

Muckrakers of the Progressive Era

Muckrakers were journalists and novelists of the Progressive Era who sought to expose corruption in big business and government. Their work influenced the passage of key legislation that strengthened protections for workers and consumers.

The term “muckraker” was popularized in 1906, when Theodore Roosevelt delivered a speech suggesting that “the men with the muck rakes are often indispensable to the wellbeing of society; but only if they know when to stop raking the muck...” In this context, “raking the muck” refers to the practices of investigative journalists and activists who brought the unpleasant “muck” of corruption in government and big business to the surface.

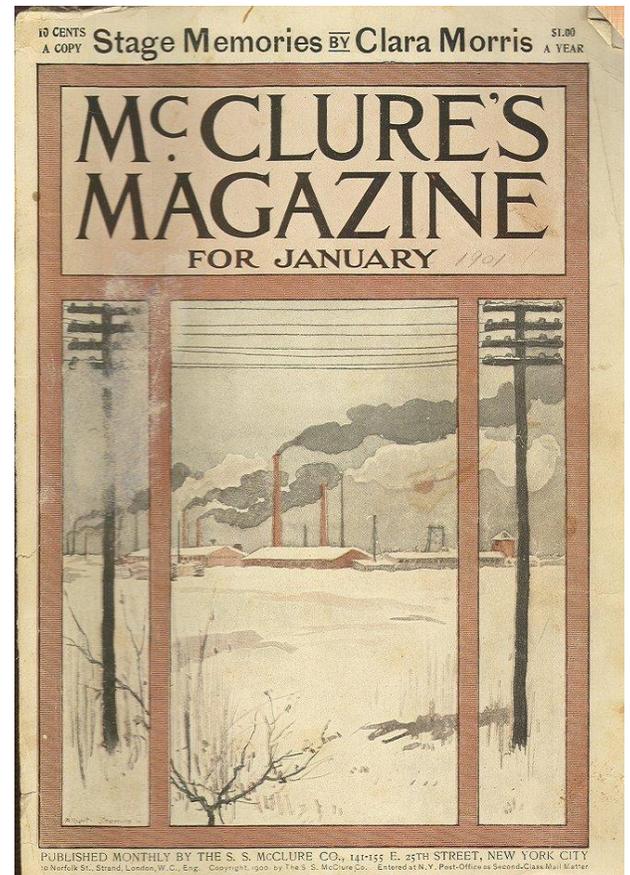
Some of the most famous Progressive muckrakers were women. Journalist Ida Tarbell published a series of articles in McClure’s Magazine in 1902 that depicted Standard Oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller as a greedy, miserly monopolist. These articles became the foundation for her book, *The History of the Standard Oil Company*, which quickly became a bestseller and established Tarbell as an early pioneer of investigative journalism.

Ida B. Wells, an African American journalist and suffragist, was another influential female muckraker. She was born into slavery in Mississippi in 1862, and in the 1890s became involved in anti-lynching activism. In 1892, she published *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all its Phases*, which detailed the systematic disenfranchisement of Southern blacks and even some poor whites. Wells was very influential in the early movement for civil rights, and was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909.

Other muckraking writers included Lincoln Steffens, Upton Sinclair, and Frank Norris. Steffens documented corruption in city government in his book, *The Shame of the Cities*. Upton Sinclair investigated and exposed horrid conditions at meatpacking plant in his book, *The Jungle*. This helped lead to the passage of the Meat Inspection Act and Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906. Norris wrote *The Octopus* in 1901, a fictional book that still exposed railroads as monopolies taking advantage of people in California. Soon after, railroad monopolies in northwest were broken up after the ruling in *Northern Securities v. US* (1904).

Not all muckrakers were writers, however. Thomas Nast is known as the “Father of the American Cartoon,” having created satirical art during the 19th century that critiqued slavery and crime. Nast was born in Germany in 1840 but his family moved to New York City when he was 6. Nast did poorly in school, preferring drawing to schoolwork. He landed his first illustration job when he was just 15 and later joined the staff of *Harper’s Weekly*. While there, he led a crusade against corruption and helped bring down Boss Tweed and the corrupt Tammany Hall political machine.

Muckrakers also sought to raise awareness of poverty and other social ills associated with industrialization. Jacob Riis, a Danish immigrant and photojournalist, published a photo essay called *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* in 1890. The photos documented the harsh living conditions of recent immigrants in New York City and inspired reforms such as the New York Tenement House Act of 1901, which required tenement housing to be cleaner, safer, and more spacious.



Progressive Era Muckrakers

Directions: Use the information in the chart to answer the questions that follow.

Muckraker	Work(s)	Subject(s)	Results
Thomas Nast 	Political cartoons	Political corruption; Tweed's Tammany Hall Ring political machine	Tweed was convicted of embezzlement and died in prison
Jacob Riis 	<u>How the Other Half Lives</u> (1890)	Living conditions of urban poor; focused on exposing horrific conditions in tenements	NYC passed building codes to promote health and safety; Tenement Act of 1901
Ida B. Wells 	<i>A Red Record</i> (1895)	Provided statistics on the lynchings of African Americans	NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) helped pass anti-lynching legislation
Frank Norris 	<u>The Octopus</u> (1901)	Fictional book that exposed railroads in California as monopolies taking advantage of people	Railroad monopolies in northwest were broken up after the ruling in <i>Northern Securities v. US</i> (1904).
Ida Tarbell 	"History of Standard Oil Company" in <i>McClure's Magazine</i>	Exposes the ruthless tactics of Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company through series of published articles	In court case <i>Standard Oil v. US</i> (1911), the company was declared a monopoly and broken up
Lincoln Steffens 	<u>The Shame of the Cities</u> (1904)	Examined political corruption in cities across the United States	Cities began to use commissions and city managers
Upton Sinclair 	<u>The Jungle</u> 1906	Investigated and exposed horrid conditions at meatpacking plant	Meat Inspection Act and Pure Food and Drug Act passed in 1906



Name: _____

Progressive Era Muckrakers

1. Whose corruption did the cartoons of Thomas Nast expose?
2. What was the name of Jacob Riis' book?
3. What effect did Riis' book have on society?
4. What did Ida B. Wells write about?
5. Who wrote The Octopus? What was it about?
6. Who did Ida Tarbell write about?
7. What effect did Tarbell's work have on society?
8. What was The Jungle about?
9. What do you think the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act do?
10. What issues are reporters presently working to expose and reform?

Name: _____ **Answer Key**

Progressive Era Muckrakers

1. Whose corruption did the cartoons of Thomas Nast expose?

Nast exposed the political corruption of the Tammany Hall political machine in New York City.

2. What was the name of Jacob Riis' book and what do you think it is referring to?

Riis' book, How the Other Half Lives, is about the very poor who lived in horrible conditions in cities like New York, Boston, and Chicago. Many wealthy and middle class Americans had no idea people were living in conditions like this.

3. What effect did Riis' book have on society?

Riis' book helped pass building codes in New York City to promote health and safety like the Tenement Act of 1901.

4. What did Ida B. Wells write about?

Ida Wells wrote about the lynchings that took place across the United States during the Jim Crow era of segregation and how African-Americans were not receiving justice.

5. Who wrote The Octopus? What was it about?

Frank Norris wrote the Octopus about how the railroad companies were powerful monopolies that took advantage of people.

6. Who did Ida Tarbell write about?

Ida Tarbell wrote a series of articles about the Standard Oil Company that exposed the ruthless tactics that Rockefeller used to eliminate his competition.

7. What effect did Tarbell's work have on society?

Tarbell's book helped get the US courts to declare Standard Oil a monopoly under the Sherman Anti-Trust Act and it was eventually broken up.

8. What was The Jungle about?

The Jungle was Upton Sinclair's book on the meatpacking industry and how horrific the conditions there were and how the food Americans were eating was unsafe.

9. What do you think the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act do?

These two laws ensure that the food Americans are eating is safe and that meatpacking and food processing facilities are obeying the law and keeping food clean.

10. What issues are reporters presently working to expose and reform?

Open to many possible student opinions.



Name _____

Progressive Era Muckrakers

Directions: Research each muckraker to complete the table.

Muckraker	Work(s)	Subject(s)	Results
 Thomas Nast			
Jacob Riis 			
Ida B. Wells 			
Frank Norris 			
Ida Tarbell 			
Lincoln Steffens 			
Upton Sinclair 			

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THIS IS TRULY INSPIRED!!! This changed the way my students thought of and interacted with their community, and it changed the way I thought of myself as their teacher.
One of my students even ended up on the news for raising over \$500 for the local homeless shelter because of this assignment! What a great way to teach citizenship! Not to mention, this package is so complete and detailed.

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