

Bill of Rights in Action



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IDA TARBELL AND THE MUCKRAKERS



The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, Peletier Library, Allegheny College

Ida Tarbell helped pioneer investigative journalism when she wrote a series of magazine articles about John D. Rockefeller and his Standard Oil Trust. She and other journalists, who were called “muckrakers,” aided Progressive Movement reform efforts. But Tarbell also had another side to her career.

Ida Tarbell was born in western Pennsylvania in 1857, two years before oil was discovered nearby. This set off the first oil boom in the United States. Her father, Franklin, soon joined others to become independent oil producers and refiners.

In 1860, John D. Rockefeller, a 21-year-old bookkeeper from Ohio, appeared in the Pennsylvania oil fields and began to buy out the independent oil men. Some independents like Ida’s father refused his offers and Rockefeller made their businesses suffer.

Meanwhile, as Ida grew up, her mother Esther complained about the drudgery of a homemaker. She thought it was a waste of a woman’s time, which should be focused more on educational pursuits. At a young age, Ida vowed never to marry.

In 1876, Tarbell enrolled in Allegheny College, one of the first women to do so. She studied biology, a field almost totally dominated by men. She learned the scientific method, which involves proving facts by observation.

After graduating in 1880, she taught school for a short time, but then got a job on the staff of a magazine that promoted education and culture for America’s growing middle class. She gained valuable experience as a writer and editor.

In 1891, Tarbell decided to take a radical leap in her life and moved to Paris. She immersed herself in French

BENEATH THE SURFACE

The first article in this issue analyzes the career of Ida Tarbell who pioneered what we now call “investigative journalism” and shows her similarities and differences with the “muckrakers” of her time. The second article takes a close look at what the Anglo-Zulu War in South Africa in the 19th century shows us about British imperialist policy. The third article outlines the background and possible outcomes of the investigation by Robert Mueller into Russian involvement in the 2016 presidential election.

U.S. History: *Ida Tarbell and the Muckrakers* by longtime contributor Carlton Martz

World History: *The Anglo-Zulu War and British Imperialism* by Carlton Martz

U.S. Government/Current Issues: *Will the Mueller Probe End With a Constitutional Crisis?* by contributing writer Patrick Jenning

culture, took classes on historical writing, and wrote a biography of a woman involved in the French Revolution. She supported herself by writing articles about French life for American newspapers and magazines. Back home, a reform movement was gathering steam.

Rise of the Progressive Movement

Industrialization took hold in the U.S. after the Civil War. This meant the rapid growth of large corporations, banks to finance them, and railroads to ship their products. For example, by the 1890s, nearly every household lamp in the U. S. was lit by kerosene refined and sold by Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company.

Millions of men, women, and children left farms to labor in textile (cloth-making) mills, factories, iron and steel foundries, and other industries fueled by coal and oil. Much of this industrial activity occurred in the big cities, which drew large numbers of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe.

Successful corporation owners like Rockefeller and a growing middle class of managers prospered. But workers, both native-born and immigrant, barely survived on low wages, labored long hours under often harsh working conditions, and lived in crowded slum apartments called tenements.

Business abuses by corporations and railroads led Congress to enact some federal reform laws, such as a law to require "reasonable and just" railroad freight rates and a law to prohibit corporate monopolies from eliminating competition in order to charge higher prices. Corporations challenged these and other laws in courts that often ruled in their favor.

By 1900, the Progressive Movement demanded new reforms. Writers, politicians, and other middle class reformers called progressives became increasingly vocal about injustices in American society. They condemned poverty, child labor, unsafe working conditions, government corruption, the lack of regulation of big businesses, and other social ills.

At this time, new magazines with a nation-wide circulation emerged. Aimed at the middle class, they began to add factual articles to the fiction and poetry of traditional literary magazines.

In 1893, Sam McClure and his partner John Phillips founded *McClure's Magazine*. McClure assembled a group of talented writers who were paid a monthly salary that enabled them to do in-depth investigative reporting on economic, social, and political issues.

McClure met Ida Tarbell in Paris and was impressed with her writing. In 1894, he recruited her to join the staff of his magazine in New York City. She wrote popular biographical series on Napoleon and Lincoln. She went on to be one of *McClure's* editors.

In 1900, Republicans William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt were elected president and vice president. The following year, McKinley was assassinated and Roosevelt, a former governor of New York, became president. He was known as a pro-business conservative Republican. But he had been drifting in a progressive direction, speaking out against the excessive power and political influence of large corporations.

In his first message to Congress, Roosevelt cheered the state of the economy. He was not opposed to large corporations, he declared. But he called for them to be "supervised" and reasonably controlled by the government. He soon came to see magazines like *McClure's* as allies.

Tarbell's Investigation of Standard Oil

In 1882, Rockefeller formed the Standard Oil Trust. This was a huge collection of oil producing, refining, retailing, and related companies. By 1900, the Trust controlled nearly a 90 percent monopoly of the entire petroleum industry in the U.S.

In 1890, Ohio sued the Standard Oil of Ohio Company because it was controlled by the Trust in New York City, a violation of the state's law. The state supreme court ordered the Ohio company to be separated from the Trust. But this never happened, and Ohio eventually dropped the case.

Finally, in 1899, the Standard Oil Trust reorganized under New Jersey law that allowed corporations to hold stock in other corporations. This made Standard Oil of New Jersey a holding company that owned stock in numerous corporations throughout the country. Rockefeller's oil empire could now function in dozens of businesses such as refining, manufacturing, transportation, and investments. Profits were enormous because there were no personal or corporate income taxes.

Sam McClure decided to focus his magazine's coverage on Rockefeller's Standard Oil. After learning that Tarbell had grown up in the Pennsylvania oil fields and had witnessed Rockefeller's early practices there, he assigned her to the story.

Starting in 1901, Tarbell traveled the country on an exhausting investigation of Standard Oil. She read books and newspaper files on trusts and monopolies, studied reports of congressional and state legislature hearings, examined thousands of documents, and reviewed court testimony.

Tarbell also interviewed many who had had dealings with Rockefeller. This even included a Standard Oil executive at the corporate office in New York City. She never interviewed Rockefeller himself, however, since he went to great lengths to protect his privacy. Tarbell had to hire an assistant to help her comprehend the massive amount of material she collected.

Tarbell discovered that Standard Oil used bribery, fraud, and selling oil below cost.

Tarbell's first article in *McClure's* appeared in the November 1902 issue. A planned few articles turned into a long series that ended in October 1904. Later she wrote a book, *The History of the Standard Oil Company*, based on her magazine articles.

Spurred by the success of the Standard Oil series, McClure was determined to dig deeper into the dark side of American life. He declared he believed in "a vigilant and well-informed press, setting forth the truth."

The Most Famous Woman in America

Tarbell found that from the earliest days of the Pennsylvania oil boom, Rockefeller plotted to own the entire oil industry in the U.S. and even the world. His strategy was to buy out successful independent oil men by persuasion or by threat. Suddenly, she wrote, "a big hand reached out" to steal their good fortune.

Rockefeller's key method of doing this was to make secret deals with railroads that agreed to rebate (return to) him a significant portion of the official oil transportation rate he paid. Then to make up for this discount, the railroads doubled the rate they charged Rockefeller's competitors. He could then sell his oil cheaper on the market and force his competitors out of business if they refused his offers to buy them out.

Once Rockefeller's competition was eliminated in a region, a Standard Oil monopoly existed that could jack up oil prices. Tarbell estimated that the consumer paid up to a third more for oil products.

McClure's Magazine

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NO. 1

THE HISTORY OF THE STANDARD OIL COMPANY

BY IDA M. TARBELL

Author of "The Life of Lincoln"

CHAPTER I—THE BIRTH OF AN INDUSTRY

ONE of the busiest corners of the globe at the opening of the year 1872 was a strip of Northwestern Pennsylvania, not over fifty miles long, known the world over as the Oil Regions. Twelve years before, this strip of land had been but little better than a wilderness its only inhabitants the lumbermen, who every season cut great swaths of primeval pine and hemlock from its hills, and in the spring floated them down the Allegheny River to Pittsburgh. The great tides of Western emigration had shunned the spot for years as too rugged and unfriendly for settlement, and yet in twelve years this region avoided by men had been transformed into a bustling trade center, where towns elbowed each other for place, into which the three great trunk railroads had built branches, and every foot of whose soil was fought for by capitalists. It was the discovery and development of a new raw product, petroleum, which had made this change from wilderness to market-place. This product in twelve years had not only peopled a waste place of the earth, it had revolutionized the world's methods of illumination and added millions upon millions of dollars to the wealth of the United States.

Petroleum as a curiosity was no new thing. For more than two hundred years it had been described in the journals of Western explorers. For decades it had been dipped up from the surface of springs, soaked up by blankets from running streams, found in quantities when salt wells were bored, bottled and sold as a cure-all—"Seneca Oil" or "Rock Oil," it was called. One man had even distilled it in a crude way, and sold it as an illuminant. Scientists had described it, and travelers from the West often carried bottles to their scientific friends in the East. It was such a bottleful, brought as a gift



GEORGE H. BISSELL

The man to whom more than any other is due the credit of what is called the "discovery" of oil; for it was he who first took steps to find its value and to organize a company to produce it. It was he, too, who suggested the means of getting oil which proved practical. After the oil company which he organized obtained oil in the Drake well, he aided in establishing the needed industries and institutions in the new country.

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Starting in 1902, Tarbell's articles about Standard Oil were serialized (published in a series of installments) in *McClure's* magazine.

knows practically where every barrel shipped by every independent dealer goes; and where every barrel bought by every corner-grocer from Maine to California comes from."

Tarbell did not condemn Standard Oil for being too big or even a monopoly. She even wrote a chapter in her book on "The Legitimate Greatness of the Standard Oil Company." But she explained, "They had never played fair, and that ruined their greatness for me."

The *McClure's* series on Standard Oil was so popular that Tarbell became a national celebrity. Sam McClure called her "the most famous woman in America."

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Excerpt From Ida Tarbell's *The History of the Standard Oil Company* (1904)

To know every detail of the oil trade, to be able to reach at any moment its remotest point, to control even its weakest factor – this was John D. Rockefeller's ideal of doing business. It seemed to be an intellectual necessity for him to be able to direct the course of any particular gallon of oil from the moment it gushed from the earth until it went into the lamp of a housewife. . . . In spite of his bold pretensions and his perfect organisation, a few obstinate oil refiners still lived and persisted in doing business. They were a fly in his ointment – a stick in his wonderful wheel. He must get them out; otherwise the Great Purpose would be unrealised. And so, while engaged in organising the world's markets, he incidentally carried on a campaign against those who dared intrude there.

However, Tarbell was not finished with Rockefeller. In 1905, she wrote a long biographical profile of him in *McClure's*. Despite his well-known charity giving and church attendance, she described him as obsessed with money. He was, Tarbell wrote, “the man with a mask and a steel grip, forever peering into hidden places for money, always more money; planning in secret to wrest it even from his friends, never forgetting, never resting, never satisfied.”

Tarbell concluded, “Our national life is on every side distinctly poorer, uglier, meaner for the kind of influence he exercises.” Rockefeller remained publicly silent after this personal attack, but privately called Tarbell “Miss Tarbarrel.”

The Muckrakers

Tarbell’s astounding popular success spurred investigative reporting by *McClure's* and other magazines. But in 1906, President Roosevelt grew disturbed that too many writers were raking the “filth of the floor” of American society while ignoring what was good about it. Such writers were soon called “muckrakers.”

Although they were guided by the facts they investigated, the muckrakers had a point of view. They wanted to reform the economic, social, and political conditions that troubled society. Thus they became part of the Progressive Movement. Tarbell, however, rejected the label of muckraker. Instead, she described herself as an historian.

Tarbell and the muckrakers made important contributions to the Progressive Movement. The Hepburn Act of 1906 gave authority to the Interstate Commerce Commission to set reasonable railroad freight rates that did not favor big companies. The 16th Amendment enabled Congress to enact an income tax on individuals and corporations. The 17th Amendment provided for the direct election of U.S. senators rather than them being appointed by state legislatures, often as a result of political corruption.

The work of Tarbell and others led to many anti-trust lawsuits to finally curb the power of monopolies like Standard Oil. Roosevelt brought dozens of federal anti-trust lawsuits against corporate giants.

One of the most important federal anti-trust actions was *Standard Oil Company of New Jersey v. United States*. In 1911, the U.S. Supreme Court decided that the purpose of the Standard Oil Trust was “to drive others from the field and exclude them from the right to trade.” The Court ordered the breakup of Standard Oil into over 30 independent competing companies such as today’s Exxon.

Rockefeller lost his quest to totally own the oil business. Ironically, he became even richer because he received cash and oil stock from the breakup just as

gasoline-powered cars were beginning to replace the horse and buggy.

The Other Ida Tarbell

Tarbell and others left *McClure's* in 1906 and purchased the *American Magazine*. They wanted to write more about what was right in America. In 1915, she left this magazine to become a freelance writer and lecturer on current issues.

Tarbell seemed to soften her progressive image when she began to write positive articles about business and corporate leaders. Unlike some of the muckrakers, she was not a foe of capitalism. She admired Henry Ford and wrote a friendly profile of U.S. Steel board chairman Elbert Gary.

Confusingly, she wrote that “the business of being a woman” should be as a homemaker and to raise children, especially “opening a child’s mind” to learning. This view contradicted her entire career as an unmarried and childless professional journalist.

Tarbell also strongly opposed women’s suffrage (right to vote). She argued that politics would corrupt women. She was convinced women did not need more rights. Instead, they should embrace their natural gifts as wife and mother. Her mother was a lifelong suffragist. Her progressive journalist colleagues were puzzled. However, after the 19th Amendment granted women the right to vote in 1920, she traveled the country and found women voting enthusiastically. So she changed her mind. She even remarked that a woman should someday be president.

Ida Tarbell died in 1944 at 86. She is remembered today mainly as a muckraker journalist, a term she hated. Her major contribution to journalism, however, was the fact-based investigative reporting that she pioneered and passed on to today’s journalists.

WRITING & DISCUSSION

1. How could monopolies like Standard Oil be harmful to the consumer?
2. What do you think was the worst aspect of Rockefeller’s Standard Oil Company that Tarbell revealed? Why?
3. How did the muckrakers play an important role in the Progressive Movement?

ACTIVITY: Who Was Ida Tarbell?

Ida Tarbell was a complicated, even contradictory, person. Meet in small groups to discuss, choose, and report which one of the following terms best describes her. Justify your choice with evidence from the article.

Muckraker	Historian	Investigative Journalist
Progressive	Liberated Woman	Hypocrite

Sources

Ida Tarbell

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Standards Addressed

Ida Tarbell

National U.S. History Standard 20: Understands how Progressives and others addressed problems of industrial capitalism, urbanization, and political corruption. **High School Benchmark 1:** Understands the origins and impact of the Progressive movement (e.g., social origins of Progressives and how these contributed to the success and failure of the movement; Progressive reforms pertaining to big business, and worker’s and consumer’s rights; arguments of Progressive leaders).

California History-Social Science Standard 11.2: Students analyze the relationship among the rise of industrialization, large-scale rural-to-urban migration, and massive immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe. (9) Understand the effect of political programs and activities of the Progressives (e.g., federal regulation of railroad transport, Children’s Bureau, the Sixteenth Amendment, Theodore Roosevelt, Hiram Johnson).

Common Core State Standards: SL.11-12.1, SL.11-12.3, RH.11-12.1, RH.11-12.3, WHST.11-12.10.

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