from "Little Brown Hands" through "The Curfew Must Not Ring Tonight" and "The Monon Wreck" to Will Thompson's "High Tide at Gettysburg."

Reform, of one kind or another, was a favorite choice of subject also. In the early years, religious sectarianism received most attention. Several decades of vituperation were required before Baptists were willing to admit that there might be one Methodist in heaven (maybe just a little one, who wasn't quite bright and hadn't really known what was going on), and Methodists became reconciled to Campbellites, at least to the point where they would swap horses or borrow money from them.

About the time this Utopian state of affairs came about, a new and different evangelical wave hit the state, and the Indiana scribes brandished their pens again. In the thirties some one in England had discovered that alcohol, used as a beverage, seemed to be sometimes associated with unpleasant manifestations—domestic, moral, or physical. Word of this startling discovery eventually reached the United States and

* Richard E. Banta is a resident of Crawfordsville, Indiana.

finally filtered through even to Indiana. Some people in the state (probably with impaired digestive systems) began to take the business seriously and before long exhorters canceled their previous commitments and took the stump in behalf of this novel theory: the Temperance Movement was underweigh.

Of course, pamphlets, books, and tracts had to be written to fortify the orators and the resulting literature proved quite attractive to readers sated with the sweetness and light of the pieces in *The Family Magazine* and *The Ladies' Repository*. In temperance tracts, there could be blood-curdling statistics showing how many men beat how many wives in the city of New York alone in a given year, and how many wives died of it. It was possible to demonstrate, with interesting details, how many girls went wrong in Boston through the use of malt beverages, and how many people went insane and in what intriguing ways their insanity manifested itself. The Indian temperance tract was a nineteenth-century counterpart of *True Confessions Magazine*, with touches of *Forever Amber* and *The Lost Weekend*. It was considered by our Hoosier ancestors to be right peart readin'.

Of all the fields of writing invaded by Hoosiers, those of fiction and biography certainly resulted in the greatest artistic—and financial—success.

Some effete Easterner has intimated that Indiana writers turn to fiction as an escape from the utter desolation of the Indiana scene. Of course that is a base canard. Hoosiers need no escape, psychological or physical. Did any Hoosier, author or otherwise, ever leave the old state except maybe to make more money? Or at worst to act as a missionary to the seaboard, East or West?

Let the reviewers and essayists attribute the cause as they wish, the fact still remains that Indiana authors of fiction ran second only to those of New York state (with an average five times the population) between 1895 and 1945, and by a microscopic margin at that!

True enough, poetry, religion and reform, fiction, and biography supplied subject matter for the bulk of the output—but the writing of history has not been without its strong men in the state. There are Wilbur Cortez Abbott (whose work on the Cromwellian Period will still be standard a century from now), Frederick Austin Ogg, Claude Bowers, and, most prolific of the moderns, Charles A. and Mary Rit-

ter Beard.¹ Even John Clark Ridpath and John H. Beadle, hacks though they were, must be credited with selling a great many books, whatever their stature. These were (or are), however, professional historians, and it is upon the amateurs that emphasis is to be placed.

Perhaps one should first settle the question "Who is an amateur historian?" My definition of the term is this. An "amateur" historian is one without formal training in the field, who is engaged in some other activity for a livelihood, and who carries on research and writing as an avocation.

Greatest of the amateurs in nineteenth-century Indiana was certainly John Brown Dillon, tragic—perhaps even, in his later years, repulsive—figure, he was Indiana's first great scholar of history (amateur or professional) and, after a century, still occupies a position which is very high indeed.

Dillon and the strange, lonely life he led were the subject of conjecture and discussion wherever he was known in his own day—and precious little factual matter about his past ever rewarded his contemporaries. No one seems ever really to have known John Dillon, as most men are known to their fellows.

Born in Wellsburg (then Virginia, now West Virginia) in either 1807 or 1808, he had apparently received the rudiments of an education before he was orphaned, at nine, and bound out to a printer to learn the trade. By his eighteenth year he was in Cincinnati—an awkward, fumbling, near-sighted, and pitifully ugly, young journeyman printer.²

It was in Cincinnati, as an employee of the Cincinnati *Gazette* that he was believed to have fallen in love and to have suffered the tragedy which prompted the writing of his first known work. It was a poem, "The Burial of the Beautiful," and it begins

Where shall the dead, and the beautiful, sleep?
In the vale where the willow and cypress weep;
Where the wind of the west breathes its softest sigh;
Where the silvery stream is flowing nigh,
And the pure, clear drops of its rising sprays
Glitter like gems in the bright noon's rays—
Where the sun's warm smile may never dispel
Night's tears o'er the form we loved so well—

¹ [Charles A. Beard, who was born at Knightstown, Indiana, on November 27, 1874, died at Grace Memorial Hospital, New Haven, Connecticut, on September 1, 1948.—Editor.]

² [For a biographical sketch of Dillon see John Coburn, "Life and Services of John B. Dillon," and Horace P. Biddle, "Notes on John B. Dillon," in Indiana Historical Society *Publications* (Indianapolis, Indiana, 1895-), II (1895), 39-62.—Editor.]

In the vale where the sparkling waters flow;
Where the fairest, earliest violets grow;
Where the sky and the earth are softly fair;
Bury her there—bury her there!³

Those may not be great lines but that was a sentimental day and over-florid verse was flowing from pens more experienced than young John Dillon's. The poem is certainly marked by the gentle, hopeless melancholy which seemed, to his contemporaries, to have set the pattern of his character and, in their tragic implication, to offer explanation enough for the lonely life he chose to lead thereafter.

Sometime before 1834, John Dillon came to Logansport, Indiana, and read law with a local firm. He must have achieved learning in this subject considerably beyond what was considered essential for the blossoming lawyer in those free and easy days, for his writing on colonial and territorial jurisprudence and legislation in his book *Oddities of Colonial Legislation in America* (Indianapolis, Indiana, 1879), is still highly regarded.

No matter what his qualifications may have been, he did not practice at the bar. Instead he joined with Stanislaus Lasselle in founding a weekly newspaper, *The Canal Telegraph*. One may suppose that Dillon was editor and mechanical foreman, while the Lasselle family purse—well-filled by the results of half a century of Indian trading and frontier speculation—furnished capital.

During the nine years following 1834—apparently in odd moments stolen from editorial chores and the occasional type-sticking in which all pioneer editors often found themselves forced to participate—John Dillon completed his first and greatest work. It was *The History of Indiana, From Its Earliest Exploration by Europeans, to the Close of Territorial Government in 1816: with an Introduction Containing Historical Notes of the Discovery and Settlement of the Territory of the United States Northwest of the River Ohio*. . . . It was published in Indianapolis in 1843, and was revised, extended, and republished in 1859.

Being a newspaper man, Dillon might be said to have been a professional writer, but orphaned and indentured at nine, a journeyman printer at seventeen, a lawyer and editor at twenty-four, he could, by no stretch of the imagination, be

³ William T. Coggeshall, *The Poets and Poetry of the West* (Columbus, Ohio, 1860), 111.

called anything but an amateur historian. Yet in this first book is to be found research as thorough, establishment of sources as satisfactory, and an exposition as clear and logical as the first half of the nineteenth century saw in America.

His work was undoubtedly forwarded by the almost monastic life he led. John Dillon had no close friends and no attachments to bias his reporting when he interviewed survivors of the events he described or examined their letters and records. He said "I have endeavored to keep my mind free . . . either from ambitious contentions between distinguished men . . . false traditions . . . national partialities and antipathies . . . or from dissensions among uncharitable teachers of different creeds of religion; and thus to qualify myself, in some measure, for the work of compiling and writing an impartial history. . . ."⁴

It was probably in this detachment that his chief virtue lay: John Dillon himself had no "ambitious contentions"; the "distinction" of no man meant anything to him; he had no "partiality," no "antipathy" and no particular "creed of religion." It is fortunate that in addition to these rather negative advantages, he also had the methodical repertorial attitude combined with a sense of the important and the dramatic.

Given such qualifications and being located (as he was in Logansport) near what had been the center of the most important activities of both the Old Northwest and the Indiana territories, with many men still alive who had known the strenuous days and were happy to talk of them, it should have been fairly easy for Dillon to produce a book of pioneer reminiscence. How he then knew of, and how he managed to consult, the obscure published sources and the official records which he used to make his book also a satisfying and well-documented history of the Territory is a matter at which one may well marvel.

In 1845, Dillon was appointed Indiana State Librarian. It was not a lucrative position but Dillon, thinking of the reading and research which could be pursued among even such a modest collection of books as the State Library offered—it was largely law and legislative material—must have found the prospect irresistible.

For eighteen years he continued in Indianapolis, part of

⁴John B. Dillon, *A History of Indiana* (Indianapolis, Indiana, 1859), iv.

the time as State Librarian, and later in any other position which would furnish the barest existence, always meticulous as to the carrying out of his duties but always mainly interested in his reading and his notes.

In 1863, he went to Washington (possibly because he had, by then, read every book and examined every document of interest in the Indiana capitol) and became a clerk in the Department of the Interior. He stayed there until 1875, completed and published his *Notes on Historical Evidence in Reference to Adverse Theories of the Origin and Nature of the Government of the United States* and wrote much of his second most important work, *The Oddities of Colonial Legislation in America*.

The latter, although packed with material of very considerable importance, is little known and less appreciated. It is not as well-organized as his first great work, perhaps because failing sight and failing health prevented a final revision, perhaps because John Dillon's mind had become so cluttered with the store of historical and legislative lore with which he had crammed it that he had lost the power to select pertinent matter and to arrange it.

In 1875, he returned to Indianapolis to another of that series of drab bachelor rooms—always more notable for their vast content of books, notes, and manuscripts than for either comfort or cleanliness—in which his life had been spent. There he died on February 27, 1879, alone, as he had lived, respected—even honored—by the more discerning of his contemporaries but loved by no one.

Perhaps his acquaintances were right, perhaps John Dillon's capacity to love and to be loved had been buried in that "vale where the willow and cypress weep" near Cincinnati in 1826.

Before John B. Dillon, printer-turned-historian, in time (but not in significance) came John Law, attorney and judge, with one good performance as a historian to his credit.

John Law was an example of a type more common to neighboring Kentucky and Ohio than to Indiana. A young man who, with an eastern university education and financial support behind him, came west for the purpose of making a career in the new country.

Law was born in New London, Connecticut, on October 28, 1796. He graduated from Yale in 1814, read law, and was admitted to practice in his home state in 1817. Thus

secured in a profession, he cast an eye to the west, where a new country might be expected to welcome a young lawyer with a genuine college education, and where a man could invest a little money in a very large estate, should he so desire. Very shortly he arrived in Vincennes, in the yearling state of Indiana.⁵

Oliver H. Smith (who was not in the habit of exaggerating the virtues of his fellows) called John Law "A noble specimen of our race—fine looking, urbane, kind, hospitable and generous." Law attracted immediate and favorable attention and a few clients as well. Shortly, he was elected prosecuting attorney (then, as now, the springboard from which a young lawyer, could best take off on a legal career), and in 1823 he was elected to the state legislature, which, in turn, elected him judge of the Seventh Judicial Circuit. He retired from the circuit bench after only a year, however, to resume private practice.

He had married Sarah Ewing, daughter of prosperous Nathaniel, receiver of the local Government Land Office. His law practice was profitable, he served as a receiver of public monies himself during the Van Buren administration, he made wise investments in land (one of them a partnership in seven hundred acres now occupied by a part of Evansville, Indiana) and eventually was appointed to the Federal Bench. All in all, Law's early appraisal of the opportunities in Indiana was justified. He did quite well here.

It was as an attorney at the bar that he enjoyed his greatest success—with the exception of one single case, which he eventually won, although it was in court almost fifty years and both he and his client were dead before it was decided in their favor.

The client was François Vigo, Vincennes capitalist of the Revolutionary War period, who had made the mistake of advancing supplies to hard-pressed young General George Rogers Clark, then engaged in conquering the Old Northwest for Virginia. Clark had found it inexpedient to travel the two thousand miles to either the Virginia legislature or the Continental Congress and, rather than see his men starved, had given Vigo drafts not properly endorsed.

⁵ [For biographical sketches of Law see William Wesley Woollen, *Biographical and Historical Sketches of Early Indiana* (Indianapolis, Indiana, 1883), 332-334; Charles Denby, "Judge John Law," in *Indiana Historical Society Publications*, I (1897), 201-213; and Christopher B. Coleman, "John Law," in *Dictionary of American Biography* (20 vols., New York, 1943), XI, 40-41.—Editor.]

The federal government did not succeed in overcoming its scruples against such laxity until 1877—a little matter of a century!

Justice was finally done, however, and after another sixty years or so the grateful nation provided what may be a handsome statue of François Vigo seated in a rather strained position and gazing toward the town in which he waited until his death to collect his due and was disappointed.

Law's historical writing began with his *Address Delivered Before the Vincennes Historical and Antiquarian Society*, February 22, 1839, of which he had two thousand copies printed in pamphlet form in Louisville, Kentucky. This address on the early history of Vincennes, eleven or twelve thousand words in length, antedated Dillon's book by four years and seems to be the first effort at scholarly historical writing completed in the state.

The work was widely circulated (Dillon himself mentions having used it) and in 1858 Law republished it—with the addition of explanatory matter, much of which is of value—in clothbound octavo under the title *The Colonial History of Vincennes, Under the French, British and American Governments*. . . . It is interesting to note that Law also beat Dillon into print with his revision, antedating Dillon's, this time, by only a year, however.

Law's address, and also the material he added for the revised edition, is well-organized, well-documented, well-written, and also includes references to some remarkably obscure sources. An amusing change is noticeable, however, between the literary style of attorney John Law, who wrote the address in 1839, and that of the Honorable (Federal) Judge Law who amended it in 1858. The first is plain and straight forward, the second is flowery and adorned with much Latin, considerable French which was not very sound, and an occasional classical allusion. Federal Judge Law, "urbane, kind . . . and benevolent" gentleman that he was, seems to have felt the weight of his improved position in society.

Third of the amateurs, and to me the most delightful, is schoolmaster-historian Sandford C. Cox. It must not be assumed that, in his schoolmastering, Cox endangered his amateur standing as a historian. History was a furbelow not considered appropriate to the reading-and-writing-and-arithmetic curriculum of the eighteen twenties to the eighteen fifties period, and it is doubtful if either Cox or his pupils

ever wasted a classroom hour on it. In my opinion, he is as virgin an amateur as either a printer or a lawyer could possibly be.

Sandford C. Cox appears upon his own biographical scene at Crawfordsville in 1824, an observant lad of fourteen or so. He reports himself as having come by wagon with his parents, brothers, and sisters from the Whitewater Valley by way of the Falls of Fall Creek and the Strawtown—Thorntown Trace.

Sandford's eye missed very little. He had seen four men awaiting hanging at the Falls for what must have appeared to most of the populace to be merely the thoughtless misdemeanor of killing a few Indians; he saw land speculators, in Crawfordsville, sporting phenomenal watch chains and white beaver hats; he saw mud; overflowing taverns; mud; recently retired Indian fighters; mud; hundreds of movers' wagons; mud, and more mud.

He must have had some education before he left the Whitewater—where schools were comparatively plentiful due to the efforts of the Quakers—for within two years he himself became a tender-aged schoolmaster and continued to follow that business in Montgomery, Fountain, Warren, and Tippecanoe counties during most of his life.

Unlike many of his contemporaries in the teaching profession—whose first interest was tuition money and whose second was often the fiddle and sometimes the jug—Cox seems always to have cherished literary ambitions. He wrote long and interesting accounts of the new country to his friends (apparently going to the trouble of keeping copies of them), and by 1833 began to contribute verse to local newspapers. The contribution of verse to newspapers is a certain indication of faithful and disinterested wooing of the muse. Newspaper editors did not pay for poems then, any more than they do today, and there was (and is) more likely to be discredit than glory for the poet in the eyes of his neighbors.

In the fall of 1859, most of the early settlers having been called on to fairer fields, it occurred to Cox that his letters and notes on the pioneer day might make interesting reading for the public. He had associated with leading men in the middle Wabash Valley, and his keen interest in human frailties had prompted him to become acquainted also with those at the opposite end of the social scale. Besides he had seen

the "Indian Murderers" at the Falls with his own eyes and his grandfather, Richard Rue, had told him the otherwise unrecorded story of the captivity of himself, Irvin Hinton, and George Holman by Indians under the leadership of the notorious Simon Girty.

Cox published his series of articles in the *Lafayette Daily Courier* and they aroused sufficient interest to encourage their author to bring them out in book form.

Recollections of the Early Settlement of the Wabash Valley appeared in 1860. The book was good, and it is still good today—far better than either Cox or his contemporaries probably suspected.

Dillon's work is based upon elaborate and painstaking research, as, to a lesser extent, is Law's. Cox had need to consult no archives, to read no books, to interview no pioneers, to search no newspaper files. His sources were his own notes and letters, jotted down as the incidents of which he wrote were occurring (except for grandfather Rue's yarn, of course) and all of it done simply for the fun of the business.

Dillon is venerated as the first to carry on really extensive historical research in the state and as the author of historical works which still hold their own in scholarly authority. Law should be honored for his priority of appearance in print as an Indiana historical writer. But for a view of the Hoosiers as they looked and lived; of the Indiana scene in, as it were, full color; and for genuine reading pleasure, Cox, the Black Creek Schoolmaster, is deserving of whatever special diadem is awarded for such homely virtue.

It is not likely that any of the three appreciated his own importance as a historian in his own lifetime. Probably all three gentlemen—printer, lawyer, and schoolmaster—if they happen to be gazing down from their heavenly home upon the Hoosier scene today, have first raised their halos and scratched their brows in amazement then summoned all the little cherubim to gather 'round and marvel at the sight of others listening to their simple stories so patiently!⁶

⁶ Factual material in this article resulted from research in preparation of the book, *Indiana Authors and Their Books, Biographical Sketches and Title Listings of Indiana Writers Whose First Publications Appeared Before the Centennial of the State in 1916*, which is to be published by Wabash College and distributed free of charge to libraries in Indiana and throughout the nation. The work has been completed under the direction of an editorial committee composed of J. K. Lilly, Jr., Chairman, Howard H. Peckman, Harold F. Brigham, Ben Hitz, Lee McCanliss, and R. E. Banta.