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Steve Weinberg. *Taking on the Trust: The Epic Battle of Ida Tarbell and John D. Rockefeller.* New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2008. xv + 304 pp. \$25.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-393-04935-0.

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Clash of the Titans

Steve Weinberg is a prominent investigative journalist who teaches at the University of Missouri Journalism School. He began this book as a biography of Ida Tarbell, whose detailed report on the machinations of the Standard Oil Company, first published serially in *McClure's Magazine* in 1902, was one of the most famous antitrust indictments of the Progressive Era. Weinberg admires Tarbell for obvious reasons. "The techniques Tarbell used," he writes, "taught me that a talented, persistent journalist can penetrate any façade through close readings of government documents, lawsuits and interviews with knowledgeable sources." He adds that "Tarbell's methods have allowed me to train investigative journalists around the world" (p. xi).

This is a worthy goal, and I hope Weinberg's book will inspire journalism students to read closely and dig deep. *Taking on the Trust* is lively and clear. Though Weinberg relies on a previous biography by Kathleen Brady and on Tarbell's autobiography, *All in the Day's Work* (1939), he also presents the results of his own considerable archival research. The book includes vivid descriptions of Tarbell's childhood in the early oil fields of Pennsylvania, where her father designed the standard forty-two-gallon oil barrel and built a prosperous business in oil storage.

Tarbell, born in 1857, witnessed several traumatic events in her childhood. She was haunted by her two-year-old brother's agonizing death from scarlet fever. Later in life, she also remembered the aftermath of an oil

well explosion that killed nineteen, including oil driller Henry R. Rouse, founder of Rouseville, Pennsylvania. A badly burned survivor recuperated at the Tarbell home. Weinberg rightly observes that Tarbell admired such men. Based on her father's experience, she essentially wrote as an industry insider, and she believed Rockefeller was a thief who had stolen the rightful achievement of others. Weinberg quotes from Tarbell's *The History of Standard Oil* (1904): "Life ran swift and ruddy and joyous in these men [the early oil industry developers]. They were still young.... They would bring the oil refining to the region where it belonged. They would make their towns the most beautiful in the world. There was nothing too good for them, nothing they did not hope and share. But suddenly, at the very heyday of this confidence, a big hand reached out from nobody knew where, to steal their conquest and throttle their future. The suddenness and the blackness of the assault on their business stirred to the bottom their manhood and their sense of fair play" (p. 220).

Weinberg provides helpful insights into Tarbell's struggles as a woman in a professional field dominated by men. After graduating from Allegheny College, Tarbell had great difficulty landing a job as a serious journalist. She had an awkward and often conflicted relationship with her editor, S. S. McClure, a womanizer whom she seems to have managed to keep at arm's length. Though her admiring biography of Abraham Lincoln won popu-

lar success, Tarbell faced the scorn of male critics who classed her as a “‘sentimental sob sister’ ” and a “‘dear girl’” whose efforts were “‘pathetic’” (p. 189).

Weinberg chose, in the end, not to write a straightforward biography of Tarbell but to maintain a dual focus on her and her nemesis, John D. Rockefeller. That decision yields mixed results. Weinberg draws thoughtful portraits of both figures, and, along the way, he introduces readers to an array of other interesting characters, from Theodore Roosevelt to McClure and his long-suffering wife Hattie. The addition of Rockefeller feels, however, like a bit of an afterthought, and Weinberg does not tell us much that is new about the infamous trust builder. He draws heavily on Ron Chernow’s *Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller, Sr.* (1998), which remains the best recent biography for historians interested in Rockefeller’s life and career.

Weinberg also focuses much more attention on the early lives of his dual protagonists than he does on their public showdown. Despite Tarbell’s childhood in the Pennsylvania oil fields, drawing parallels between her early life and Rockefeller’s proves difficult. Tarbell had little interest in writing about Standard Oil until after 1900. Instead she spent three years living in Paris, writing a biography of Madame Manon Marie-Jeanne Phillipon Roland. She followed this with studies of Napoleon, Louis Pasteur, and Lincoln.

In *Taking on the Trust*, Tarbell finally decides to write about Rockefeller on page 198, and she publishes her report in chapter 13 (out of 16). Since the book is about “The Epic Battle of Ida B. Tarbell and John D. Rockefeller,” Weinberg has to work hard to tie their stories together on pages 1 through 197. “Ida Tarbell felt a distinct calling at an early age, albeit in a different manner from John D. Rockefeller,” he writes at one point. “As Rockefeller consolidated his grip on the oil business, finding a college that would enroll a woman became seventeen-year-old Ida’s first challenge” (p. 83). Later, he compares Tarbell’s adventure in Paris with Rockefeller’s “momentous decision,” eight years earlier, to relocate his family from Cleveland to New York City (p. 126).

As a reader, I longed for less of this and more about the antitrust movement and the impact of Tarbell’s powerful exposé. A more thorough, nuanced analysis of

the public debates that followed publication of *The History of the Standard Oil Company* would add to our understanding of both Progressivism and the rise of investigative journalism. Weinberg is prone to sweeping overstatements that may distress historians. He claims, for example, that Progressives were the first reformers to “call into question the basis of American capitalism, which had been almost entirely laissez-faire since the dawn of the Republic” (p. 253). This is wrong on two counts. As historians of the Greenbackers and Populists will attest, there were many earlier and even more vociferous critics of capitalism. And, as historians like Richard Bense have shown, the late nineteenth-century United States was by no means laissez-faire.

Weinberg’s central argument is that investigative reporting “did not exist in 1900” and that Tarbell “invented a new form of journalism” (p. xiv). The author knows better: he describes the earlier investigative work of Helen Campbell (pp. 120-122) and Josiah Willard (p. 192). Without diminishing Tarbell’s achievement in any way, Weinberg could also have mentioned the reportage of Jacob Riis and Ida B. Wells Barnett. He could have noted that American women had filed investigative reports at least as far back as Margaret Fuller, in the early 1840s. Tarbell was a skilled investigator and significant pioneer, but she was not the first and only.

For these reasons, *Taking on the Trust* may leave historians unsatisfied. It will certainly interest those who seek a brief introduction to both Tarbell and Rockefeller, and who may not want to tackle Chernow’s masterful, but massive, biography of the latter. On the one hand, Weinberg’s readable book might be a good choice for undergraduate classes in both history and journalism. On the other hand, professors might feel inspired to follow Weinberg’s advice and teach students to practice, themselves, the critical art of “close reading.” If so, they might want to send their students to browse *McClure’s*, read excerpts from Tarbell’s original book, find some of Theodore Roosevelt’s antitrust speeches, and track down the 1911 Supreme Court ruling that smashed Rockefeller’s monopoly. This would give students a first-hand lesson in what vigorous, careful reporting looks like and what it can accomplish. With luck, it might inspire them to follow Weinberg’s lead and sustain the crucial democratic enterprise of investigative journalism.

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