

IDA M. TARBELL: THE HISTORIAN

A Master's Thesis

by

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To My Family..

IDA M. TARBELL: THE HISTORIAN

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I certify that I have read this thesis and have found that it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in History.

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ABSTRACT

IDA M. TARBELL: THE HISTORIAN

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This thesis focuses on Ida M. Tarbell, one of the most influential literary figures of the late 19th and early 20th century in the United States. She has been recognized as the pioneer of investigative journalism and generally referred to as a muckraker. This study, however, will argue that she was primarily a historian. By putting her two significant historical works, *Life of Lincoln* and *The History of the Standard Oil Company*, into the center of analysis and by exploring her career in general, it will try to demonstrate Tarbell's qualities as a historian and her contribution to the history discipline. In general terms, it aspires to explore Tarbell's position in American literary, social and economic history.

Keywords: Investigative Journalism, Muckraker, *Life of Lincoln*, *History of the Standard Oil Company*, 19th and 20th Century United States, *McClure's Magazine*.

ÖZET

IDA M. TARBELL: TARİHÇİ

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Bu tez 19. yüzyıl sonu ve 20. yüzyıl başlarındaki dönemde Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'ndeki en önemli edebi kişiliklerden biri olan Ida M. Tarbell'e odaklanmaktadır. Tarbell araştırmacı gazeteciliğin öncüsü olarak kabul edilmekte ve genellikle muckraker olarak adlandırılmaktadır. Bu çalışma ise Tarbell'in öncelikle bir tarihçi olduğunu öne sürmektedir. İki önemli tarih çalışması olan *Life of Lincoln* ve *The History of the Standard Oil Company* kitaplarını analizin merkezine koyarak ve genel anlamda kariyerini inceleyerek Tarbell'in tarihçi özelliklerini ve tarih disiplinine olan katkılarını göstermeyi amaç edinmiştir. Daha genel bir tabirle, Tarbell'in Amerikan edebi, sosyal ve ekonomik tarihindeki konumunu keşfetmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Araştırmacı Gazetecilik, Muckraker, *Life of Lincoln*, *History of the Standard Oil Company*, 19. ve 20. yüzyıl Amerika Birleşik Devletleri, *McClure's Magazine*.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the Progressive Era, a new type of journalism emerged in the United States. It was responsible for pointing out the illnesses of the industrial society. Also known as investigative journalism, muckraking aimed to expose bad conditions in slums, prisons, factories, mines as well as illegal actions performed by corrupt bosses and politicians who had been exploiting the weak. Ray Stannard Baker, Lincoln Steffens and Upton Sinclair were among the pioneers of the movement. Besides these gentlemen a woman was remarkably influential: Ida M. Tarbell stands out as one of the most successful muckrakers in the Progressive Era and she has been referred to by historians as the pioneer of professional investigative journalism. She owes this title mainly to her work *The History of the Standard Oil Company (1904)* in which she attacked the evil and unjust conduct of the company. In this work, Tarbell successfully employed history and scientific analysis as a tool for her critique. She was so successful in exposing the company's illegal acts that her work managed to initiate a series of legal procedures that led to the dissolution of the company, which was indeed a huge bust for the trusts, and began a new era for American economic system. That was not her only achievement though. She is also known for her biographies on Madame Roland, the French activist and supporter of

the French Revolution; Abraham Lincoln, the Great Emancipator President; and Napoleon Bonaparte, the legendary French Emperor. These biographies attracted huge public attention and also contributed to the existing literature on these historically important figures. She was also interested in social, political and economic changes of the era. She published *Tariff in Our Times* in 1911 and *New Ideals in Business* in 1916 and investigated the changing patterns of American politics and its impact on the economy with reference to the capitalist traditions. Besides the fact that she lived at a time when women were regarded as the inferior sex, and that she took on topics which were regarded as serious tasks which could only be handled by men, her works had far-reaching effects, even revolutionary.

While her journalistic career is worth recognition, there is also a need to acknowledge the fact that she was actually writing history, and hoping to deliver historical works in the end. She always wanted to be an historian and educated herself to be one. Although she was writing mainly for a magazine that aimed at high circulation and popularity, both *Life of Lincoln* and *The History of the Standard Oil Company* were attempts by Tarbell to deliver historical works. While *Life of Lincoln* marked a turning point in Lincoln literature as it revolutionized the way American scholars viewed and portrayed the President, her history of the Standard Oil Company stood out as one of the best pieces of social and economic history writing in the United States. As a matter of fact, these works were important contributions to history writing in the United States and demonstrated Tarbell's qualities as a historian. That is why, there is a need for a study which primarily focuses on her education and career as an historian. Focusing on her early career in Chautauquan literary circle¹, and the years she spent in France and by analyzing the techniques she

¹ The Chautauqua Movement became popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the United States. It sought to educate adults, especially those in small towns and villages. Its members travelled

employed for her research, her arrangement of primary and secondary sources, her writing style in those historical works can provide a fresh insight into the literature on the subject. Furthermore, it can tell more about the nature of American journalism and history writing at the turn of the 20th century in the United States by putting forward what was remarkable and unique about one of the most influential writers of the era.

As an influential journalist Tarbell's career has been under examination by scholars in depth. Most of the works deal with her lifetime in journalism and what she managed to contribute to this discipline. They would all agree that she is one of the female figures in the entire American history whose works made a significant difference. However, they mainly talk about how great a journalist she was, and how her writing had far-reaching effects on the social and economic life in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In fact, they all prove valuable studies, as they pay tribute to one of the most outstanding women in the history of the United States, and even the world history in general. For example, Tarbell's most renowned work, *The History of the Standard Oil Company*, is regarded as one of the best examples of muckraking and that is why much has been said about it. Ellen F. Fitzpatrick, the editor of *Muckraking: Three Landmark Articles*, overviews Tarbell's taking on the job of writing articles to expose the realities of The Standard Oil Company, how capable and fit Tarbell was from the first day, how she handled the whole process professionally and by delivering a great work in the end. She also discusses the response to her work and whether Tarbell's ideas were taken seriously by other journalists, politicians or whether the illnesses she pointed out were taken

to different parts of the country to give speeches on religious, political and scientific topics. Famous figures such as Mark Twain and William Jennings Bryan attended their organizations. The movement lost its popularity after World War I. See Theodore Morrison, *Chautauqua: A Center for Education, Religion and the Arts in America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

care of. Carl Jensen, in *Stories That Changed America: Muckrakers of the 20th Century*, makes a clear statement about this inquiry and claims that the book by Tarbell had a great impact on American society by defeating the most powerful man in America. According to him, her work was so important that it set a model for future journalists, even continued to be followed to the present day. Similarly, in *More Than A Muckraker: Ida Tarbell's Lifetime In Journalism*, Robert C. Kochersberger, Jr. evaluates the value of Tarbell's work and emphasizes her pro-business stance, despite the fact that she wrote against the business idol of that time. Unlike socialists who often intended to expose the failings of the capitalist system, Tarbell believed in the benefits and opportunities of the laissez faire economy but always stood for the moral act or fair play within the workings of economic activity. Kochersberger also praises the reporting principles she managed to follow all the time without advocating any political idea.

An interesting perspective is brought by Robert Miraldi who in his book *The Muckrakers: Evangelical Crusaders* searched for the religious backgrounds of famous muckrakers of the era. According to Miraldi, behind Tarbell's decision to go after the evil doings of John D. Rockefeller lay religious motivations such as the brotherhood of man, true spirituality and human betterment. However, the motives behind Tarbell's taking on the trust issue are controversial. Tarbell's father was an oil refiner himself and he had to quit his business as a result of pressure from Standard Oil. In his article "Lady Muckraker" Paula A. Treckel discusses this issue in referring to Tarbell's past. As Treckel argues her involvement in such a project must have been caused by Tarbell's childhood memories which reminded her of the destruction of the good old American way of life. The growth of trusts had destroyed morality and peace in people's lives in small towns and cities all throughout the

United States. Tarbell had every reason to hate and act against Rockefeller and his evil company. However, Treckel thinks that she had an historian's eye and was capable of distinguishing fact from fiction. Thus she delivered a unbiased study in the end. In another article, "How They Kept Trust: Ida Tarbell's Rockefeller," Robert Stinson examines Tarbell's study and its impact on later researchers. Tarbell's study, according to Stinson, not only influenced decisions on trusts but also encouraged modern studies on the subject such as *Seven Sisters: The Great Oil Companies* by Anthony Sampson.

Just as *The History of the Standard Oil Company*, Tarbell's interest in Abraham Lincoln has been studied and interpreted by scholars. In "Ida M. Tarbell: A Progressive Look at Lincoln," Judith A. Rice explores Tarbell's progressive mind and ambition reflected in her Lincoln study. According to Rice, Tarbell's Lincoln reflected many of the impulses of the Progressive Era and Tarbell herself believed that Lincoln could set an example for people at the time who had difficulty in understanding the meaning of democracy and being a proper American. Rice's attempt to portray Tarbell as a progressive historian is a successful one as it raises the question about Tarbell's possible subjectivity in her work, which indeed would harm her reputation as an historian. Similarly, in "Our Lincoln Heritage from Tarbell," Benjamin P. Thomas comments on Tarbell and Lincoln. He demonstrates similarities in the life and characters of Lincoln and Tarbell. In this comprehensive study, he evaluates Tarbell's study of Lincoln in terms of what it had accomplished and what it had failed to do, and what it provided for later biographers. Thomas argues that Tarbell's legacy as a Lincoln biographer was so influential that Carl Sandburg, one of best known Lincoln biographers, had to borrow Tarbell's materials and style of writing.

Biographies also offer fresh insight into Tarbell's writing career. Kathleen Brady presents the most comprehensive study on Tarbell's life in *Ida Tarbell: The Portrait of a Muckraker*. Brady explores Tarbell's life in depth. She narrates every step Tarbell took towards becoming a successful journalist. From her years in the Chautauquan movement to her experience in Paris, she provides a reliable source for Tarbell's life. Tarbell's works on Madame Roland, Napoleon Bonaparte and Abraham Lincoln are studied and praised for their contribution to the literature. She illuminates Tarbell's journey through *The History of the Standard Oil Company*: from deciding on writing the book to the difficulties she faced when she was searching for the truth, or from the Standard's plans to stop her to her determination to overcome them. Brady is also good at providing information on her childhood and family background where her distrust of huge oil corporations began to emerge. In another study, Mary Tomkins actually calls Tarbell a journalist, a biographer and a historian simultaneously and analyzes her multipurpose narrative. Both for the Lincoln biography and the history of Standard Oil, Tomkins questions Tarbell's objectivity. Furthermore, she discusses the legacy of these works and presents a comprehensive critique.

The present study aims to build on these works by concentrating on Tarbell's career and legacy as a historian. Thus Chapter II will focus on Tarbell's early literary career and education. In fact, before she began writing for *McClure's* magazine which published the biography of Lincoln and the history of Standard Oil, she was involved in other tasks. She was involved in the Chautauquan movement and the seven years that she spent in this literary atmosphere contributed to her intellectual and professional development. Discovering the impact the Chautauquan movement had on Tarbell is thus necessary to understand her beginnings as a professional

scholar and historian. After her Chautauquan experience Tarbell moved to France in order to improve her skills in research and writing. There she got into contact with French literary circles, took lessons, and learned French historical methods. As a result of her experience in France she was able to write biographies of Madame Roland and Napoleon Bonaparte. That is why it is also necessary to study sources on Tarbell's journey into French intellectual circles, and try to define the scope of French influence on her writing.

Chapter III will discuss the work which brought Tarbell fame and recognition, *Life of Lincoln*. Tarbell's decision to take on one of the most prominent people in the history of United States was a difficult one. Lincoln had been dead for years but people who knew him still praised and romanticized his presidency and humanity. John George Nicolay and John Hay who worked alongside Lincoln had produced the most comprehensive and reliable study on Lincoln's life in 1894. They discouraged Tarbell and told her to stay away from their area of expertise. Thus a challenging task began for Tarbell. She followed the footsteps of Lincoln from Kentucky to Springfield, talked to people who knew him and tried to gather material that would say what was unsaid about him. It took years for Tarbell to do research and compose it but in the end it proved to be a significant study. This chapter will explore Tarbell's motivations, her research techniques, her style of writing and it will comment on Tarbell's achievements and failures as a Lincoln biographer. It will also cover reviews of the book and draw comparisons to other works written on the same subject and try to discover what was unique or typical about Tarbell's study.

Chapter IV will discuss *The History of the Standard Oil Company*, the most controversial and significant work by Tarbell. Unlike studies which deal with the social and economic outcomes of this work, this part will try to analyze it as

historical work. By discussing Tarbell's research techniques, writing sensibilities, and historical narrative, it will try to demonstrate the scientific method and factuality in this work. It will follow a comparative approach and try to portray similarities and differences between Tarbell's *Standard Oil* and Henry Demarest Lloyd's *Wealth Against Commonwealth* that had actually taken on the subject even before Tarbell. By this comparison, it will try to support the argument that Tarbell was a professional historian who always depended on facts rather than speculation. After all, while Lloyd's expose had limited impact and failed to bring concrete outcomes, Tarbell brought about revolutionary ideas which led to governmental intervention and economic regulations which also had social reflections. This part will argue that it was able to do so thanks to the unique characteristics of Tarbell: the ability to use history as medium for critique and exposé .

As for the conclusion, this thesis will explore Tarbell's legacy as an historian. While analysis of her early career and major works will help understand Tarbell's contribution to the history discipline, the later part of her career will determine what her history writing meant for the following generations. It will demonstrate how each of these works influenced people who later became interested in those topics and took similar tasks. It will show that either materially or scientifically, Tarbell influenced other authors. It will also take a look at Tarbell's later career and try to find out in what ways she continued to serve history writing in the rest of her life.

Finally, this study aims to provide a fresh outlook on one of most important female figures who ever lived in the United States, Ida Mae Tarbell. Whatever the reasons that pushed her to become a journalist, and despite the fact that she was mainly remembered as a pioneer in investigative journalism, her writing embodied historical value and that is a fact the existing literature does not cover well enough.

By analyzing her works, by offering different perspectives into the subject, this study will try to fill that gap and contribute to the literature on Tarbell and investigative journalism. It will also contribute to the literature on history writing in the United States at the turn of the 20th century by putting forward what was unique and characteristic about Tarbell's biographies and other historical writings.

CHAPTER 2

BIRTH OF A HISTORIAN

Ida Tarbell's career as a historian was a long journey. On the path to becoming a historian she had to go through several steps, each of which took her closer to the profession she became good at. Initially, her family taught her the principles of Christianity and advised her to respect and demonstrate morality in life. High school and college education introduced her to a scientific point of view that would revolutionize the way she saw the world and upon which she would base her studies. Similarly, her first job familiarized her with the literary world, its basics and its aims, which encouraged her to develop her own mind about matters concerning the world and produce her own works in attempt to give meaning to them. The years she spent in France proved a fruitful education and Tarbell developed certain qualities and characteristics of a historian. And finally, working for the *McClure's Magazine* enabled her to conduct her work effectively thanks to the availability of time and money.

As this study treats Tarbell as a historian, and it will use the term "historian" frequently, it is necessary at this point to explain what it means. The questions of

“what is history?”, “is objective history writing ever possible?” and “what qualities should a historian possess?” have long been discussed and it is still a matter of debate today. However, in broad terms, this study will assume that a historian is simply someone who has curiosity in historical matters and ambition to discover truth from the past. He or she is supposed to deal with historical facts only, and avoid speculation. Being a professional historian requires the ability to gather material, organize and deploy evidence. It is also crucial to have a clear expression, structure and coherence, and fluency in writing. Only then the historian can deliver what he or she has discovered efficiently. Similarly, interpreting conflicts, events and people’s actions is another important feature of an historian. Furthermore, a historian is an individual who seeks historical truth, but he or she is also a member of a group sharing the same principles and goals. That is why he or she is supposed to be able to work with others, respect their views and credit their works. Similarly, historians should honor the historical record by “leaving a clear trail for subsequent historians to follow.”² History writing requires continuity. Historians should build on what others have constructed, usually bringing new approaches and insights towards subjects studied. Likewise, as John Arnold, author of *History: A Very Short Introduction*, stated “every historian is, in some fashion, is a story teller” and it is for that reason “in producing a synthesis, the historian has to make it available to a wider audience.”³

While it is useful to define what this study means by history, it is also necessary to place Tarbell’s history in the context of historiography at the turn of the 20th century. Following the foundation of American Historical Association in 1884

² “Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct,” American Historical Association, accessed August 30, 2010, <http://www.historians.org/pubs/free/professionalstandards.cfm>

³ John Arnold, “The Historian’s Many Hats,” BBC History, accessed August 30, 2010, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/htd_history/historians/historians_hats_07.shtml

and investments into historical studies in universities, American History writing was still taking important steps towards professionalization. History writing was a tool to draw lessons from the past and bring ideas for social improvement. Biographies of famous Americans were quite popular and they were expected to create models for successful and proper lives. History was a social force and it could also be used to promote nationalist ideas. In that sense, it was progressive. As John Higham discusses in his article “The Rise of American Intellectual History,” historians such as Moses Coit Tyler were disturbed at the perils that beset American society in the Gilded Age, and hoped through history to reassert the force of national ideas. History writing, according to Tyler, was an intellectual activity that supplied the motive force for social evolution.

Later on a new approach became dominant. Its pioneers in the United States were Frederick Jackson Turner and Charles A. Beard, who revolutionized the discipline with their consideration of the whole range of human experience. By investigating social and economic progress of the nation, they were able to provide a new outlook. However, “literary studies still confined themselves essentially to moralizing, idealizing and criticizing.”⁴ Under these circumstances, Tarbell’s work could be understood better. She was in the middle of this transformation and she contributed to change with her own approach to writing and interpreting history. While she took on individuals’ lives as her subject matter, she believed they could present good examples to the contemporary society. In that sense, she was a progressive historian. What made her writing even more progressive was her employment of scientific thinking and method. She used the tools “the new history” offered and contributed to new approach by focusing on the social and economic

⁴ John Higham, *The Rise of American Intellectual History*, *American Historical Review*, vol. 56, no. 3 (Apr., 1951), pp. 453-471.

development of the nation. What is more, she attached importance to the surrounding forces in the overall American experience. A good example of that is when Tarbell portrayed Abraham Lincoln's frontier background and explained his march to the presidency under the light of his past in the frontier. This study will deal with these issues in detail and try to elaborate on her place in the historiography.

This chapter will focus on the earlier period of Tarbell's life in which she demonstrated a steady progress towards becoming a historian. It will employ a biographical approach involving her family education, school years, first job experience and academic and journalistic work she conducted in France. By analyzing in depth certain stages of this period, the chapter will try to explore early influences by people, institutions and places on Tarbell's intellectual and professional development. It will also look at the challenges she faced, aspirations she followed, and efforts she demonstrated, and try to answer what kind of skills she developed during those years that would help her in crafting her most influential works later. This chapter will provide a background information for the chapters that will treat *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* and *The History of the Standard Oil Company* and it will also offer help in understanding and appreciating those works.

2.1. Family Influence

Tarbell was born in Erie County, Pennsylvania in 1857. Her parents were both teachers. Educated and well-to-do, her parents wanted to provide Tarbell with the best education and moral development. They encouraged her to learn music and took her to new places so that she could discover new things. A newspaper article commented on her family's impact on Tarbell's character. "from father's side of the house she inherits her practical and logical qualities, while from her mother, who had

been a teacher for twelve years, she had gained her keen literary judgment and her exquisite spiritual perception.”⁵ The family was also a member of the Methodist Church. They attended church regularly and there Tarbell was introduced to the principles of Christianity and was encouraged to become a person who respected morality and goodness in life. According to Robert C. Kochersberger, “although Tarbell did not practice Methodism as an adult her strong religious background instilled her a sense of discipline and purpose that was never lost.”⁶

Her father, Franklin Tarbell was also an entrepreneur and invested in the oil business. After the discovery of oil in the area, he started an oil tank business and thus the family moved to Titusville in 1870. The city was enjoying the advantages of the new industry as it offered new opportunities for investors. Everything for the small investors was going well until Standard Oil Company came and destroyed the competition and monopolized the industry. This meant surrender for many small businesses including Tarbell’s. The failure of Tarbell’s father in the oil business marked an important change in the way Ida Tarbell saw her country and its people. Although she was young, Tarbell witnessed the unrest in the area and it provoked some thoughts in her mind. Tarbell later wrote in her autobiography that “the sly, secret, greedy way won in the end, and bitterness and unhappiness and incalculable ethical deterioration for the country at large came out of that struggle.”⁷ The United States was a country in which morals such as respect, hard work, and sincerity were valued and rewarded. Witnessing the fall of her father and many people like him who possessed these qualities against a mighty corporation which did not have moral or

⁵ “Ida M. Tarbell: Who She Is,” *Anaconda Standard*, August 6, 1910, accessed February 22, 2010, NewsBank.

⁶ Robert C. Kochersberger, *More Than a Muckraker: Ida Tarbell's Lifetime in Journalism* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1994), xxix.

⁷ Ida M. Tarbell, *All in the Day's Work* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1939), 26.

religious motivations drove Tarbell to question her Christian values as well as the ways the American system operated.

At all events, uncomprehending as I was in that fine fight, there was born in me a hatred of privilege, privilege of any sort. It was all pretty hazy to be sure, but still it was well, at fifteen, to have one definite plank based on things seen and heard, ready for a future platform of social and economic justice if I should ever awake to my need of one. At the moment, however, my reflection did not carry me beyond the wrongness of the privilege which had so upset our world, contradicting as it did the principle of consideration for others which had always been basic in our family and religious teaching. I could not think further in this direction, for now my whole mind was absorbed by the overwhelming discovery that the world was not made in six days of twenty-four hours each.⁸

Tarbell's recollections of the events that took place in the oil regions reflect her disappointment in her country and religion. It was obvious for her that in this world the divine law of Christianity did not grant people what it had promised. It seemed that following the tenets of Christianity did not provide people just, moral lives and there was a need for more efficient ways to cope with injustice. This led Tarbell towards science. In science, she could seek facts, build cause-effect relationships, and construct bodies of work that would explain the world's phenomena. In the end, Tarbell's partial break from religion and embracing of science was an important breakthrough on her way to becoming a historian.

2.2. High School and University Education

Her independence from religious thought and subsequent approach towards scientific thinking became more prominent at Titusville high school, where she started studying science. There she was taking Zoology, Geology, Botany, and Natural Philosophy. History did not seem to interest her at first but she still read and enjoyed specific works. "History seemed to her unnecessary, except for Smith's *History of Rome*, which she read over and over, and her father's books, which he

⁸ Ibid, 26.

began to acquire as soon as he could afford them. A favorite was John Clark Ridpath's *A Popular History of the United States from Aboriginal Times to the Present Day*.⁹ She would have rather liked collecting stones, plants, insects and examining them. It was then she decided to become a biologist. She began to question the world and its formation. It was a conflict hard to resolve because she had once believed in the formation of the world by God in six days. Science taught her it may not be so. Two of her favorite authors demonstrate the confusion she was going through in this period: Hugh Miller, a Scottish geologist and writer, folklorist and an evangelical Christian who opposed the theory of evolution, and Herbert Spencer who embraced evolution as the progressive development of the physical world, biological organisms, the human mind, and societies. This confusion also brought about an important turning point in Tarbell's character and mind. After all, she did not abandon her religious belief and held onto basic principles of Christianity such as morality and hard work, but at the same time she understood that religion may fall short in explaining and solving problems and she began to believe that evidence existed to prove that things happened for a reason, and if looked for carefully enough, they could be found. That is why she called herself a pantheistic evolutionist. In order to understand the world's evolution, she had to understand the beginnings of life, in other words, history. Thus she began to seek evidence and rely on facts rather than expecting religion to guide, which was indeed another important step towards becoming a historian:

But giving up this heaven was by no means the greatest tragedy in my discovery that the world was not made in six days of twenty-four hours each. The real tragedy was the birth in me of doubt and uncertainty. Nothing was ever again to be final. Always I was to ask myself when confronted with a problem, a system, a scheme, a code, a leader, "How can I accept without

⁹ Kathleen Brady, *Ida Tarbell: Portrait of a Muckraker* (Pittsburg: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 19.

knowing more?" The quest of the truth had been born in me the most tragic and incomplete, as well as the most essential, of man's quests.¹⁰

The microscope was her best friend. It was a tool that helped her discover nature's unknown. In an attempt to get more professional knowledge in this field, she entered Allegheny College, an institution that highly valued science and women's education. Tarbell's entrance to college immediately caused her to see the environment she was living in differently and shaped her approach towards history. That was the first time that history had fascinated her:

When I entered Allegheny College in the fall of 1876 I made my first contact with the past. I had been born and reared a pioneer; I knew only the beginning of things, the making of a home in a wilderness, the making of an industry from the ground up. I had seen the hardships of beginnings, the joy of realization, the attacks that success must expect; but of things with a past, things that had made themselves permanent, I knew nothing. It struck me full in the face now, for this was an old college as things west of the Alleghenies were reckoned an old college in an old town. Here was history, and I had never met it before to recognize it.¹¹

Tarbell was the only girl in her class, and soon became one of the most successful students. The classes she took included English literature, philology, art history, the sciences, French and German.¹² There were two professors who had a deep impact on her intellectual development. One of them was Jeremiah Tingley. He encouraged Tarbell to study evolution and let her use tools in his possession for experiment. One thing Tingley taught Tarbell was to discover things by herself. He encouraged her to examine inventions such as Alexander Graham Bell's telephone, exhibited in Centennial Exposition of 1876, which Tarbell attended. What she found inspiring however was not the telephone itself but Dr. Tingley's enthusiasm for it: "This revelation of enthusiasm, its power to warm and illuminate was one of the finest and

¹⁰ Tarbell, *Day's Work*, 35.

¹¹ Ibid, 37.

¹² Brady, 27.

most lasting of my college experiences.”¹³ George Haskins lectured on the History of Middle Ages and enabled his student Tarbell to draw parallels between history and the present. Tarbell said that although Professor Haskins’s efforts to make them understand the rise and fall of Rome and relate that life to that in America had been in vain, she understood why history was studied and written. If Tingley taught her how to be enthusiastic and ambitious, Haskins taught her other basic characteristics necessary for a historian such as being factual, disciplined and industrious:

“Cherish your contempts,” Henry James advised me once when he had drawn from me a confession of the conflict between my natural dislike of saying anything unpleasant about anybody and the necessity of being cruel, even brutal, if the work I had undertaken was to be truthful in fact and logic. “Cherish your contempts,” said Mr. James, “and strength to your elbow.” If it had not been for George Haskins I doubt if I should have known what he meant; nor should I ever have become the steady, rather dogged worker I am.¹⁴

In addition to her success in class and interest in her professors’ guidance, Tarbell was active outside class. She was an editor of the college publication and secretary of the junior class. The responsibility can be said to have been Tarbell’s first experience as a journalist. After all, it required collecting, interpreting and publishing material. More importantly, she was an active member of the Ossoli Society. It was a literary society addressed to women and named after Margaret Fuller Ossoli.¹⁵ The society addressed current topics and added philosophy and history to their poetry and literature shelves.¹⁶ Although there is no record of Ossoli’s impact on Tarbell, as a member of this literary society, Tarbell was involved in

¹³ Tarbell, *Day’s Work*, 44.

¹⁴ Ibid, 45.

¹⁵ Sarah Margaret Fuller Ossoli, 1810 – 1850, was a one of the most important woman figures of the 19th century American literary world. She was a journalist, critic and women’s rights activist. She is regarded as one of the pioneers of transcendentalism. She was also a feminist, and her book, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), is one of the significant works on women’s history in the United States. See Paula Blanchard, *Margaret Fuller: From Transcendentalism to Revolution*. (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1987) and Joan Von Mehren, *Minerva and the Muse: A Life of Margaret Fuller*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994).

¹⁶ Brady, 29.

several discussion topics involving science, literature and history. These activities contributed to her outgoing personality and skills in human relations.

2.3. The Chautauquan

After graduation she became a teacher. In Poland, Pennsylvania, she taught Greek, Latin, French and German. However, the experience was short lived. As she stated: "Teaching was a stepping stone in my plan of life." She looked for something more professional and inspiring. Thus Tarbell quit and started working for the Chautauquan movement, which was a literary and intellectual movement that promoted religious and scientific adult education. The foundation soon started publishing books on a broad variety of fields such as travel, science and literature. History too constituted a huge portion of the publications and it was of great importance for circulation. Among the first publications on history was the history of England and Russia. Another popular story was *Ben-Hur*, a semi-historic tale. According to Tarbell: "The most important volume in that first year's course was Green's *Short History of the English People* in my judgment the most important book save one that the Chautauquan Literary and Scientific Circle ever included."¹⁷ It seemed Tarbell was beginning to appreciate historical works.

Tarbell's job included proofreading and editing. The job contributed to Tarbell's professional development. As an editor she had to be careful about the correctness and reliability of the sources and the publication. The job was a difficult one and she was worried most of the time about avoiding mistakes. The editorship enabled Tarbell to gain technical knowledge on gathering, arranging and publishing material. These were important tools for a historian. The job also introduced Tarbell to the importance of history in understanding the world in addition to contemporary

¹⁷ Tarbell, *Day's Work*, 70.

issues. She also observed that the public had always been interested in stories from the past and that history could sell. More important however, was her own intellectual development. If she wanted to understand and make meaning out of social developments, she needed to gain a specialty. In this case, the specialty was history. She already enjoyed reading history: “In connection with my editorial department, I had to indulge in comment on current events, which interested me greatly, I became absorbed in questions of the hour, and to handle them in the broadest and most intelligent way, I discovered that I would have to know more of history, and this started me reading along that line –a habit which I have never abandoned.”¹⁸

Her first project involving historical study for the magazine was the history of women's patents in the United States. Now focusing on social matters, Tarbell started thinking about women's place in American society. It was a response to Mary Lowe Dickinson, who in an article proposed that only ninety of twenty-two thousand patents issued in one year were by women. Tarbell was disturbed by the notion that women were unable to prove themselves to be sophisticated and smart and failed to contribute to growth of American civilization with their inventions. She decided to prove otherwise and investigated the history of women's patents. Tarbell travelled to Washington D.C. to look for records and conducted interviews in the U.S. Patent Office and “discovered that although the article had said that women had won 334 patents in the history of the United States, the number was actually 935.”¹⁹ This single investigation would set an example for the rest of her career. When there was question about a specific topic, Tarbell did her own research and the study had to be based on facts. Tarbell used her research techniques to make sure that her study was

¹⁸ “Ida M. Tarbell: Who She Is,” 6.

¹⁹ Brady, 44.

fact-based and the main tool to make her point would be history. As in this example, Tarbell picked a question concerning American society and used an historical approach to illuminate the present situation. She travelled to Washington D.C., looked into the records, interviewed people there and revealed historical truth. This report also provided Tarbell with self-confidence and more enthusiasm towards her work: “These dashes into journalism, timid and factual as were the results, gave my position more and more body, began slowly to arouse my rudimentary capacity for self-expression.”²⁰

Now that she had decided to study history, Tarbell became interested in many authors, including Herbert Baxter Adams.²¹ As a part of her editorial job, she was corresponding with other journals and editors and Adams was one of her constant contacts. Tarbell praised Adams and his work as a liberal historian in her autobiography: “I valued particularly Dr. Herbert B. Adams and Dr. Richard T. Ely of Johns Hopkins University, men who were stirring youth and shocking the elders by liberal interpretations of history and economics. We felt rather proud of ourselves at Chautauqua that we were liberal enough to engage Dr. Adams and Dr. Ely as regular lecturers and teachers, and that our constituency accepted them, if with occasional misgivings.”²² Tarbell’s admiration for Adams was important. As she read and appreciated one of the most influential authorities on American History, Tarbell developed a professional approach towards history.

In Chautauquan, Tarbell quit her old habits. She was no longer experimenting with plants and rocks but was concerned with people. She was interested in social

²⁰ Tarbell, *Day’s Work*, 76.

²¹ Herbert Baxter Adams, 1850 – 1901, historian and educator, launched his famous seminar in history at Johns Hopkins University in 1880. It became a model for American Higher Education. He trained the next generation of American historians. He founded the American Historical Association in 1884. His scientific historical approach influenced many historians including Frederick Jackson Turner and Woodrow Wilson.

²² Ida Tarbell, *Day’s Work*, 76.

matters and wanted to develop skills in interpretation on several subjects: “It was no longer to seek truth with a microscope. My early absorption in rocks and plants had veered to as intense an interest in human beings. I was feeling the same passion to understand men and women, the same eagerness to collect and to classify information about them.”²³ In order to understand social issues, as she did in the patent issue, she focused on women. She picked the women of the French Revolution. She believed that by studying those personalities’ lives, she could throw light on the role women played in national life and explore their contribution to civilization and enlightenment: “Its was as a phase of the woman question. I wanted to see just what women who had the opportunity to engage in public affairs were able to do—to determine the importance of the influence they were able to wield.”²⁴ However her access to sources was limited as she was in Meadville, Pennsylvania. She wrote to Paris and asked for books and whatever material was available. Out of what she gathered, she wrote an article on Madame de Stael in Meadville and got it published in *the Chautauquan*. Upon the success of her article she began working on Madame Roland, another woman who was active during the French Revolution.

As a result of her new interest in the role of women in social matters and her involvement in studying French women, she gained confidence to seek further study and was encouraged to seek a professional history education. In fact, she was more interested in studying French historians than American. Her acquaintance with French history convinced her that French historical methods were more sophisticated and offered more professional help to her development as an historian. For example, her knowledge on historical writing was heavily influenced by *Revue des Deux*

²³ Ibid, 80.

²⁴ “How Ida M. Tarbell Came to Interest Herself in Mr. Rockefeller’s Standard Oil Company,” *Saint Paul Globe*, April 24, 1904, 4, Chronicling America in Library of Congress, accessed February 23, 2010, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn90059523/1904-04-24/ed-1/seq-4/>

Mondes, a French language monthly literary and cultural affairs magazine. She also enjoyed the writings of French historian Ferdinand Brunetière²⁵. They brought a new perspective to her thinking towards writing history and encouraged her to take it as an example to follow: “I realized” she said, “that those articles were the best pieces of historical writing for general reading that I have ever seen. I wanted to write that sort of thing as Mr. Brunetière wrote it, and so I made up my mind to learn in Paris from this man himself.”²⁶ According to one newspaper, what fascinated Tarbell with the French method of historic and biographic writing was “its painstaking accuracy of statement, its logical and scientific unfoldment, its elegant directness and clearness of expression.”²⁷ After she decided to get a history education in France, she quit her job in *The Chautauquan* and travelled to Europe.

2.4. France

Tarbell's ambition to study history in France led her to Paris, the center of history and culture. Tarbell was fascinated by how old and historic the city of Paris was. The city itself spoke to her through its historic setting. When she took a walk around the town, she could see history everywhere and often envisioned how the people she was studying lived, or how the bloody revolution raged through those streets. It was a fascination Tarbell enjoyed and the more time she spent there, the more she felt drawn into the history of Paris and it offered inspiration for her to do research and conduct her historical work on Madame Roland and the French Revolution:

²⁵ Ferdinand Brunetière was a French writer and critic who is known as a rationalist and freethinking scholar. He wrote on French history and literature. He was decorated with the Legion of Honour in 1887, and became a member of the Académie française in 1893. Tarbell's interaction with Brunetière provided her with a sense of historical expertise that was never lost.

²⁶ “History of the Standard Oil: How Miss Tarbell Wrote Her Story of Monopoly,” *Bellingham Herald*, January 19, 1904, NewsBank.

²⁷ Elizabeth Lee, “Ida M. Tarbell: Biographer and Historian,” *Macon Telegraph*, June 12, 1904, 5, NewsBank.

The physical scars of all this long train of violence could be seen on my daily walks or studied in the Musée Carnavalet where Paris has gathered documents and relics of what she has destroyed as well as of what she has achieved. But besides the scars of Madame Roland's time were other scars dating from the centuries, scars of revolutionary outbreaks of the same type hardly to be distinguished from those of the period I was trying to visualize ; and the more you knew of these explosions, the more they seemed to fit together.²⁸

Although she came to Paris to study history, she also had to work in order to support herself financially. This necessity led her back to magazine work. However, in Paris she was on her own, thus had to work individually. She wanted to make a living by writing, a skill she thought she had lacked. It was a great chance though for her to improve her writing skills, and it proved out to be a fruitful experience. Tarbell soon started writing for magazines and got her works published. Her first article, 'The King of Paris', a character study of Jean Alphonse, was published in the *Scribner's Magazine* and received positive feedbacks.²⁹ This encouraged Tarbell to do similar work. Her second work was on Madame Blanc, woman archeologist, and it was also published in the magazine.

Besides income and recognition as a writer, magazine work provided Tarbell something more valuable. By meeting people, she became acquainted with the intellectuals of Paris. They not only provided her with a new perspective towards issues she was curious about, but also enabled her to get help in her history education. Interacting with those people changed the way she saw the world and contributed to her intellectual development as well as her qualities as a historian. For example, she made acquaintance with Madame Dieulafoy. Together they worked on

²⁸ Tarbell, *Day's Work*, 125.

²⁹ Jean-Charles Adolphe Alphonse was a French engineer and park designer. Under Napoléon III, Alphonse helped renovate Paris between 1852 and 1870. He was involved in the construction of several important spots such as Temple Square, The Paris Observatory, the Gardens of Champs-Élysées and the Bois de Boulogne.

women's history. "Madame Dieulafoy and I grew friendly over the history of the exploits of women in the world, and it took no time at all for me to decide to write the history of women from Eve up, as if I had not already enough on my hands."³⁰ Although the two were not able to finalize their study, the effort was beneficial as it familiarized Tarbell with the way French thought and wrote about history. As well as Madame Dieulafoy, she met other influential literary personalities such as Judith Gautier, poet and historical novelist. Others were Leon Marillier, Anatole Le Braz, and Charles Borgeud. The most important person Tarbell was lucky to get to know, however, was Charles Seignobos, a noted French historian.³¹ Seignobos was renowned worldwide, a professional whose historical background was a treasure for Tarbell to discover. Seignobos and his intellectual circle were Tarbell's favorite pastime. She recalls how she enjoyed discussion with Seignobos's entourage: "I could afford to listen; I had never heard such talk. There was nothing on earth that was foreign or forbidden. Opinions were free as the air, but they had to fight for their lives. There was a complete absence of pretense, and sophistry was thrown as soon as it came to its feet. That it was a friendly circle, its acceptance of me was proof enough."³² She enjoyed engaging herself in conversations with intellectuals and it provided her a broad variety of ideas to consider. Seignobos also helped Tarbell get into an academic environment. She familiarized herself with the French historical methods thanks to classes she took in Sorbonne and Collège de France.

³⁰ Tarbell, *Day's Work*, 128.

³¹ Charles Seignobos, 1854-1942, was a French historian. He taught at the University of Paris and wrote many works on French and European history and civilization. A number of these are widely used as textbooks in France. Seignobos's most outstanding book is his *Histoire politique de l'Europe contemporaine* (1897). Noted for his clear and unbiased narrative, Seignobos emphasized political history rather than social and economic change. "Charles Seignobos," In *The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition*, 2008. *Encyclopedia.com*, accessed August 10, 2010, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1E1-Seignobo.html>

³² Tarbell, *Day's Work*, 133.

2.5. Madame Roland

On the other hand, Tarbell was working on the project she started in the United States. Madame Roland was a famous figure among the French and when she mentioned her intention of doing a biographical study on her, she was introduced to Roland's living relatives by Madame Marillier. She met Roland's great-great-grandson and great-granddaughter in the spring of 1893. Thanks to the help they offered she was able to get to some family documents, visited their family estate and observed the environment in which she grew up. That was important for Tarbell as she began to see Roland's character in a more insightful way. She also gained access to the Roland manuscripts in the National Library. Indeed she was the first person to use the manuscripts which had just been catalogued. Tarbell used them effectively by working for hours in the library.

As she ended her research and hours of library work, she was equipped enough to finish her work. However she encountered a dilemma that challenged her study. That was a confusion she was going to experience in every historical topic she intended to study. As a historian who was about to finish her first important biographical study, she was torn between telling the truth or portraying the person as she wanted. She wanted to portray an ideal figure, an example for the society to follow. That was the reason she started studying and writing history in the first place. Upon her research, however, Tarbell found out that while Madame Roland embodied revolutionary ideas and defended freedom, she defended violence as a way to reach her goals. That was a disappointment for Tarbell. A woman of intellect should be nonviolent, and civilized, she believed. Such was a dilemma she was going through:

She will be no party to violence. She knows that solutions are only worked out by patient cooperation, and that cooperation must be kindly. She knows

the danger of violence in the group as she knows the danger of selfishness. She has been the world's greatest sufferer from these things, and she has suffered them in order that she might protect that thing which is her business in the world, the bearing and the rearing of children. She has a great inarticulate wisdom born of her experience in the world. That is the thing women will give. That was what I had hoped to find Madame Roland giving³³

“I would go through with it,” Tarbell concluded, “I would put down what I had found as nearly as I could, even if I had not got what I came for.”³⁴ She decided to finish her biography of Madame Roland. This decision marks one of the significant phases of Tarbell's history writing career. After all, she overcame her disappointment, forgot about the ideal character she wanted present to the public and decided to tell the truth. A professional historian had to recognize the fact that the personalities she was interested in studying had both ugly and admirable characteristics. She had to let go of some of the ideas or morals she thought her writing could deliver to her readers. She understood that being a professional required treatment of facts only, and even if it disturbed, truth had to be told.

The biography's publication was delayed as William McClure offered her a job in his magazine in 1894 when she was about to finalize her study. She accepted and started work for *McClure's Magazine* and went back to the United States. It was two years later she managed to finish her work and get it published. After its publication, Madame Roland biography received positive feedback. One of the praises it received was its dependence on facts. She had portrayed Roland's life in detail within the context of the French Revolution. Another success of Tarbell's

³³ Ibid, 143.

³⁴ Ibid, 144.

biography was a lively, warm depiction of the historical character. *The Baltimore Sun* commented:

A biography should be full and reliable as to its facts. This first requisite has rendered many a dull biography treasure for the library shelves. Like some men, these biographies are valued less for the manner in which they are dressed than for their sterling, honest characters. Then there are biographies which live because they have life in them. Warmth, color, graces of style. For simple beauty, unadorned, is not adorned the most in setting forth the counterfeit presentiment of departed worthies. The facts will bear the proper dressing up, the pose and bearing may be changed and varied, and the different aspects of the individual may be lightened or shaded off, without any disloyalty to the truth of history.³⁵

Another review commented on the impact of Jean Jacques Rousseau's impact on Roland's ideas and actions. Like Rousseau, Roland had defended freedom and applied philosophy and history to her arguments against the oppression of women and people in general against evil governments. Tarbell also discovered other influences in Roland's life, as one reviewer said:

Leaving aside all invidious comparisons which other biographers of the fascinating character in history, it can be said without exaggeration that her story is one of the most brilliant bits of biographical writing which has recently appeared. To us the most entertaining chapter in the book is the one wherein is described the effect which Jean Jacques Rousseau had upon her mental development, the part that Emile and La Nouvelle Reloise played in her conception of marriage, and her subsequent conversations with her father. ... All in all, it is a very readable, painstaking and well balanced work, well worth reading by any who care to read biography, French history of illustrious women.³⁶

The Roland biography was Tarbell's first success as a biographer. Her work was appreciated by reviewers and Tarbell's skills as a historian had become more apparent. She became more convinced that history writing was her main ideal. What

³⁵ "New Publications," *Sun*, May 8, 1896, 8, accessed February 22, 2010, NewsBank.

³⁶ "Miss Tarbell's Madame Roland," *Boston Journal*, March 26, 1896, 4, accessed February 22, 2010, NewsBank.

is more, she began to develop a style. Tarbell was interested in famous personalities' lives. By portraying those people's lives, she believed that she could present important examples to society.

2.6. Napoleon Bonaparte

Tarbell quit her studies in France when Samuel McClure asked her to join the staff of *McClure's*. Although it was journalistic work, Tarbell was hired for writing history. The head of the magazine, McClure was a clever entrepreneur and had plans for using Tarbell's best skill: biographical work. He saw that the growth of magazines in the late 1890s was heavily thanks to public interest in biographical works. Magazine series which treated lives of famous and historical personalities were enjoying high circulation figures. Napoleon Bonaparte, whose reputation, on the centennial of his first military success, was undergoing a kind of renaissance of his first military successes, was one of these personalities.³⁷ McClure asked Tarbell to work on Napoleon and complete her second important biographical study.

Tarbell's research and work on Napoleon demonstrates that the lessons and methods she learned in France had begun to tell. After she took on the task, she took enough time to make sure she had covered all the available sources and made the right observations. She didn't have to go to France for resources on the French Emperor. The Library of Congress in Washington D.C. had a large amount of material on Napoleon, and Tarbell was lucky enough to be the first historian to be able to look at them. Like in the Madame Roland study, she reached files and photographs others couldn't. Gardner Hubbard, a Napoleon collector, let her use his collection, which in the end proved very useful in terms of visual support. Thanks to

³⁷ Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, vol. 4, 1885-1905, (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), 590.

her connection with Hubbard, she was invited by Charles Bonaparte, the grandson of Jerome Bonaparte, and Mrs. Bonaparte to lunch with them in Baltimore to see their collection. Meeting the Bonaparte family was indeed another motivational force for her study. As a researcher and historian Tarbell did not do library work in isolation only, she searched every possible document, memoir and family connections to make her work perfect.

Tarbell finished her work in six weeks and got first installment published. That seemed a short period of time to finish an important study. She thought she could have taken more time to do more elaborate work. She owed the idea to William Milligan Sloane, another biographer whose work Tarbell admired and followed. When she told him that the way biography should be written was years of research, of note-taking, of simmering and saturation, like Sloane did, he replied and consoled her:

I am not so sure that all the time you want to take, all the opportunity to indulge your curiosity and run here and there on bypaths, to amuse yourself, to speculate and doubt, contribute to the soundness or value of a biography. I have often wished that I had had, as you did, the prod of necessity behind me, the obligation to get it out at a fixed time, to put it through, no time to idle, to weigh, only to set down. You got something that way a living sketch.³⁸

Sloane was right. Even though she finished her work in a short time, her work had all the qualities of a good biography. Tarbell was praised for her ability to access new material, and provide new look at the French emperor's life. Her clear and simple language made it an easy read. The reader loved her style. The series ran from November 1894 through June 1895. It doubled the circulation of *McClure's*

³⁸ Tarbell, *All*, 152.

Magazine, and set it well on its way to one hundred thousand.³⁹ The reviews confirmed Tarbell's skill as a biographer. *New York Press* said: "The best short life of Napoleon we have ever seen." Besides her ability to provide an interesting and impartial life of the man, they praised its ability to amaze readers with its visual material. *The Springfield Republican*: "It would be hard to rival these exceedingly interesting pictures"⁴⁰ Another critic commented: "Tarbell relates the history with lucidity and compactness, and the portraits, battle scenes and other pictures, all after paintings by noted artists, give special vividness and reality to the story."⁴¹

While Tarbell's success with Napoleon was a result of her hard work and ambition as a writer, it also owed partially to Samuel McClure, her employer, and John S. Phillips, her coworker. McClure provided her with time and finance to help her deliver a good work. Furthermore, McClure made a more important contribution to Tarbell's writing career. He was indeed a professional whose leadership made his magazine one of the top selling publications in the United States. And his dedication to his work and precision influenced Tarbell's writing career as well. By encouraging her to find undiscovered and unpublished stories from the past, he supported her growth as a historian whose main duty was to add something new to existing knowledge. As Tarbell later wrote:

In my field of biography and history the Edge of the Future meant to Mr. McClure the "unpublished" or the so poorly published that its reappearance was equal to a first appearance. The success of a feature spurred him to effort to get more of it, things which would sharpen and perpetuate the interest. He was ready to look into any suggestion, however unlikely it might seem to the

³⁹ Mott, 591.

⁴⁰ "Advertisements," *Oregonian*, December 23, 1894, 15, accessed February 21, 2010, NewsBank.

⁴¹ "Comment upon New Publications," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 4, 1895, 7, accessed February, 2010, NewsBank

cautious-minded. He was never afraid of being fooled, only of missing something.⁴²

Clearly, without McClure's support, Tarbell would have had more difficulty in achieving journalistic work as well as developing a historian's qualities.

Phillips, on the other hand, demonstrated some other characteristics a historian had to possess: patience and double-checking evidence. Journalists and historians were supposed to make sure the stories they were covering indeed happened and they relied on facts. On the other hand they were supposed to take their time in order to verify the evidence they found. For instance, when Tarbell heard a rumor about Napoleon's tomb having been opened by Napoleon III who was skeptical about his body being there at all, she was curious if they could publish it. Phillips warned McClure and Tarbell that he thought it could be fake. Caring for the soundness and truthfulness of his magazine, McClure travelled all the way to France to see if the story was real. He found out the story was false and thus told his employees not to publish it. Both McClure and Phillips affected Tarbell's professional development with their carefulness with the evidence and patience they demonstrated. As Tarbell commented:

I came later to feel that this quick kindling of the imagination, this untiring curiosity, this determination to run down every clue until you had it there on the table, its worth or worthlessness in full view, was one of Mr. McClure's greatest assets; but it was an asset that would have landed him frequently in hot water if it had not been for the partner who had saved him from the Napoleon hoax, John S. Phillips J, S. P. as he was known in the office.⁴³

Working with McClure's staff, Tarbell finally found what she had been looking for. She could use research methods and writing skills she had been developing since an

⁴² Tarbell, *Day's Work*, 154-55.

⁴³ Ibid, 156.

early age. In this new institution that valued edge cutting, absorbing publications, she began to turn years' education and experience into concrete works.

Besides their contribution to the world of journalism, the Napoleon and Roland biographies proved Tarbell's ability to treat the lives of historical personalities with a vivid and interesting style. They were praised for their historical truthfulness. Thanks to these works, she established herself at McClure's and this guaranteed more elaborate studies. After those two biographies had boosted magazine circulation, Samuel McClure asked Tarbell to take on a much more challenging task, a biographical study on Abraham Lincoln, the martyr president, whose life story amused readers. Although his life was believed to have been studied in depth, McClure encouraged Tarbell to do more research to find undiscovered material. Although the task seemed a difficult one at first, Tarbell had the experience and ambition to cover such an important personality. She used her research techniques and writing skills to treat the President's life. With Lincoln biography Tarbell was about to take her history writing to a whole new level.

CHAPTER 3

TARBELL'S LINCOLN

"It is extravagant praise to affirm that this 'Life of Abraham Lincoln' by Ida M. Tarbell, is the best that has been written."

*Milwaukee Sentinel*⁴⁴

Her education in France had helped Tarbell build a historian's qualities and her first two biographical works introduced her to the American literary world. The success of the series provided Tarbell both confidence to seek further studies in historical discipline and encouragement by her employer and colleagues to continue similar works. As Samuel McClure believed in her research techniques and writing skills, he came up with a project much more significant. He asked Tarbell to cover the life of the great American President, Abraham Lincoln. Once she took on the task, Tarbell demonstrated a historian's qualities. Her research techniques, ambition and patience to gather material, delivering a clear, unbiased work on Lincoln were what she achieved through this study. Her work not only brought new material and sources into the Lincoln literature, which influenced the discussion and interpretation

⁴⁴ "Advertisements," *Wilkes-Barre Times*, January 18, 1913, 11, NewsBank.

of his life, but also enabled future historians to make use of them. Besides bringing nationwide fame to the magazine she worked for, she opened a new era in which old depictions of Lincoln began to change. She enabled a break from romantic, legendary portrayals of Lincoln's life and success by focusing on his frontier background, his family past and instances from his life that made him look more human and more common. Furthermore, she corrected some of the myths from his life and settled some of the controversies. In the end, by elaborate research and vivid portrayal of his life, she achieved scientific accuracy through her work which not only changed the way American people saw Abraham Lincoln but also affected future historians who took on the subject. Furthermore, Tarbell's history was representative of the ideals of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era. She used scientific approach and put emphasis on science, rationality and realism. The shift towards a more scientific thinking also contributed to professional history writing that was still maturing at the turn of the 20th century in the United States.

This chapter will argue that *Life of Lincoln* by Ida Tarbell was a clear manifestation of her character and skills as a historian. By covering the whole process of taking on the task, doing thorough research on the subject, and delivering a comprehensive study on Lincoln's life, it will try to demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of Tarbell's history writing. It will also try to address how influential her work was by detailing the similarities and differences between Tarbell's work and that of those who wrote on the subject before her. Overall, it will propose that Tarbell's was a great contribution to Lincoln literature because it was able to provide a variety of sources and material others did not make use of, it brought a new approach to the interpretation of Lincoln's character and actions, it was able to illustrate his frontier past which other historians had ignored or had not covered in

depth, and it achieved a new perspective freed from the romantic, elevating portrayal of his life by pointing out the common man in Lincoln's character.

The first real taste of popular approval came to *McClure's* as a result of the publication of Ida Tarbell's "Napoleon" and the pictures from the Hubbard collection that illustrated it.⁴⁵ McClure began looking for new ideas to stimulate sales and he derived one from another magazine. *The Century* had published Nicolay and Hay's "Abraham Lincoln: A History," the longest biographical serial of the period, which ran during 1887-1890, and it brought a great success. McClure hoped that a similar study could do the same for his magazine. Furthermore, he believed that "his readers would benefit from reminders of the American virtues Lincoln embodied."⁴⁶ His initial plan was to collect documents that were not published, conduct interviews with Lincoln's friends and turn McClure's offices into a Lincoln's Bureau. Later, these findings were brought together for a biography of the President.

McClure's best option to assign the task seemed to be Ida Tarbell. She had already completed two biographical works for the magazine and proven herself capable of conducting thorough research and arranging material. While the Madame Roland study introduced her to the American literary world and it received good comments, her successful biography of Napoleon also contributed to the popularity of the magazine and her image as a biographer. When she was asked to work on Lincoln, however, she did not want it. Tarbell biographer Kathleen Brady says: "Her enthusiasm was for France and for its revolutionary period, not for American icons. She had made herself sit through congressional debates, thinking they were a mandatory sight for visitors, but she had much preferred absorbing the atmosphere of

⁴⁵ Mott, 590.

⁴⁶ Mary E. Tomkins, *Ida M. Tarbell* (New York: Twayne, 1974), 43.

Mme Roland in the museums and libraries of France.”⁴⁷ Samuel McClure was determined. He offered her five thousand dollars a year, which was hard to refuse. Tarbell accepted the challenge.

3.1. Research Process

Claiming that Tarbell took on the task for the money only would be an insult to her career as a journalist and historian. She was a professional first of all, and wanted to deliver works that were known for their literary value. Thus, one of the motivational forces for taking Lincoln research was her ambition to conduct her profession, which was history. She began to demonstrate her qualities as a historian just after she accepted the offer. Tarbell initially sought help from John Nicolay, co-author of the most comprehensive Lincoln biography until then. She asked if she could use or publish some of the findings from his research. His response was surprising. “He at first assured her there was nothing more to be published, then told her the subject was his and that she should stay away.”⁴⁸ As discouraging it was his response was also a controversial one. Was there really nothing new that could be published about Lincoln? Was it possible to find new material that would make Tarbell’s study worth recognition?

First of all, for the most famous study, the Lincoln family had let Nicolay and Hay use their family papers and provided them full access. However, the family also had control over what was and was not be published. This made their study a double-edged one. This necessity was put forward by Lincoln’s contemporary Carl Schurz in 1891. He complained that “the ten volume work of Nicolay and Hay was neither history nor biography; it was an unsuccessful attempt to combine both. He granted its

⁴⁷ Brady, 95.

⁴⁸ Brady, 96.

value and importance, but he characterized it as tedious and redundant and as heavily moralistic and far too uncritically eulogistic.”⁴⁹ Previous biographers, according to Schurz, had allowed awe to overcome objectivity.

Other less popular but still important Lincoln biographies belonged to William H. Herndon, Lincoln’s law partner, and Henry Clay Whitney, another lawyer friend of Lincoln. These biographies were written by men who knew Lincoln closely and this resulted in their reflecting him in a romantic manner, devoid of a truthful depiction. Among those works, it was only Herndon who did not like the legendary Lincoln and he tried to make a more objective depiction, but he was not able to achieve it. What is more, his portrayal was not welcomed and he was criticized by many Lincoln scholars and friends. According to Benjamin P. Thomas, who commented on the biographical works written before Tarbell, those who had known Lincoln and cared to write about him provided the groundwork of Lincoln biography and had had their say, and thus there was need for a new perspective:

With Herndon’s realism discredited, the world had a distorted conception of Lincoln, an image compounded of reminiscences which had not always escaped the inaccuracies that come from failing memories or uninhibited imaginations. It was not essentially untrue; but it was colored by the quirks and preconceptions and idiosyncracies of individuals, and by sectional bias. It lacked perspective and adequate background, and it had been smudged in certain detail by unskilled hands. Even Herndon, with all his good intentions, had contributed to the distortion when the lack of critical acuteness, misplaced trust in the memories of others and undue reliance on his own clairvoyance sometimes led him astray.⁵⁰

What Thomas described as adequate background was a missing feature of Lincoln biographies according to Tarbell’s contemporaries as well. Those biographies were so focused on Lincoln as a successful man and president, they failed to detail his childhood environment. Even if they did, they wanted to portray it as bad as possible

⁴⁹ Tomkins, 45.

⁵⁰ Benjamin P. Thomas, “Our Lincoln Heritage from Tarbell,” in Roy P. Basler, G. W. Bunn, Jr., Benjamin P. Thomas, eds. *The Abraham Lincoln Quarterly* 4, no.1, (March 1950): 6.

so that they could contrast his poor background and later success. A newspaper review observed such a necessity: “The lives heretofore written have had every conceivable aim,-political, proselyting, sensational, historical, unscrupulous, canonizing, academic, amusing- but none has quite satisfied the increasing demand to know how this poor white from Kentucky, born at the foot of the social ladder, and seemingly intended for a thriftless prairie lawyer and tavern jester, rose to be, as Tennyson said,-The pillar of a people’s hope, The center of a world’s desire.”⁵¹

There was a need to compile other possible sources, such as unpublished documents in a study to fill in the historical gaps. Also a fresh look at Lincoln’s life, free from legendary or romantic understanding of his personality and life was necessary. It required a more professional approach, a historian’s eye, ambition and patience to achieve such a task. In that case, Tarbell was the right person to handle the issue as she had the necessary qualities for conducting elaborate research and delivering an unbiased work. Just after she began doing research Tarbell proved she was the right pick. Unlike other biographers who were contemporaries with Lincoln and had access to private papers, Tarbell investigated court records, county histories, and newspapers. She was hoping to find original materials even though many thought it was unlikely. She began her journey from Kentucky, the birthplace of Lincoln. She travelled to Indiana and later Springfield, Illinois. She was clearly following the footsteps of Lincoln, and wanted to gather material from every available source. She interviewed people in the places she visited and they shared what they remembered or knew about him. The elderly Roland W. Diller, in whose Springfield drug store Lincoln used to relax with his friends, was one of them. Her

⁵¹ “The Latest Life of Lincoln,” *Springfield Republican*, January 15, 1902, 11, NewsBank.

interview with Diller enabled Tarbell to gather material that she would also use to write the book *He Knew Lincoln* that was published in 1907. She did not work alone. She hired J. McCan Davis, a Springfield lawyer who hunted information for her. He made such important finds as “Lincoln's first published speech, most of the documents of Lincoln's early life in New Salem and Springfield, such as his first vote, his reports and maps of surveys, his marriage certificate and many letters.”⁵² Additionally, she visited libraries including that of University of Chicago and sought help from every possible person who knew something about Lincoln. One of these persons was Lincoln's son, Robert Lincoln. By consulting Robert, Tarbell wanted to check validity of her findings and make sure the stories she was about to cover matched his records and also to get new material others did not make use of.

Initially, McClure's team hoped to reach new material on Lincoln but could not anticipate that there would be so much. So the plan of publishing new Lincoln materials evolved into a biographical project. Tarbell's task of editing the Lincoln material turned into arranging and putting them into a biographical work, which was indeed one of the important moments in Tarbell's history writing career. She put hard work into the project for four years and after its completion, it was serialized in *McClure's Magazine*. It indeed achieved what Samuel McClure aimed in the first place. Just as life of Napoleon doubled the circulation of *McClure's Magazine* and set it well on its way to its first hundred thousand, the “Early Life of Lincoln” began in November 1895, when the magazine circulation was 175,000: the next year it was 250,000. In 1898-1899, a series on Lincoln's later life was published. Together they helped to put *McClure's* in the forefront of American magazines in terms of

⁵² Judith A. Rice, "Ida M. Tarbell: A Progressive Look at Lincoln," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* Winter, (1998), 61, <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jala/19.1/rice.html>

circulation, advertising patronage, and prestige.⁵³ In 1899 the series was put into book form and published as two volumes. *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* consisted of three parts. First part of the book started with his family roots and ended with Lincoln's marriage in 1842 and his subsequent election to Congress. The next part covered his election to the presidency in 1860. And the last part was about the rest of his life until the tragic assassination.

3.2. New Material Discovered

Tarbell's Lincoln biography is a clear manifestation of her qualities as a historian, beginning with her research skills. Despite resentment by Lincoln scholars who claimed that there was nothing new to be published or said about him, she insisted that through careful research finding new material was always possible. Rather than depending on books written on the subject, she travelled and sought information from people and places Lincoln was once in touch with and in the end was able to discover a variety of sources upon which she could build her study. When asked how she found any new material about Lincoln, Miss Tarbell replied and reflected a historian's philosophy that there was always something new to be told about a specific subject: "I just did it by work. I proceed on the theory that there is nothing about which everything has been done and said. I have made that the foundation principle of my work." According to Tarbell, prodigiously hard work, too, was demanded. She declared: "There are sudden journeys, wading through tedious books and manuscripts, listening to the tales of cranks and others, pegging away day after day, year after year. Yet the result is ten times worth all the trouble."⁵⁴

⁵³ Mott, 591.

⁵⁴ "Ida M. Tarbell," *Macon Weekly Telegraph*, June 12, 1904, 5, NewsBank.

With the new material she revealed, Tarbell fascinated scholars as well as the public. The series contained letters, speeches and other documents, which had not been published before. The book itself included an appendix covering about 200 pages documenting these sources. The variety of material and photographs that illustrated Tarbell's narrative constituted one of the important characteristics of the work and was praised by critics. Altogether they provided an understandable and enjoyable account of Lincoln's life, which in the end was reflected in the sale of the magazine and the book. *The Boston Daily* praised the materially rich work: "its numerous excellent illustrations would, as the writers claim, give a fair idea of Lincoln's life even to one who did not read a word of the text. A systematic effort has been made to secure a complete collection of the portraits of the President, and the success which has attended the search for photographs, ambrotypes and daguerreotypes augurs well for the completeness of the collection. Of the 20 portraits in this volume, it is believed that 13 have never been printed."⁵⁵ As *The New York Sun* commented: "There is no doubt that the new material here collected materially increases our knowledge of Lincoln's Life."⁵⁶

While the discovery of new material and visual support influenced the popularity of the biography, it also led to a discussion over understanding the life and character of Lincoln. This was made possible partly thanks to a portrait which was then believed to be the earliest portrait of Lincoln ever produced. In fact, it was provided by Lincoln's son, Robert. He had helped Nicolay and Hay's biography, but he was not willing to let anyone use family papers again. However he gave Tarbell the earliest daguerreotype of Lincoln. As soon as the picture was published, it created a sensation as it enabled a new look at Lincoln's character and past. As one review

⁵⁵ "McClure's Lincoln," *Boston Journal*, April 3, 1896, 4, NewsBank.

⁵⁶ "Advertisements," 11.

commented: “In this case one picture was truly a thousand words; for it contradicted the popular image of him as a shambling backwoodsman with unkempt hair and a slack jaw who wore a ragged shirt and greasy coonskin cap. Instead it showed him conventionally dressed, his hair was short and neatly combed, and his expression was strikingly like that of Ralph Waldo Emerson- dreamy yet virile, poetic yet craggily noble.”⁵⁷ The photograph’s publication was a big event and it created interest both in Tarbell and her Lincoln study. Woodrow Wilson, professor of finance and history at Princeton University, wrote that he found it “both striking and singular- a notable picture”. He added that he was moved by “the expression of dreaminess, the familiar face without the sadness”. Charles Dudley Warner, a literary figure who co-wrote *The Gilded Age* with Mark Twain, said that it “explains Mr. Lincoln far more than the most elaborate engraving which had been produced.”⁵⁸

3.3. Lincoln’s Frontier Background

In addition to providing new material to Lincoln literature, Tarbell filled gaps in previous studies by delivering a detailed and truthful depiction of Lincoln’s frontier background. Tarbell traced Lincoln’s ancestry to Hingham, Massachusetts, where Samuel Lincoln had arrived in 1637 as an indentured servant. She also traced his mother’s footsteps, which led to early New England. Both families had migrated westward in the seventeenth century. Tarbell also presented a detailed picture of Lincoln’s early life. Reviews praised Tarbell’s ability in documenting details from this period. *The New York Times* commented: “The principal features of Lincoln’s early manhood and education have been described very often, but never, we think,

⁵⁷ Brady, 46.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 98.

better than by Miss Tarbell.”⁵⁹ Similarly *The Boston Daily* reviewed: “The text shows painstaking and well-directed research, much attention having been given to personal inspection of the localities where Lincoln’s boyhood was passed, and to the examination of all relics and documents bearing upon this period.”⁶⁰

By discovering his family roots and his own journey from Kentucky to Illinois, she showed how the frontier environment influenced his character and life. Contrary to previous biographers, Tarbell presented the American frontier as an environment which provided opportunity for Lincoln to develop certain qualities. Lincoln, according to Tarbell, became a self-made man and despite the fact that he did not get a formal education, thanks to the rough conditions of the frontier, he developed great intellectual and moral qualities, seriousness of thought and purpose which led him to success.⁶¹ In that sense, as Benjamin Thomas put it, “Lincoln did not become what he did in spite of his background. He became what he did because of it. Here was a man who was denied the advantages of formal education, but absorbed his education largely from his surroundings.”⁶² According to Mary E. Tomkins, Tarbell’s success in detailing Lincoln’s frontier background was partly due to her own past in the frontier. “Tarbell was on familiar ground in depicting Lincoln’s frontier background; as a result, she was able to incorporate the wealth of anecdotes available to her to characterize her subject. Her feeling for the circumstances of his frontier experience enabled her to weave together the innumerable reminiscences she had available into a coherent narrative that made believable Lincoln’s development from a Yahoo to a man of destiny.”⁶³ Clearly,

⁵⁹ “Lincoln: Miss Tarbell’s Fresh and Striking Life of Him,” *New York Times*, March 3, 1900, 12, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9E05E0DF1339E733A25750C0A9659C946197D6CF>

⁶⁰ “McClure’s Lincoln,” 4.

⁶¹ Brady, 101.

⁶² Thomas, 15.

⁶³ Tomkins, 47.

while Tarbell changed the way Lincoln's frontier background was presented, she also opened a new era in which a new mythical image of Lincoln began to appear.

Rediscovering Lincoln's family roots and frontier background were not her only achievement. While her work met the demand for more detailed information on Lincoln's early life it also corrected some of its myths. One of those corrections was about Lincoln's father. Earlier biographies treated Thomas Lincoln as a poor man who could hardly make his living. According to Judith A. Rice, previous historians had disparaged him in order to make his son seem more remarkable. Tarbell on the other hand, restored Thomas Lincoln's image by proving that he was not a shiftless Southerner although he had to work hard to make his living. "The squalor and wretchedness of Lincoln's home, she said, had been overdrawn. She described the comforts the Lincoln family did enjoy, such as a cow and a calf, a featherbed, and the various household tools necessary for life on the frontier."⁶⁴ Similarly, other important corrections made Tarbell's work worthy of praise. Kathleen Brady, the author of the most comprehensive Tarbell biography, elaborated on Tarbell's achievement in providing and correcting details of Lincoln's life:

William Herndon had cited John Hanks as the source of Lincoln's vow against slavery at a New Orleans auction, but Tarbell found that Hanks had never been there. She contradicted William Cullen Bryant's belief that he had seen Lincoln during the Black Hawk War by showing that Lincoln had left his command a month before Bryant ever arrived. Despite Nicolay's contention that he had published the complete Lincoln correspondence, Tarbell discovered three hundred more letters of varying importance.⁶⁵

While Tarbell's Lincoln study had great features, it also had weaknesses. One of them was in relation to Tarbell's treatment of Lincoln's mother. Contrary to previous studies by biographers who emphasized the illegitimacy of Lincoln's

⁶⁴ Rice, 37.

⁶⁵ Brady, 101.

mother, Tarbell proposed that Abraham Lincoln was not born of an unknown woman as had been generally believed. Tarbell's account was that:

In 1789, Joseph Hanks moved from Amelia county, Virginia., into Kentucky and settled near what was then Elizabethtown. At his death he left his children modestly provided for and shortly afterwards his wife died and the children became scattered. As Nancy Hanks was a girl of some property, though it was small, she was appointed a ward of John H. Infare, but it was at the house of Richard Berry that Thomas Lincoln met her. The two became engaged and on the 10th of June, 1800, their marriage bond was issued and two days later they were married by Reverend Jessue Head.⁶⁶

The evidence to support this argument was provided by a writer named Caroline Hanks Hitchcock. The story however, was proven to be in error in the 1920s although it was believed to be a convincing one when Tarbell wrote about it. Tarbell accepted her error when she found out the truth.

3.4. Lincoln as a Common Man

While giving utmost importance to Lincoln's frontier background and family roots, Tarbell also wanted to present Lincoln as he really was. She narrated instances with Lincoln's friends, colleagues and wanted to portray his daily activities as they really happened. This was a new appreciation of Lincoln's life and character. This change in the depiction of Lincoln was immediately appreciated by those who reviewed her work. *The Anaconda Standard* said: "The book as a whole is a detailed account of the man. It tells of Lincoln as he really was and details the tremendous influence he exerted on events and men of his time."⁶⁷ *The New York Times* commented: "It is more of a personal life of the man from earliest boyhood to his tragic end and a history of the times in which he lived or a description of the scenes in which he was one of the principal actors. We here have Abraham Lincoln the man

⁶⁶ "Ida Tarbell's *Life of Lincoln*," *Anaconda Standard*, January 28, 1900, 18, NewsBank.

⁶⁷ "In Society's Realm," *Anaconda Standard*, January 28, 1900, 18, NewsBank.

described and not Abraham Lincoln the President.”⁶⁸ Portraying Lincoln in a more informal way indeed was one of the achievements of Tarbell’s work. It influenced the way Lincoln would be later studied. Interest in Tarbell’s depiction of Lincoln as “the man” grew and this encouraged other papers to initiate series of Tarbell’s study. In November 29, 1908, for example, *The Sunday Times* published the first issue of a Lincoln series by Tarbell titled “The Loves of Lincoln”. The story covered Lincoln’s affairs with three women in his life: Ann Rutledge, Mary Owens and Mary Todd.

Lincoln’s affair with Ann Rutledge was especially significant. Lincoln was deeply in love with Ann Rutledge and upon her death he became deeply depressed and lost interest in life. Tarbell narrated his mood after the funeral:

The death of Ann Rutledge plunged Lincoln into the deepest gloom. He was seen walking alone by the river and through the woods, muttering strange things to himself. He seemed to his friends to be in the shadow of madness. They kept a close watch over him and at last, Bowling Green, one of the most devoted friends Lincoln then had, took him home to his little log cabin, half a mile north of New Salem. Here, under the loving care of Green and his good wife Nancy, Lincoln remained until he was once more master of himself. . . . In later life, when Lincoln’s sorrow had become a memory, he told a friend who questioned him: ‘I really and truly loved the girl and think often of her now.’ There was a pause and then the President added: ‘And I have loved the name of Rutledge to this day.’⁶⁹

As the story went before Tarbell, Lincoln’s later life was deeply affected by the tragic loss of his love. Tarbell thought this was an exaggeration and although he mourned after his love’s death and he could not forget her for the rest of his life, he pulled himself together to get married to another woman he loved, Mary Todd.

Her depiction of Mary Todd is also noteworthy. Other biographers like Herndon had negative portrayal of Mary Todd and Lincoln as a couple. Herndon claimed that Ann Rutledge was the only woman Lincoln had ever loved. Tarbell tried

⁶⁸ “Lincoln: Miss Tarbell’s Fresh and Striking Life of Him,” 12.

⁶⁹ Ida M. Tarbell, “The Loves of Lincoln” *The New York Times*, November 29, 1908, [nytimes.com/archive](https://www.nytimes.com/archive)

to change this image. She produced several witnesses to contest the story that Lincoln had left Mary Todd waiting at the altar after their first engagement. She revealed the marriage certificate of the couple and proved otherwise. According to Kathleen Brady, possibly because of her indebtedness to Robert Lincoln and the hope of prying more material from him, Tarbell treated Mary Todd Lincoln more gently than she was otherwise inclined to do. “She suppressed the story told her by Carl Schurz, a Lincoln confidant and appointee, that Lincoln’s wife had been the tragedy of his existence and that she tried to influence the president after accepting a diamond necklace as a bribe. After Robert died in 1926, Tarbell wrote a profile of Mary for the *Ladies Home Journal* in which she said simply that Mary felt she had right to some of the gifts favor-seekers offered.”⁷⁰

3.5. Employing Scientific Method

Tarbell’s treatment of the Todd – Lincoln couple raises question of how objective Tarbell was throughout her study. Was she hiding facts or manipulating some so that they could serve a specific purpose? After all, besides providing fresh material and bringing new approaches towards the topic, a historian is supposed to be objective throughout his or her work. Her contemporaries approached Tarbell’s factuality at her Lincoln biography in a positive manner. Yet, what is good biography was a matter of debate. While some thought authors should stay neutral to personalities they were writing about, some thought they should build a kind of personal attachment to their subjects and promote morals. One example of the latter, a critic who reviewed Tarbell’s work, Augustus C. Buell stated that “Some sympathy of temperament between the biographer and his subject is indispensable. . . . Coming

⁷⁰ Brady, 100.

to Lincoln, I put Miss Tarbell's first not under the rule of 'place aux dames' but because I liked it best. It is a case of the biographer losing herself in her subject. Of course it is a panegyric; but Lincoln's character and career can stand a good deal of that."⁷¹ Other reviews indicated that Tarbell was the first person who achieved factuality in portraying Lincoln's life: "The reader of history today desires above all things to see a realistic truthful portrayal of the real man whether saint or sinner or as generally happens a mixture of both. Miss Tarbell has given us this. There has been no other life of Lincoln which without attempt at idealization still gives so vivid an impression of the true greatness of the man."⁷²

More recent scholars interpreted Tarbell's Lincoln in different ways. Judith A. Rice, for example, in her article "Ida M. Tarbell: A Progressive Look at Lincoln", made an interesting comparison. She referred to Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis and his emphasis on the necessity of taking the American western experience into consideration while studying American history. She believed Turner's approach was evident in Tarbell's Lincoln study. By focusing on his life in the frontier, she was able to portray the background in which Lincoln was able to build qualities that enabled him to rise up to the Presidency. What is more, Tarbell's work on the life of Abraham Lincoln had characteristics of the Progressive Era. Through her work, Tarbell wanted to remind the American public of good old American values, which seemed to be degenerating at the time. According to Rice, that new perspective came not only from the passing of time and an older generation but also from Tarbell's own talents as a researcher and the Progressive Era's emphasis on science, rationality and realism. Her efforts to establish Lincoln's frontier environment as a

⁷¹ Augustus C. Buell, "Biographies: They Need to be Better Written Before They Can Compete with Fiction," *The New York Times*, April 5, 1902, nytimes.com/archive

⁷² "Another Life of Lincoln," *Washington Times*, February 18, 1900, 8, Chronicling America in Library of Congress, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85054468/1900-02-18/ed-1/seq-18/>

benefit to his early development also melded with progressive historiography and a new appreciation for the common man. Tarbell used Lincoln as an example of what could be accomplished by strong, executive leadership and later urged readers to emulate his impartial logic and moral fortitude in solving their own problems.⁷³

For Benjamin P. Thomas, an eminent academic Lincoln scholar, said of Tarbell that, like Lincoln, she “saw democracy as a spiritual faith, not as a matter of law or system, . . . [her] faith in democracy was no less strong than Lincoln’s, and he saw it as ‘the last, best hope on earth.’” Thomas gracefully qualified Tarbell’s scholarship by pointing out her position as an advocate of an ideology. He placed her midway between the “idealists,” whose Lincoln biographies were unreliable in fact and interpretation, and contemporary scholars, whose aim is objectivity. He classified her as an “idealistic realist” who was inclined toward the sentimental. Yet, he added: “she never put sentimental above evidence, though she was apt to be uncritically laudatory in her estimate of Lincoln.”⁷⁴

While both scholars are quite right in their estimate of factuality in Tarbell’s work, they seem to ignore one important point. The question of factuality could be answered with reference to Tarbell’s personal view of Lincoln. It should be kept in mind that Tarbell was a journalist and *McClure’s* included people like her, those who saw illnesses in the society and believed in the need to take action to bring American values back to life and correct the issues that were troubling the nation. In that sense, like historians argued, Tarbell wanted to idolize Lincoln and saw him as an example to the society in an attempt to remind people of the values of old America. She personally liked Lincoln, what he stood for and hoped to deliver his “proper” and “moral” character to masses. However, her interest in social matters and American

⁷³ Rice, 70-71.

⁷⁴ Thomas, 51.

progressivism emerged during her Lincoln study and became more prominent after it. During her research on Lincoln, she became more acquainted with American nation and developed thoughts about the problems facing it. She believed that ideas and values Lincoln embodied could set an example for the nation. However, she did not put this thought into her biography on Lincoln.

Tarbell's progressive mind was still in the making and thus her Lincoln study was not as progressively oriented as Rice claimed it to be. Her work was more of a product of her historical aims. Although she personally admired Lincoln, she avoided a biased approach towards him and was able to create a truthful depiction. It was later on when she completed her work and became interested in progressive duties, she proposed Lincoln as an example to follow. This became evident in her public speeches. For instance, she spoke her thoughts about Lincoln to the members of the Chicago Society of New York in 1904:

Mr. Lincoln used to define extemporaneous speakers as men with a gifted tongue and shining eyes who left the consequences to God. In my experience I have generally found that the consequences are up to me. What I know of Lincoln I learned during the five years of close association which I spent studying him. I believe Abraham Lincoln is the only man, dead or alive, with whom I could have spent five years without one hour of boredom. . . . Mr. Lincoln never pretended to be anything he was not. Perhaps that is the reason why he never learned how to wear clothes. All men know how his trousers always bagged at the knees. . . . He always sacrificed personal, temporary advantages for the good of the country. He was a man of real goodness. Not the kind of goodness that preaches on Sundays only, but the kind that loves his fellow-men. He was the best man American institutions ever produced.⁷⁵

Clearly, here she was praising Lincoln's character in public in order to contrast it to problems and personalities who did not have similar qualities. In another instance, on the occasion of Lincoln Centennial Memorial Fund in 1909, "Tarbell made an address on his life and works. She dwelt on his religious feeling and faith and said

⁷⁵ "Miss Tarbell's Lincoln Speech," *The New York Times*, February 13, 1904, [nytimes.com/archive](https://www.nytimes.com/archive)

that he prayed in great crises with which he had to deal.”⁷⁶, as *The New York Times* wrote. Perhaps Tarbell was calling for a religious reconciliation against the evils of industrial society. Besides those, occasionally Tarbell referred to Lincoln as the monument of democracy in America. In an article published in 1917 titled “Lincoln Greater Each Passing Day”, Tarbell began with this introductory sentence: “He is today the source to which Statesmen of All Lands Look for Understanding Democracy”. Then she advised those who were debating the nature of democracy in America to comprehend Lincoln’s interpretation and experience of it.

Although she was not enthusiastic in the first place, discouraged by those who were claiming to be Lincoln experts and that there was nothing new to be discovered about Lincoln’s life, Tarbell took on this difficult task of writing a Lincoln biography. Encouraged by her boss’s faith in her abilities as a researcher and writer, seeing the need to bring a fresh look, she conducted a patient, long, thorough research, looking at documents others did not, and discovering new materials. In the end she brought a comprehensive, refreshing work American readers enjoyed reading and critics admired and praised. Perhaps her personal attachment to Lincoln’s ideals and character has been a matter of debate over the factuality in history writing. Yet, historians have concluded that she never let these emotions ruin her work and always stood for the advocacy of facts. Tarbell’s Lincoln was a popularized one but there was no harm in portraying Lincoln as one of the common men who helped to build American nation. On the contrary, shifting from Lincoln’s romantic depiction meant a new approach to reading American History. In isolation from her works, Tarbell wanted Lincoln to be an example of democracy, decency and morals of good old America and thus served her part as a progressive journalist. Overall, through

⁷⁶ “Lincoln Memorial Benefit,” *New York Times*, February 10, 1909, [nytimes.com/archive](https://www.nytimes.com/archive) (22 February 2010).

Lincoln study, she demonstrated her historical expertise. She revealed new material, completed gaps, brought a fresh look on the subject. Her work also inspired and influenced later Lincoln biographers. When the distinguished Lincoln biographer Carl Sandburg, for example, knocked on Tarbell's door to ask for material and advice, she helped. Her work also contributed to the literature of the Progressive Era that advocated social and economic development by challenging problems the industrial nation generated.

CHAPTER 4

TARBELL VS. TITAN: HISTORY AS EXPOSÉ

At the turn of the 20th century, the United States was discussing trusts which were becoming more and more powerful each day. People were calling for government action to end discrimination, monopolization and other economic problems originated by their growth. A newspaper article stated in 1894: “The trail of the Standard Oil company is marked by the charred remains of competing derricks, by the silenced machinery of independent refineries, by the records in the courts of bankruptcy, by the roll of inmates in the insane asylums. It is a trail of inhumanity and heartlessness, springing from selfishness and avarice and leading to perdition.”⁷⁷ Although scholars and journalists attempted to address the issue, such as Henry Demarest Lloyd who in *Wealth Against Commonwealth* (1874) exposed the Standard Oil Company’s illegal actions, their impact was limited and they were far from bringing concrete results. *McClure’s Magazine* also believed the issue needed coverage. Counting on her research skills and simple yet effective prose they assigned Ida Tarbell to the task. Her assignment was not a coincidence. She had

⁷⁷ “Trusts and Monopolies Created by Transportation Barons,” *American Nonconformist*, December 13, 1894, 6, NewsBank.

become interested in national issues while she was conducting her Lincoln study. Travelling along old frontier regions in search of Lincoln's past, she met people, talked to them and was introduced to their lifestyles, problems, major concerns. This brought an enlightenment which led her to think more critically about the way the American system operated. What is more, she was born and raised in the oil regions of Pennsylvania where she witnessed her father's oil business failing against the giant Standard Oil. Taking on the Standard Oil project, she made use of her experience as a historian. She conducted much research, and wrote a comprehensive history of the company, which in the end not only interested readers by its historical correctness and vividness, but also brought about the dissolution of the Standard Oil Company and discredited John D. Rockefeller in the mind of the public.

Tarbell achieved a new approach to the trust problem by focusing on the historical progress of the company. She worked professionally, collected documents that were not touched by others, revealed new documents, and delivered a landmark piece which would deeply affect the mightiest company on earth. She was able to present a clear picture of John D. Rockefeller who she thought acted unjustly and immorally by accumulating wealth with the help of evil strategies which in the end crushed the independent oil refiners. Rockefeller, on the other hand, did his best to overcome the threat directed against his wealth but could not prevent the dissolution of his company. This chapter will cover Tarbell's study on the Standard Oil Company by focusing on Tarbell's research methods, her findings, and her coverage of the subject, and argue that *The History of Standard Oil Company* was another clear manifestation of Tarbell's unique qualities as a historian as it turned out to be a great contribution to the institutional and economic history of the United States. Moreover it contributed to the general atmosphere against trusts in the Progressive

Era and twentieth century America's social and economic life by putting forward the discussion of environmental sensibilities, the ethics of business and evils of capitalism.

4.1. Taking on the Task

Tarbell's Lincoln biography helped *McClure's Magazine* become one of the most popular magazines in the United States. In order to boost sales even more, the magazine planned to launch a series on trusts, one of the hot subjects of the era. It was John Finley, the editor of the magazine who came up with the idea. Tarbell and others all agreed that if they focused on one big trust, it could set an example for all trusts and reflect what was wrong with the trust system. Tarbell, surprisingly, did not come up with the Standard Oil Company. She suggested a study on the Sugar Trust and how it influenced tariff legislation. Ray Stannard Baker, on the other hand, suggested a story on the discovery of oil in California. Tarbell replied:

Unquestionably, we ought to do something in the coming year on the great industrial developments of the country, but it seems clear to me that we must not attempt to do this by describing the discovery and opening of great natural resources such as in the case of the oil. We have got to find a new plan of attacking it. Something that will show clearly not only the magnitude of the industries and commercial developments, and the changes they have brought in various parts of the country, but something which will make clear the great principles by which industrial leaders are combining and controlling these resources.⁷⁸

Tarbell envisioned a study that would address the birth and growth of a single trust and demonstrate how it stood for a system that caused social and economic transformation in the late nineteenth century in the United States.

With such an idea in mind, Tarbell recalled her childhood memories, and the times when she used to witness weak oil producers forced to surrender to the South

⁷⁸ Ida Mae Tarbell to Ray Stannard Baker, April 29, 1901. Library of Congress, quoted in Brady, 121.

Improvement Company. She was equipped with the historical background for the subject already. She was born in Erie County, Pennsylvania. Her father was a oil refiner himself and had had to fight the Titan and had experienced the hardships caused by its unjust, devious actions. She was able to remember it because when she was in high school, she had already started writing on the small oil refiners in the region whom she thought had become victims of the unfair system. All she had to do was to use her skills as an historian to collect evidence and bring results to explain the present situation of trusts. She was self-confident. Her education as an historian already proved noteworthy as her Lincoln study was a praised work and established her as a recognized researcher and writer. She convinced Finley of the project and began her research.

Tarbell's taking on the work had many motives. First, her past in the oil regions in Pennsylvania enabled her to recognize the destruction caused by the South Improvement Company, which dispossessed many local oil refiners who had been enjoying some wealth, including her own father. Equally, she was disturbed by the physical damage caused by unregulated oil processing. In her eighties she wrote:

No industry of man in its early days has ever been more destructive of beauty, order, decency, than the production of petroleum. . . . All about us rose derricks, squatted enginehouses and tanks; the earth about them was streaked and damp with the dumpings of pumps, which brought up regularly the sand and clay and rock through which the drill had made its way. If oil was found, if the well flowed, every tree, every shrub, every bit of grass in the vicinity was coated with black grease and left to die. Tar and oil stained everything. If the well was dry a rickety derrick, piles of debris, oily holes were left, for nobody ever cleaned up in those days.⁷⁹

Besides her search for more environment-friendly production of petroleum, she was also interested in business ethics. The existence of The South Improvement

⁷⁹ Tarbell, *Day's Work*, 9.

Company in the region was causing unfair competition as it had more privileges and advantages over its rivals which had to survive under harsh circumstances. This, according to Tarbell, was morally wrong and was against American ethics of business. Her humanitarian approach would again reveal itself in her *New Ideals in Business*, in which she described the new industrial leader who does not care anything but profit:

We know fairly well what this type (in this case would be John D. Rockefeller) preaches and practices. His concern is with the machinery of business, not with the human beings who operate that machinery. They must look out for themselves. If they contract occupational diseases, it is their lookout. If they are hurt, it is also their lookout. If the hours are long and wages low they are free to leave. If they put in suggestions which help the business but not them that is their bad luck. Briefly his creed is "Humanity has nothing to do with business."⁸⁰

To these moral concerns, religious sensibilities can be added as well. *The History of the Standard Oil Company* was a revelation of the evil at work in human society, Robert Minaldi argues. John D. Rockefeller employed "force and fraud, sly tricks and special privilege to get his way." His activities were only a symptom of a phenomenon that went deeper. Blackmail was becoming a "natural part" of business practice. The result, she found, was not only a "leech" on the public pocket, but the "contamination of commerce." Only the principles of Christian fair play, she argued, could transform business practice and make it a "fit pursuit for our young men."⁸¹

Her personal experience with the company, and her belief in business ethics and religious concerns convinced her that such a study, and a possible change it could bring, were necessary. Her major concern however, was her main profession, history. She was primarily concerned with creating a historical work, and being appreciated as a historian. When asked later why she took on such a project and what

⁸⁰ Ida M. Tarbell, *New Ideals in Business* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1916), 317.

⁸¹ Robert Miraldi, *The Muckrakers: Evangelical Crusaders*. (Wesport: Praeger, 2000), 8.

she was trying to achieve, Tarbell replied and stated that it was not just a personal or moral decision: “We were undertaking what we regarded as a legitimate piece of historical work. We were neither apologists nor critics, only journalists intent on discovering what had gone into the making of this most perfect of all monopolies.”⁸²

While her intention defined her work as a historical study, her research process further established the fact that she was after professional success. Although her involvement in such a hard task worried her family as they thought such an attempt could ruin her literary career as well as *McClure's*, she was confident and began research. It was a long and painful process which lasted five years. During this period she witnessed many challenging moments as well as rewarding ones, which indeed demonstrated how great a researcher Tarbell was and how her work proved to be one of the most successful journalistic works ever written in the history of the United States.

4.2. Learning from Henry Demarest Lloyd

Tarbell was not the first person to study the history of the Standard Oil Company. It was Henry Demarest Lloyd who wrote the sensational book, *Wealth Against Commonwealth* (1874). It was a successful exposé of the illegal actions of railroad and oil monopolies. The work was so important that it is marked by historians as the beginning of investigative journalism in the United States. In order to understand Tarbell's research process and writing her story, a comparison to Lloyd's is helpful. After all, although he was the first person who addressed the issue, and tried to bring solutions to trust problem, Lloyd's work had little impact, while Tarbell's work had outstanding outcomes. In his PhD dissertation titled “The

⁸² Tarbell, *Day's Work*, 206.

Gilded Age Journalist as Advocate: Henry Demarest Lloyd and *Wealth Against Commonwealth*” Richard Digby-Junger explains Lloyd’s success and failures of his exposé. According to Digby-Junger, although Lloyd made extensive use of highly reliable primary sources and he was able to bring together “the most exhaustive collection of legislative, legal and personal documents”, he wrote with a one-sided perspective which failed verification of his sources by Standard Oil’s documents and caused contradictions. Secondly, “he buttressed his book’s assertions with more evidence than was necessary”, which caused “factual overkill that perceptive readers were left wondering why such a practice was necessary”. Furthermore, it has been acknowledged in time that it was “factually incorrect”. Finally, “critics have complained that not once in any of the book’s 535 pages can the name of John D. Rockefeller be found, making it difficult to consider the book as a serious attack on the billionaire. –creating *a roman a clef* as readers pored over each page trying to guess the identities of the various perpetrators”.⁸³

Tarbell, on the other hand, learned from Lloyd’s mistakes and tried to avoid them by solely adhering to facts. Firstly, she made sure that evidence she collected was based on solid ground. As much as she listened to and gathered material from small oil producers and refiners from Pennsylvania, she consulted Standard Oil executives to see if her findings matched their records. Similarly, in contrast to Lloyd, she was able to gather material from “the enemy”. For example, H. H. Rogers, who worked in the administration of Standard Oil for years, provided Tarbell the data she asked for. Another contributor was President Cassatt of Pennsylvania Railroad, who had once signed freight contracts with the Standard Oil Company. As she approached these people, she ensured the fact that she was after facts only, not

⁸³ Richard Digby-Junger, “The Gilded Age Journalist as Advocate: Henry Demarest Lloyd and *Wealth Against Commonwealth*,” Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1989. ProQuest, 271.

baseless accusations and defamation and that is why “whatever be the criticisms which she passed upon the Standard Oil Company and the railroads they had never been laid up against her when she had applied to these companies for facts.”⁸⁴ Another important feature of Tarbell’s history was her treatment of John D. Rockefeller. Contrary to Lloyd, Tarbell used Rockefeller’s name at every possible point. In treating Standard Oil, Tarbell took Emerson’s motto that “an institution is but the lengthened shadow of a man.” This enabled Tarbell to construct her history upon one man and thus focusing on his decisions and actions. It helped readers to follow and identify the real “hero” of the story besides the fact that it made the series more popular.

4.3. Research Process

What made Tarbell’s study unique was her research methods, first of all. Starting from the day when John D. Rockefeller entered the oil business and became one of the richest men in the world, she covered all the steps the company took. And she basically relied on public records to support her arguments. “Almost continuously since its organization in 1870”, she noted, “the Standard Oil Company had been under investigation by the Congress of the United States and by the legislatures of the various states in which it had operated, on the suspicion that it was receiving rebates from the railroads and was practicing methods in restraint of free trade.”⁸⁵ In addition to the Standard Oil court records, there were pamphlets, newspapers and monthly magazine articles criticizing them, as well as number of

⁸⁴ “History of the Standard Oil: How Miss Tarbell Wrote Her Story of Monopoly,” *Bellingham Herald*, January 19, 1904, 7, NewsBank.

⁸⁵ Ellen F. Fitzpatrick, *Muckraking : Three Landmark Articles*. (Boston: Bedford Books of St.Martin’s Press, 1994), 25.

civil suits which had generated more court files. Tarbell also had the notes she had taken earlier when she was planning to write a novel about the oil region.⁸⁶

The use of public records provided Ida Tarbell with the advantage of putting her findings on firm ground and enabled her to support her arguments legally. Most of the legal cases were forgotten or kept away from the public and no one would attempt to search for such lost documents. Her intensive research and elaborate writing brought some little-known practices of the company to light and attracted public attention. Such careful examination of the evidence and publication material was necessary as the lawyers of Standard Oil were watching every published article closely. As Fitzpatrick discussed, “any baseless accusation or wrong data would cause the destruction of *McClure’s Magazine* in a libel suit. In order to avoid such a disaster, Samuel McClure acted cautiously. He hired economists to read portions of Tarbell’s manuscript for accuracy. Every article went through repeated editorial readings, with Tarbell receiving extensive support and criticism from John Phillips, John Siddall, and McClure himself. Their efforts and Tarbell’s elaborate historical research placed the magazine in a strong position. Standard Oil Company avoided taking the case to courts.”⁸⁷

Tarbell’s first success was discovering a pamphlet called *The Rise and Fall of the South Improvement Company*. Compiled in 1873, “it detailed the exposure and dissolution of the company which had colluded with railroads to obtain rebates (refunds of its own shipping costs), drawbacks (payments from competitors’ shipping fees), and illegal information about its rivals’ shipments.” Surprisingly, all copies of this document had mysteriously disappeared. Reportedly, the Standard Oil had purchased and destroyed them all. It seems they forgot one of them as The New York

⁸⁶ Carl Ensen, *Stories That Changed America: Muckrakers of the 20th Century*. (New York : Seven Stories, 2000), 28.

⁸⁷ Fitzpatrick, 25.

Public Library still held a copy. Tarbell found it. The document included a testimony by John Alexander, who was asked by a congressional investigator if he sold his refinery to South Improvement. He replied: “To one of the members, as I suppose, of the South Improvement Company, Mr. Rockefeller; he is a director in that company; it was sold in name to the Standard Oil Company, of Cleveland, but the arrangement was, as I understood it, that they were to put it into the South Improvement Company.” Thus for the first time, Ida could prove that Rockefeller was a linchpin of an illegal ring whose tactics he transferred to the Standard Oil Company.⁸⁸

Another key moment of her research was when Mark Twain, the distinguished novelist and a friend of Tarbell, offered to introduce her to another friend of his whom he thought could help her in her research. Henry Rogers was an old refiner himself who had competed against the South Improvement Company for a long time before he had to join Rockefeller’s empire when he saw that it was the only way to survive. He then became a top executive and when he met Tarbell, he was still in charge. The two had occasional meetings for over two years and discussed rebates and pipelines, independents’ failures, and Standard Oil’s efficiency and productivity. Ironically, the meeting place was the headquarters of the Standard Oil at Broadway, New York. As Tarbell said, during her visit a guard was escorting her to and from the Rogers’s office. The careful monitoring of her movements by the company’s men was a sign of their close examination of her project. After all, this series of interviews proved to be a good contribution to her series as she was able to prove some of her arguments with the evidence confirmed by Rogers.⁸⁹

Tarbell’s research methods did not only include library and court visits. She liked talking to people, average citizens who provided first hand information. That

⁸⁸ Brady, 124.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 127.

provided her a unique advantage as their stories usually covered issues not be found in legal documents. It helped her work involve social history in addition to institutional or economic history. After the series began to run in 1902, Tarbell's courage and skillful writing influenced people and she began to use the public's hatred of trusts to her advantage. They wrote to Tarbell and provided first hand information including legal documents and pictures. Besides the public, which showed its interest in the subject by buying the magazine, the businessmen were also interested in what Tarbell was after. The opponents to Standard Oil, mostly the victims of the conducts of the company who once were pushed out of the market, backed Tarbell's efforts. These included small producers, company executives, although not as powerful as Henry Rogers, and even Rockefeller's brother Frank. They were all willing to provide further evidence to make Tarbell stronger in her advocacy. "One of them, a clerk at one Standard company, passed to an independent refiner damning bookkeeping records that revealed a concerted effort on the part of Standard Oil to destroy the competitor. Much impressed by the quality of Tarbell's essays he was then reading in *McClure's*, the refiner turned over the full set of incriminating documents."⁹⁰

But not everything went smoothly during her research. She had difficulties as well and occasionally she had to struggle hard in order to get what she was after. Some people had doubts about her goals and some thought she was a socialist who aimed to attack the capitalist system by attacking Standard Oil. It was not so. On the contrary, she believed in the goodness and efficiency of the capitalist system and dismissed all these charges by not adhering to any socialist organization or activity. She was a professional historian and always wanted to be seen as one. One of the

⁹⁰ Fitzpatrick, 26.

good examples of that was when she entered a discussion with Henry Demarest Lloyd. Actually, Tarbell appreciated Lloyd's work on trusts and believed it was an important contribution. She consulted the work for finding facts and thoughts. At the same time, she believed it could be improved. However, her visits to Standard Oil executives and her interest in Rockefeller must have annoyed Lloyd because he warned the independents that she had been taken in by Standard Oil. He wrote to key people in the oil regions entreating them to avoid Tarbell. According to Brady, Tarbell, who had collected material about Abraham Lincoln from backwoods strangers, could not understand why she could not convince her old neighbors to help her. "It was a persistent fog of suspicion and doubt and fear. From the start this fog hampered what was my first business, making sure of the documents in the case,"⁹¹ she said. When she finished her research and publication began, however, Lloyd understood that he was wrong in his judgement of her and that Tarbell was only interested in facts. In April, 1903, he wrote to her, and congratulated her.⁹²

4.4. Publication and Reviews

The research and writing lasted more than four years and it cost McClure's approximately fifty thousand dollars. It was worth the money, though, as the series ran for two years and it created high circulation figures. The first part of the series began in the November issue, 1902. The second part, which mostly covered contemporaneous history, ran from December, 1903 to October, 1904. As the publication ended, it was published in the book form with the title *The History of The Standard Oil Company*. Both the series and the book received positive reviews. *The Morning Herald* from Lexington, Kentucky, put emphasis on its importance as an

⁹¹ Brady, 123.

⁹² Peter Lyon, *Success Story: The Life and Times of S. S. McClure*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), 212.

historical study which could bring significant outcomes: “Miss Tarbell’s work is of unequalled importance as a ‘document’ of the day. Her story has live men in it; they suffer and work and win and lose their battles with the verisimilitude that removes the tale from the dry statement and clothes it with the color of human interest and the vivid rainbow garment of human sympathy. The results of her work are likely to be far-reaching; she is writing unfinished history.”⁹³ Commenting on her unexpected success as a woman *The San Jose Mercury News* wrote: “Miss Tarbell’s recent work in portraying the history of the Standard Oil Company has been described as one of the most notable things done by a member of her sex in a generation.”⁹⁴

Standard Oil, on the other hand, at first did not take Tarbell seriously most probably because she was a woman and they thought that damage the study would do to the company would be limited. However, as the publication began and its fame grew, the company became more anxious about the consequences of the series. Although they avoided a suit as Tarbell’s findings were mostly legal documents and hard to argue against, Standard launched a national campaign to discredit the book with negative reviews. They distributed five million copies of an essay extolling the benefits of monopolies, and published a book supporting Rockefeller which was distributed free to librarians, ministers, teachers, and prominent citizens throughout the country. Rockefeller also made a number of well-publicized and substantial contributions to charities in his blatant pursuit to gain public support.⁹⁵ Their efforts to dishearten her were felt by Tarbell. She claimed that some men were following her and probably spying on her. Also some telegrams between Tarbell and her assistant went astray, forcing them to communicate in cipher.

⁹³ “Advertisements,” *Morning Herald*, January 8, 1903, 5, NewsBank.

⁹⁴ “Ida Tarbell’s Career,” *San Jose Mercury News*, July 9, 1904, 8, NewsBank.

⁹⁵ Ensen, 28.

4.5. What She Managed To Reveal

But what worried the Standard Oil executives? What did Tarbell aim to reveal at the end of her research? One of the important subjects Tarbell focused on was that the South Improvement Company had benefited from an alliance with railroad companies to eliminate its rivals. “From the beginning, Rockefeller succeeded in extorting from the railroads a deal that gave him major advantage over his competitors: preferential rebates. Moreover, those same railroads also committed themselves to inform Standard Oil of every move of their competitors, and collaborated in price wars by raising the price of transport for a given area. There was no way producers outside the South Improvement Company could compete with a combination that could ship petroleum more cheaply than any other business in the region. They depended on the railroads to move crude oil out of the oil towns to outlying refineries as well as to carry crude and refined oil to distant shipping points. The South Improvement Company threatened their ability to survive in the petroleum industry.”⁹⁶ Ida Tarbell wrote in the third installment of the series, “The Oil War of 1872”:

It was not until after the middle of February, 1872, that the people of the Oil Regions heard anything of the plan which was being worked out for their "good." Then an uneasy rumour began running up and down the creek. Freight rates were going up. Now an advance in a man's freight bill may ruin his business; more, it may mean the ruin of a region. Rumour said that the new rate meant just this; that is, that it more than covered the margin of profit in any branch of the oil business. The railroads were not going to apply the proposed tariffs to everybody. They had agreed to give to a company unheard of until now-the South Improvement Company-a special rate considerably lower than the new open rate. It was only a rumour and many people discredited it. Why should the railroads ruin the Oil Regions to build up a company of outsiders?⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Fitzpatrick, 27.

⁹⁷ Ida M. Tarbell, *The History of the Standard Oil Company*. (McClure, Phillips and Co., 1904), 70.

Another practice revealed by Tarbell was the manipulation of the price of oil. Standard Oil did not provide cheap oil. In monopoly, prices were kept artificially high. As David Mark Chalmers commented: "The Standard Oil Company, after having made generous allowances for depreciation, paid annual profits of fifty percent of its initial capitalization. The price of the oil was deliberately kept high, and economies effected through size and efficiency were given to the public only under pressure. The statistics showed that consumers had always paid more than they would have paid under a competitive price system."⁹⁸

The manipulation of the price of oil did not only affect the public but also other producers. The price was not necessarily always kept high. In specific areas, the company lowered the prices so that its competitor could not afford to sell oil at such a low price and was forced to go bankrupt or join Standard Oil. As Tarbell put it, this was against competition and highly immoral and as long as price of oil was not brought under control by regulatory measures, the business would witness further exploitations. In "The Crisis of 1878", another article for the series, she wrote about the cunning of Standard Oil and how it managed to damage its competitors by manipulating the price of oil:

One of the greatest construction feats the country has ever seen was put through in the years 1878, 1879 and 1880 in the Bradford oil field by the Standard interests. It was a wonderful illustration of the surpassing intelligence, energy and courage with which the Standard Oil Company attacks its problems. But while it was putting through this feat it instituted a policy toward the producers which was regarded by them as tyrannical and unjustifiable. The first maneuver in this new policy hit the producer in a very tender spot, for it concerned the price he was to receive for oil.⁹⁹

Besides the practices mentioned, the company also used a variety of cutthroat techniques to acquire or destroy competitors and thereby "consolidate" the industry.

⁹⁸ David Mark Chalmers, *The Social and Political Ideas of the Muckrakers* (New Hampshire: Ayer Company, 1964), 47.

⁹⁹ Tarbell, *Standard Oil Company*, 216.

They included: “buying up the components needed to make oil barrels in order to prevent competitors from getting their oil to customers; secretly buying up competitors and then having officials from those companies spy on and give advance warning of deals being planned by other competitors; secretly buying up or creating new oil-related companies, such as pipeline and engineering firms, that appeared be independent operators but which gave Standard Oil hidden rebates; and dispatching thugs who used threats and physical violence to break up the operations of competitors who could not otherwise be persuaded.”¹⁰⁰

Tarbell covered these techniques in detail. There was nothing about the company’s actions she failed to mention. She did it with great certainty, basing her findings on firm evidence. Rockefeller, on the other hand, did not seem to care about this powerful, outspoken woman. He was known to have been quoted only twice about her: “I tell you, Hiram, things have changed since you and I were boys. The world is full of socialists and anarchists. Whenever a man succeeds remarkably in any particular line of business, they jump on him and cry him down.”¹⁰¹ And he told his advisor to avoid mentioning her name: “Not a word. Not a word about this misguided woman.”¹⁰² And what he was accused of never seemed to bother him. He always believed what he did as a businessman was right and every step he took towards success was justified. America was the land of freedom and he took his opportunity and became successful. Thus he was proud:

I ascribe the success of the Standard to its consistent policy to make the volume of its business large through the merits and cheapness of its products. It has spared no expense in finding, securing, and utilizing the best and cheapest methods of manufacture. It has sought for the best superintendents and workmen and paid the best wages. It has not hesitated to sacrifice old machinery and old plants for new and better ones. It has placed its

¹⁰⁰ “The Dismantling of the Standard Oil Trust,” The Linux Information Project, accessed February 12, 2010, <http://www.lininfo.org/standardoil.html>

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Brady, 143.

¹⁰² Ensen, 28.

manufactories at the points where they could supply markets at the least expense. It has not only sought markets for its principal products, but for all possible by- products...It has not hesitated to invest millions of dollars in methods of cheapening the gathering and distribution of oil by pipe lines, special cars, tank steamers and tank wagons. It has erected tank stations at every important railroad station to cheapen the storage and delivery of its products. It has spared no expense in forcing its products into the markets of the world among people civilized and uncivilized. It has had faith in American oil, and has brought together millions of money for the purpose of making it what it is, and holding its markets against the competition of Russia and all the many countries which are...competitors against American oil.¹⁰³

While these actions were indispensable for the growth of a big company, Tarbell attacked some of these methods by her exposé.

4.6. Employing Scientific Method

Although he never took steps towards stopping Tarbell or not take time to criticize her, Rockefeller's supporters did. They were close friends, company executives, and government officials who believed in the decency and the legitimacy of Rockefeller's business actions. They watched Tarbell's study closely and mostly could not help admiring her determination and writing skills. However, there were parts of it which they found incorrect and thus they aimed to reveal the truth as they believed it. According to the defenders of Rockefeller, Tarbell committed numerous errors, and her work must be cited with caution. To begin with, the South Improvement Company was initiated by the railroads, not Rockefeller, who doubted the plan's efficiency. And for all its notoriety, the Southern Improvement Company did not cause the oil crisis of the early 1870s, but was itself a response to the glut that forced almost everybody to operate at a loss. It was also true that, swayed by childhood memories, Tarbell ennobled the Oil Creek drillers, portraying them as exemplars of a superior morality. She overlooked the baldly anticompetitive

¹⁰³ Quoted in Brian Trumbore, "Standard Oil," Freedom Investments, accessed February 12, 2010, http://www.buyandhold.com/bh/en/education/history/2000/standard_oil2.html

agreements proposed by the producers themselves. As Rockefeller pointed out, they happily took rebates whenever they could. The world of the early oil industry was not, as Tarbell implied, a morality play of the evil Standard Oil versus the brave, noble independents of western Pennsylvania. And after all, Standard Oil was such a big organization that Rockefeller alone could not be responsible for all the actions it took.¹⁰⁴

The opposition to Tarbell's work is significant as it raises questions over Tarbell's factuality. As the publication began, she was accused of going after the Standard Oil Company and John D. Rockefeller because of her personal history with them. Her father had gone bankrupt in his struggle against the company, and this conflict affected the Tarbell family's future. Was Tarbell seeking revenge? One company executive called Tarbell "an honest, bitter, talented, prejudiced and disappointed woman who writes from her own point of view. And that view is from the ditch, where her father's wheelbarrow was landed by a Standard Oil tank-wagon."¹⁰⁵ Thus they tried to discredit Tarbell's work and facts. Tarbell, however, was not motivated by sentimental thoughts. While her childhood in Pennsylvania helped her to write about the subject, it did not affect the professional work she was trying to construct. After all, Tarbell was not against the Standard Oil Company or any other institution which employed thousands of people and helped the United States flourish. Her employer, Samuel McClure, who commented on the criticism over Tarbell's focusing on Rockefeller as the target of her study, said: "Mr. Rockefeller was well worth being the central figure- there is no question that he is the Napoleon among business men. Without him there would have been no Standard

¹⁰⁴ Ron Chernow, *Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller, Sr.* (New York : Random House, 1998), 445.

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Donald A. Ritchie, "Ida M. Tarbell: A Journalist, Not an Advocate," *American Journalists: Getting the Story*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 175.

Oil. In the commercial, industrial and financial development of this country he probably played a greater part than any other single man.”¹⁰⁶ Similarly, she stated her personal opinion on Rockefeller and other industrial giants in her autobiography: “If each of these strong men left something sinister behind, each also contributed to higher living standards and hurried on the nationalization of the country.”¹⁰⁷ Thus, she was able to provide a balanced view through her work, detaching herself from “muckraker” journalists, who were generally referred to with a negative connotation.

The term “muckraker” is important as it changed how Tarbell and her historical study were perceived. As the reviews indicated, her contemporaries saw Tarbell’s work as a mere historical work which served a specific purpose by detailing recent social and economic history. However, as Tarbell’s colleagues Baker, Steffens, and Sinclair became more popular with their exposés, they were labeled as one group: muckrakers. The term was coined by the United States President, Theodore Roosevelt. “In Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*”, he said, “you may recall the description of the Man with the Muck-Rake, the man who could look no way but downward, with the muck-rake in his hands; who was offered a celestial crown for his muck-rake, but who would neither look up nor regard the crown he was offered, but continued to rake to himself the filth of the floor.”¹⁰⁸ After the term emerged, Tarbell’s study began to be read and interpreted in this genre. Rather than its historic value, its potential to bring social and economic justice and possibly a political impact began to be discussed. As she indicated her historical intention of such a study, Tarbell was uncomfortable with the term and insisted that her work was a historical work, not a political one. In her autobiography, she stated that “I had hoped

¹⁰⁶ S. S. McClure, *My Autobiography*, (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1914), 239.

¹⁰⁷ Tarbell, *Day’s Work*, 401.

¹⁰⁸ Theodore Roosevelt, “The Man with the Muck-Rake,” *American Rhetoric*, Top 100 Speeches, accessed August 30, 2010, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/teddyrooseveltmuckrake.htm>

that the book might be received as a legitimate historical study, but to my chagrin I found myself included in a new school, that of the muckrakers.”¹⁰⁹

In the end, Rockefeller’s silent response and the opposition to Tarbell’s work did not prove to be effective in diverting the government initiative to stop the hegemony of trusts on the American economy. Tarbell’s historical work made the trust problem more apparent and encouraged authorities to take action. In 1906 Congress passed the Hepburn Act¹¹⁰ and brought an end to oil company rebates. Another immediate result of Tarbell’s work was the formation of the Bureau of Corporations, which would conduct an investigation of the petroleum industry. In 1906, the Bureau reported that Standard Oil was getting preferential treatment from railroads and had been for some time. In the suit that followed, Standard Oil was found guilty and fined twenty-nine million dollars. Taking office in 1909, after Theodore Roosevelt had already begun antitrust cases, President Taft continued to enforce the Sherman Antitrust Act. He launched 75 suits in four years and on May 15, 1911 the Court ruled against Standard Oil by an 8 to 1 vote. The Supreme Court upheld the Missouri decision to dissolve Standard into some 37 subsidiary companies.¹¹¹ Today some of them are operating as Exxon, Mobil, Boron, Chevron, and Amoco.

The might of Tarbell’s pen had been proven. What began as a couple of articles turned out to be one of the most important documents in the American

¹⁰⁹ Tarbell, *Day’s Work*, 241.

¹¹⁰ Congress passed the Hepburn Act to clarify and increase the authority of the Interstate Commerce Commission over railroads and certain other types of carriers. It authorized the commission to determine and prescribe just and reasonable maximum rates, establish through routes, and prescribe and enforce uniform systems of accounts. The law also strengthened the Elkins Act of 1903, dealing with personal discrimination; forbade railroads from transporting, except for their own use, many commodities in which they were financially interested; restricted the granting of free passes; and increased the number of commissioners from five to seven. The commission’s orders were made binding without court action, thus requiring carriers to assume the burden of initiating litigation that tested the validity of the orders. In “Hepburn Act,” *Dictionary of American History*, accessed September 5, 2010, http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Hepburn_Act_of_1906.aspx

¹¹¹ Trumbore, 1.

history. *The History of the Standard Oil Company* became a landmark book which set an example for investigative journalism and social and economic history. Future writers would admire her and be inspired by Tarbell's determinism and courage. For some, Tarbell's work had more far-reaching effects than imagined. From then on individuals in business became more resistant to big companies' attempts to eliminate them. Americans became more sensible to the potential manipulations in economics and politics, thus raised their voices against abuses. Tarbell became a figure that would inspire the nation-friendly policies followed by the Taft Administration and the terms following it. She continued her career in journalism, investigating distinguished personalities and their life stories. She avoided getting involved into political or social movements as she wanted to be recalled as a professional historian only. She continued to invest in her profession and create more history. Rockefeller, on the other hand, did not lose his wealth, and ironically became even richer. However, he lost his reputation of the respectable and the noblest man in the United States. It is perhaps for that reason he dedicated rest of his life to charity. He had given away over a \$500 million by the time of his death in 1937.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

"This classification of muckraker, which I did not like. All the radical element, and I numbered many friends among them, were begging me to join their movements. I soon found that most of them wanted attacks. They had little interest in balanced findings. Now I was convinced that in the long run the public they were trying to stir would weary of vituperation, that if you were to secure permanent results the mind must be convinced."

Ida Tarbell in All in the Day's Work

As Standard Oil was driven into a transformation after her study, Tarbell became a famous figure nationwide. Her biographies on Madame Roland, Napoleon had introduced her to the American literary world, and her biography on Lincoln and study on Standard Oil established her reputation as one of the most influential historians in the United States. What made her success even more remarkable was the fact that she was a woman and no other of her sex managed to receive so much professional praise. After the Standard Oil sensation, however, Tarbell sought a new career. She left *McClure's Magazine* and launched her own magazine project, *The American Magazine*. Her interest in national issues became more apparent, and she began to invest in that direction. She wrote on issues like the economic policies of the government, workers' rights, and the tariff. She gave speeches in universities and made statements about the current state of the nation. On the other hand, she refused to get involved in any political movement or party.

Her refusal to get involved in political affairs had significance as it demonstrated her attachment to her main profession, history. She continued to conduct research on topics that interested her. She did more work on Lincoln and helped those who also studied the President's life. She revisited the issue of trusts and Standard Oil and wanted to improve its historical development by revealing more documents. She used her historian's skills to address other issues as well. For example, she used an historical approach to make her point on the tariff issue. Similarly, she contributed to women's history in the United States by advising those who studied on the topic to trace women's place in world history. Overall, the later phase of Tarbell's career is representative of her historian character and can reveal more about the way she viewed history and contributed to history writing in the United States in the 20th century. This chapter will cover the rest of her career and argue that while the early biographies and the history of the Standard Oil Company helped establish her as a significant woman historian, her later work further established the fact that Tarbell as a historian contributed to the social and economic history writing in the United States. It will also look at Tarbell's reputation among later historians and comment on her legacy as an historian.

The Lincoln study did not just provide Tarbell with fame and *McClure's Magazine* with high circulation. It also helped Tarbell break away from European history and become more involved in American national issues. As she travelled to old frontier regions and got to know more about American people and their concerns, she felt a necessity to direct her attention to American history. Her *Life of Lincoln* proved a noteworthy contribution to literature on the life of Lincoln and the Civil War Era. Considering her job as a journalist one might expect Tarbell to quit her interest in Lincoln and focus more on other popular topics. She was however, more

than a journalist. She was a historian and that is why she continued her study on Lincoln in hope of delivering more knowledge about him. She continued to contribute to Lincoln literature till the end of her life. Tarbell's Lincoln study provided her with much material, and she was not content with what she was able to put into that single study. She believed there was more need to write about Lincoln as his life could provide an example to the American nation. That is why she devoted a vast amount of time for more Lincoln works. She published several more books. *In Lincoln's Chair* (1920) was a collection about his religious views. *He Knew Lincoln and Other Billy Brown Stories* (1924) revisited Lincoln's past in frontier regions and presented anecdotes by a storekeeper Billy Brown. According to Judith A. Rice, "The Billy Brown stories served as popular vehicles to illustrate Lincoln's wisdom, humanity, and intelligence. They especially played on the link between Lincoln and the common man. In the books, both Lincoln and Billy Brown spoke in the unpolished manner of the western pioneer."¹¹² In the *Footsteps of Lincoln* (1924) she discovered Lincoln's family roots. This book, according to Mary E. Tomkins, "emphasizes Tarbell's strong points as a writer- her feeling for a place, for personalities, her easy anecdotal style. The reviewers, who were generally favorable, stressed the book's merit as the first connected history of the Lincoln family, its placement of Lincoln in the mainstream of American experience, and its removal of him from the stagnant backwater of a wilderness novel."¹¹³ *A Reporter for Lincoln* (1927) was an account of a young soldier reporter, Henry Wing, on duty during Lincoln's presidency. Altogether they improved knowledge on Lincoln's life, making it more understandable and opened a new path for future historians to analyze and interpret.

¹¹² Rice, 26.

¹¹³ Tomkins, 53.

Tarbell's contribution to the Lincoln literature was also thanks to her support of researchers and authors who studied Lincoln. Contrary to Nicolay and Hay, who did not help Tarbell in her research, she always favored new approaches, fresh looks at Lincoln's life. The best example of this was Carl Sandburg, the distinguished Lincoln biographer. He wrote two influential Lincoln biographies, *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years* (1926) and *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years* (1939), the latter winning a Pulitzer Prize. Thanks to these works, he is regarded as one of the most influential authorities on Lincoln today. And his reputation partly owes to Tarbell whose *Life of Lincoln* and other biographical studies that inspired Sandburg. He took Tarbell as an example and her help proved beneficial for his study. She corresponded with Sandburg during his research process and answered questions, traced documents for him, and sent necessary material for Sandburg to use. In the end, Sandburg was grateful. Before its publication, he sent Tarbell proofs of *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years* and said: "Yourself and Oliver R. Barrett (the great Lincoln collector of Chicago) are the only persons receiving advance sheets, as you are the two who have helped me most". Similarly, when the second book, *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*, was published, he sent her a copy and wrote: "not merely with my compliments, but with respect and affection- and something like reverence for a wisdom and integrity that have lasted so well across the years."¹¹⁴ There was much of Tarbell's influence in Sandburg's work. Benjamin P. Thomas attracted attention to the impact Tarbell had on Sandburg's representation of Lincoln by saying: "If one reads Miss Tarbell's books and then reads Sandburg, he will sense a similarity of feeling. There is much of Ida Tarbell in Sandburg's product, not always readily

¹¹⁴ Thomas, 19.

recognizable, perhaps, but filtered out to us through the mind of one who excels in the poet's talent to translate what he feels within him.”¹¹⁵

Tarbell's contribution to Lincoln studies was not limited to publications only. Tarbell collected and analyzed Lincoln material, arranged them. She later shared them with others, and helped Lincoln students. It began with her first assignment. During her research for her Lincoln biography, *Life of Lincoln*, *McClure's Magazine* turned one of its offices into a Lincoln bureau. There was collected invaluable material which would later provide researchers a huge ammount of documents and sources . Following the book's publication, the founders of the *McClure's Magazine* undertook to assist Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, to establish The Abraham Lincoln School of Science and Practical Arts as a memorial to the great statesman. Later on, Tarbell continued to collect material and assist others. During all her studies, she had travelled to many places, traced documents concerning Lincoln's life, and that is why she had numerous documents, and books in her collection. She did a great favor on her eightieth birtday and gave all the material to Allegheny College and helped build the Lincoln Room which contained her collection of books and mementos of Lincoln.

Tarbell's contribution to Lincoln studies has always been acknowlegded by historians and her legacy has been a significant asset. After all, she was the first person to have been able to break from romantic depictions of Lincoln and provide an unbiased, fact-based story. Despite its few flaws, it opened a new path for future historians in terms of richness of material and fresh interpretation. Benjamin P. Thomas commented on Tarbell's legacy as a Lincoln historian and said:

The ideal of scholarship is absolute impartiality, but too often scholars have their own peculiar hobbies to ride. The search for truth is too often hindered

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 20.

by unwillingness to confess mistakes, or give up preconceived ideas, and this has been especially true of Lincoln students. But it was surely not the case with Ida Tarbell. She recognized that setting out to prove certain things, instead of drawing conclusions from the facts, was dangerous in any investigation. She was the first person to bring to the study of Lincoln an open mind.¹¹⁶

However, Tarbell lacked the “coldness” of academic scholarship and thus remained aloof from that environment. She was more interested in “intimate” and “humanly” depictions. Her writing style was also that of a person who spoke frankly and sincerely. That is probably because she wrote for a magazine that had to address to masses rather than a few intellectual people, but it was nothing that would diminish historical value of her writings. On the contrary, as John Arnold described, historians were a storyteller and like Tarbell they had to make it available to a wider audience. This made Tarbell’s work more ‘popular’ rather than ‘academic’. Thomas also comments on that:

Do not be disturbed or disappointed if the tough realists of the future detract from Ida Tarbell’s stature as a Lincoln scholar. Her place in the Lincoln story will not be that of a great scholar. She will be known rather as a wise and wholesome influence. Her impress on our Lincoln portrait is ineffaceable. Yet, her writings, however influential, may prove to be by no means her greatest glory. Her Lincoln legacy to Allegheny College, exerting a calm, sure, subtle influence through coming years, may turn out to be our richest heritage.¹¹⁷

Tarbell’s identity as a historian does not owe to her Lincoln studies, only. The Standard Oil Company history was a work that made her reputation grow. It did not just bring revolutionary outcomes like regulation of trusts by the government, but it helped future scholars and authors who studied the same subject. Its impact on the era was huge and the time that followed was no different. When John D. Rockefeller announced his plan for a biography, *The State* wrote: “John D. has undertaken to

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 16-17.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 23.

write his biography only to add a few things that Ida Tarbell overlooked, we suppose.”¹¹⁸ What is more, she never lost interest in the history of oil. Like in Lincoln studies, she encouraged similar works and supported those who sought help from her. In 1938, at the age of 81, for example, she wrote an introduction for Paul H. Giddens’ book, *The Birth of the Oil Industry*. According to Ernest C. Miller, “her introduction, which covered thirty-nine pages, was found to be so clear and comprehensive that except for minor details it is unnecessary to read the rest of the book.”¹¹⁹

Tarbell’s history became an example to follow for future historians. In 1955, a new book on Standard Oil, *Pioneering in Big Business*, was published. It was written by Ralph and Muriel Hidy for the Business History Foundation. With new documents available to them, and with a thorough research, it proved to be more accurate story of Standard Oil than before. The authors however, admitted that Tarbell was a pioneer in the subject and influenced their study to great extent: “As a matter of fact, considering the circumstances, Miss Tarbell merits a good measure of praise. She put together, for the first time, a readable, coherent exposition of the main lines of development of the Standard Oil combination and of the leading controversies connected with its history.” Similarly when Anthony Sampson published *The Seven Sisters: The Great Oil Companies and the World They Shaped* in 1975, *The Nation* announced the book as “the modern sequel to Tarbell’s book”.¹²⁰ *The History of the Standard Oil Company* still holds its place among one of the most

¹¹⁸ “The State’s Survey,” *State*, September 4, 4, NewsBank.

¹¹⁹ Frank M. Surface “Ida Tarbell and Her Proposed Volume III of The History of the Standard Oil.” A seven-page mimeographed report. July 2C, 1955, p. 6., quoted in Ernest C. Miller, eds. “A Second Look at the Standard Oil Company,” *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 39, no.4 (1956): 225.

¹²⁰ “Ida Tarbell’s John D. Rockefeller, How They Kept the Trust,” *Nation*, 1977, 564, NewsBank.

successful historical studies in the United States. It was listed as No. 5 in a 1999 list by *the New York Times* of the top 100 works of 20th-century American journalism¹²¹

By the time of her death, Tarbell had become an expert on Standard Oil and the life of John D. Rockefeller. Historians have attributed much importance to Tarbell's works on the topic because they illustrated a very critical phase of American History. The history of Standard and the story of Rockefeller were representative of changing American system after the Civil War. Rockefeller's company became a symbol for American individualism, entrepreneurship, and free market economy. His success as a businessman inspired many others to initiate similar projects. Andrew Carnegie and Henry Ford became similar icons. Their life stories were contributing to what is called "the American Dream". Tarbell's work stands in a very important spot considering the importance of the topic she covered. She illustrated through her study that nobody, not even Rockefeller, had the right to manipulate laws, and kill competition, thus reminding American nation of the values that had been long forgotten. It made American public face its economic system's faults.

Tarbell's legacy manifests itself in the public memory with its revolutionary impact and historians did not ignore the book's importance for the United States. Miller said: "The book probably has been more widely purchased and its contents more widely disseminated throughout the general public than any other single work on American economic and business history."¹²² Tarbell's work however, mainly thanks to social and economic transformation it pioneered, was taken as a journalistic

¹²¹ "Journalism's Greatest Hits: Two Lists of a Century's Top Stories," *New York Times*, March 1, 1999, accessed September 5, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/03/01/business/media-journalism-s-greatest-hits-two-lists-of-a-century-s-top-stories.html>

¹²² Miller, 228.

effort rather than historical. As Tarbell stated, her intention was historical, and did not aim any political outcome. While many history books categorized her as one of the muckrakers of the Progressive Era, there were some who gave her the right credit. Like Lillian P. Trubey, in his dissertation titled “The Public Speaking Career of Ida M. Tarbell” who stated that:

The tragedy of Miss Tarbell’s life, if that busy, productive life may be said to be tragic, is that she is remembered in history primarily as a muckraker. She did write one of the first books to be put into that category, but it was a factual, historical effort. She did not tell anything but the truth and did not demand changes that would affect the basic organization of the Standard Oil Company. This book, nevertheless, is often put into the same class as fictional accounts of malpractices in industry and the extreme attacks of later writers.¹²³

Judging by her *Life of Lincoln*, one could argue that Tarbell was a biographer who popularized the President and helped *McClure’s* sell magazine. *The History of the Standard Oil Company* could be seen as an attempt to bring a popular issue to daylight and again promote magazine sales. However, Tarbell’s history writing was not limited to these two works. She used history all throughout her life. In all topics she studied and portrayed her thoughts about, she employed history. Another example is her book that was published in 1911, *The Tariff in Our Times*. It was a reflection of Tarbell’s growing interest in economic policies of the government. In this study, she wanted to attract attention to tariff issue and how significant it was for the development of the American economy as well as the living standards of the American people. Not surprisingly, as a method of her composition, Tarbell studied historical development of the tariffs in the United States. She wanted to show what had been done with the tariff since the Civil War, why it had been done and what results had been. She traced every tariff, from the Morrill bill of 1860 to the Payne-

¹²³ Lillian P. Trubey, “The Public Speaking Career of Ida M. Tarbell,” PhD diss., The Florida State University, 1972, 161-162.

Aldrich bill of 1900 from their beginnings. She analyzed the popular and political point of view, the campaigning, the Congressional debates, and the lobbying- all of the various forces which were brought to bear on a tariff bill. *The Dallas Morning News* reviewed the book and commented by praising its style and content:

Miss Tarbell begins with a study of war tariffs, interesting for the light it throws upon the development of the modern situation. She then takes up the story of the development of the tariff from a business standpoint. A chapter is given to the bill of 1883, another to Grover Cleveland and the tariff. In succession she discusses the Mills and Allison bills, the McKinley bills, the Wilson bills, the Dingley bill and the bill of 1909. There are two chapters in particular which it would be profitable for every voter; and for every potential voter now denied the vote, to read. The first is entitled 'Where Every Penny Counts'- an illuminating discussion of the margin of wages over expenditure and of the effect of advancing prices upon the cost of living. The second is the chapter, 'Some Intellectual and Moral Aspects of Our Tariffmaking'- an extremely suggestive review of some of the effects of protection upon the manufacturer and ultimately upon the worker.¹²⁴

In this study, Tarbell achieved a very important task for a historian. Similar to *The History of the Standard Oil Company*, she took a contemporary issue and explained it with reference to past. By looking at history of tariff, she made the tariff regulations of 1900s more understandable. Her language was simple, and her facts were representative themselves. That is why as a result, she was regarded as an authority on the tariff issue. Her work was so well-documented that it impressed President Wilson. He sought her advice and offered her a job in the Federal Tariff Commission in 1916, which she refused.

Similarly, Tarbell employed her historical skills for other projects. She wrote another biography on one of the influential businessman of the era, Elbert H. Gray. Although it was regarded as one of the weaker studies by Tarbell –probably because she had to accept the project as she needed money- it was another good piece of

¹²⁴“ Ida M. Tarbell’s New Book on the Tariff,” *Dallas Morning News*, December 25, 1911, 3, NewsBank.

biographical writing. Her last industrial book, *The Nationalization of Business: 1878-1898*, was included as a volume in *A History of American Life*, edited by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Dixon Ryan Fox and Carl Becker in 1936. The editors wrote “it may be fairly said that no other book on the subject offers so clear a picture of the sweep of American economic development”. *Review of Reviews* called it “this excellent study” and added “Miss Tarbell has always been both a careful historian and a first-rate journalist, and these qualities are outstanding in the present book.”¹²⁵ In 1943, she also served as a consulting editor to an Arizona literary magazine, *Letters*. From these series, she planned a book on how to write biographies, but could not finish it.

Despite her fame and active role as a woman historian, she did not want to get involved in the suffrage movement. When asked, she emphasized that she did not consider herself a suffragist, and also stated that she was interested in what she did best: historical and journalistic work. She believed society needed women for their excellence at being a mother, and taking care of the family. She received much criticism for her opinions on that subject. This did not stop her however, from making statements on the role of women and their rights in society. As Lillian P. Trubey discussed in his study of Tarbell’s speaking career, “whenever Tarbell talked about the place of women in the world, she usually refuted the charge that women were downtrodden. Always she used an explanation based on her discoveries about the place of women in the civilization of the past.” She believed it was so because there was a lack of historical perspective towards the subject:

My first point then in this discussion is that the important thing for all women is to be considering their duty as citizens. Now, I know that many women will come out and say at the start that we are not citizens, that we have no rights in public life. That, as a matter of fact, we are a downtrodden unrecognized

¹²⁵ “The Nationalizing of Business,” review of *The Nationalizing of Business: 1878-1898* by Ida M. Tarbell, *Review of Reviews*, Dec. 1936, p. 13, quoted in Lillian P. Trubey, “The Public Speaking Career of Ida M. Tarbell,” 22.

element in society. Such talk is essentially shallow. It has no whole historical perspective at all.¹²⁶

And to support this argument, she referred to history again by saying:

Now all these ideas have been adopted by our present civilization as parts of a woman's civic duty. Society demands of a woman today that she be a mother; she must look after the family; she must look after the sick, the poor, the needy. She must be the moral force, she must be the social force, that England, France and Germany made her in the 17th and 18th centuries.¹²⁷

The Suffrage movement was another hot topic of the late 19th and the early 20th century. And although she did not share same opinions with suffragists, when she was asked to make her point, she called history to her rescue. She referred to women's role in past, she emphasized historical development of it, and made a contemporary interpretation, a typical characteristic of the historian Tarbell.

All throughout her life, Tarbell became interested in various topics, and worked for different places. Generally, she wrote for magazines. She did all that however, thanks to her education and skills in history writing. In all topics she covered Tarbell employed a historical approach. When she went to Europe, where she developed a sense for history writing, she became interested in important personalities' lives and she wrote biographies on Madame Roland and Napoleon Bonaparte. When she returned and began her journalistic career in the United States, she became interested in women's history. Thanks to her research skills, she was recruited by one of the most popular magazines of the era, *McClure's*. There she was asked to study an important and daring subject, Abraham Lincoln and it proved to be one of the best biographies written on the President. Another project, *The History of the Standard Oil Company*, proved even more remarkable as it led to the dissolution of the company. This enormous impact casted a shadow on Tarbell's identity as an historian and included her in the genre of exposé or muckraking. While she did not

¹²⁶ Trubey, 198.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 200.

want that title, she began to demonstrate her real profession, history. She wrote more books on the topics she already studied and brought more hidden material to day light and enabled fresh interpretations appear. She personally helped and inspired one of the best Lincoln biographers of all times, Carl Sandburg, who immediately extended his regards to her. When she intended to write or comment on other topics such as tariff and women's suffrage, she used her historian skills to make her point. She demonstrated that a journalist could also be a good historian and use history as a way to address problems and issues on the agenda. The research techniques she employed, her attention to detail and attachment to facts, her simple yet effective writing style made her history unique. She contributed to the existing literature by building on what was published on the subjects she studied. What is more, she opened a new path for subsequent historians who took on similar subjects. And for all these reasons, Tarbell remains more important as of an historian than a journalist and needs to be taken as such.

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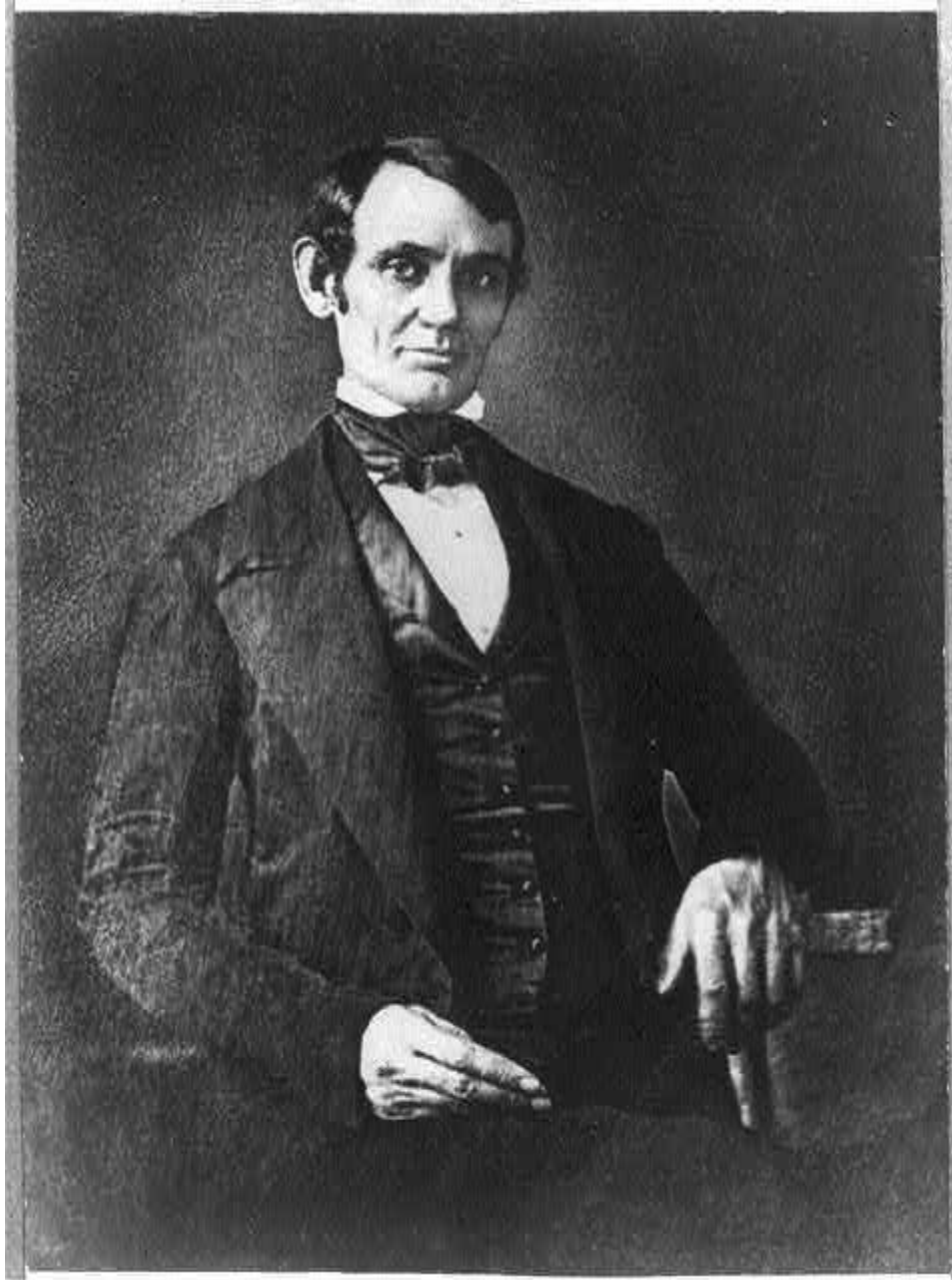
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APPENDIX. Illustrations Related to Chapter 3



Abraham Lincoln, Congressman-elect from Illinois.

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