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...
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.

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

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’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) 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.

Tarbell discovered that Standard Oil used bribery, fraud, and selling oil below cost to enable its scheme to work. The company bribed railroad clerks to report the quantity, quality, and selling price of independent oil shipments. The company owned stock in the railroads and used its influence to delay shipments by independents to refineries.

In 1892, the federal Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) ruled against rebates by the railroads that discriminated against the independent oil companies. The railroads refused to comply. In 1895, the ICC repeated its ruling. The railroads then took the matter into the courts where the issue remained undecided for years.

Company agents worked at the retail level too. They forced store owners to sell only Standard Oil products or face being undersold at prices below cost. Tarbell revealed that “Standard Oil 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.”
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


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).


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