

Exposing Big Business

Ida Tarbell

*~Muckrakers ~
The pen is mightier than the
sword!*

By the early 1900s, John D. Rockefeller, Sr. had successfully built his oil empire. For over 30 years, he had applied his uncanny business sense and unprecedented patience to the creation of the Standard Oil Company- a business without rival. Unfortunately in 1900, a 45 year old woman by the name of Ida Tarbell proved that Rockefeller and his Standard Oil Company were not invincible. Ida Tarbell's magazine series "The History of the Standard Oil Company," would not only change the history of journalism, but also the fate of Rockefeller's empire.



For almost two years, Ida Tarbell thoroughly looked through volumes of public records, including court testimony, state and federal reports and newspaper coverage. From her research, Ida found a mind-boggling wealth of information on Rockefeller's rise to power and the methods he used to run Standard Oil. Ida Tarbell proved her writing ability when she was able to not only digest all of her research on Rockefeller but then rewrite it into a fascinating, yet understandable narrative even the most common American could enjoy.

"The History of the Standard Oil Company" grew to be a 19-part magazine series, published between November 1902 and October 1904. Tarbell wrote a detailed exposé of Rockefeller's unethical tactics that took advantage of Pennsylvania's independent oil workers. Still, she was careful to give Rockefeller credit for his business savvy and the sheer genius of the business structure he had created. She was not against capitalism, but "the open disregard of decent ethical business practices by capitalists." About Standard Oil, she wrote: "They had never played fair, and that ruined their greatness for me."

What did the Standard Oil Company do that was unfair? The New York Times reported in 1937: "Rockefeller (of the Standard Oil Company) was accused of crushing out competition, getting rich on rebates from railroads, bribing men to spy on competing companies, of making secret agreements, of coercing rivals to join the Standard Oil Company under threat of being forced out of business, building up enormous fortunes on the ruins of other men, and so on."

As a result of Tarbell's work was a Supreme Court decision in 1911 that found Standard Oil in violation of the Sherman Antitrust Act. The Court found that Standard was an illegal monopoly and ordered it broken into 34 separate companies, thus preserving competition in business.

From Ida Tarbell's "A History of the Standard Oil Company":

A: The strides the firm of Rockefeller & Andrews ... were attributed... mainly to [his] extraordinary capacity for bargaining and borrowing. Then its chief competitors began to suspect something. Rockefeller might get his oil cheaper now and then, they said, but he could not do it often. He might make close contracts for which they had neither the patience nor the stomach. He might have an unusual mechanical and practical genius in his partner. But these things could not explain all. They believed they bought, on the whole, almost as cheaply as he, and they knew they made as good oil and with as great, or nearly as great, economy. He could sell at no better price than they. Where was his advantage? There was but one place where it could be, and that was in transportation.



B. With Mr. Rockefeller's genius for detail there went a sense of the big and vital factors in the oil business and a daring in laying hold of them which was very like military genius. He saw strategic points like a Napoleon and he swooped on them with the suddenness of a Napoleon. Mr. Rockefeller's capture of the Cleveland refineries in 1872 was as dazzling an achievement as it was a hateful one. The campaign ... viewed simply as a piece of brigandage, was admirable. The man saw what was necessary to his purpose and he never hesitated before it. His courage was steady--and his faith in his ideas unwavering. He simply knew what was the thing to do, and he went ahead with the serenity of the man who knows.

C. Little by little as the public began to realize the compactness and harmony of the Standard organization, the ability of its members, the solidity of the qualities governing its operations, they began to forget its history...they began to accept the Standard's explanation that the critics were indeed "people with a private grievance," "moss-backs left behind in the march of progress." It looked more and more to the outsider as if henceforth Mr. Rockefeller was going to have things his own way, for who was there to interfere with him, to dispute his position? No one, save that back in Northwestern Pennsylvania, in scrubby little oil towns, around greasy derricks, in dingy shanties, by rusty deserted oil stills, men still talked of the iniquity of the railroad rebate, the injustice of restraint of trade, the dangers of monopoly; still rehearsed with tiresome persistency the evidence by which it had been proved that the Standard Oil Company was a revival of the South Improvement Company.

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Exposing Mental Health Care

Nellie Bly

Nellie Bly talked her way into an improbable job on a newspaper at the young age of 19. She then went on to become known as "the best investigative reporter in America." Throughout her career, Nellie Bly continually risked her life to capture stories. She repeatedly went undercover to investigate the ills of society. In the years ahead, Bly exposed corruption, the injustice of poverty, the ways in which women prisoners were treated, and the inadequate medical care given to the poor. In order to expose the abuse of the mentally ill, she had herself committed into a mental institution for 10 days. What resulted was a disturbing expose' that captured the attention of readers and reformers throughout America. The following are excerpts from Nellie's undercover experience in a mental institution:

"...I wondered if my companions knew where we were, so I said to Miss Tillie Mayard: 'Where are we?' 'At the Blackwell's Island Lunatic Asylum,' she answered sadly. 'Are you crazy?' I asked. 'No,' she replied; 'but as we have been sent here we will have to be quiet until we find some means of escape. They will be few though, if all the doctors, as Dr. Field, refuse to listen to me or give me a chance to prove my sanity.'

I turned my attention to the prunes and found that very few of them would be sufficient. A patient near asked me to give them to her. I did so. My bowl of tea was all that was left. I tasted, and one taste was enough. It had no sugar, and it tasted as if it had been made in copper. It was as weak as water. This was also transferred to a hungrier patient, in spite of the protest of Miss Neville. 'You must force the food down,' she said, 'else you will be sick, and who knows but what, with these surroundings, you may go crazy. To have a good brain the stomach must be cared for.' 'It is impossible for me to eat that stuff,' I replied, and, despite all her urging, I ate nothing that night.

We were sent to the bathroom, where there were two coarse towels. I watched crazy patients who had the most dangerous eruptions all over their faces dry on the towels and then saw the women with clean skin turn to use them. I went to the bathtub and washed my face at the running faucet and my underskirt did duty as a towel."

"...Before I had completed my ablutions a bench was brought into the bathroom. Miss Grupe and Miss McCarten came in with combs in their hands. We were told to sit down on the bench and the hair of forty-five women was combed with one patient, two nurses, and six combs. As I saw some of the sore heads combed I thought this was another dose I had not bargained for."

"...Oh, that combing! I never realized before what the expression 'I'll give you a combing' meant, but I knew then. My hair, all matted and wet from the night previous, was pulled and jerked, and, after expostulating to no avail, I set my teeth and endured the pain. They refused to give me my hairpins, and my hair was arranged in one plait and tied with a red cotton rag. My curly bangs refused to stay back."

What, excepting torture, would produce insanity quicker than this treatment? . . . Take a perfectly sane and healthy woman, shut her up and make her sit from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. on straight-back benches, do not allow her to talk or move during these hours, give her no reading and let her know nothing of the world or its doings, give her bad food and harsh treatment, and see how long it will take to make her insane. Two months would make her a mental and physical wreck."



Nellie Bly

Exposing Slum Life in Industrial Cities

Jacob Riis



Jacob Riis was a muckraking journalist. He was an immigrant himself who saw first hand the struggles of the poor in industrial America. As a photo journalist he was primarily interested in photographing the awful conditions in which poor people had to live. He photographed slums, tenement houses, and lodging houses in the city. His first major work published in 1889 called "How the other half lives" generated a lot of public attention. It was an illustrated account of life in an industrial city. Over the next twenty-five years Riis wrote and lectured on the problems of the poor in an attempt to educate America on the plight of the poor. Riis often hosted magic lantern shows in which he would project his pictures on the early version of a slide projector. One observer noted that "his viewers moaned, shuddered, fainted and even talked to the photographs he projected, reacting to the slides not as images but as a virtual reality that transported the New York slum world directly into the lecture hall."



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Exposing Working Conditions & Food Safety

Upton Sinclair

Upton Sinclair was a famous muckraking journalist from California. In 1904 he visited industrial Chicago to research the working conditions of workers in meat packing plants. He intended to reveal the “exploits of labor” but his expose about the unsanitary conditions in the meatpacking plants affected Americans the most. His best-known novel was "The Jungle" which was an expose of the appalling and sickening conditions in the meat-packing industry. Sinclair wrote that “I aimed at the nation’s heart, but by accident I hit them in the stomach.” Sinclair’s realistic description of the conditions in a meatpacking factory literally made Americans sick.

Upton Sinclair’s book, "The Jungle“ sold over 25,000 copies in only a week and even came to the attention of President Teddy Roosevelt. President Roosevelt was so appalled he called for an investigation and later pushed for passage of the Meat Inspection Act in 1906, which mandated that meat producing factories follow strict cleanliness requirements.



From “The Jungle”:

There would be meat that had tumbled out on to the floor, in the dirt and sawdust, where the workers had tramped and spit uncounted billions of consumption germs. There would be meat stored in great piles in rooms; and the water from leaky roofs would drip over it, and thousands of rats would race about on it.

It was too dark in those storage places to see well, but a man could run his hand over these piles of meat and sweep off handfuls of the dried dung of rats. These rats were nuisances and the packers would put out poisoned bread for them, they would die and then the rats, bread, and meat would all go into the hoppers together...This is no fairy story and no joke...the man who did the shoveling would not trouble to lift out a rat even when he saw one- there were things that went into the sausage in comparison with which a poisoned rat was a tidbit. There was no place for the men to wash their hands before they ate their dinner, and so they made a practice of washing them in the water that was to be ladled into the sausage.

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Exposing Quack Medicine

Samuel Hopkins Adams



Samuel Hopkins Adams began writing in Collier's Weekly in 1905. He wrote a series of 11 sensational articles on "The Great American Fraud," the patent medicine business. He exposed many of the false and even ridiculous claims made by patent medicine manufacturers and showed that these medicines frequently harmed rather than helped those who took them. The series had a huge impact and was published as a book in 1906. As a result of these articles, the first Pure Food and Drug Act was passed in 1906. The purpose was to protect the public against adulteration of food and from products identified as healthful without scientific support. The following are excerpts from the writings of Samuel Hopkins Adams:

"Gullible America will spend this year some seventy-five millions of dollars in the purchase of patent medicines. In consideration of this sum it will swallow huge quantities of alcohol, an appalling amount of opiates and narcotics, a wide assortment of varied drugs ranging from powerful and dangerous heart depressants to insidious liver stimulants; and, in excess of all other ingredients, undiluted fraud"

"Seventy-five million dollars a year is a moderate estimate of the volume of business done by pseudo-medical preparations which "eradicated" asthma with sugar and water, "soothed" babies with concealed and deadly opiates, "relieved" headaches through the agency of dangerous, heart-impairing, coal-tar drugs, "dispelled" catarrh by cocaine mixtures, enticing to a habit worse than death's very self, and "cured" tuberculosis, cancer, and Bright's disease with disguised and flavored whiskies and gins."

- Samuel Hopkins Adams



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