Interview: Ida Tarbell with Mr. Smitney regarding Owen D. Young, October 20, 1939

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Owen D. Young:

I met Mr. Smitney at Arts Club, October 20th, 1939. As his letter shows he feels that he has a strong case against Mr. Young. It is:

1) That I give him too much credit in the Texas case. There are other lawyers, which is true. I argue that I was trying to unravel O D Y's story—nobody's elses. The fact remains that the impression he made on Coffin was that he was asked to come under the General Electric staff.

2) Very bitter about the credit I give him for his work with the company in the War. I have always felt it was very much to Mr. Young's credit, but he thinks this proves that / he was feathering his own nest and not interested in the war. His reasons are:

   1) That he really was pro-German and his only reason for this—I asked him for proofs—was that he was of German origin. The German origin dates back to Queen Anne's time and the Young's have always been patriotic citizens, serving in the Revolutionary War, etc. His charge of course made no particular impression.

   2) He thinks he has a damning case against Young, because he refused to go with Polk as assistant secretary during the War. The salary offered was $7,000.00. He brought the letter to Coffin, according to S.
said, "You see what he has offered me. I can't afford to give up my position, my commitments are such that I must go on earning money."

This I can understand. His family and obligations in Van Hornesville, etc., etc., were in his judgment of first importance, more important than anything he could do with P. 

S. is very amusing at effort at dramatization. Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils. Quote Shakespeare. This is the case he repeatedly declares proves that Y. was after spoils. He has no documents to offer but it is what he remembers.

He scoffs at the idea that Young's industrial ideas were of any value. Think myself that I rather over-played that side of it, important and as genuine as I consider it, that there should have been more attention paid to Mr. Swope, perhaps to and outside influences like that of McKenzie King at this time.

I told him I was trying to follow the Young thread and no other. There is a biographical point here which I would do well to consider in my talks on biography - the danger in following only the thread of your subject, not showing how it is knotted up and twisted with other threads. You follow that alone and you give a wrong impression probably. Nothing like discovering your errors.

As near as I can make out from my talk with Mr. Smitney the one very important point is the charge that Young was after spoils, was not patriotic.
He also charges Young with nepotism. He says Elwood was a relative. Young had taken him on as a personal secretary. I thought that Elwood's report on the way the men were feeling at the end of the war was excellent and that one of the intelligent things that Young did in securing such a report he took up point by point their complaints. Think this had a decided influence in the General Electric's future industrial policy. But S. sneers at the whole thing, resents Elwood's advancement. He complains that I do not give due credit to other officers of the company. I tell him that I wasn't writing the life of the officers. As for Bingham (?) he thinks I should have talked about him. He thinks that if Young had treated him fairly he would hold the position that Trench now holds. Of course S. has become so bitter and so nourished his grievances that it is hard to judge what he was in '21 when he retired or was retired - did not catch the story. But now he is terribly embittered and terribly contemptuous of Young. Not long ago an article appeared in Liberty eulogizing Young. He wrote what he considered a blistering letter to Mr. Young accusing him of building up his own case, and publizing himself. Young replied that he had never seen the article until someone put it on his desk - had no connection with it.

I tell him that these cases he brings up - Mr. Young didn't tell me these things, that I got them out of the
records of the Company, particularly of his office, which were open to me, that my relations with him were confined to clearing up a point when I was puzzled. He certainly never saw the book before it was published and I do not believe he has read it since. At least I have had no indication that he ever did.