

AMERICAN

LITERATURE

The Muckrakers

1902–1917 The tradition of the investigative reporter uncovering corruption was established early in the 20th century by the writers known as muckrakers. Coined by President Theodore Roosevelt, the term *muckraker* alludes to the English author John Bunyan's famous 17th-century religious allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which features a character too busy raking up the muck to see a heavenly crown held over him. The originally negative term soon was applied to many writers whose reform efforts Roosevelt himself supported. The muckraking movement spilled over from journalism as writers such as Upton Sinclair made use of the greater dramatic effects of fiction.



◀ IDA M. TARBELL

Ida M. Tarbell's "The History of the Standard Oil Company" exposed the ruthlessness with which John D. Rockefeller had turned his oil business into an all-powerful monopoly. Her writing added force to the trustbusting reforms of the early 20th century. Here Tarbell describes how Standard Oil used lower transportation rates to drive out smaller refineries, such as Hanna, Baslington and Company.

Mr. Hanna had been refining since July, 1869. . . . Some time in February, 1872, the Standard Oil Company asked [for] an interview with him and his associates. They wanted to buy his works, they said. "But we don't want to sell," objected Mr. Hanna. "You can never make any more money, in my judgment," said Mr. Rockefeller. "You can't compete with the Standard. We have all the large refineries now. If you refuse to sell, it will end in your being crushed." Hanna and Baslington were not satisfied. They went to see . . . General Devereux, manager of the Lake Shore road. They were told that the Standard had special rates; that it was useless to try to compete with them. General Devereux explained to the gentlemen that the privileges granted the Standard were the legitimate and necessary advantage of the larger shipper over the smaller. . . . General Devereux says they "recognised the propriety" of his excuse. They certainly recognised its authority. They say that they were satisfied they could no longer get rates to and from Cleveland which would enable them to live, and "reluctantly" sold out. It must have been reluctantly, for they had paid \$75,000 for their works, and had made thirty per cent. a year on an average on their investment, and the Standard appraiser allowed them \$45,000.

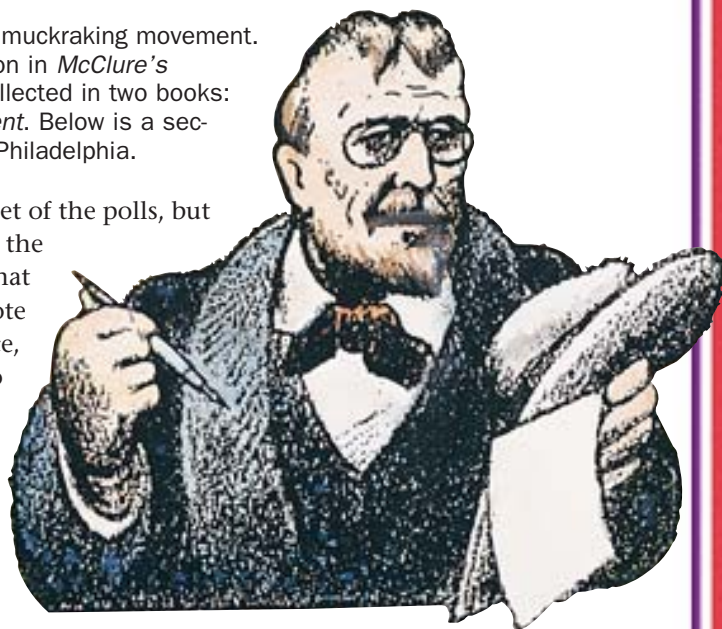
—Ida M. Tarbell, "The History of the Standard Oil Company" (1904)



LINCOLN STEFFENS ►

Lincoln Steffens is usually named as a leading figure of the muckraking movement. He published exposés of business and government corruption in *McClure's Magazine* and other magazines. These articles were then collected in two books: *The Shame of the Cities* and *The Struggle for Self-Government*. Below is a section from an article Steffens wrote to expose voter fraud in Philadelphia.

The police are forbidden by law to stand within thirty feet of the polls, but they are at the box and they are there to see that the [Republican political] machine's orders are obeyed and that repeaters whom they help to furnish are permitted to vote without "intimidation" on the names they, the police, have supplied. The editor of an anti-machine paper who was looking about for himself once told me that a ward leader who knew him well asked him into a polling place. "I'll show you how it's done," he said, and he had the repeaters go round and round voting again and again on the names handed them on slips. . . . The business proceeds with very few hitches; there is more jesting than fighting. Violence in the past has had its effect; and is not often necessary nowadays, but if it is needed the police are there to apply it.



—Lincoln Steffens, *The Shame of the Cities* (1904)

UPTON SINCLAIR

Upton Sinclair's chief aim in writing *The Jungle* was to expose the shocking conditions that immigrant workers endured. The public, however, reacted even more strongly to the novel's revelations of unsanitary conditions in the meatpacking industry. Serialized in 1905 and published in book form one year later, *The Jungle* prompted a federal investigation that resulted in passage of the Meat Inspection Act in 1906.

Jonas had told them how the meat that was taken out of pickle would often be found sour, and how they would rub it up with [baking] soda to take away the smell, and sell it to be eaten on free-lunch counters; also of all the miracles of chemistry which they performed, giving to any sort of meat, fresh or salted, whole or chopped, any color and any flavor and any odor they chose. . . .

It was only when the whole ham was spoiled that it came into the department of Elzbieta. Cut up by the two-thousand-revolutions-a-minute flyers, and mixed with half a ton of other meat, no odor that ever was in a ham could make any difference. There was never the least attention paid to what was cut up for sausage; there would come all the way back from Europe old sausage that had been rejected, and that was moldy and white—it would be dosed with borax and glycerine, and dumped into the hoppers, and made over again for home consumption.

—Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (1906)



THINKING CRITICALLY

- 1. Comparing and Contrasting** State the main idea of each of these selections. What role do details play in making the passages convincing?

 **SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R8.**

- 2. INTERNET ACTIVITY CLASSZONE.COM**

Visit the links for American Literature: The Muckrakers to learn more about the muckrakers. What topics did they investigate? How did they affect public opinion? What legal changes did they help to bring about? Write a summary of the muckrakers' impact on society.