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Letter with attachment: Ida M. Tarbell to Thomas L. Stix, June 13, 1932

Tarbell, Ida M.

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June 63, 1932

Mr. Thomas L. Stix
Vice President
The Book League of America
New York City

Dear Mr. Stix:

I am enclosing a rather hurried set of answers to your questions. They will serve as a working basis at least. Kindly give me your suggestions and let me know when we are to have our dress rehearsal if there is to be one.

Very sincerely yours
1. Miss Tarbell, doesn't it seem to you rather extraordinary that Owen D. Young has so completely captured the fancy of the American people? There is really, comparatively little that is known about him except that he is an extraordinary leader of an extraordinarily large corporation.

2. You know, as I read through his life it occurred to me that it was a regular Horatio Alger success story.

3. The curve of his success seems to have been a steady one with no dips at all. Is this actually the case?

4. I was particularly interested in your idea on Owen D. Young and labor and how he worked out all the labor problems of his concern.

5. Is there an open shop, or does be believe in company unions?

6. I think it is rather interesting to be able to talk to you as his biographer over the radio, because I somehow have the feeling that not many people really know that he is one of the most important figures in the radio field. Won't you just tell us a few words about his work in that field?

7. Of course, as a book person I am particularly interested in what you said about Mr. Young's collection of fine and rare editions.

8. It is easy to understand a person's hobby for books, but it seems to me very unusual that a man as busy as Mr. Young could really have collected so many rare books himself. By that I mean doing the actual buying rather than working through agents.
Answers to Stik's questions:

1) I am not sure you are right when you speak of Owen Young having completely captured the fancy of the American people. There is no doubt of his having completely captured the fancy of his associates, those who work with him, but they are only a handful of the American people. Isn't the interest in him rather due to speculation as to whether or not we are really getting in him an authentic, dependable, far-sighted leader. One important task as a people is looking for leaders, choosing them. We are always trying them out, and, unhappily often, finding that we have made bad mistakes. Then we are so hampered by our prejudices that if an authentic political genius comes along, in my judgment we have had only one in recent years and we refused him if he comes along we are afraid to try him out. As I see it the interest of the people at large in Owen Young is speculation about his potentiality as a future leader in the public life of the country.

My interest in him lies in what I believe to be his value as a leader in our industrial life — his ability to see and work out the new financial and business set-ups that we must have if we are to whip industrialism into harmony with those social and moral principles on which in the long run it must depend for its stability and its usefulness. I think the American people see something of this in Mr. Young and needing
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leaders as they do they say to themselves. How about the man? Would he make a good president? That is, it is calculation rather than fancy that is back of the interest.

Popular interest in Mr. Young is partly explained I think by the quality of the enthusiasm of his friends. Truly it is an experience to talk with Mr. Young's associates and friends about him - those that have been close to him. In preparing for the book I went about asking hard-headed lawyers and business men, Is this man as good as he looks? I was received shocked looks as if I had spoken treason. It was lese-majesty. You know that kind of enthusiasm is really contagious - it goes through the air.

It is a long time since I read a Horatio Alger success story, so I don't know that I can answer your question clearly. As I recall that gentleman's books he took the poor and down-trodden boy and made him by his own hard efforts a rich man, in terms of money, that is, money success was the end of Alger's boys. Now really I think the last thing in the world that one thinks of in connection with Owen Young is money. I suppose he has money. But that is not what makes him interesting and of course wealth is not what makes any man interesting. It is the way he gets it, what he does with it. Young of course had to depend on himself. He made his own decisions even as a boy as to what he wanted to do. He made up his mind that he didn't want to chop wood and plow and hoe corn all his life as Youngs before him had done. Where he decided he would be a lawyer.
Having made his decision he went hard after what he wanted. But remember he had the best kind of a background — a very remarkable mother. I consider her a great personality. I hope if Owen Young lives to be ninety-two years old he will be as big a person as his mother was at ninety-two when I met her. And he had a good father — a good man. I am all for good men; I am rather fed up on the contempt that people show now for the things we call goodness. I do not mean by goodness perfection, but the sum of a man working for soundness, justice, consideration of others. The evil man is one in whom the sum is corrupt. To succeed in life he will have to make a smallification of his selfishness. I am all for the boy who depends on himself to pull himself out of a hard and miserable situation. I wish there were more youths of today exercising that kind of quality. Is not one of the things that ails us that so many boys and girls are allowed to go on loose and the poor things never really develop — never get a taste of real living? On the whole I think a little more Horatio Alger would be a good thing for this generation.

3) Yes, I can safely say that the curve of what you call Mr. Young's success, that is the curve of his life, has been steadily upward. It has been a climb always and a climb fixed to note on something ahead. And very interesting he has always known when the thing he had was not the thing he wanted and has been willing to make a break. Take his leaving the law firm where he had been for something like sixteen years — a very prosperous
firm in Boston with connections the best of the town. And
great confidence those Boston Real Estate and banking people
had in Young. I have talked with a number of them and it has
been the same story everywhere - they believed in him. They
were willing to trust him. He broke with his firm; he did it
because he saw a larger and freer opportunity in the General
Electric Company. He saw a chance to experiment there. You
know the Company has always been extraordinarily experimental.
That is Young - he likes to try things. He really will try
anything that seems to him to be fundamentally sound and the
thing that ought to be done. Everything that ought to be
done he believes can be done. And I have a suspicion that he
drives those about him pretty hard, when it comes to working
out what he thinks ought to be.

4) I am glad you find what I have had to say about
Young's connection with labor interests you, for that is the basis
of my interest in him. As I see it, the first thing in sound
industrial relations is peaceful negotiations. Of course our
industry has been largely on a war basis in this country and
soon after Young came along in industry he at once established
himself with people who had their eye on that sort of thing,
as one who considered both sides. Theoretically we say everybody
should consider both sides of a question but practically we know
very well that we generally consider our own sides and we know perfectly well that that has been the trouble in industry, that each side, labor, capital, has obstinately, pig-headedly stuck to what they thought was their right. Mr. Young is famous for considering the other fellow. He might be the employer of labor, but his first object in a dispute was to try to find out what the employee was thinking about, why he felt as he did, and then straighten out the trouble. Very interesting to me the way that, having started back in war times with labor problems, he has steadily progressed and that he and Mr. Swope have about the widest and on the whole I think the soundest labor program that is being worked out in anyone of our great industries today.

5) You ask about the open shop - company unions. I think he believes in both. Any kind of organization which will bring the human being together to consider all sides of a question; Decidedly he believes in trade unionism, but I think he believes the trade union is something which should be larger than it has been in this country. Circumstances have made it a fighting body and in fighting for what it considered its rights it has minimized the trade itself, possibly, not kept abreast of new industrial ideas as it should. I believe myself that a shop as a unit is different from every other shop. While the trade as a whole is one thing the shop is another. It is up at Schenectady where Mr. Young and Mr. Swope have led the
way. There you have an excellent. I suppose you call it a company union. But there are all kinds of trade unions represented.

6) Yes, it is interesting, isn't it, that we should be talking, over the radio, of Owen Young who really secured it for the country. A very good example of the kind of courage he has when he thinks a thing should be done. You know the story don't you how the Navy had brought together all of the various American patents connected with radio and made a tremendous effective system. Josephus Daniels says that he could talk with men in France more easily than Stanton and Lincoln could talk with the commanders in Virginia in the Civil War. The Navy did a great job - the developing of the radio. Of course they commandeered all kinds of private inventions. When the war was over they had to let them go back. It disrupted the whole thing. Unquestionably it was the British radio system that would have profited by most of our inventions if Mr. Young on the insistence of the Navy had not led in marshalling all the companies concerned, persuading them to join in working out an international service. To be sure, Congress might have taken over the system the Navy had developed, made it a government monopoly like the postoffice. But you know how Congress would feel about such an undertaking as that - the country would never have accepted it. So Mr. Young led in organizing the radio into
one great corporation in which all the inventors had their share. It has led to the amazing development of today.

I am quite sure that there is nobody more conscious of the drawbacks in the radio, of which people complain, than Mr. Young. He is very keen on making it more of an educational factor in our life than it is. His efforts for doing that are much greater than people in general realize. What we do not realize is that educating over the radio is one thing and educating in the teacher's chair with books and blackboard is another. The educator has not worked out his technique for the radio, at least that is the way it looks to me, and until he does that he must not be too critical. Mr. Young has been particularly interested in broadcasting of good music. We get a great deal of good music over the radio, don't forget that and don't forget, too, that there is a constant strenuous effort to correct whatever abuses, financial, educational, develop. It is a new art but one with a fine future in which I am confident Mr. Young will have as much to do with its beginnings.

It is interesting, isn't it, that Mr. Young's book collecting began when he was a young man without a cent in his pocket, and that he has never neglected it however little money he had to spend. Of course collecting interesting books is common enough among all classes of people; and most men of means, even though they are the hardest of business men buy

In recent years we have seen

$80,000 for a single rare book.
books liberally. I am not one of those that believe they buy purely for decorative purposes either, but among my acquaintances there are few who have the personal interest in books that Mr. Young has. He runs to English and American classics. He is very keen on having a complete collection of and also editions as many manuscripts as authors as he can get hold of. I have been very much interested in his talks about manuscripts of men like Scott, Kipling and others who were never satisfied - were always seeking to perfect. Mr. Young likes to point out the way a man would change one word for another which more perfectly expressed his meaning, how he reconstructed phrases. It is really a delightful experience to spend an evening with Mr. Young listing to his comments on his manuscripts and books.

I think he is quite jealous of the handling of what he buys. His librarian told me once that she never opened a book or package because Mr. Young took such pleasure himself in taking off the wrappers, getting the first glimpse of the thing he had bought, putting it into its proper place.

I think that is very nice, don't you? Book therefore like Spencer in London, have great respect for Mr. Young's knowledge and interest. He works and with such a sense of the meaning of the piece that he gets - knows where it fits in, this effort of his to get all of the pieces which show the craft and development of the writer.
He came sure you will be indebted in one of the industries some day
to having plenty of free time. But that's not the case.

Sincerely,

[Signature]
But there, I have talked too long about these things. You see I look on Mr. Young as one of those who are really contributing something to the future stabilization and humanization of American life and consequently I am apt to be a little too garrulous, a little too enthusiastic, when I find a sympathetic listener like yourself. I hope the folks listening in are having as good a time as we are talking over this fine man. Where cool head and warm heart make him so useful a public citizen.