

THE PROGRESSIVISM OF THE MUCKRAKERS: A MYTH RE- EXAMINED THROUGH FICTION

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American political thought in the early years of the twentieth century was dominated by the Progressive movement. As liberal thinkers surveyed the contemporary scene, they observed that local, state, and federal governments had fallen largely under the domination of the privileged few. Railroads, banks, manufacturing concerns, or other corporate interests were directing the play of political life in the capitols of the nation. The subsequent Progressive revolt against such government by privilege, a revolt grown out of long protests in the nineteenth century, is well known and has been amply recorded.

What has not been so carefully observed is the dual nature of this Progressivism--the split in its political program and personality that occurred about 1908. Two distinct phases of Progressivism come to view when one examines the years of protest from 1900 to the First World War. The first phase was surfeited with moral fervor, with pragmatic faith, with an abundance of the urge to expose; it was not, however, very new in its democratic concepts and it was not, accurately speaking, progressive. The second phase of Progressivism--that which began to take shape around 1908 and came to a conclusion at the end of Woodrow Wilson's first administration--more properly deserves its name. It looked forward to the formulation of new social and economic doctrines for a nation too long enmeshed in older political theories. It had a dynamic philosophy; it had superior intellectual spokesmen. Earlier Progressivism, however, did not.

Early Progressivism is probably best exemplified in the muckrakers. It has been almost axiomatic to treat these journalistically-oriented reformers as true progressives. Too often they have been painted as crusading democrats marching forth under the banners of liberalism to propose unique solutions for the economic and political ills of their day. Yet an examination of muckraking literature--particularly a scrutiny of their fiction--does much to reveal the true nature of their protests and solutions. The muckrakers, when they had solutions, like the other early Progressives whom they joined, sought to meet the challenge wrought by science and evolution at the turn of the century by a return to the old values of Jeffersonian America. On closer examination one can see that the group proposed nothing radical, nothing even progressive; actually, they were seeking old solutions in their celebrated new tenets of democracy.

The real focus of the muckrakers was foreshadowed in their backgrounds. For the most part, they were young men. Practically all came from or lived in the city by 1900--most of them in cities in the Northeast. Their political proclivities in the nineties had been conservative. After 1910, many of them again became conservative. They were recruited from the professional classes of journalism or business; most were college graduates; economically, they were of the middle class; a few could be called wealthy. They were highly respectable people--city-class reformers whom essentially conservative people could endure.

The motivations of the muckrakers were almost altogether moral. They were fervent in their support of individual initiative, their pride of self-accomplishment, and their reflection of Puritan righteousness. They clung to the myths of a former day when individual opportunity had not been curtailed, when city centers of poverty had not existed, and, above all, when crime and corruption had not besmirched the political landscape.

Manifestations of the essential conservatism of the muckrakers might be cited in their racism, their distrust of labor unions, and the imperialistic type of foreign policy some of them espoused.¹ But nowhere was their idealistic position more evident than in their simple cure--all for the boss rule and business concentration they attacked. Simply return government to the people where it originally resided, arouse the public to the graft and corruption in high places, and the people would vote the rascals out of office. The cure for democracy was more democracy, their articles usually pontificated. Obviously, the new Progressivism advocated here was neither new nor accurately progressive. Alfred Kazin has written of the muckraker's apotheosis: "Always the same, a vision of small, quiet lives humbly and usefully led; a transcription of Jeffersonian small village ideals for a generation bound to megalopolis, yet persistently nostalgic for the old-fashioned peace and the old-fashioned ideal."² And Richard Hofstadter has reminded us that "the muckrakers were themselves moderate men who intended to propose no radical remedies. From the beginning, they were limited by the disparity between the boldness of their means and the tameness of their ends. They were working at a time of widespread prosperity, and their chief appeal was not to desperate social needs but to mass sentiments of responsibility, indignation, and guilt. Hardly anyone intended that these sentiments should result in action drastic enough to transform American society."³ As Ray Stannard Baker put it, "We were far more eager to understand and make sure than to dream of utopias."⁴

Except for the few socialists in their midst (men like Gustavus Myers and Upton Sinclair), the muckrakers, then, were suggesting nothing really new. They were advocating a return to the older days of Jeffersonian government. The ways of the Founding Fathers should be an example; restore morality, honesty and integrity to government and all would be well. Capitalism and Republicanism, to the majority of muckrakers, were essentially

sound systems. But they had been prostituted by monopoly and corruption. Sweep corrupt men from office, break up concentrated power, and restore the older type of free enterprise. This was the moral solution.

The naivete of this muckraking approach was underlined in the plethora of political novels that came from their pens. This fiction began to appear even before the muckraking magazine articles had started to arouse the public. The muckraking movement has too long been studied as a journalistic movement without regard to the fiction it created, although in most instances, the fiction was simply a transcription of newspaper stories, and as John Chamberlain writes, "It was as profound as the mind of Theodore Roosevelt, no more, no less."⁵

David Graham Phillips entered the lists of muckraking battle early, and he began as a fiction writer. The Great God Success in 1901 made use of his own experiences in the newspaper world, even to the extreme of using his own employer, Pulitzer, as the villain of the piece. Then had come a series of exposures of political rottenness--The Golden Fleece, The Plum Tree, The Master Rogue, and The Deluge. When the life insurance companies were under fire he aided the attack with The Light Fingred Gentry. All but the last of these were written before The Treason of the Senate expose in Cosmopolitan of 1906. But Phillips was not alone in his fictional attacks. Brand Whitlock in The Thirteenth District had warned the public in 1902 that politics was not what it should be. Booth Tarkington had gained his first fame even earlier with The Gentleman from Indiana, in which a crusading country editor smashed the local political ring and the boss. In 1903, Alfred Henry Lewis wrote The Boss based on the career of Richard Croker, New York Tammany leader. In the same year, Elliott Flower's The Spoilsman and Mark Lee Luther's The Henchman exposed the public utility politics in Chicago. William Allen White had written Strategems and Spoils in 1901; later in the decade came A Certain Rich Man, the story of John Barclay, whose ruthless conduct of business brought him wealth and nation-wide power but in the end led to ruin and unhappiness. Even Lincoln Steffens, who shunned the fictional approach in his early muckraking days with McClure's, later turned his attention to political novels. In 1914, 1915, and 1916--several years after other muckraking novelists had expended their righteous energies--Steffens brought forth The Dying Boss, The Reluctant Briber, and The Boss Who Was Bossed.

But the most representative of all muckraking novelists in his approach to the problems of the new century, and certainly the most successful in terms of popular appeal, was the American Winston Churchill, whose books stood at the head of the best seller lists for twelve years at the beginning of the century. Churchill wrote two muckraking novels of politics, exposing bosses and legislative domination, and two muckraking economic novels indicating the practices of big business. Coniston is a study of the political boss; Mr. Crewe's Career depicts the political maneuvers of a railroad. A

Far Country and The Dwelling-Place of Light, again written after muckraking had expended itself, are economic attacks on big business and the lack of ethical practices in corporation rule. Coniston and Mr. Crewe's Career, especially, are excellent illustrations of the naivete of the muckraking solution to the ills of the industrial era.

Coniston, published in 1906, tells of the rise of a political boss, Jethro Bass, through the "might makes right" theory. He is a pioneer in professional politics just as his ancestors were pioneers in government. But he thoroughly debases the ideal. He acquires mortgages quietly among his neighbors, multiplies these as time and added wealth permit; he does favors for men so that they become his debtors; he frightens others into submission; slowly he builds up a body of henchmen and a machine of power and influence which controls important legislation at the state capitol--and which is able eventually to exert an influence on the President of the United States in Washington. He holds in submission powerful combinations that rise in his own state. These combinations are forced to make terms with him before they can have favorable laws passed--before they can be permitted to exploit their own interests. Bass is not a plutocrat or a monster--but a man of natural instincts, with warm, determined affections. He does not wish to gratify selfish aims for wealth; he does not desire fame. He wants power--power over persons and things--and in order to gain this end he employs the weapon he knows best, intrigue. Coniston is really the history of the system symbolized in Bass--its unscrupulous methods, its power, the character of its friends and enemies. It is a faithful representation, for the book was based on Churchill's own experience with a political leader in the New Hampshire legislature at the turn of the century.

But the only solution that Churchill can find is for Bass to succumb to his conscience toward the end of the novel and to abandon the field of politics under the sentimental prodding of a do-good, crusading niece. His affection for her leads him to examine his unethical practices and to voluntarily give up his power. It is an implausible conversion but, typically, one a muckraker would make. Early Progressivism's reliance on moral persuasion is nowhere more obvious.

Churchill's serious purpose--and no one was more earnest than the mild muckraker in his fiction--is summed up in the afterword to Coniston: "The duty rests today, more heavily than ever, upon each American citizen to make good to the world those principles upon which his government was built. . . . In America today we are trying--whatever the cost--to regain the true axis established for us by the founders of our Republic."⁶ In other words, the nation was drifting away from the principles on which the republic was founded; it should return to them and all would be well. Earlier Churchill had written highly successful historical fiction and his glamorization of the American past served him well in his typical muckraking solution that was neither new nor especially progressive.

In his second political novel, Mr. Crewe's Career, published in 1908, Churchill moved from the power of the individual boss to the power of the corporation. The example chosen is the domination of government by "the railroad interest." The book was again based on Churchill's legislative experience and his efforts to rid New Hampshire of Boston & Maine Railroad rule. Under able but unscrupulous chiefs, the railroad exerts immense influence upon legislation by gifts of free passes to members of the legislature and to young lawyers just rising to power who promise to get in the way. The novel shows the railroad capturing individual legislators, determining the candidates for governor, and dictating the personnel of committees before whom bills might appear that would be favorable or unfavorable to the corporation. It represents the railroad's complete power over the press and over the men who have ambitions to rise in public life. It is a book which underlines the duel between the vested interests and the people. Even the central figure of the novel, patterned after Churchill himself, learns that he cannot get anywhere in politics by overriding or ignoring the established powers. He must conform. His election to the legislature comes only after he has joined hands with the system and has gone to the town boss, a railroad henchman, and fixed things with him.

It is through a character named Austen Vane that Churchill presents his answer to this situation. Vane is a Rooseveltian sort of figure, for he has energy and cries out with the force of the native reformer for a moral solution. He makes his plea for an awakened electorate and for a more sensitive public conscience. In one of the dramatic scenes of the novel, Vane stands before Flint, President of the Northeastern Railroads and embodiment of all corporation evils, and indicts him for his unscrupulous practices and at the same time sounds the typical note of muckraking and early Progressive reform: "The practices by which you have controlled this state, Mr. Flint, and elected governors and councillors and state and national senators are doomed. . . . These practices violated every principle of free government, and were they to continue the nation to which they belong would inevitably decay and become the scorn of the world."⁷ Flint accuses Vane of being a radical, to which Vane replies, "My radicalism goes back behind the establishment of railroads, back to the foundation of this government, to the ideal from which it sprang."⁸ And when Flint then remarks that Vane does not recognize the material changes that have taken place in the twentieth century, Vane counters with the moral emphasis of the muckraker:

Yes, we have changed materially. The mistake you make, and men like you, is the stress which you lay on that word material. Are there no such things as moral interests, Mr. Flint? And are they not quite as important in government, if not more important, than material interests? Surely, we cannot have commercial and political stability without com-

mercial and political honour! If, as a nation, we lose sight of the ideals which have carried us so far, which have so greatly modified the conditions of other peoples than ourselves, we shall perish as a force in the world. . . . But it is a matter of importance, not only to the nation, but to the world, whether or not the moral idea of the United States of America is perpetuated, I assure you.⁹

This is Churchill's answer, one can assume, and the only one most muckraking novelists ever reveal. Churchill has Vane tell Flint what he would do were he in Flint's position:

I should announce, openly, that from this day onward North-eastern Railroads depended for fair play on an enlightened public--and I think your trust would be well founded, and your course vindicated. I should declare, from this day onward, that the issue of political passes, newspaper passes, and all other subterfuges would be stopped, and that all political hirelings would be dismissed. I should appeal to the people of this state to raise up political leaders who would say to the corporation, 'We will protect you from injustice if you will come before the elected representatives of the people, openly, and say what you want and why you want it.' By such a course you would have, in a day, the affection of the people instead of their distrust. And, more than that, you would have done a service for American government the value of which cannot well be estimated.¹⁰

Thus the muckraker proposes that the dishonest bosses reform themselves --or an aroused public will sweep them from their positions of influence through the ballot box. Both Coniston and Mr. Crewe's Career, as did much of the muckraking literature, take pains to point out that this sorry condition of affairs is the people's fault because they permit it. Graft is the price they pay for political negligence.

Insofar as the muckrakers sought to wake the people up, they were successful. But their naive solution to the nation's troubles solved nothing, as the early years of the century soon proved. By the end of the second Roosevelt administration in 1908, the early reforms had largely been accomplished. Most corrupt men had been swept from office, municipal clean-up campaigns--indeed, many at the state level--were in full swing. Federally, some anti-trust suits had been instituted, and conservation measures had been enacted. The first fruits of the muckrakers' efforts were tested. The emphases on a return to the ideals of the Founders and to moral self-examination had been tried in the crucible of practical politics. With the rascals turned out and honest men everywhere in their places, it would seem that content should reign supreme.

But, of course, such was not the case. The real reformers, who earlier had advocated mildness and moderation, now turned more searching eyes on the economic and social structure of the country. The result was a marked change in Progressive emphasis on the role of government in an industrial society. The old moral argument advanced by the muckrakers, the government as an umpire concept, no longer seemed adequate. The new Progressivism looked instead to direct government intervention and regulation to effect changes in the system itself. The dominant figure of Progressivism, Theodore Roosevelt, reflected this change. His tenure as President had borne out the moral tone; his campaign on the Progressive ticket in 1912 clearly reflected another note. The Bull Moose candidate was far to the left of the man who had occupied the White House.

But all this was the work of more discerning critics, writers, and scholars than the muckrakers ever were. The Crolys, the LaFollettes, the Brandeises, the Lippmans, the Weyls, the Wilsons made Progressivism truly progressive. The muckrakers aroused--but they could not answer the needs of their day. All they could offer was something really traditional--a return to the older order of Jeffersonianism, a searching of the conscience, a plea for men to do good, an attempt to do as the Founders would have done. And this, to be truthful, was neither new nor progressive nor uniquely democratic.

Footnotes:

- ¹ See George E. Mowry, The Era of Theodore Roosevelt (New York, 1958).
- ² Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds (New York, 1942), 109.
- ³ Richard Hofstadter, The Age of Reform (New York, 1955), 195.
- ⁴ Ray Stannard Baker, American Chronicle (New York, 1945), 226.
- ⁵ John Chamberlain, Farewell to Reform (New York, 1933), 176.
- ⁶ Winston Churchill, Coniston (New York, 1906), 543.
- ⁷ Winston Churchill, Mr. Crewe's Career (New York, 1908), 476.
- ⁸ Ibid., 477.
- ⁹ Ibid., 477-478.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 480-481.

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