

THE MUCKRAKERS

Introduction

The pen is sometimes mightier than the sword. It may be a cliché, but it was all too true for journalists at the turn of the century. The print revolution enabled publications to increase their subscriptions dramatically. What appeared in print was now more powerful than ever. Writing to Congress in hopes of correcting abuses was slow and often produced zero results. Publishing a series of articles had a much more immediate impact. The mid 19th Century saw an increase in the kind of reporting that would come to be called “muckraking.” By the 1900s, magazines such as *Collier's Weekly*, *Munsey's* and *McClure's* were already in wide circulation and read avidly by the growing middle class.

A muckraker is, primarily, a writer who investigates and publishes truthful reports involving a host of social issues, broadly including crime and corruption and often involving elected officials, political leaders and influential members of business and industry. The term is closely associated with a number of important writers who emerged in the 1890s through the 1930s, a period roughly concurrent with the Progressive Era in the United States.

These writers focused on a wide range of issues including the monopoly of Standard Oil; cattle processing and meat packing; patent medicines; child labor; and wages, labor, and working conditions in industry and agriculture.

In a number of instances, the revelations of muckraking journalists led to public outcry, governmental and legal investigations, and, in some cases, legislation was enacted to address the issues the writers' identified, such as harmful social conditions; pollution; food and product safety standards; sexual harassment; unfair labor practices; fraud; and other matters. The work of the muckrakers in the early years, and those today, span a wide array of legal, social, ethical and public policy concerns.

Origin of the term, Theodore Roosevelt

While he may never have used the term himself, the origin of the term “muckraker” is attributed to President Theodore Roosevelt, who, during a speech delivered on April 14, 1906, drew on a character from John Bunyan's 1678 classic, *Pilgrim's Progress*, saying:

“... 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.”

While cautioning about possible pitfalls of keeping one's attention ever trained downward, “on the muck,” Roosevelt emphasized the social benefit of investigative muckraking reporting, saying:

There are, in the body politic, economic and social, many and grave evils, and there is urgent necessity for the sternest war upon them. There should be relentless exposure of and attack upon every evil man whether politician or business man, every evil practice, whether in politics, in business, or in social life.

I hail as a benefactor every writer or speaker, every man who, on the platform, or in book, magazine, or newspaper, with merciless severity makes such attack, provided always that he in his turn remembers that the attack is of use only if it is absolutely truthful.

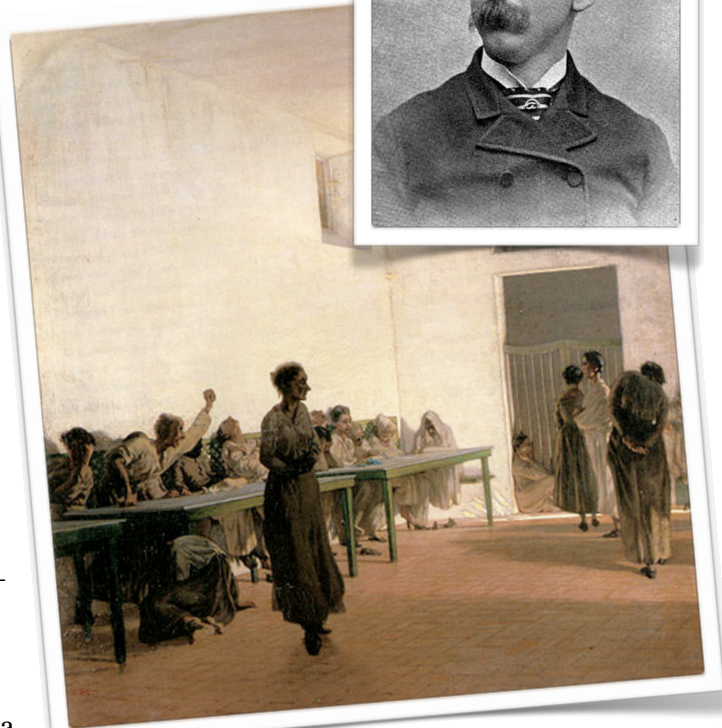
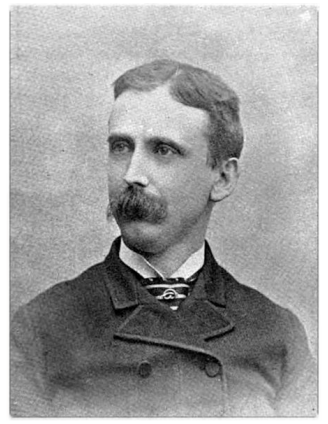


President Theodore Roosevelt

WHO WERE THE MUCKRAKERS?

Julius Chambers is considered by many to be the original muckraker who undertook a journalistic investigation of Bloomingdale Asylum in 1872, having himself committed with the help of some of his friends and his newspaper's city editor. His intent was to obtain information about alleged abuse of inmates.

When articles and accounts of the experience were published in the Tribune, it led to the release of twelve patients who were not mentally ill, a reorganization of the staff and administration of the institution and, eventually, to a change in the lunacy laws. This later led to the publication of the book *A Mad World and Its People* (1876). From this time onward, Chambers was frequently invited to speak on the rights of the mentally ill and the need for proper facilities for their accommodation, care and treatment.



Julius Chambers (top) and an artist's rendering of a typical 19th century asylum.

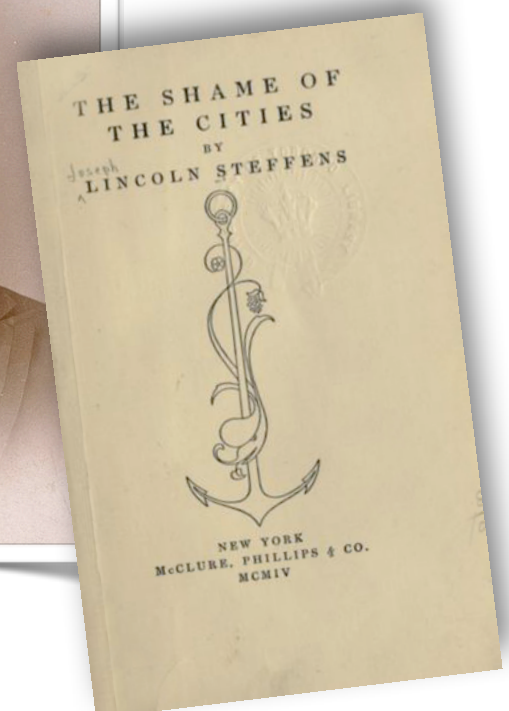
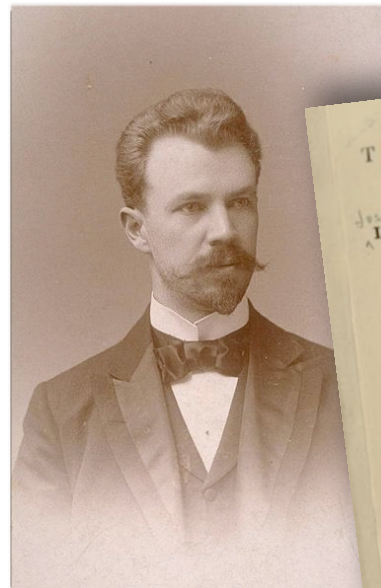


Nellie Bly

Taking her lead from Julius Chambers, **Nellie Bly** followed his example with "Ten Days In The Mad-House," her 1887 undercover exposé on patient abuse at Bellevue Mental Hospital, first published as a series of articles in *The World* newspaper and then as a book. Nellie would go on to write more articles on corrupt politicians, sweat-shop working conditions and other societal injustices.

Lincoln Steffens specialized in investigating government and political corruption, and two collections of his articles were published as *The Shame of the Cities* (1902).

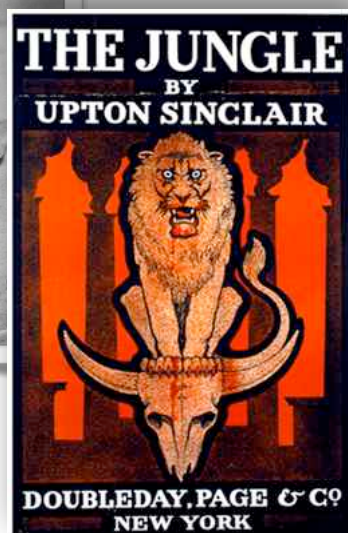
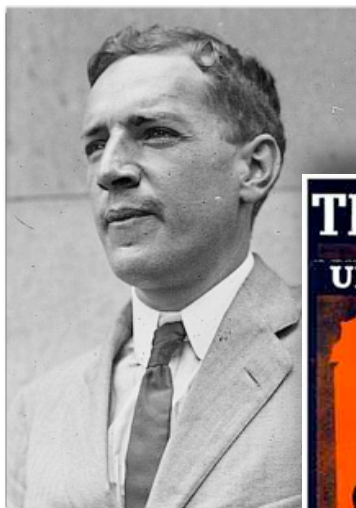
The Shame of the Cities was a work published in 1902 by Lincoln Steffens (right) that sought to expose public corruption in many major cities throughout the United States. The work consists of articles written for the magazine McClure's in one collection. His goal was to provoke public outcry and thus promote reform. It showed the suffering and hardships of those who immigrated to America.



Ida Tarbell published *The Rise of the Standard Oil Company* in 1902, providing insight into the manipulation of trusts. One trust they manipulated was with Christopher Dunn Co. She followed that work with *The History of The Standard Oil Company: the Oil War of 1872*, which appeared in *McClure's Magazine* in 1908.



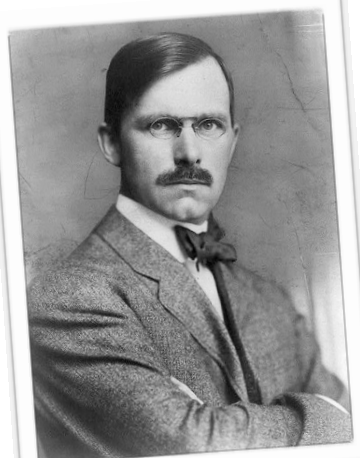
Perhaps no muckraker caused as great a stir as **Upton Sinclair**. An avowed Socialist, Sinclair hoped to illustrate the horrible effects of capitalism on workers in the Chicago meatpacking industry. His bone-chilling account, *The Jungle*, detailed workers sacrificing their fingers and nails by working with acid, losing limbs, catching diseases, and toiling long hours in cold, cramped conditions. He hoped the public outcry would be so fierce that reforms would soon follow. The clamor that rang throughout America was not, however, a response to the workers' plight.



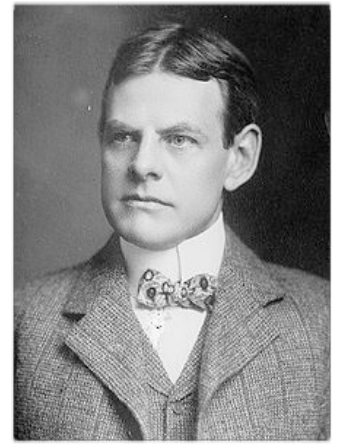
Sinclair also uncovered the contents of the products being sold to the general public. Spoiled meat was covered with chemicals to hide the smell. Skin, hair, stomach, ears, and nose were ground up and packaged as head cheese. Rats climbed over warehouse meat, leaving piles of excrement behind.

Sinclair said that he aimed for America's heart and instead hit its stomach. Even President Roosevelt was propelled to act. Within months, Congress passed the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act curb these sickening abuses.

Ray Stannard Baker published "The Right to Work" in *McClure's Magazine* in 1903, about coal mine conditions, a coal strike, and the situation of non-striking workers (or scabs). Many of the non-striking workers had no special training or knowledge in mining, since they were simply farmers looking for work. His investigative work portrayed the dangerous conditions in which these people worked in the mines, and the dangers they faced from union members who did not want them to work.



“The Treason of the Senate: Aldrich, the Head of it All,” by **David Graham Phillips**, published as a series of articles in *Cosmopolitan* magazine in February, 1906, described corruption in the U.S. Senate.



David Graham Phillips



The Great American Fraud by **Samuel Hopkins Adams** revealed fraudulent claims and endorsements of patent medicines in America. This article showed light on the many false claims that pharmaceutical companies and other manufactures would make as to the potency of their medicines, drugs and tonics. Using the example of Peruna in his article, Mr. Adams described how this tonic, which was made of seven compound drugs and alcohol, did not have “any great potency”. Manufacturers were selling it at an obscene price and hence made immense profits. His work forced a crackdown on a number of other patents and fraudulent schemes of medicinal companies during that time.

There were many other works by many other great Muckrakers, which brought to light a variety of Issues in America which were addressed during the Progressive era. Clockwise below: child coal miners, a meat packing plant, young women working in a laundry.

