



## BIOGRAPHY

## Ida Tarbell

Among the muckrakers of the Progressive Era, none surpassed the careful reporting, clever pen, and moral outrage of Ida Tarbell. She took on the nation's most powerful trust—Standard Oil—and its creator—the nation's wealthiest man, John D. Rockefeller—in 18 installments of *McClure's* magazine.

*As you read, think about how Ida Tarbell's writing influenced her country's history.*

Ida Tarbell developed her moral outrage at the Standard Oil trust through personal family experience. Soon after her birth in 1857 on a farm in Pennsylvania, oil was discovered in nearby Titusville. Her father, Franklin, saw an opportunity to make money in this promising new field. He became the first manufacturer of wooden tanks for the oil industry and established a prosperous business.

In time, however, the Standard Oil Company began to force other oil suppliers out of business. Standard Oil became Franklin's only client, and refused to pay his prices. The business failed and Franklin's partner committed suicide. Ida Tarbell would never forget her father's pain or its cause.

After graduating from Allegheny College in 1880, Ida pursued a career in magazine editing and writing, which eventually took her to France. Impressed by her writing, a young magazine publisher, S. S. McClure, tracked her down in Paris and persuaded her to return to New York to write for him. McClure would later boast that the founding of *McClure's* and the discovery of Ida Tarbell were his proudest achievements.

Tarbell's writing began boosting the magazine's circulation immediately. McClure, wishing to capitalize on reader interest in muckraking articles, decided to publish an exposé of the Standard Oil Company. Because of Tarbell's skill as a reporter

and her experience with Standard Oil, McClure assigned her to the story. Her father, recalling the trust's ruthless tactics, pleaded, "Don't do it, Ida." Others also tried to warn her away from the trust's "all-seeing eye and the all-powerful reach," predicting, "they'll get you in the end," but Tarbell would not be stopped. For the next two years, she researched the business practices of Standard Oil and then began writing her series. In the first installment, she described the hope, confidence, and energy of pioneer oil men. "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 big hand, she revealed, belonged to John D. Rockefeller. In subsequent articles she documented his practices of demanding rebates from railroads that shipped his oil, of forcing competitors out of business through coercion, and even of robbing widows of the true worth of what they owned. Rockefeller was incensed, but the public outcry against him and Standard Oil could not be stilled. Congress launched an investigation and later the Supreme Court ruled that the trust must be broken up. Tarbell became famous as the reporter who had successfully taken on John D. Rockefeller. She remained active into her seventies, and died at the age of 86.

### Questions to Think About

1. How was Ida Tarbell first introduced to the oil industry?
2. **Recognizing Bias** (a) Why was she warned against writing about the Standard Oil Company? (b) Why might Tarbell have been accused of bias against Standard Oil?