

Ellen F. Fitzpatrick: Muckraking (1994)

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Muckraking was a kind of investigative journalism relatively new to early-twentieth-century America. This journalism was hard-hitting in tone, often well rooted in fact, and at times brutal in its exposure of venality and corruption. It took as its subject critical social, economic, and political realities in Progressive-era America, the tumultuous age of industrial expansion that spanned the years from roughly 1880 to 1920. Perhaps most important, the new journalism was disseminated nationally in inexpensive magazines that rarely cost more than a nickel or a dime.

Ida Tarbell's "The Oil War of 1872" and Lincoln Steffens's "The Shame of Minneapolis," were among both the earliest and the best contributions to the new literature of exposure. Like the wider journalism of which they were a part, these essays brought stories from grimy oil fields and seedy gambling dens into the homes of millions of Americans. They added names and faces to the impersonal forces that were redefining the character of American society at the turn of the century. They made fierce conflicts between strangers in distant places appear highly relevant to the concerns of working-class and middle-class Americans, spread across a vast and tremendously diverse land. The journalists' stories had a remarkable immediacy for many Americans who would never be personally affected, in any direct sense, by the gripping and disturbing tales the reporters had to tell.

Theodore Roosevelt called this new investigative journalism "muckraking" in 1906 because he was troubled by its focus and tone. The president likened the journalists to a character in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, the "man with the muckrake," who according to Roosevelt raked up "filth" at his feet and ignored the offer of a "celestial crown." The magazine journalists focused on "evils" in the "body politic," Roosevelt complained, to the extreme of failing to see the

good. Although his charge was incited by politics, Roosevelt's characterization of the journalists as "muckrakers" stuck. The work of talented writers and reckless hacks was lumped together from that time forward, obscuring in a haze of charges of sensationalism an important moment in the evolution of twentieth-century American life.

The muckraking years represent a time when the writings of investigative journalists broke through the boundaries of literature and entered the arena of modern politics. They foreshadowed the complex and often contested relationship between journalists and public officials that exists today. In recent American history, the Watergate scandal stands out as perhaps the most dramatic and consequential example of investigative journalism's power to shape national politics. But that power has deep roots in the American past and an especially important precursor in the muckrakers.

The January 1903 issue of *McClure's Magazine* did not mark the advent of muckraking, if we mean by that term the appearance of investigative journalism in magazines. Articles and essays exposing political corruption, business fraud, and labor violence had already appeared in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century periodicals. In 1900 McClure himself had published a thinly fictionalized series by Josiah Flynt and Alfred Hodder entitled "True Stories of the Underworld," and he followed it in 1901 with Flynt's shocking account "The World of Graft." Both Lincoln Steffens and Ida Tarbell had published installments of their series on political corruption and Standard Oil, respectively, in the fall of 1902.

Nonetheless, historians widely credit the January 1903 issue of *McClure's* with launching muckraking. By publishing three hard-hitting essays in a single issue and highlighting their message with a provocative editorial, S. S. McClure called attention to a phenomenon and in so doing helped inaugurate a movement. Circulated among approximately 400,000 readers, the January 1903 issue was a fast sell-out. Imitators quickly seized the formula, and countless essays of exposure began to fill the pages of popular magazines. By 1912, more than two thousand such articles had been published. Muckraking had become a nationally recognized part of the American cultural, literary, and political landscape.

Finding the Story: The Genesis of the Muckrakers' Investigative Reporting

Tarbell and "The Oil War of 1872"

Tarbell's decision to pursue a series of stories on the Standard Oil Company had complex beginnings. *McClure's* editor, John Finley, had approached his boss as early as 1899 with the idea of publishing several articles on the trusts. Journalist Alfred Low floated a similar, though more detailed, proposal at roughly the same time. Both men had been trained in political economy, and both had been much impressed by a conference on the trust question held by the Chicago Civic Federation in the fall of 1899. More important, both had a keen sense of the drift of public affairs. They believed that in the trust readers would find a powerful object of common concern and curiosity.

That assumption was based on a firm understanding of late-nineteenth-century political economy. The 1890s had been a critical period in the great merger movement. As large businesses consolidated, they sought legal protections that would permit them to exert a controlling influence on markets and competitors. In 1882 the Standard Oil Company came up with the tactic of using the legal instrument of the trust to circumvent state antimonopoly laws that forbade one corporation from holding stock in another. Under the arrangement of the trust, stockholders of various oil companies turned over their stocks to Standard Oil "trustees." The trust in turn issued certificates to shareholders in exchange for the power to manage and direct the oil companies.

Political and legal attacks on this use of the trust forced Standard Oil to beat a hasty retreat in the early 1890s. Abandoning the trust instrument, Standard Oil instead took advantage of loosened New Jersey corporation laws to form a holding company. The holding company created a corporation whose purpose was to hold controlling stock in several other companies. The creation of Standard Oil of New Jersey, as the new holding company was known, boosted the capitalization of the corporation from \$10 million to \$110 million and gave it direct controlling interest in no fewer than forty-one other companies.

The attack on the trusts that was gaining steam in the 1890s was less frequently an attack on the literal legal entity of the trust. It was more often a broader effort to combat monopoly and curb the overpowering force of consolidated corporations and giant holding companies. Nonetheless the mergers continued, resulting in 1901 in the first billion-dollar corporation ever formed in the United States, U.S. Steel.

It was against this backdrop that McClure began to turn over suggestions that he offer his readers a series of detailed articles on the trusts. It was true that much had already been written about this subject, but a detailed portrait studded with names and facts—the kind of portrait showcased by *McClure's*—would add something new. The question was, which trust? Standard Oil seemed an obvious choice. John D. Rockefeller's company was, in many ways, the "granddaddy" of them all and its founder a subject of no small interest as a personality. Furthermore, Tarbell's presence on the staff presented the advantage of an ace writer with intimate knowledge of the oil regions. Tarbell's father had himself fallen on some hard times since his early successes in the business. Like many independent producers, he knew what it was like to be grabbed in the stranglehold of Standard Oil, and he warned his daughter away from profiling the company in *McClure's*. "Don't do it, Ida," he cautioned "They will ruin the magazine." At first Ida doubted that Standard Oil would care much about her essays, though she was immediately struck in beginning her research that a "persistent fog of suspicion and doubt and fear" hung over the entire subject of the great oil trusts.

For nearly five years Tarbell pursued her research into the history of Standard Oil. The series was originally slated as three articles, but the wealth of material uncovered and the popularity of the series justified stretching it out to nineteen essays in all, published over a period of two years. When the series ended, Tarbell's essays appeared as a book in 1904. McClure invested more than \$50,000 in the project, a substantial sum of money by the standards of the day. The funds made it possible for Tarbell to hire an assistant, John Siddall, to track down leads in Cleveland, though she did much of the research herself. Indefatigable in her pursuit of missing documents, dogged in her search for personal testimony and previously untapped sources, Tarbell con-

structed a historical narrative whose proportions began to mirror in scale the company she detailed.

Tarbell's reliance on the public record was one of the most striking and persuasive aspects of her research. "Almost continuously since its organization in 1870," she noted, "the Standard Oil Company had been under investigation by the Congress of the United States and by the legislatures of the various states in which it had operated, on the suspicion that it was receiving rebates from the railroads and was practicing methods in restraint of free trade." Court records, the findings of state and federal investigative commissions, newspaper accounts from the oil regions, a large "pamphlet literature," and depositions from civil suits provided ample evidence of the methods Standard Oil had employed to amass its fortune and of the ways in which it maintained its monopoly.

Tarbell's use of these public records was important for two reasons. First, the documents put her findings on firm evidentiary ground and thus made for persuasive reading. Tarbell uncovered some little-known Standard practices and brought together original testimony from many company intimates and industry competitors. She provided a powerful narrative structure that made a coherent whole of the company's history. But she did not so much offer entirely new intelligence on the company as collect and analyze data already in the public record. That record needed a historian with a powerful narrative voice to lift the drama of the Standard Oil story from the dreary investigating committee reports. Few Americans would bother to piece together the facts by tracking down the various fragments of evidence strewn throughout a mammoth public record. Tarbell's massive research and writing effort simplified their task, opened up what already existed, and put the public record before the public.

The painstaking character of her research and her reliance on documents was important too in protecting *McClure's Magazine* from a libel suit. As Tarbell's father warned, a libel suit in this early pass at powerful economic interests—particularly one leveled by Standard Oil—might well have "ruined" the magazine. McClure was clearly attentive to the dangers involved in Tarbell's explosive series. He hired economists John R. Commons and John Bates Clark to read portions of Tarbell's manuscript for accuracy. Every article went through re-

peated editorial readings, with Tarbell receiving extensive criticism from John Phillips, John Siddall, and McClure himself. These efforts and the generally high quality of Tarbell's historical research placed the magazine in a strong position had Standard Oil chosen to pursue legal redresses. The company did not do so.

Another fascinating dynamic at work in Tarbell's construction of her narrative was the impact of the series itself—its announcement and then the publication of the first few articles—on the evolution of her remaining essays for *McClure's*. The series was advertised in the magazine a year after Tarbell's research had begun, and soon after S. S. McClure heard from Mark Twain that a friend of his wanted to speak to "Miss Tarbell." The friend was Henry H. Rogers, one of the most powerful Standard Oil executives. Rogers had begun his career in the industry as an independent refiner. Like so many other oil men, he had caved in to Standard Oil eventually. But he knew the oil region well and found common ground with Tarbell in their recollections of the pioneering days both remembered vividly.

For two years Rogers met regularly with Tarbell. He attempted to shape her story by giving his—and the company's—views of events. She listened politely, checked his claims against the facts, made use of what was reliable, and discarded what was not. Most important, her meetings with Rogers allowed Tarbell to penetrate the worldview of the entrepreneurs. She caught what she saw as the company's great obsession—"that nothing, however trivial, must live outside of its control." The reporter and the corporate titan "even argued with entire friendliness the debatable question, 'What is the worst thing the Standard Oil ever did?'" Rogers offered to put Tarbell in touch with other executives, including Rockefeller's founding partner and close associate Henry Flagler. Flagler proved to be a less satisfying source. Pressed by Tarbell to reveal details on Standard Oil's scheme to win rebates from the railroads, he ignored her queries and offered his own narrative history of his work with Rockefeller. As the story wound on, he punctuated his account with "we were prospered." Tarbell later dryly recalled, "That was not what I was after. Their prosperity was obvious enough." However reliable or unreliable their contents, these interviews nonetheless helped Tarbell get at the human faces behind the corporate machinations that built Standard Oil.

As the series began to run in November of 1902, the public response to the articles continued to be a factor in shaping Tarbell's history. "Victims" of the company, ranging from small would-be producers to Rockefeller's estranged brother Frank, began to seek Tarbell out, regale her with honor stories, and offer additional documentary evidence. A clerk at one Standard company passed to an independent refiner damning bookkeeping records that revealed a concerted effort on the part of Standard Oil to destroy the competitor. Much impressed by the quality of Tarbell's essays he was then reading in McClure's, the refiner turned over "the full set of incriminating documents." Rogers, who had continued to cooperate through the publication of the first essays, flew into a rage when Tarbell published the damning evidence. That ended any further interviews.

"The Oil War of 1872" was the third chapter of Tarbell's history to appear in McClure's. It tells the story of the battle independent oil producers waged against the South Improvement Company. In the 1870s, John D. Rockefeller was maneuvering to consolidate the various existing oil refiners into one huge company. One tactic used to break the competition was forged through an alliance with the railroads. In exchange for guarantees of regular, planned shipments, the refiners in the South Improvement Company would receive rebates from the railroads that reduced the cost of their shipments. In addition, they would prosper from "drawbacks"—money skimmed off the higher rates paid by those who shipped their oil without benefit of membership in the South Improvement Company. It was a devious and secretive scheme that threatened to break the backs of the independent oil producers and achieve a monopoly. There was no way producers outside the South Improvement Company could compete with a combination that could ship petroleum more cheaply than any other business in the oil region. They depended on the railroads to move crude oil out of the oil towns to outlying refineries as well as to carry crude and refined oil to distant shipping points. The South Improvement Company threatened their ability to survive in the petroleum industry.

Tarbell's father was one of the men who resisted the South Improvement Company. His daughter was a teenager during the oil war and he used the events of 1872 as a parable to teach her the impor-

tance of fair play. In spite of her personal connection to the oil war, Tarbell, in her essay for McClure's, presented the "facts" as she had come to understand them, believing that an objective account would best serve the evidence. She maintained the same stance throughout her *History of the Standard Oil Company*. It is worth asking how well she succeeded in this regard. Some critics accused Tarbell of harboring prejudices toward big business, independent of their corporate tactics. Does "The Oil War of 1872" support such a view? What *does* seem most troubling to Tarbell in her account of the oil war? Does she reject the realities of industrial capitalism or is she looking toward the regulation of corporations that would become one of the hallmarks of political and economic reform in the twentieth century? These are a few of the questions raised by "The Oil War of 1872."

Tarbell's construction of her historical narrative also deserves scrutiny. Why might Tarbell have chosen history as her method of analyzing the great oil trust? What forces does she emphasize as causal agents? Does Tarbell see Standard Oil's monopoly as the product of the misguided genius of one man? Or does she see the struggle over oil as a contest rooted in the conditions of modern industrial society? What, in fact, is Tarbell's essential message to her readers? Why would Tarbell's account of a battle over oil that had taken place thirty years ago seem so compelling in 1903?

Steffens and "The Shame of Minneapolis"

The dripping sarcasm of Lincoln Steffens's "The Shame of Minneapolis: The Rescue and Redemption of a City That Was Sold Out" made moot any questions of strict objectivity. Political corruption was a daily news item in Steffens's day, and the genius of his work was to bring essentially local stories of dirty politicians, corrupt police, and conspiring businessmen to a national stage. They seemed to exemplify deep flaws in the body politic and a kind of moral bankruptcy that, in Steffens's view, was infecting not just the cities but American democracy.

Steffens came to McClure's wise in the ways of contemporary urban politics. But McClure's gave him an opportunity to establish himself as one of the foremost political journalists of his day. That opportunity

was, in one sense, bred of failure. Although hired to assume the duties of a managing editor, Steffens soon proved himself to be poorly suited to such administrative tasks. He also had a difficult time adjusting to his boss. S. S. McClure traveled often in search of ideas, new writers, and new material, and just as often he came home talking a blue streak to his editorial staff and raving about their failures in his absence. Steffens admired McClure tremendously, but he took “the madness of McClure’s genius” to heart much more than did staff members such as Ida Tarbell who had known McClure longer and viewed him with greater sympathy.

McClure was similarly both admiring of and unhappy with his new editor. After observing Steffens in the office and looking over his editorial work, McClure sat the new arrival down and said “very sincerely, very kindly”: “You may have been an editor. [...] You may be an editor. But you don’t know how to edit a magazine. You must learn to.” Hurt and angry, Steffens replied, “Where then can I learn? Where shall I go to learn to be an editor?” McClure “waved his hand around a wide circle,” Steffens recalled. “Anywhere. Anywhere else. Get out of here, travel, go-somewhere. Go out in the advertising department. Ask them where they have transportation credit. Buy a railroad ticket, get on a train, and there, where it lands you, there you will learn to edit a magazine.” The free ticket was available on a train that ran to Chicago. Steffens went there in the fall of 1902 and “learned—not exactly how to edit a magazine, but I started something which did ‘make’ not one but several magazines. [...] I started,” Steffens boasted with less than perfect accuracy, “our political muckraking.”

Steffens had actually gone to Chicago with a list of contacts to query about appropriate stories for *McClure’s Magazine*. One of them suggested that Steffens check out a young circuit attorney, Joseph W. Folk, whose reforming zeal was causing a stir in St. Louis politics. The crusading prosecutor was already much in the St. Louis news. Steffens saw a chance “to take confused, local, serial news of the newspapers and report it all together in one long short story for the whole country.” The scene in St. Louis, Folk assured him, was “beyond belief.”

In fact, as Steffens would soon stress, Folk’s discovery of bribery, theft, and various other forms of corruption among the city’s aldermen was well within the boundaries of belief. An unusual alliance of ma-

chine politicians and municipal reformers had put Folk in office. But once there the public prosecutor quickly learned that he was expected to heel to the demands of boss Ed Butler’s Democratic machine. Rather than accede, Folk began investigating the very system that had elected him. But the “ballot stuffers” so important to the success of Butler’s machine proved to be small change compared to another scandal Folk had been pursuing when Steffens met him.

In January 1902 a local reporter had called Folk’s attention to an article just ten lines long in the St. Louis *Star*. The article noted that money recently deposited in a city bank was there for the purpose of paying off elected city officials in exchange for “passage of a street railroad ordinance” favorable to a railway company. Although the article mentioned no names, Folk traced the funds to the Suburban Railway Company. Within hours of publication of the article, officers of the company, bankers, lobbyists, and assemblymen were being rounded up by the sheriff at Folk’s command. Claiming far more evidence than he actually had in hand, Folk frightened the railway company president and a key lobbyist into informing. An ocean of evidence then poured forth as one informer led to another and tales of routine bribes for city franchises, licenses, property, exemptions, and privileges washed over the stunned prosecutor. In spite of concerted efforts to derail him, Folk won indictments and convictions of many of the principals. The ax even “struck the greatest oak of the forest”—Colonel Ed Butler himself.

When Folk met with Steffens, the former was in the midst of pursuing the trail of political and corporate corruption. Yet he willingly cooperated with the reporter because he believed national exposure could strengthen his hand in St. Louis. Initial local reaction to Folk’s investigations had been disappointing; his campaign to root out corruption was written up in city newspapers “in the spirit of burlesque.” As the prosecutions continued and the widespread vested interest in business as usual began to be touched, Folk believed he would lose “all local support.” As a New York-based reporter, Steffens represented a safe haven for the beleaguered prosecutor. “You publish in New York,” Folk stressed. “You are not subject to the pulls and the threats of St. Louis. You might see me through and so set the pace for the papers published here.”

Folk's canny observation underscored the mutual benefits that might accrue to political reformer and political journalist, benefits that changes in mass media made increasingly possible in the early twentieth century. Folk recognized the power of the press to mobilize public opinion. He further understood that when a national magazine made an example of St. Louis, the pressure within the city to mend its ways would be intense. National magazine exposure would elevate St. Louis politics and raise its stakes to a level that would otherwise be out of reach. Steffens's essay for *McClure's* in this sense would itself then become a weapon, however distantly wielded, in reform politics. In a stunning development that captured perfectly the shifting character of modern American society, national forces would play a powerful role in determining the local political scene.

If Folk stood to reap rewards from a profile in *McClure's Magazine*, gains for Steffens seemed ample as well. Steffens was looking for a good story, and he had one in the courage of an honorable man battling the machine. Furthermore, as he listened to Folk pour out his heart, Steffens began to see a pattern that Folk was also devastated to see. The corruption of St. Louis resembled closely the corruption Steffens had observed as a cub reporter in New York. "What Folk's mind was doing," Steffens later explained, "was simple, but unusual. He was sweeping all his cases of bribery together to form a truth out of his facts. He was generalizing." And so was Steffens. "Were not the extraordinary conditions of St. Louis and New York," he began to ask himself, "the ordinary conditions of city government in the United States?"

The two men found common ground in a second realization that was also freighted with significance. "Good business men" were in league with "bad politicians," Folk said. "It is good business that causes bad government. [...] It is the leading citizens that are battering on our city." This also squared well with what Steffens had seen in New York. Corrupt politics worked because it was profitable to all the players, including "the leading business men." There was more than simple or even complex crimes at work; there was a system in place that undermined the very purpose of democracy. "Bribery and corruption," Folk exclaimed, "is a process of revolution, to make a democratic government represent, not the people, but a part, the worse part of the

people." "Or—the best," Steffens replied. St. Louis might be a setting for the story, Steffens decided, but the particularities of that city were just background scenery. The drama was in "the revolutionary process which was going on in all our cities." Steffens was convinced that "if I could trace it to its source, I might find the cause of political corruption—and the cure."

In the meantime, more prosaic matters intervened. Steffens had found a story in St. Louis, but as an editor his duties were to match a writer to the tale. Folk recommended Charles Wetmore, a local reporter, who had been following the investigations. Steffens hired Wetmore to write the article, returned to New York, and then edited the piece when it came in. But Wetmore had soft-soaped the story in Steffens's view, and Steffens quickly began to add specifics. Fearful of his reputation, Wetmore insisted that Steffens also run his name on the piece "and take the blame" for the details he had added, if necessary. Steffens agreed and supplied a title that evoked the pattern he had come to see. "Tweed Days in St. Louis" appeared in the October 1902 issue of *McClure's Magazine*.

Impressed with the St. Louis piece, McClure assigned Steffens the task of preparing a series on political corruption to run alongside Ida Tarbell's series on corporate misdeeds. Indeed, the thrust of Steffens's early work suggested considerable overlap between corruption in business and corruption in politics. A *McClure's* editor called Steffens's attention to an item on corruption in Minneapolis that had appeared in the *New York Sun*. Aware that investigations of police corruption in Minneapolis had unearthed crimes paralleling those in New York, Steffens settled on the midwestern city as the next object of research. Once again the writer picked his subject not because no one knew what was happening in the city but because "the exposure of Minneapolis was all over; the main facts had been running scappily in the papers for a year. My job was to collect and combine the news serial into one digested, complete review." As was true in Tarbell's case, this evidentiary base grounded Steffens's exposé and provided some protection to the reputation of his magazine.

McClure provided a title for the article and an angle on the subject before Steffens had even left for Minneapolis. The essay would be called "The Shame of Minneapolis," and it would prove, McClure

instructed, “that democracy is at fault: that one man has to run a city just as one man has to run a business to make it a success.” Steffens firmly disagreed, but in fact he did find one man running the city, though hardly successfully. Researching the shenanigans of mayor Dr. Albert Alonzo Ames and his various police and criminal “associates,” Steffens achieved a reportorial coup when he gained access to the “big mitt ledger.” The ledger had been kept by gambling sharks who were set up in business by the police and others who worked for the mayor. It existed to keep track of debts owed to city officials and the police. Offered as evidence by informers, the ledger remained in the possession of the grand jury hearing evidence on the case. The foreman of the grand jury slipped the document to Steffens, who took photographs of the ledger, reproductions of which then appeared in *McClure’s Magazine*. The publication of Steffens’s essay on Minneapolis in January 1903 was deliberately timed by S. S. McClure to coincide with an impending mayoral election in the city. The convergence of both the reformers’ and the magazine’s interests in publicity once again led to an alliance that was critical to Steffens’s muckraking.

In reading Steffens’s article, it is useful to reflect on the concerns he brought to the piece. Did Minneapolis confirm the suspicions that had taken hold during his research on St. Louis? How is his understanding of municipal political corruption altered or enlarged by what he saw in Minneapolis? Steffens hoped to find the cause of political corruption and thereby the cure. What does he offer by way of analysis and remedy in “The Shame of Minneapolis”?

It is worth thinking too about the way Steffens constructs his narrative. What tactics does he use to draw his readers in to what is, after all, a revelation of graft in a midwestern city probably never even visited by many in his audience? What makes the tale compelling and dramatic? How does the exposé compare, for shock value, with more recent investigations into corruption in contemporary politics? How might a political reporter today approach Steffens’s explosive material? These are just a few of the questions raised by “The Shame of Minneapolis.”