

# Muckraking: A Dirty Job with Clean Intentions

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I.  
**Muckraking: A Dirty Job with Clean Intentions**

By Courtney E. Bowers '08



There is nothing more interesting to people than other people. The plethora of tabloids and morning discussions over who has broken up with whom attest to this fact. People love to read about the gripping stories of other people's lives, especially when their own seem so boring and unexciting. They love the triumphs of a hard battle won, of a good turnout against all odds. But they love the darker side of humanity even more—hearing about thievery and calumny and murder and all the foibles of the lives of the rich, famous and powerful. In a sense, it is a way of “sticking it to the man,” as the saying goes. Such stories show opportunities that the average man will never have, and how they blew up in the face of those who misused them.

Muckrakers play off of this theme. They know that the more sordid the story, the more people it will grip and the better it will sell. In the period 1880-1920, America was rife with the kind of dirty corruption on which muckrakers play best. Bold-faced lies in advertisement, gigantic trusts, dangerous foods, political machines: all these were everyday occurrences that made the lives of the everyday man that much more difficult. The muckrakers of this time period exposed these stories, and then went on to do more—they sought social reform. They brought their own sense of moral justice (fed by a certain spiritual fervor that was perfectly suited to the times) into the fray. They acted for the “common man,” despite threats against them by those in the highest echelons of power. Though their movement eventually became unpopular—as all movements are wont to do—they became the heroes of an era and are still today exonerated by journalists. In the light of this knowledge, it can be stated that muckraking between 1880-1920 was unequivocally a success.

Muckraking sounds like a dirty job, and in a sense it was. It involved hours upon hours of research, mostly in the public records, to find the one document that would condemn the rich and powerful. It required a certain degree of hard-boiled determination, one that led them to be vilified by their enemies and loved by the masses. Though a Progressive himself, President Theodore Roosevelt disliked the constant negativity that so popularized this kind of journalism and bestowed upon them the title of “muckrakers.” That term comes from the classic book *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan, in which a character will not look up even if a crown were offered him—he keeps on his task of raking the muck.<sup>1</sup> Yet the work of these muckrakers would also lead Roosevelt to investigate the different circumstances they portrayed and move for change.<sup>2</sup> As distasteful as these journalists might have been, they were effective.

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<sup>1</sup> Doug Underwood, *From Yahweh to Yahoo!*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 24.

<sup>2</sup> Rodger Streitmatter, *Mightier than the Sword*, (Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), 96.

It makes sense that muckraking came into being when it did. Over the breadth of history a series of movements and counter-movements can be seen; as one era ends another begins which swings the opposite direction from it. Just as the Romantic era opposed the Enlightenment, this Progressive era came into being as the Romantic era brought to an end. Realistic literature became the rage after Romanticism was ousted by William Dean Howells in the 1880s, and both muckraking journalism and literature (such as *The Jungle*) fit right in.<sup>3</sup> In a way, it can be surmised that the Progressive era (and therefore the muckrakers) was a reaction to the Industrial Revolution, which had led to all the excesses and abuses in pursuit of wealth against which the Progressives raged.

During the time span of 1880-1920, several different movements came to the fore and began to work together brilliantly. Already, as we have seen, there was a movement away from the romantic to the realistic. Too, there was the movement from the pursuit of extreme wealth to the fight against its inherent abuses. Further, there was a great spiritual movement in the United States—a revival that inspired the religious and non-religious alike. The muckrakers, some of them socialist and almost all eschewing organized religion, were motivated by this moral awakening. They were just as fanatic in their own ways as were the revival and evangelical leaders. They wanted to create a society that reflected the social equity and sense of community responsibility so harped upon in the Bible. The Hebrew prophets were their guiding lights, and they felt themselves prophets of their own time.<sup>4</sup> They were on a crusade to awaken the people to the deterioration of the social order, and they easily picked up on the brand of fiery oratory that was so effective at revival meetings. There was a sense of destiny about many of the muckrakers—they were called to perform a vital duty—which was particularly American. They were not interested in Jesus the Savior—they were not looking to save souls. Rather, they were interested in Jesus the Social Activist, dictating how the people should act in their everyday lives. The corruption of the factories and big businesses were in direct opposition to this principle, and the suffering of the people could only be ameliorated if those with the ability lived such socially just lives.<sup>5</sup>

The muckrakers were possessed of a singular kind of journalism. They were caught between being reporters and being participants. A proper reporter gives only the facts, not judging or trying to influence opinion. Yet they experienced a certain “confusion of function.”<sup>6</sup> Some of the muckrakers, such as Ida Tarbell, were generally content to let the story tell itself. The situation was so sordid that input from a reporter was not needed to excite the readers. Other reporters could not help but editorialize, lambasting the situations and offering their own brand of conclusions or solutions to end the social malaise and bring society to its true destiny. They presented their own ideology for the consumption of the masses, and the people were only too happy to devour it. Too, they were trapped between the need to capture the reader’s attention and present the facts. A treatise on public records and legal documents does not make for entertaining reading, but human-interest stories are almost always gripping. Sometimes the facts did get lost in the dramatic and literary world of scandal and intrigue and their opinions would become the underpinning of the stories. Literary sensationalism sells, and the trend toward it has

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Miraldi, *Muckraking and Objectivity*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990) 32.

<sup>4</sup> Underwood, 77.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 76-87.

<sup>6</sup> Miraldi, 28.

never left journalism. Whether the stories were heavily based upon verifiable fact or not, they still sold and still contributed to the social outcry and change that the muckrakers sought.<sup>7</sup> Their brand of reporting worked because it was both literary and real (the reports were always based on some fact), and they were written on a level to which everyone could relate.

The journalists of today still hold these reporters of old as heroes and exemplars of their craft. To understand why modern journalists would be so enamored of these writers it is important to look at their individual and famous contributions. This is not to say that these were the only muckrakers, or even the only successful muckrakers—at the time, muckraking was fashionable for journalists from the smallest town papers to the biggest city circulations. Social reform was not limited to those who had name recognition and star power. But it is these names that are exonerated, these correspondents that are remembered, because they challenged the biggest names in business and politics and won.

Lincoln Steffens was and is still one of the most famous of the muckrakers—an icon to journalists who is taught about in almost every American History course. He was an intellectual who studied domestically and abroad at the best universities before becoming a journalist. He eventually went to work for *McClure's*, the most famous and powerful of the muckraking journals. His personal project, which took him three years, was to expose the corruption in the governments of the nation's biggest cities. He started with Boss Tweed in St. Louis, giving details to the American people about the graft and dirty business dealings of this spoils-system machine.<sup>8</sup>

Steffens's article did more than just outrage the St. Louis and American public: it allowed for the prosecution of the corrupt city officials. The District Attorney of St. Louis, Joseph W. Folk, found that he finally had enough support to bring the officials up on charges for a series of offenses, "from stuffing the ballot box to padding contracts."<sup>9</sup> Folk would two years later be elected governor, riding on this popularity, and would move to reform the state government. Steffens, meanwhile, moved on to other big cities in the nation, writing exposés on them and garnering accolades for his careful study of governmental vice. His articles led many cities to entirely overhaul their municipal systems, bringing in professional administrators who reduced the spoils system and pressed for actual credentials from city employees.<sup>10</sup> While Steffens did not do any of the reforming himself, he left quite a legacy.

Another of the famous muckrakers would be Ida Minerva Tarbell, the great trustbuster. She grew up in the oilfields of Pennsylvania and held a masters degree, which she put to good use in securing a journalist position writing on progressive topics as well as biographies. In 1902 she would use these skills in writing her series, "History of the Standard Oil Company," in which she would prove how the ruthless actions of John D. Rockefeller helped create and maintain the giant Standard Oil. She used financial documents and information to prove her points, but she combined these dry details with racy anecdotes about a cunning man and his sometimes violent and always salacious activities. The American people were so enamored with her that many offered the finest

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<sup>7</sup> Miraldi, 23-56.

<sup>8</sup> Streitmatter, 87.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

accolades; some went even further, going out of their way to help and smuggling damning information to her. Even the Congress paid close attention to what she was saying, and in 1906 they passed the Hepburn Act to make penalties on preferential treatment of the railroads so severe that the practice stopped. Standard Oil was soon indicted on charges of fraud, and the Supreme Court broke it up, ruling that it violated the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. Rockefeller's image was so severely damaged that, though he avoided jail, he became a philanthropist and hired a publicity man to help him salvage some of his reputation. Sales of *McClure's* (for whom she also worked) went through the roof due to the popularity of her articles, and the public was pleased to find that they could, by meticulous and hard work, force the great businessmen of America to account for their actions. Tarbell was the conscience of America.<sup>11</sup>

There were other muckrakers whose actions led to tangible public outcry and reform. Ray Stannard Baker became famous because of his total immersion into whatever topic about which he was writing. He used the stories of individual workers to expose the corruption of the labor unions, which had become as machine-like as the corporations against which they were supposed to fight. Workers could no longer voluntarily join the unions, and the unions themselves were seized with racketeering and other ruthless tactics. The members of the unions had become a mob, while the labor leaders had tied themselves into the corruption of the big cities. Top academics and common men alike praised Baker's exhaustive work, which came to fruition with the indictment of labor boss and mayor Schmitz of San Francisco on extortion.<sup>12</sup>

Baker's work opened the door for other muckrakers, who examined various aspects of the unions. Rheta Childe Dorr profiled the struggle and painful life of American women in labor, while Edwin Markham castigated the practice of child labor. Markham's work paid off, and soon most of the states and then the U. S. Congress enacted legislation protecting America's youth. Not only were the laws changed—Markham changed the entire attitude of the public and policymakers in respect to the practice.<sup>13</sup>

Magazines themselves joined the crusade against the ills of America, contributing editorials and hiring muckrakers to incense the public. *Collier's* printed inflammatory pictures about patent medicines and their deleterious effects on children. *Ladies Home Journal* also went on attack concerning patent medicines. Their editor, Edward Bok, urged his subscribers to avoid all patent medicines, showing in articles and charts that they were made mostly of alcohol and drugs such as opium or cocaine. *Collier's* Mark Sullivan, a lawyer, proved to the people the power that the medicine companies had over the press through their advertising contracts and their complete disregard for the safety of America.<sup>14</sup> Bok would author "An Act to Regulate the Manufacture and Sale of 'Patent' Medicines," an attempt at a proactive attack on dangerous drugs. It inspired the Pure Food and Drug Act, which was passed on the behest of Roosevelt and the public, who had flooded Capitol Hill with demands for regulation and protection from these dangerous medicines.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-92.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-4.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 96-7.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-9.

A less famous but just as effective muckraker can be found in David Graham Phillips. He was hired by William Randolph Hearst, who had realized that muckraking had more than enough sensationalism to boost sales. Phillips started writing in 1906 in a series that would rebuke the Senate, coupling the name of this high legislative body with treason. He claimed that the interests and conspiracies of its policymakers helped only the few while harming the many. The Senators fervidly attacked Phillips and Hearst and tried to threaten them into silence, but the public avidly read their work and raised an outcry. Phillips's work defeated the reelection of several Senators, but he went further to call for a change from the election of Senators by state legislatures to direct election. In 1913 a constitutional amendment was finally passed that provided for this direct election by the people of each state, forcing the Senators to be accountable to their constituents. Muckraking had reached the height of its power, changing the Constitution of the United States.<sup>16</sup>

There is one writer from this time that many literary critics and historians would argue was not a true muckraker, though his work is probably one of the most famous of them all. Upton Sinclair was a fictional book writer, not a journalist, and some would argue that only journalists dealing with hard fact could deserve such a title.<sup>17</sup> Yet Sinclair's contributions stand out amongst those of all his peers, especially for his work on *The Jungle*, which would lead to both the Pure Food and Drug Act and also Roosevelt's movement to pass the Meat Inspection Act after being appalled by the state of American meatpacking.<sup>18</sup> Sinclair was accused of writing only for the money, yet he spent his life devoted to reform. He was helped in his career by Lincoln Steffens, who became his close friend. He too was friends with or knew well Ida Tarbell, Ray Stannard Baker, Robert Collier, and David Graham Phillips. The muckrakers respected each other and traveled in each other's circles. He too knew President Theodore Roosevelt, calling him the worst muckraker of them all. Though he became disillusioned with much of the twentieth century, he expressed optimism about the new generation of reporters in 1963. He would outlive the other muckrakers, surviving to the age of 90 and passing away in 1968.<sup>19</sup>

Though muckraking was a success in its time, it eventually petered out. The religious fervor died away, and the people tired of corruption and dastardly deeds. The major problems had been fixed—the work of the muckrakers was largely done. There was a movement for balanced opinions, sliding away from controversial stands, and muckraking itself became a big business in which advertising and corporate buyouts became king. World War I signaled the end of muckraking, as a new type of reporter emerged and the people of the United States were gripped by pessimism and ennui rather than zeal—they looked for writing that would make them feel better, or at least make them feel that they were not trapped in terrible circumstances.<sup>20</sup> All great movements eventually come to an end, but muckraking leaves a lasting legacy on journalism and the United States itself. Many of the reforms enacted at that time have present incarnations or

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 99-100.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 95-9.

<sup>19</sup> Judson A. Grenier, *Reform and Reformers in the Progressive Era*, ed. David R. Colburn and George E. Pozzetta (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983), 75-88.

<sup>20</sup> Miraldi, 46-50.

are still followed today. In light of these achievements, it can be concluded that muckraking between 1880-1920 was indeed a success.

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