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**Ray E. Boomhower**. *Jacob Piatt Dunn, Jr.: A Life in History and Politics, 1855-1924.* Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 1997. xxvi + 174 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87195-119-9.

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**Jacob Piatt Dunn, Jr.: Progressive?**

This book represents an apt match between author and publisher, for its subject will engage the attention primarily of non-academic readers interested in Indiana history. A goodly portion of the Indiana Historical Society's members will no doubt be grateful for the Society's publication of this work, which likely could not have become available to them in any other way. As Ray Boomhower makes clear, Jacob Piatt Dunn's impact or significance rarely extended beyond the borders of the Hoosier state. In Indiana historiography, Dunn stands as a significant figure, who produced several works that still retain some usefulness. In politics, on the other hand, he was at best medium potatoes. He held a few appointive positions and once made a losing race for Congress. Mostly, however, he had to content himself with whispering in the ear of the powerful and with purveying Democratic party doctrine to the public.

Rather than a full-fledged biography, Boomhower's book comprises a series of chapters that recount certain aspects of Dunn's career. Although he was trained in the law and engaged in practice, his first love was writing, both as a journalist and an amateur historian. He spent his late twenties in the new state of Colorado, where he wrote for a number of newspapers and where he began his lifelong study of Native American history. The result of his early research was a sympathetic treatment of the Indians in *Massacres of the Mountains: A History of the Indian Wars of the Far West, 1815-1875* (1886). Dunn argued against the government's concentration of the Indians on reservations but did so mainly on the grounds that the policy hindered their being "civilized" (p. 14).

*Massacres of the Mountains* gained national attention and successfully launched Dunn's career as an amateur historian. Over the next two decades he produced a half dozen books on Indiana history, most notably *Indiana: A Redemption from Slavery* (1888), *Greater Indianapolis* (1910), and the five-volume *Indiana and Indianans* (1919). Although he wrote primarily for popular audiences, Dunn grounded his narratives in careful research. The latter two works, says Boomhower, were "both marked by a refreshing lack of boosterism on the writer's part and a dedicated effort to document his sources through footnotes" (p. 19). The availability of those sources was due in large measure to Dunn's early efforts to ensure their preservation by the Indiana Historical Society and the Indiana State Library. In 1886, he participated in a revitalization of the nearly moribund Society, thereby launching that institution on a career of collection, preservation, and publication that took it to the first rank of state historical agencies. As state librarian from 1889 to 1893, Dunn labored to modernize the state library as well. As a member of the Indiana Public Library Commission, he sponsored a program to increase support for the state's township libraries.

Boomhower devotes half of his six chapters to three episodes in Indiana politics in which Dunn played a role. Although these chapters form the heart of the book, they are in fact the least successful. The author tries to cast Dunn in the role of a Progressive reformer, but he comes across more as a vehement Democratic partisan. With a smug sense of the political and social entitlements owed to people of his race and class, Dunn exhibited little true sympathy for those outside that charmed realm.

Boomhower's treatment of the election of 1888 is distinctly old-fashioned, more in keeping with Matthew Josephson's *Politicos* than the work of modern historians. The author focuses almost exclusively on allegations of vote-buying, the Dudley letter from the Republican national treasurer instructing party workers to organize the "floaters," and Dunn's post-election efforts in favor of the Australian ballot. As editor of the *Indianapolis Sentinel*, the state's Democratic organ, Dunn helped expose the Dudley letter and pushed for the secret-ballot reform, not only for its intrinsic merit but also because he thought it would hurt the Republicans, who he believed had more money to buy votes. Missing from

Boomhower's account, however, is any sense of the important issues at stake in the 1888 election, issues upon which modern scholars center their attention. Benjamin Harrison's front-porch campaign devoted largely to the tariff question drew national attention to Indianapolis, and Dunn's *Sentinel* countered with low-tariff editorials. Indeed, as a writer for the Democratic State Central Committee's literary bureau, Dunn published a ninety-five-page low-tariff campaign pamphlet entitled *Seven Percent Off: What the Democratic Party Demands from the Protection Monopolists*. About this Boomhower says nothing.

Boomhower next chronicles Dunn's somewhat tangential efforts in behalf of a new charter for Indianapolis. Adopted in 1891 and following the trend of municipal reform generally, this document greatly strengthened the office of mayor at the expense of the city council. Under its terms the mayor would have a cabinet of six department heads and he could appoint other officers without council approval. Boomhower again hails Dunn as a reformer for his work in behalf of the new charter, but when Dunn himself received a city appointment two decades later, his sense of the res publica seemed to have taken a new turn. As city controller, Dunn deposited contractors' guaranty bonds into accounts whose interest he pocketed for his own use. When the practice came to light, Mayor Joseph Bell ordered Dunn to stop it. Six months later Bell fired Dunn and several others in the controller's office for mismanagement. Boomhower asserts that "[i]n this matter Dunn had allowed his party spirit to overcome his zeal for reform" (p. 72), but that exculpatory judgment seems wide of the mark.

The last major reform effort Boomhower examines is Dunn's behind-the-scenes work for a new state constitution proposed by Governor Thomas R. Marshall in 1911. The document included several progressive features including the initiative, referendum, and recall; a line-item veto for the governor; and expanded power for the legislature to enact such legislation as workmen's compensation. But for Dunn, as Boomhower admits, "the chief purpose of the new constitution was 'to secure honest elections"' (p. 84) through restrictions on the franchise. The new document would have eliminated voting by resident aliens (who could vote under the old constitution), required payment of a poll tax, and instituted a literacy requirement for suffrage. Dunn's support for the document was clearly driven by nativism and class and race prejudice. In a speech to the Indiana Democratic Club, he declared that suffrage had "'debased the negro, on the average, instead of elevating him.... It has made him insolent and quarrelsome instead of self-respecting."' Hence, it was no injustice to take the vote from "the negro who remains illiterate, shiftless or criminal" (p. 97). Marshall and Dunn's constitution was not enacted, but it contained enough progressive elements to win Marshall a place on the national Democratic ticket with Woodrow Wilson. Dunn, however, failed in his attempt to parlay his association with Marshall into a diplomatic appointment under the new administration.

Dunn had, meanwhile, continued his Native American studies, focused particularly on the preservation of the Miami Indian language. For a time the U.S. Bureau of American Ethnology funded his linguistic work, but he failed to find financial backers for his proposed Society for the Preservation of Indian Languages. Near the end of his life, he used his business and government connections to wangle support for a bizarre prospecting trip to Hispaniola in search of a fortune in manganese. He found no El Dorado, however, and spent much his time writing light-hearted pieces about the trip that exhibited his clever wit, mostly at the expense of the laughable "inferiors" he encountered on his expedition.

Boomhower attempts to portray the "seeming contradictions in Dunn's character"–his racism and elitism playing against his reform impulses and his concern for Indian culture–as "a trait shared by other Progressives of the day" (p. xxv). At best, this non-explanation and Boomhower's book in general simply underscore the irreducibly protean nature of Progressivism. More to the point, they provide one more argument for those historians who say we ought to scrap the term altogether.

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