


**CRUSADERS FOR
AMERICAN LIBERALISM**

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XVIII. THE SEARCH FOR DEMOCRACY

GEORGE W. ALGER, the lawyer who was to draft important labor and child-labor laws for New York and who, like many other primarily non-literary men, sought and found support for his ideas through the magazines, wrote for the *Atlantic Monthly* an article on "The Literature of Exposure" which had a wide circulation.¹ Commenting on the muckraking magazines, he asserted that they did not go to the roots of trouble; that they merely "disheartened" the reader with arraignments of people who had succumbed to temptation; that, in a word, they were doing nothing constructive. Alger represented a school of thought which was, to speak simply, wrong. Even *The Bookman*, which rarely held a brief for the muckrakers, took issue with him. The critic cited Tarbell's work as a model of constructive criticism, and went so far as to give Charles Edward Russell credit for using a scientific method in his beef trust exposé. Furthermore, *The Bookman* critic concluded, muckraking did show results: the insurance men who had laughed at Lawson were not laughing any more; Standard Oil, the railroad barons, and grafters of every kind were on the defensive.

Neither Alger nor *The Bookman* writer, however, saw very far into muckraking. The aim to find constructive remedies for corruption was inherent in the muckraking articles, particularly in those which most bravely and conscientiously sought to analyze entire situations as a prelude to prescribing for them. The muckrakers, to repeat what has been said before, had to learn like the people: through inquiry, study, and experiment. Steffens, for example, wrote *The Shame of the Cities* before he wrote *The Struggle for Self-Government* (a book which compared the relative state of democracy in various sections of the country) for the sim-

¹ Reprinted in *Moral Overstrain*, Houghton Mifflin & Co., Boston, 1906.

ple reason that he did not know enough to write the second book first. Like George W. Alger he was a professional man who had been born and bred among certain outmoded ideas; unlike Alger he was determined to dig down until he understood conditions thoroughly and only then to name the correctives. On the other hand, he was not a political theoretician. His contribution to muckraking consisted of feeling and imagination. *The Struggle for Self-Government*, for instance, was dedicated to the Czar of Russia (just then reorganizing his empire, after the 1905 revolution), whom he advised to grant his people everything they wanted: then, Steffens promised, like the American people they would give their privileges away to individuals.

Alger might have found nothing suggestive in Steffens's irony; other readers of his book did. But Alger might have found something in Steffens's definition of political corruption; namely, that it was the process by which a representative democracy was transformed, through party evolution, into an oligarchy representative of special interests. An elementary definition? It focused attention on parties, at least, and it gave a first principle for evaluating La Follette and Folk, "Boss" Cox's Cincinnati, Tom Johnson's Cleveland (in the chapter "Ohio: A Tale of Two Cities"), and Jersey City, of the "traitor state" of New Jersey, the maternity ward of trusts, where Mayor Mark Fagan, a religious man and an undertaker, was in sharp conflict with the utilities.

Labor laws were certainly worth getting passed. They were the tangible memorials to popular victories. But propaganda against intolerable conditions, "disheartening" though it might have been, was a necessary groundwork for Alger's "constructive" legal work in labor legislation. Alger, like many another, ignored his debt to the muckrakers.

Every muckraker restlessly considered alternatives to the conditions he was describing. The entire purpose of *Frenzied Finance*, as Lawson time and again repeated, was education for change. Again, Upton Sinclair constantly professed to have the solution for the country's ills: Socialism—modern democracy. In the absence of a Socialist victory at the polls, he undertook to give a practical demonstration of his beliefs. He invested the money he had made from *The Jungle* in Helicon Hall, a colony, run on a co-operative basis, which incidentally became the target for count-

less malicious and libelous attacks. The colony was a valuable project from any, including the public, point of view. To it were attracted many of the outstanding intellectuals and radicals, as well as others who were to become outstanding—Harry Sinclair Lewis, for example, who left Yale to become Helicon Hall's furnace man. When Helicon Hall burned down, to the concerted jeers of the press, which took special delight in baiting the sensitive and argumentative Sinclair, the loss was real, for Helicon Hall had pioneered the way for other and more ambitious projects.

Everybody's made a more extended and deliberate search for democracy. It sent Charles Edward Russell about the world to write a series called "Soldiers of the Common Good,"² which would acquaint Americans with the efforts other nations were making to achieve democracy. Russell reported on the famous Rochdale Co-operative in England, told how Germany, Italy, and France were handling their government-ownership problems, elaborated on Switzerland, the classic land of successful democracy, and was properly impressed by New Zealand's triumphant paternalism. In his autobiography he was to admit that New Zealand's arbitration boards had fooled him (he was actually convinced that the problem of strikes had been settled) but, again, experiment had to come before knowledge, and Russell, who was one of the most sincere of the muckrakers—a martyr type, as Steffens called him—had fewer errors to confess than others who chanced less and accomplished less.

Muckraking was, first of all, constructive and democratic. Sensationalism as an end in itself was to become the property of writers who had nothing else to contribute. After the muckrakers, in incredibly few years, had educated the country to new conditions and solutions, they advanced—or rather began to advance—to more sophisticated planes of discussion. They discarded outmoded methods of debate, which straightway became the property of less sincere and less talented writers.

The city, wrote Frederic C. Howe, is the hope of democracy. And yet it might have seemed to those who read *McClure's*, *Suc-*

² Published in book form as *The Uprising of the Many*, Doubleday, Page & Co., New York, 1907.

cess, *Arena*, and like magazines in 1906 that America had never been so flagrantly corrupt as now. Trials of eminent and pre-



"CURRENT LITERATURE"

Drawn by E. W. Kemble for *Collier's*, March 25, 1905

eminent men were taking place in scores of cities. The Oregon land frauds several years after having been disclosed, continued to be aired in the press. Francis J. Heney, who had become a

national figure through his handling of the case, was now in San Francisco acting as special prosecutor against Mayor Schmitz and investigating, among others, Patrick Calhoun, the famous traction magnate. The prosecution, only temporarily halted by the great earthquake, continued down to 1909 in an atmosphere of terror and stench.

Similar situations existed in Philadelphia, Chicago, and other major cities. It was almost as though, perversely, the old-time political bosses were offering the muckrakers opportunities for exposure. Actually, of course, they were only continuing disreputable practices because they knew no other ways of carrying on business and politics. Those practices were the ones by which they had grown and flourished. They fought reform stubbornly, blindly, because reform rendered them useless.

In practice, it was the reformers who had to learn resistance, for the odds were heavily against them. The muckraking organs were more than encouraging to the reformers in their work; they were essential to prevent the isolation of reform campaigns—as was true when Folk reached an impasse in St. Louis and Steffens came to his aid. The magazines, in brief, gave the reformers a chance to voice their aims and difficulties, taught them what other reformers were doing, and otherwise sustained them in their individual crusades.

Among the muckrakers themselves, Brand Whitlock was an illustration of the political reformer (he detested the term) who, being fundamentally literary, was acutely conscious of what his work involved. He was no lawmaker, like W. S. U'Ren, of Oregon; no robust, practical Single-Taxer, like his friend Tom Johnson, who had made Cleveland the best-governed city in the country. Whitlock had the temperament of the artist, and he had been inspired by "Golden Rule" Jones to believe that the fight for democracy must go on. After Jones's death in 1904, Whitlock took up the work of "practical Christianity" where Jones had left it, and served four times as Mayor of Toledo.

Why did not Whitlock devote himself freely to literature, as he longed to do, rather than to his "duty" as a politician? Whitlock wanted more than other muckrakers to step out of his times

and produce "pure" art. There being little of that in America, he read eagerly the work which the last line of English masters—Hardy, Conrad, and the others—was creating, and struggled for leisure to do his own writing. He believed that literature as he conceived it, cool and finished and classical, could be developed out of the broken soil of the era. It seemed to him that muck-raking was only a half-step to frankly political work: one might just as well go the whole way. At any rate, it was with no feeling of triumph that he became a municipal statesman (he later recognized those years of his service as the best years of his life³) and he was many times to wish that "Golden Rule" Jones, with his calm, indomitable faith in his fellow-men, were beside to advise and direct him.

Whitlock inherited the hatred which all the organized groups of the community had accorded Jones. Sensitive and imaginative, Whitlock was never able to read indifferently the malice and misrepresentation which capitalists, churchmen, and Socialists alike directed at him. Yet it was, curiously enough, the Socialists to whom he most quickly turned cold. They too were idealists; and because he was an idealist, it seemed to them that he deserved less consideration than others who were frankly corrupt or ignorant. When, in 1907, Whitlock published *The Turn of the Balance*, in which he summed up all his intense feeling about the injustices of which life was capable, Socialist fury against him only increased. A man capable of such social understanding had no right to be less than a Socialist; it was his duty to join the only party of truth and righteousness! Whitlock, who read seriously and thought seriously, was revolted by their indifference to his point of view, their assumption that only a desire to be comfortable—actually, there were millionaire Socialists who received whole-hearted party approval—prevented him from taking the one course which honesty and courage would have dictated. They closed their doors to him, and Whitlock henceforth ignored them.

Whitlock saw that common people, uninspired and unprophetic, had at least the virtue of human nature, if not always of human kindness. He found himself at war with every organized element

³ See *The Letters and Journal of Brand Whitlock*, D. Appleton-Century Co., New York, 1936.

of Toledo, but he himself shrank from hurting anyone. Like Jones, he saw no gain to society in the harassment of criminals and prostitutes. They had to live; the duty of society was to purify itself. And it was to the task of purification that he addressed himself as best he could.

For eight years he immersed himself in work which was as exhausting as it was disheartening. Very often he felt like Tom Johnson, "even such a strong man as Tom Johnson," whom he reported to have said: "I wish I could take a train to the end of the longest railway in the world, then go as far as wagons could draw me and then walk and crawl as far as I could and then in the midst of the farthest forest lie down and rest."⁴

Still, he had chosen his work, and it was good work. He and those others who had dedicated themselves to it were able to look upon charters and laws which established landmarks of municipal order, and to call them their own.

In 1912 Whitlock declined the nomination for a fifth term as Toledo's Mayor. If he was ever to write his novels, he would have to leave politics now. Instead, he wrote *Forty Years of It*, a sensitive and true account of his long struggle for achievement. It was meant to be merely a summary of the long years before a new, and literary, career began. The career to which he actually turned was a diplomatic career, upon which Upton Sinclair in *Money Writes!* so unfairly and inadequately commented.

Whitlock wrote novels, but they were not the novels about which he had dreamed. (*Uprooted*—a title of significance—as published in 1926 was representative of his several later efforts in novel-writing.) He was unable to transmute his profound experience, at least fictionally, for use in the late Tens and the Twenties. *Forty Years of It*, however, even more than the stirring *Turn of the Balance*, contained all the art of which Whitlock had dreamed. It was not fiction, but, had he known it, had criticism been able to tell him so, it had enduring qualities such as major works by his literary heroes possessed—granting that democracy, and the struggle for democracy, were as important as he and others of his generation believed.

⁴ Quoted in Whitlock's *Forty Years of It*, D. Appleton & Co., New York, 1914.

Such were some of the human factors in the struggle for representative government. The development of a *mechanism* for good government proceeded along parallel lines. From the theoretical point of view, if one had honest men in power, any framework of politics was as good as another. It did not much matter whether a city was ruled from the state capitol or from the city hall; whether the voter had a long, complicated ballot on which to register his vote or a short, simple one; whether there were bosses, city councils, or city boards of directors. Hard experience had nevertheless shown that the casual, brutal, dictatorial rule which obtained in the cities was, to say the least, unscientific. Under such rule it was physically impossible for the citizen to cast a meaningful vote.

Well aware of such truths was *The Arena*, which throughout the era had been a sort of theoretical organ of reform. B. O. Flower placed a great deal of emphasis upon methods of conducting a real democracy. He ran articles on the Australian ballot and experiments in city rule. He conducted pages for public-ownership news, printed notes about co-operatives, and otherwise encouraged all plans to simplify government and give it improved form and character.

McClure's also consciously sought the way to better democratic city government. When, back in 1901, Galveston, Texas, had been destroyed by a tidal wave, the office of the mayor and the council had been summarily abolished, and entire responsibility for the restoration of the city had been placed in the hands of five commissioners, one of whom had been called the "mayor president." The Galveston Plan, as commission government came to be known, had since shown such powers of efficiency that news of it had spread over the country. McClure had pricked up his ears: this was just the kind of scheme he had been seeking. His dream of government had been government as it was found in England and on the Continent: efficient, simple, and, incidentally, class-biased. McClure had been willing that it need not be class government in America; in any event, it could be efficient.

A revolution had taken place in his offices. His associate John S. Phillips had resigned, and with Tarbell, Baker, and Steffens, as well as Finley Dunne, and William Allen White, had taken over *The American Magazine* (as *Leslie's* had recently become) which

they quickly pushed to the front rank of muckraking organs.⁵ Despite this, McClure had dauntlessly reorganized his staff and set out to publicize municipal experiments. He himself had already outlined the negative phase of city rule in his December 1904 article "The Increase of Lawlessness in the United States." Now he sent George Kibbe Turner to the new Galveston to report developments, and Turner came back with an article that immediately placed him high among the magazine writers.

"Galveston: A Business Corporation," published in October 1906, was the first of Turner's articles on municipal government to make a deep impression on the country. (As late as December 1909 McClure was to notice, with pardonable pride, that the article was being frequently published and republished in pamphlet form and in the newspapers.) By April 1907 Turner had ready for McClure's another article, "The City of Chicago," an unforgettable picture of the reigning immoralities of drink, gambling, and prostitution which McClure had himself earlier drawn from the editorial standpoint. An editorial on "Chicago and Galveston," pointing out the wide interest the articles by Turner had caused, now mentioned efforts that were being made to push commission government in various states of the Union. Thus McClure once more struck a major note that arrested thoughtful readers—a note he was to strike with continued success until, finally, his magazine was taken away from him.

✓ The Galveston Plan caught on. But continued experiment with it revealed defects. Practice showed that, too often, the commissioners were mere politicians who did not know how to direct public health, works, and utilities, and the fire and police departments. The proposal was then made, in connection with the city-manager plan which Des Moines created, that a city should be run not by commissioners but rather by directors with power to select and appoint competent managers. This plan succeeded the Galveston Plan in popular interest and spread rapidly. It was supplemented by amendments providing for the recall of unsatisfactory city officials and for other democratic needs, and was otherwise modeled into a standard form for city government. By 1915

⁵ Tarbell's *All in the Day's Work* (Macmillan Co., New York, 1939) narrates in detail the reasons and results of this revolution.

it was recognized as an American method of municipal control that had already developed a history.

It was not wholly premature in 1910 to issue a book⁶ which declaimed the end of the old methods of city rule. The book was written in a key that was much too triumphant for any realist, and yet it was startlingly true. The old bosses were gone. Municipal affairs were being conducted with an efficiency that "Boss" Croker, Ames, Cox, and the others of Steffens's immortal gallery would not have recognized, and—this was significant—in 1910 the muckrakers themselves were no longer busy exposing arch political criminals. This sort of agitation had become the concern of local newspapers dealing with local affairs. There were bosses, of course, but the bosses were, by and large, no longer the picturesque and bold characters whom the muckrakers had challenged. The new bosses were merely integral units in a larger system.

The cities had become regulated. And, it is true, not always by impeccable men. New Jersey, for instance, was among the first of the Eastern states to give state-wide sanction to the commission form of government. Under the Walsh Act, Jersey City came under that variety of rule, and in 1916 it elected Frank Hague to the proud office of mayor. Reformers like Frederic Howe, watching officials like Hague, cried despairingly that regulation was not enough, that monopolists and politicians had adjusted themselves to it and preferred it for their business and careers.⁷ But that despair simply drove Howe and others to the logical next step of demanding socialization and economic equality. This was what Howe and other mature muckrakers and reformers, flanked by a healthy, trained, radical youth, were turning over in their minds when war broke their moorings and scattered them into helpless isolation.

Meanwhile one could understand Brand Whitlock's strange mixture of despair for American democracy as he viewed it in the Twenties, and pride in his old achievements. The younger men did not realize how much trouble it had been to achieve reform. They accepted and held lightly forms and modes of government

⁶ *The Dethronement of the City Boss*, by John J. Hamilton, Funk & Wagnalls Co., New York, 1910.

⁷ *The High Cost of Living*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1917.

that had only been won through sacrifice and persistence. Yet it was for them to prove that, being unimportant—or no longer crucially important—these reforms had not been worth the winning. It was also for them to define more important, more ambitious political objectives.