

Review: Stephanie Gorton's 'Citizen Reporters' - The Atlantic

Clip source: [Review: Stephanie Gorton's 'Citizen Reporters' - The Atlantic](#)

The Woman Who Made Modern Journalism

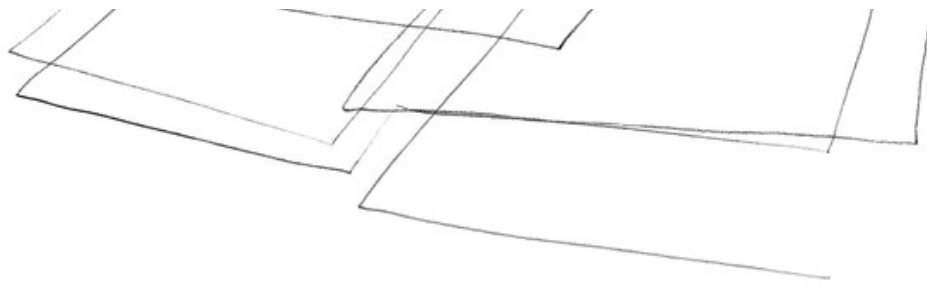
Ida Tarbell championed reportorial methods and investigative goals that are as potent today as ever.

[Liza Mundy](#)

[January/February 2020 Issue](#)

Citizen Reporters: S. S. McClure, Ida Tarbell, and the Magazine That Rewrote America by Stephanie Gorton
Ecco





Clemens Habicht

Once upon a time, during a period of great technological innovation but also great economic inequality, journalism was striving to define its role in a fractious democracy. Divisions between conservatives and progressives were stark—and angry—and social anxiety about racial injustice and the rise of women was acute. The behemoth size of some corporations stirred alarm. So did the plight of workers with few protections. At the helm of the government was a president with a bully pulpit, ready to upend things. It was one of those rare moments, in the words of the historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, of “transformation so remarkable that a molt seems to take place, and an altered country begins to emerge.”

If that sounds familiar and ominous, take heart. I’m describing the turn of the 20th century, a time when those striving journalists were defining the bedrock reporting principles we now take for granted—developing their field on the fly, and triumphantly. In the process, they confirmed what a potent force their vocation could be. To revisit investigative journalism being born and magazines thriving more than 100 years ago is to be reminded that dizzying change in technology and the media—the refrain of our digital era—is by no means unique to our moment. Nor is it the whole story. The standards, methods, and collaborative ambitions that fueled the 20th-century journalistic upsurge don’t look quaint at all: [They remain as crucial as ever in the effort to hold power accountable.](#)

Back when modern journalism was defining itself—before *objectivity* was a reportorial byword, before *off the record* and *on background* were terms of the trade, and before *narrative nonfiction* was common parlance—one of the leading practitioners of the bold new form of inquiry was Ida Tarbell. A tall woman in a long dress, her brown hair piled high, she might be seen regularly entering the doors of the Standard Oil offices in New York City as the century began. Tarbell was meeting with what we would call a “source.” Her interlocutor was a forceful man with a nickname—Henry “Hell Hound” Rogers—right out of central casting. Tarbell was writing a series on Standard Oil and the rapacious practices of its founder, John D. Rockefeller. Rogers’s job was to guide her reporting—as we might say, to “spin” her.

But Tarbell was not to be spun. When he gave her a glass of milk, she insisted on paying. When he pressed to know who had told her something, she refused to say. When she ran some near-finished copy by him—what would today qualify as fact-checking—she refused to let him make changes beyond offering corrections. All of these were guidelines she developed alongside her editor, S. S. McClure, and her colleagues at his eponymous magazine, *McClure’s*. The upshot was one of the seminal early examples of what is now known as long-form investigative reporting. Tarbell might have won a Pulitzer, except that journalism prizes also were not yet a thing. “Woman Does Marvelous Work!” was one of many rapturous headlines.

Tarbell's 19-part Standard Oil series began in *McClure's* in November 1902, and the celebrated January 1903 issue—which featured the third installment of the series, a piece on labor unrest among coal miners by Ray Stannard Baker, and an exposé by Lincoln Steffens on municipal corruption—sold out on newsstands in days. (The magazine also had about 400,000 subscribers.) Tarbell became so famous that she was recognized everywhere. McClure, a manic genius, had assembled what an editor of *The Atlantic*, Ellery Sedgwick, later called “the most brilliant staff ever gathered by a New York periodical” at precisely the time when magazines enjoyed top status as the mass medium of the moment; newspapers tended to be sensational and partisan, and radio had not quite arrived. Among the first-ever magazine staff writers, McClure's team grasped that when laying a complicated topic before readers, narrative pacing and a strong writerly voice are invaluable. So are facts, facts, and more facts; vivid characters; and a central conflict.

The sway exerted by these “muckrakers” has been the subject of books including Goodwin's [*The Bully Pulpit: Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and the Golden Age of Journalism*](#), which highlights the influence of their muscular exposés of political corruption, monopoly power, and labor conditions. Their work enabled [*Roosevelt to push his Progressive agenda*](#), securing better enforcement of antitrust legislation and persuading Congress to regulate the food and drug industries. In *Citizen Reporters: S. S. McClure, Ida Tarbell, and the Magazine That Rewrote America*, Stephanie Gorton, a magazine journalist herself, focuses on how a “hothouse” collaboration happens. She explores the clash and interplay of talents that created an entity greater than the sum of its parts, absorbed in an endeavor as important now as it was then: molding coherent narratives that help readers—surrounded by a cacophony of daily stories—grasp the changes they are living through.

From 1860 to 1895, the number of magazines in the United States rose from 575 to 5,000. McClure, born in Ireland, set out to form his own in 1893. Small-framed and vital, he was like a modern-day start-up founder, endlessly pitching the ideas his febrile brain produced. He shocked the competition by dropping the price of a quality monthly from 35 cents to 15. He understood that ads could bring in the bulk of the income, especially at a time when new corporate brands such as Cream of Wheat and Coca-Cola were endeavoring to create a consumer market.

McClure also understood that if he could provide an array of versatile talents with job security, time, and a workspace—transforming what up to then had been a gig-based enterprise that had writers scrambling—their voices together would shape the magazine and define its character and mission. He knew how to pick writers, and how to listen to them. In Tarbell, Steffens, Baker, and William Allen White, he had the Big Four, relentless reporters who injected magazine journalism with a new seriousness of purpose as they came to appreciate that their work was having an impact on democracy itself.

The key to the undertaking was McClure's discovery of Tarbell. The two had much in common, including their outsider status (one an immigrant, the other female), their curiosity, and a college education at a time when few had one. Tarbell had grown up in northwestern Pennsylvania, where she watched as her father and their neighbors—ordinary people making a living as independent oil producers—were forced to sell off or go under when Rockefeller struck a crooked deal with the railroads: Trains would carry his petroleum cheaply, while

gouging his competitors. “There was born in me a hatred of privilege,” she wrote.

As a girl, Tarbell read anything she could get her hands on: Charles Dickens, William Thackeray, and also the lurid *Police Gazette*, which she found lying around the bunkhouse where her parents’ workers lived, and which she enjoyed for the [“wanton gaiety about the women”](#) and the “violent rakishness about the men,” as she wrote later. After graduating from Allegheny College, she tried teaching but found it tedious. She then began working on the editorial staff of *The Chautauquan*, the progressive but predictable periodical that served the Chautauqua talkfests. Restless as she moved into her 30s, she set out for Paris to freelance. A half century before *The New Yorker’s* Joseph Mitchell went to the waterfront to write about clammers and fishermen, before John McPhee started hanging out with greengrocers, Tarbell was visiting out-of-the-way sectors and practicing immersive journalism. When McClure read her submission, “The Paving of the Streets of Paris by Monsieur Alphand,” he declared, “This girl can write!” On a trip to Europe, he showed up at her door. What Gorton calls a “transformative relationship for both” had begun.

He assigned Tarbell to interview Émile Zola and Louis Pasteur, then coaxed her back to the States, where she wrote a serialized life of Napoleon—the general was in vogue, and archives in D.C. held new material—that jolted the circulation of *McClure’s*. Her next series, a 20-parter on Abraham Lincoln that she worked on for four years, did the same. Competitors scoffed—“McClure’s got a girl trying to write a life of Lincoln,” one editor sneered—and tried to thwart her. Tarbell was one of those souls (today we speak of “grit” and “resilience”) who find obstacles to be energizing. Rather than hanging out with the power crowd in the capital, she traveled to Lincoln’s place of origin, Kentucky, and worked through the chronology of his life. She chatted up archivists and librarians. She found people who had never been interviewed. She befriended Lincoln’s only surviving son, who shared “what he believed to be the earliest portrait made of his father,” as she put it, an unpublished daguerreotype that literally changed how people saw Lincoln.

When her beloved father heard she was taking on Standard Oil, he begged her, “Don’t do it, Ida”—not because he didn’t support her career, but because he did, and feared Rockefeller would destroy her and *McClure’s*. Tarbell soldiered on. She learned yet more about how to gain her own access. When Rockefeller wouldn’t grant her an interview, she attended a Sunday-school lecture and observed him. She dug up court filings by people who had sued the oil magnate: a “great mass of sworn testimony,” as she wrote. Courtroom testimony had the detail she needed; being sworn, it also had the advantage of being reliable. Today, Robert Caro is lionized for his exhaustive gumshoe method, but Tarbell was there before him, reading pamphlets and the opinion columns of local papers. “There is nothing about which everything has been done and said” became her core insight.

McClure read multiple drafts, and Tarbell, who welcomed criticism, revised and revised. She “often doubted her own originality and brilliance,” Gorton writes, but he bucked her up with ardent admiration. Tarbell bucked him up in return. Their intellectual frisson was unusually intense, but mutually motivating in a recognizable way: In workplace settings, a kind of professional passion is more fruitful—and common—than we might find comfortable to admit. Tarbell was able to pluck his good ideas from a torrent of bad ones. She gave him praise and encouragement; she stimulated but also settled him. (Her colleagues often described her, Gorton points

out, as a “maternal or sisterly figure,” expert at handling a boss given to extreme mood swings.) McClure’s feelings become clear in his letters: He loved her, if chastely. Her feelings are more obscure, in part because Gorton doesn’t quote Tarbell at length.

Tarbell’s private reflections, about gender among other things, do emerge from time to time. Early on, she recognized the predicament of women. At 14, Ida knelt and prayed to God that she would be spared marriage. “I must be free; and to be free I must be a spinster.” She was right: Though higher education was becoming more available to women, to have a career, a woman had to forgo having a family. Aside from teaching and missionary work—the two “respectable” careers for educated women—journalism, in its chaotic infancy, offered an opening an intrepid female could slip through. The *McClure’s* fiction editor was a woman, Viola Roseboro, and Willa Cather joined the staff in 1906. Elsewhere, Nelly Bly and Ida B. Wells had also performed feats of investigation. Obstacles came with the territory of being female in a mostly male industry, but Tarbell’s gender also helped safeguard her integrity: While Steffens, who was granted audiences with Roosevelt, got a little too cozy with power, she was never invited into a political inner sanctum.

As McClure, who evidently suffered from manic depression, grew more grandiose and erratic—and had affairs with two women writers—he became more of a liability than a galvanizing force. The core staff, fearing *McClure’s* would founder on charges of moral hypocrisy, walked out in 1906. They bought their own publication, *The American Magazine*, where Tarbell continued to do groundbreaking work—in another parallel to the modern day, she wrote compellingly about tariffs and how they hurt consumers by raising prices. But others in the field were not as woman-friendly as McClure had been. Despite her star status, she was the only staff member not invited to the first annual publishers’ dinner, a men-only event. “It is the first time since I came into the office that the fact of petticoats has stood in my way,” she wrote, “and I am half-inclined to resent it.”

Her exclusion was a harbinger of journalism’s passage into maturity. The National Press Club was founded as all-male in 1908, part of a dreary pattern of barring women that was replayed in other fields as they attained prestige, and as the porousness of their formative days vanished. But McClure never stopped believing in Tarbell, or craving her presence. “I wish you had not turned away,” he wrote in one poignant letter, telling her he was learning to speak and act more slowly, and had dreamed that “you drew me down & kissed me to show your approval.”

Tarbell missed him as well, and “the excited discussions” at his magazine were never quite replicated. Her “radical reforming” friends pressured her to “join their movements,” she wrote, but she resisted. The tension she felt between advocacy and objectivity—like the journalistic techniques she helped establish—is no less central today than it was then. Nor is the tenuousness of the community—profitable, important, and, as she put it, “so warmly and often ridiculously human”—that she had been welcomed into. She knew that it, like most great collaborations, couldn’t last forever. But its example could live on, and has.