

*See him you'll
call attention in
letter 11/11/38*

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BRONX, N. Y.

June 8, 1938.

Dear Miss Tarbell:

You may recall your kind letter to me concerning the work upon David Graham Phillips upon which I was engaged. I have since been commissioned to write a book upon the muck-raking era proper, and have forthwith gone to work on the subject. The book is necessary in every sense of the word, and I plan to produce sound, informative work in this first study.

I plan to pass by the mere recording of "sensations" and work for a true history of the time, rendered in proportion. It seems to me that there has been too much shallow writing on the subject, and little understanding of it as a critical period concerned with serious re-evaluations of social ideas.

I am, however, aware that mere sensationalists and money-getters did mix in the swim and create controversy. But it seems to me worthy of note that the times were such that it paid mercenaries to do worthwhile work!

One of the deepest questions which confronts me, and one upon which I would deeply value your opinion, concerns definition. What indeed was a muckraker? There are individuals who have protested that they were tarred unfairly with that term. I cannot but note that socialists as well as out-right individuals were called it equally; and that in many respects socialism and muckraking worked along parallel lines. Mr. John Spargo, the Socialist, for example, has written that his "Bitter Cry of the Children" might very well have been written by a sincere Christian. I have also read with interest the work of that strange person, Josiah Flynt Willard, who might very well have been called the first muckraker, it seems to me, even though that palm has been usually awarded to Lincoln Steffens.

I have of course read this writer's Autobiography, and been duly impressed by his work as a McClure's editor and as a reformer. I have, indeed, studied the files of the magazine carefully, as having consistently produced the most scholarly work of all, in the field of reform-writing. It has stood uniquely separate from the more evangelical periodicals. Naturally, there were various motives that impelled these others to the publication of miscellaneous agitational series and exposes. And yet, from the historian's point of view, it is necessary to differentiate between motives and results. I am sure you will agree with me on this. Would you not say that much good came from writings not necessarily written from the most objective point of view. I am thinking, in this connection, of the writings of such men as Tom Lawson, Upton Sinclair, Charles Edward Russell, David Graham Phillips. Lawson seems to have been a good deal of an

exhibitionist, for example. And yet, he would seem to have made public, in his way, "inside" material that was quite valuable in helping to inform a public which greatly needed information. Much the same case might be made for other writers of this type.

One of the things that interests me deeply, and is of interest to the general public, is the question of results. What came of muckraking? I am giving a good deal of attention to this question, since it represents the best measure by which to evaluate the separate phases of the movement. And in this connection, I would be extremely grateful for comment on the outstanding fact of Standard Oil. Needless to say, I am giving much space to this question. Standard was the most important of trusts; it was what people meant when they spoke of trusts. Now, the question I must answer is this: did the dissolution of Standard Oil dissolve it? Various critics have contended that it did not, that Standard was stronger than ever after the epochal Supreme Court decision.

What, then, came of the public clamor for its dissolution? Have the Company's activities been reined by the government? And has the result been for the good of all?

I have also come upon the interesting suggestion that the issue of Standard Oil has been internationalized; that is to say, that the ascendancy of Deterding has taken the matter out of the home field and made it one depending on the outcome of world events.

You see, to give reality to the era of which I am writing, - and few accounts have succeeded in doing that - it is necessary to show how it has affected the present, and to show how the causes and effects of muckraking did not end, but evolved into new issues. I need not say that I can look nowhere for a better appraisal of Standard as it was then, as it has become, than from you.

I shall look forward with great interest and appreciation to your view of these matters. We are just beginning to catch up with the era, and I believe it is due to attract more and more attention with the publication of documents, autobiographies, etc. It was a great time, and I am glad to be writing of it.

With best wishes, believe me,

Sincerely yours,
Louis Filler
Louis Filler

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