

By Karin Peterson

Site Lines: A Muckraker Retreats to Easton

Ida Tarbell, for nearly 40 years a resident of Easton, Connecticut, became the unlikely doyenne of the “muckrakers” of the progressive era. Her *The History of the Standard Oil Company* (McClure, Philips & Co., 1904), with its searing appraisal of the immoral practices used by John D. Rockefeller to build his monopoly, first appeared as a series in *McClure's Magazine* and helped lead to federal anti-trust legislation. As a result of the public outrage and legal action engendered by Tarbell's exposé, Standard Oil Company of New Jersey dissolved in 1911.

Tarbell, a former school-teacher and acclaimed Lincoln biographer, did not like being called a “muckraker,” an initially pejorative term coined by President Theodore Roosevelt to describe journalists who were bent on finding and exposing political corruption, industrial monopolies, and fraudulent business practices. She felt the label implied a one-sided emotional attack rather than an objective, balanced presentation of facts; she considered herself an investigative journalist. She felt that she and other writers such as Lincoln Steffens, Sinclair Lewis, Ray Stannard Baker, and Upton Sinclair took up their pens to focus on social ills out of moral concern and with the hope of effecting positive change.

Tarbell was born in 1857 in northwestern Pennsylvania, where her father was involved with the emerging oil industry. His business was one of many small enterprises that were negatively affected by the rise of large oil monopolies. Despite the family's resulting financial setback, Tarbell was able to attend Allegheny College, graduating in 1880. After several years teaching school and then working at a monthly magazine, she went to Paris to do postgraduate work in history. To support herself she wrote magazine articles, some of which caught the attention of Samuel McClure, who invited her to write for his new publication. Her first major piece for *McClure's Magazine* was a biography of Napoleon, which appeared as a series and was followed by a similar serial biography of Abraham Lincoln. These were so successful that they were published as books, and they established Tarbell's reputation as a writer.

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In recognition of her childhood experiences, Tarbell was assigned by *McClure's* to write about the development of the Standard Oil Company. With an assistant, she spent two years tracking down documents and conducting extensive interviews. Henry H. Rogers, an official at Standard Oil, was very cooperative—not understanding her intent. Tarbell was able to piece together a compelling narrative of the secret deals and strong-arm tactics used by large companies to force out smaller competitors. The series, which began in November 1902 and continued for 19 issues, was the first corporate exposé of its kind. Circulation of the magazine soared, and Tarbell's articles were published in two volumes in 1904.

This success brought Tarbell widespread recognition and financial gain. When her father died in 1905, Tarbell purchased a property in Easton, Connecticut. She named the simple white frame house “Twin Oaks,” and it became a refuge from her busy professional life in New York City and home for her mother, sister, and other relatives. Tarbell used a first-floor room as her study and did most of her writing there.

Ida Tarbell, 1915. photo: Bain News Service, Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division



left: Ida Tarbell in the foyer of Twin Oaks, Easton.

background Twin Oaks, the home journalist Ida Tarbell purchased in 1905 in Easton, Connecticut, is now a National Historic Landmark. Tarbell lived there until her death in 1944.

photos: The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, Pelletier Library, Allegheny College

about trusts. She also wrote biographies of business leaders and politicians and continued to publish works about Lincoln. She was deeply affected by what she saw on her travels in war-torn Europe and joined efforts to try to prevent another such war. She reported on the Paris Peace Conference and later the 1921 Washington Naval Disarmament Conference.

Tarbell retired to Twin Oaks, only occasionally giving lectures. She published her autobiography, *All in the Day's Work*, in 1939 at age 82 and died of pneumonia in 1944. In 1993 her Connecticut home, which is privately owned and not open to the public, was declared a National Historic Landmark, and she was further honored by induction into the National Women's Hall of Fame in Seneca Falls, New York in 2000.

After a bitter financial battle with McClure, a group of writers, including Tarbell, left his magazine and in 1906 purchased *American Magazine*, where Tarbell served as associate editor. Her last major investigative work was a series of articles on import tariffs, which she believed big companies used to hurt their competition. In 1915 Tarbell and the other investors sold *American Magazine*, and she traveled extensively, lecturing

