

Ida M. Tarbell and the Ambiguities of Feminism

THE hit of the New York theatrical season in 1905 was a political play by Charles Klein called *The Lion and the Mouse*, which opened at Broadway's Lyceum Theater on November 20. Theater audiences generally understood that Klein had based his drama on the recent assault against the Standard Oil trust by Ida M. Tarbell which *McClure's Magazine* had just finished serializing a few months earlier. It was easy to recognize in Klein's character, John B. Ryder, a thinly veiled John D. Rockefeller, and to see in the heroine, Shirley Rossmore, a partly disguised Ida Tarbell herself. Klein had had only moderate success as a writer of sentimental romances earlier, but *The Lion and the Mouse* broke records. Its 686 continuous performances constituted the longest run of any American play on the New York stage up to that time, and soon promoters put together four road companies which toured the country for several months.¹

Klein's success had less to do with the quality of the play than it did with the rise of a newly critical public opinion and the fact that his characters were easily identifiable with prominent names appearing regularly in the newspapers and magazines of the Progressive Era. The plot concerned Shirley Rossmore, a young magazine journalist whose novel, *The Great American Octopus*, attacks the ethics and empire of the most powerful robber baron in America, John Burkett Ryder. Dramatic dialogues between Rossmore and Ryder reveal the journalist courageously defending her father, a reform judge threatened with impeachment by Ryder's forces in

¹ Charles Klein, *The Lion and the Mouse* (New York, 1906); "The Romance of the Financier," *New York Times*, Nov. 26, 1905, part 4, p. 4; see also the *Times'* review, Nov. 21, 1905, p. 9; Caspar H. Nannes, *Politics in the American Drama* (Washington, D. C., 1960), 30-33; Maxwell Bloomfield, "Muckraking and the American Stage: The Emergence of Realism, 1905-1917," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, LXVI (Spring, 1967), 165-178.

the Senate and gradually winning over Ryder himself by sharp challenges to his business ethics.

The parallels between fiction and fact were obvious, but one aspect of the story seemed very much out of harmony with Tarbell's known career: during her investigation, Shirley Rossmore falls in love with Ryder's son, Jefferson, and in the end they marry. Klein's happy ending symbolized the reconciliation of opposing forces and was a concession to popular interest in love stories and to the nineteenth-century belief that the normal condition of women was marriage. The independent, willful Shirley, who, in the eyes of another character has given "the grossest exhibition of feminine boldness," must finally give all that up and take on a quieter role within marriage and the family.² Tarbell, on the other hand, had decided to remain single and, pursuing a full career in journalism, she became nationally known and visibly successful in a profession very much dominated by men. She developed a plain-spoken independent personality and earned from her mostly male colleagues at *McClure's* and elsewhere not just the deference they thought was due her sex but the respect due her achievements.³

It was more than a matter of passing curiosity, therefore, when, just a few years after the triumphant publication of her attack on Standard Oil—a symbol of her success in a kind of journalism well beyond the "woman's page" assignments reserved for her sex—Ida Tarbell began to emerge as a forceful defender of the nineteenth-century image of women and their social role.⁴ She did not herself follow the example of Shirley Rossmore but she did tell other women to retire into marriage and spent a large part of her working time from about 1909 onward writing articles, books, and even a briefly popular novel urging women to recover their "female nature,"

² Klein, *The Lion and the Mouse*, 37.

³ She did, however, tell Ray Stannard Baker once, without serious regret, that she had been excluded from a press dinner because she was a woman. Tarbell to Baker, Apr. 5, 1906, Ray Stannard Baker Papers, Library of Congress.

⁴ The nineteenth-century view is outlined in Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," *American Quarterly*, XVIII (Summer, 1966), 151-174, and in Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg, "The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Woman and Her Role in Nineteenth Century America," *Journal of American History*, LX (September, 1973) 352-356.

refrain from direct participation in political affairs, and embrace their true role as wives, mothers, and homemakers.⁵

Some people were glad for her seeming conversion, like Edward Bok, who offered her \$250 for an article he wanted to place in the *Ladies Home Journal's* antifeminist campaign to be titled "If I Were a Man: How I Would View the Modern Feminine Tendencies." She was the only woman he knew, he assured her, who could give the "straight-from-the-shoulder, direct talk that a man likes."⁶ But others were surprised at Tarbell's apparent defection. Suffragists were upset to see her name cited in antisuffrage literature and were dismayed when she, a successful, emancipated woman, accepted speaking engagements with local antisuffrage societies. Even John S. Phillips, the quiet-spoken editor of the *American Magazine*, which she and other former staff members of *McClure's* took over when they left S. S. McClure in 1906, was so disappointed at the illiberalism and apparent inconsistency of her views that he asked for a detailed justification and defense of them. Helen Keller reportedly said Tarbell was getting old.⁷

Tarbell's "conversion" is still puzzling. Why did she change her mind? Or did she? Perhaps the answers can be found in two separate approaches, both of which involve larger biographical problems. One has to do with a resentment Tarbell may have felt in mid-life at having been pushed earlier into a professional career which had made domestic life impossible. The other approach is to understand the conflict between her own life of personal independence and her preaching of domesticity for others as a latent manifestation of an old ambiguity in her mind regarding women's social role—an ambiguity which can be traced far back into her childhood. Both approaches require examination, but neither is comprehensible with-

⁵ Betty Friedan offers useful commentary on the general phenomenon of distinguished career women who counsel other women to stay home in *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, 1963), 56-57. Tarbell's advice was surely hypocritical, but, as the following pages will argue, the advice is also understandable in terms of a hidden ambiguity of thinking about women's role which followed her through her whole life.

⁶ Bok to Tarbell, Jan. 14, 1914, Papers of Ida M. Tarbell, Reis Library, Allegheny College.

⁷ C. A. Whitney (College Equal Suffrage League) to Tarbell (telegram), Sept. 4, 1911; Tarbell to Phillips, undated memo (c. 1909-1912) titled "To the Editor-in-Chief of the *American Magazine*"; Alice Hill Chittenden to Tarbell, Jan. 28, 1914, Tarbell Papers.

out a preliminary analysis of the seemingly new antifeminist stance which shocked the feminists of her time.

Her antifeminist views emerged first in a series of articles Tarbell wrote for the *American Magazine* starting in 1909, but their fullest expression came in a second series begun in 1912 and later published in book form under the title *The Business of Being a Woman*.⁸ A sense of smug self-righteousness pervaded the second series, but the articles were far from polemical. What she intended was a gentle corrective to current feminist rhetoric on the equality of the sexes and especially to what she saw as a mood of unhealthy self-discussion among women about their role in society. To use her own phrase, she was directing her counsel to "The Uneasy Woman." Tarbell's corrective was the more urgent, she thought, because the "ferment of mind" she observed in individual women could spread to the families which depended on them for security, and from there it could infect the society itself. But uneasy women could regain their calm if they realized the truth of two propositions: first, that men and women possessed wholly different natures which fit them for separate social roles and made them unfit for sharing each other's work; and second, that the societal implications of women's natural work in the home were far broader than most women who were dissatisfied with that role might see. The business of being a woman was women's business alone and was satisfying only to the extent that women understood its transcendent importance.⁹

The female nature revealed itself early in two tendencies parents everywhere observed in little girls: a craving for pretty dresses and for dolls. No one could teach a child to embrace these interests—or, for that matter, not to—because they were natural impulses and

⁸ Ida M. Tarbell, "The American Woman" (series), *American Magazine*, LXIX-LXX (November, 1909–May, 1910); Ida M. Tarbell, "The Business of Being a Woman" (series), *ibid.*, LXXIII-LXXIV (January–October, 1912). The first series is a history of American women, concentrating on biographical portraits. Its critical tone is especially evident in "The American Woman: Her First Declaration of Independence," *ibid.*, LXIX (February, 1910), 468–481.

⁹ These ideas about women's nature and the home orientation of women were common arguments against feminism and woman suffrage. See Aileen Kraditor *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1890–1920* (New York, 1965), 14–42; and Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America, 1889–1963, The Intellectual as a Social Type* (New York, 1965), 38–57.

appeared or not depending only upon whether the child were a girl or a boy. They were, in a sense, teachers themselves, for, as Tarbell put it, when a girl finds herself playing with dresses and dolls, "Nature is telling her what her work in the world is to be."¹⁰ Correctly interpreted, then, the childhood interest in dresses was the first sign that the mature woman must take an intensely personal view of the world, manifested first in self-ornamentation but characterized later by a tendency to discuss all subjects in personal terms and a corresponding inability to understand society's affairs from a broader, more objective point of view. Interest in dolls, of course, indicated a mothering instinct. "The central fact of the woman's life—Nature's reason for her—," wrote Tarbell, "is the child, his bearing and rearing."¹¹ Women's nature continued to reveal itself through the maturing process so that by the time a woman came of age she had added two new traits: a natural conservatism, useful in her adult role as guarantor of social continuity, and reliance upon intuition as opposed to reasoning.¹²

Any woman's attempt to change these patterns would be at best futile and at worst a dangerous and unsettling violation of her nature. When Susan B. Anthony, for example, added dress reform to her campaign for woman suffrage in the 1870s and began wearing the functional dress designed by Amelia Bloomer, she met unexpectedly sharp ridicule and finally abandoned the Bloomer dress. Tarbell recounted the incident but observed with a smile that public reaction was less important in Anthony's return to prettier dresses than something more fundamental: "she met her woman's soul, and did not know it!"¹³

More serious and more dangerous than the matter of dress was the fact that militant feminists were actively encouraging women to abandon what they claimed were the too narrow confines of the home and to seek equality in business, politics, and public affairs. Here were violations of the female nature which could not but bring unhappiness to the woman who followed the feminists' advice and disruption to the society which allowed it. Tarbell admitted that

¹⁰ Ida M. Tarbell, *The Business of Being a Woman* (New York, 1914), 109.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 54. The personalism and subjectivity of women are discussed on pp. 99-100.

¹² *Ibid.*, 35-39, 165.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 134.

between the husband and the wife society always allowed the man "wider sweep, more interests outside of their immediate alliance," but she saw nothing arbitrary in this arrangement. If men led in business and politics it was in their nature to do so. Their more rational cast of mind, their objectivity, were masculine traits which, unavailable to women, enabled men to be more at ease in the exercise of public power. That was why there were many good women in business and the professions but never any great ones. Whether it be merchandising, manufacturing, or even Tarbell's own profession, editing, there were no women daring enough, adventurous enough, free enough from personal prejudice to succeed as well as a man. Competition in these fields came easy for men and was conducted with an intensity welcomed by the male nature, but women could compete with men in a man's world only by arming themselves with unnatural hardness, losing their affective qualities, and finally crippling their natures. A few good women survived in business and public affairs, but they were at once successful and repellent. Surely the most tragic figure of all, thought Tarbell, was the militant feminist herself: the once-attractive and now crippled woman whose nature has been destroyed by her very fight—in public—for equality.¹⁴

Women would never have thought of crossing the line into the masculine world, Tarbell thought, if the feminists had not pushed them to the edge. The modern crisis of the "uneasy women" really began decades earlier in 1848 when about 300 men and women gathered at Seneca Falls, New York, under the leadership of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott for what they announced as the first Woman's Rights Convention. There on July 19, 1848, the feminists adopted by unanimous vote a "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions" which they modeled in language and philosophy after Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. Arguing that the "laws of nature and Nature's God" entitled women to "inalienable rights" which men had long withheld, the Seneca Falls convention did not distinguish between a male and female nature but argued for equality on the basis of women's humanity and a universal nature.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7, 25ff, 41ff.

Tarbell claimed that that was where the problem lay. She countered that the relationship of men and women was not one of a superior to an inferior which, because it was created by men could be adjusted by women, but rather was a relationship between different, complementary, and unchanging natures. What the Seneca Falls "Declaration" really proposed, she said, was the imitation of men in all things—an impossible project. "If a woman's temperamental and intellectual operations were identical with a man's," she wrote, "then there would be hope of success, but they are not."¹⁵ The continuing assumption that they were identical was one of the things spreading unease through American society.

Another thing was women's failure to realize the full societal implications of their natural homemaking role. Women looked fretfully outward from their families only because they failed to see the richness of their work and the subtle influence it had upon the rest of society. They must certainly respect the limitations of their nature, but they must understand its broad possibilities as well. The fundamental point was that a woman was not just the manager of a household; she was nothing less than the head of a "social laboratory." She had in her care the preparation of the ideas and tools for shaping society itself. Because a woman handled the financial expenditures of her family she could, as a consumer, determine and reform what went on in the marketplace. Because she was the educator of her sons as to the value and meaning of democracy, she could influence national politics in ways more fundamental than mere voting and officeholding.¹⁶

In the years following the 1912 publication of *The Business of Being a Woman* Tarbell may have gone through a period of working out in her own life some of the ideas she had put together. She would never abandon her increasingly public position in journalism, of course, and in that sense never practiced what she preached, but she did seem to exercise a personal restraint which may have indi-

¹⁵ The text of the "Declaration" is in Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *et al.*, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage* (New York, 1881), I, 70-73, and is more conveniently available in Aileen Kraditor, ed., *Up From the Pedestal, Selected Writings in the History of Feminism* (Chicago, 1970), 184-188. Tarbell's paraphrase and critique of it are in *The Business of Being a Woman*, 13ff.

¹⁶ Tarbell, *The Business of Being a Woman*, 62ff, 79-80, 139-140.

cated a desire to draw limitations and definitions for her career. She revealed this attitude by her response to two invitations President Woodrow Wilson offered her to enter government service. In 1916 he asked her to take a place on his new Tariff Commission, partly because as a champion of low tariffs he was impressed by the advocacy of downward revision in her book *The Tariff in Our Time* (1911), and also because Wilson was a moderate backer of woman suffrage and wanted to boost a woman to a prominent position in government as a way of demonstrating the abilities of women generally. But she refused to accept, and though Jane Addams pleaded with her to change her mind, Tarbell feared that her ineffective service would embarrass Wilson and disprove his point.¹⁷

A few months later, just after Congress declared war on Germany, Wilson telegraphed an invitation to her to serve on the Woman's Committee of the Council of National Defense, and this time she accepted. Her work on the Committee was congenial and fitted Tarbell's ideas on the place of women in the home. It encouraged women to avoid wastage of food as their special contribution to the war effort by counseling them on canning and drying vegetables—the Committee giving over a whole morning, for example, to “reminiscences of helping grandmother string apples for drying, of the way mother dried corn and berries”—but it also did what it could to protect women in their temporary and unaccustomed role as war industry workers, and even designed and distributed a black velvet arm band for Gold Star Mothers.¹⁸

Another wartime project defined her attitudes toward women further. In the spring of 1919 she published a novel, *The Rising of the Tide*, in which she attempted to characterize the effect of the war on the American homefront.¹⁹ Reviewers liked it only because of its message of firm support for the war effort itself, but its plot was a crudely constructed bundle of clichés. Yet her women charac-

¹⁷ Tarbell, *All in the Day's Work*, 277–279; Tarbell to Addams, Jan. 26, 1917, Tarbell Papers.

¹⁸ Mrs. John O. Miller to Tarbell, Apr. 25, 1920 (and Tarbell's note on the bottom of the page), Tarbell Papers. Her service on the Woman's Committee is detailed in Tarbell, *All in the Day's Work*, 318–329. See also Ida M. Tarbell, “Mobilizing the Women,” *Harper's*, CXXXV (November, 1917), 841–847.

¹⁹ Ida M. Tarbell, *The Rising of the Tide, The Story of Sabinsport* (New York, 1919).

ters are interesting. Some are long-suffering mothers who sustain with nobility the loss of sons in France; others are young girls who drive prostitutes from the community by providing a homelike canteen for lonely soldiers encamped nearby. One reviewer noted that the lead characters all seemed borrowed from the pages of popular magazines. Patsy McCullen and Nancy Cowder, the two young heroines, were much like the wholesome, strong girls who inhabited stories in the *Ladies Home Journal* and *Harper's Bazaar*.²⁰ What is most interesting about Patsy and Nancy, however, is that each undergoes a character transformation. They begin the story as independent, daring country girls (Nancy is "a big strapping girl with a stride like a man's"),²¹ and it is through their work as relief workers in wartime Belgium and the Balkans that their community back home comes to understand the meaning of the Allied cause. But in the final pages each gives up her strenuous public life in preference to the quiet certainties of marriage and the family. Tarbell the novelist was underscoring what Tarbell the journalist had already set out as the proper sphere for women.

In the 1920s Tarbell's disinclination to broaden her concept of women's role in society softened only a little. Her thoughts about the woman suffrage amendment and its immediate results were an example. She had never believed that women, with the vote, would be any more capable of improving the world than men and had made a restrained opposition to the Nineteenth Amendment. For her, the question had to be framed not in terms of the emancipation of women, but on the basis of what social or political result would come of women voting.²² In the 1920s, perhaps because she had defined the issue so narrowly, Tarbell became ambivalent. An article in 1924 posed the question "Is Woman's Suffrage a Failure?", and she said it was a failure in the sense that the revolution in public affairs predicted by many suffragists had not happened, for women voters seemed as conservative and regular as men. But it was a

²⁰ *Dial*, LXII (Aug. 9, 1919), 122. The comment seems the more appropriate considering Tarbell's own experience reading and editing popular magazines.

²¹ Tarbell, *Rising of the Tide*, 90.

²² Tarbell, memo to herself, Dec. 13, 1909, Tarbell Papers. In her novel she observed that neither the occurrence nor the character of war would change if women got the vote; they were as bloodthirsty as men. *Rising of the Tide*, 174.

success in that having to vote made women more conscious than they could have been before of public issues like labor conditions, the crime wave, or Teapot Dome. Elsewhere, she even challenged women to use their education and their votes to "save civilization," without, however, explaining how. Then, by 1930, she was stressing the failures again and seemed not to have changed her views at all.²³

All of this, from her first articles in 1909 through *The Business of Being a Woman* to her observations on woman suffrage, seemed a departure from her earlier thoughts and career. She was spending almost as much time writing on the woman question after 1909 as she was on business, and this shift is what surprised friends and feminists alike. Why did she change? David Chalmers has suggested that in middle life Tarbell began to regret her decision years before not to marry and raise a family. Frances Willard and other feminist leaders were occasional visitors in her home in the 1870s, and the young Ida listened to a great deal of talk about women's rights. Education and self-sufficiency seemed more important to her than marriage, but by the time she reached the age of fifty she may have begun to regret her decision and perhaps even resent the feminist influence which once made it seem wise.²⁴ In some ways *The Business of Being a Woman*, with its praise of motherhood and the home and its sharp critique of feminism, is a poignantly personal book. She seemed, for example, to be recalling a personal experience when, in the midst of a general discussion of the women's rights movement, she wrote: "There were girls in the early days of the movement, as there no doubt are today, who prayed on their knees that they might escape the frightful isolation of marriage, might be free to 'live' and to 'work,' to 'know' and to 'do.' What it was really all about they never knew until it was too late." It was not "girls" she was thinking of here so much as it was one girl: herself at the age of fourteen, kneeling, as she would describe it later in her auto-

²³ Ida M. Tarbell, "Is Woman's Suffrage a Failure?", *Good Housekeeping*, LXXXIX (October, 1924), 18-19; Tarbell, untitled notes for a lecture, undated (filed under "Women Today, Activities of"); Tarbell, "Women and Civilization," clipping from a Utica, N. Y., newspaper (1920s); Tarbell, "Women and the League of Nations," typescript (1920s), Tarbell Papers; Tarbell, "Ten Years of Woman Suffrage," *Literary Digest*, CV (Apr. 26, 1930), 11.

²⁴ David Chalmers, "Tarbell, Ida Minerva," in Edward T. James, *et al.* eds., *Notable American Women, 1607-1950* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), III, 428-431.

biography, to beg for the same deliverance, but sensing now, while writing *The Business of Being a Woman*, that it was, indeed, too late.²⁵

By taking, for the first time in her life, a *public* stand on this issue, Tarbell may have been seeking a way to manage a dilemma which plagued many of her contemporaries in various ways. People at all times feel the tension generated by the conflict between innovation and tradition. The Progressive Era was no exception. David Noble has shown that many Progressive theorists could not wholly reject the past, with the result that their works reflected a tension—a “paradox”—between the old and new. Reform novelists, too, like Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and Winston Churchill betrayed similar unease as they discovered their inability to free themselves from traditional social attitudes, and even Tarbell’s friend and fellow muckraker, Ray Stannard Baker, suffered a split in his private and public personality as he wrote journalism which faced critically and realistically the growing pains of urban-industrial America and, at the same time, published fiction which longed for an idyllic rural past.²⁶

Some women intellectuals found themselves caught in a special tension of their own. Many of them had grown up in middle-class families and learned reverence for the home setting as a primary lesson of their upbringing. At the same time, women like Margaret Sanger, Jane Addams, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Inez Haynes Gilmore grew restless at the thought of accepting the traditional role assigned to their sex and began to reach out for an independent personal fulfillment in the outside world. Then, having created a place for themselves as professionals, they were beset with feelings of alienation—a sense of severance from the old role and a sense of incomplete acceptance in the new.²⁷ The journalist Inez Haynes Gilmore expressed the tension of many other women intellectuals when she wrote a “confession” for *Harper’s Bazaar* in 1912:

²⁵ Tarbell, *The Business of Being a Woman*, 28; Tarbell, *All in the Day’s Work*, 36.

²⁶ David W. Noble, *The Paradox of Progressive Thought* (Minneapolis, 1958); Robert W. Schneider, *Five Novelists of the Progressive Era* (New York, 1965); Robert C. Bannister, *Ray Stannard Baker: The Mind and Thought of a Progressive* (New Haven, Conn., 1966).

²⁷ Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America*, 3–68.

It seems to me that sociologically, so to speak, I hang in the void midway between two spheres—the man's sphere and the woman's sphere. A professional career . . . puts me beyond the reach of the average woman's duties and pleasures. The conventional limitations of the female lot put me beyond the reach of the average man's duties and pleasures.²⁸

Many of the women who felt this conflict tried to resolve it by moving further in the direction of feminism. Tarbell, experiencing a similar conflict and facing an aggressive public renaissance of the women's rights movement,²⁹ may have tried to cope with it by maintaining her independent professional life while rejecting the feminist ideas which had led her to become a professional in the first place. She used her skill and popularity as a writer to extol the virtues of a life she thought she might have liked and from which she had become personally divorced.

Yet, if it is surely interesting to speculate on what made Tarbell publicly embrace the nineteenth-century ethic of women and the home, it may be just as useful to determine how much of a change that seemingly new stance involved. Her public emergence as an antifeminist surprised those who knew her superficially, but, in fact, there is reason to believe that she did not change her views greatly or, at least, that if she did articulate a new view, it had private roots running back deeply into her early life. Throughout her earlier years, from childhood through college and her first years as a journalist, Tarbell had lived with an uneasy but publicly unexpressed tension between her interest in feminism and her understanding of older roles for women.

There is no question about her interest in feminism during her girlhood. She was born in 1857 in western Pennsylvania's bustling oil region and grew up with an acuteness of observation that would make her characterizations of the area in her later *History of the Standard Oil Company* especially compelling. But she also grew up watching her mother struggle with attempts to reconcile her own

²⁸ Lasch, *ibid.*, 58, quotes these lines from Inez Haynes Gilmore, "Confessions of an Alien," *Harper's Bazaar*, XLVI (April, 1912), 170ff.

²⁹ One token of the renewed interest in women's rights was the rapid increase in the membership of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. Kraditor, *Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement*, 7, estimates NAWSA's growth as follows: 1893, 13,150; 1905, 17,000; 1907, 45,501; 1910, 75,000; 1915, 100,000; 1917, 2,000,000.

difficult housework—caring for the hired men needed in her husband's oil tank business as well as her family—with her growing interest in women's rights. It was part of the family legend that Ida's grandmother had ordered her mother to quit a teaching job—in the service of a rigid nineteenth-century idea of woman's place—immediately following her marriage, despite the fact that months went by before the husband could join and provide for the family himself. These observations, together with the talk she overheard from women's rights advocates who visited the house made Ida think hard about her own future.³⁰

Yet, at the same time, she was also coming to value the stability of the home life her mother created. The family lived near a settlement called Petroleum Center which nightly became the scene of drinking and debauchery among hard-working oil men; as a teenage girl Ida liked to sit by an upstairs window and imagine the wild life going on inside a dance hall the lights of which she could see not far away. But she did so from the vantage point of a well-ordered environment in which her mother enforced a stern and, to the daughter, a welcome discipline with regard to swearing and drinking among her husband's hired men.³¹ It was true that her mother entertained feminists in the house, but the figures Tarbell remembered best were Frances Willard, the well-known leader of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and Mary Livermore, her companion in the fight against alcohol. Both were suffragists but they argued temperance and votes for women in the name of the sanctity of the home and the essentially domestic role of women.³²

It was, perhaps, the feminists she did not meet who influenced her most. Internal arguments over whether or not to support the Negro's right to vote before pressing on for woman suffrage threatened the unity of the women's movement in the 1860s, and then noisy disagreements concerning the nature of marriage and the

³⁰ Tarbell, *All in the Day's Work*, 3, 30ff.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 13-14, 32. See also her commentary on the immorality of the region in *The History of the Standard Oil Company* (2 vols. in 1, New York, 1937), I, 34-35.

³² Mary Earhart, *Frances Willard, from Prayers to Politics* (Chicago, 1944); Mary Livermore, *The Story of My Life, or the Sunshine and Shadow of Seventy Years* (New Haven, Conn., 1899), especially 398ff. in which Livermore describes her unusually happy marriage with a husband who was "patient" about her cooking and other failures.

question of divorce opened a wide chasm between what became separate wings of the suffrage movement. Until their reunion in 1890, the National Woman Suffrage Association challenged the American Woman Suffrage Association for leadership of the cause.³³ All this bothered Tarbell, but what repelled her most was the rise and progress of Victoria Woodhull and her sister Tennessee Claflin. In the late 1860s and 1870s Woodhull and Claflin were known for a variety of activities in New York City, including management of a Wall Street brokerage house (backed by Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt), publishing *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly*, a feminist paper, and general support for woman suffrage. But they became famous everywhere (including the pages of the Titusville, Pennsylvania, newspapers Ida Tarbell was reading) when Victoria Woodhull came out openly for free love, and, on top of that, when, in 1871, she publicly denounced Henry Ward Beecher for having carnal relations with the wife of Theodore Tilton, one of her own sympathizers. She had intended only to point up the hypocrisy in Beecher's attacks on free love, but what followed was a full-scale revelation of the affair in *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly* and a lengthy, nationally reported trial brought on by Tilton's charges against Beecher. Tarbell, together with people all over the country, followed the testimony word by word and drew two lessons from it; first, that Beecher was not guilty (he was acquitted), and second, that the whole scandal, including Woodhull's involvement in it, hardly bore out what Tarbell had heard about the subjection of women; there seemed to be as many "henpecked men" as "down-trodden women."³⁴

Tarbell emerged from all these childhood experiences with a desire to liberate herself but with no interest in advocating women's rights as a general proposition. Education and economic self-sufficiency seemed personally most important, and in 1876, with these goals in mind, she enrolled at nearby Allegheny College, in Meadville, which had opened its doors to women only six years

³³ William L. O'Neill, *Everyone was Brave, The Rise and Fall of Feminism in America* (Chicago, 1969), ch. I.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 24-30; Tarbell, *All in the Day's Work*, 32-34. Frank Luther Mott's Sketch of the *Weekly* in *The History of American Magazines* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957-1968), III, 443-453, is biased against the two sisters but is useful for details. See also Emanie Sachs, "The Terrible Siren," *Victoria Woodhull, 1838-1927* (New York, 1928).

before. Alone in a freshman class of forty men, Tarbell felt self-conscious from the start. Together with four upperclass women, she lived in a girls' boarding house called "The Snowflake" and later in "The Black Maria," but wherever she lived she felt a constant conflict between wanting to flirt with boys—the proximity of "The Snowflake" to a men's building made this easy—and an ascetic pursuit of her studies, especially biology, lest the faculty and trustees decide that the experiment of allowing women in the college had failed. Her professors encouraged her rigorous study of science and the classics, but as the number of women students increased during her four years at Allegheny the chief interest of many became boys. "I am not sure," she would write later, "but that my chief interest was the boy."³⁵ In any case, by the time she graduated in 1880 Tarbell had modified her earlier prayer never to marry: now she thought some day she might.³⁶

Her first experience with journalism began in 1882 when, after a year of disillusioned teaching in Ohio, she returned to Meadville and joined the editorial staff of *The Chautauquan*. The Chautauqua Institution, of which *The Chautauquan* was the official organ, originated in the 1870s as a manifestation of the larger late-nineteenth-century interest in self-improvement and popular culture. Under the leadership of Dr. John H. Vincent, a Methodist minister, the Institute sponsored lecture series and reading programs designed to educate masses of people who had missed earlier, more formal learning opportunities. Though Tarbell stayed with the magazine for seven years and gradually took on much of the work of its editor, Dr. Theodore L. Flood, work on *The Chautauquan* hardly amounted to a professional breakthrough. Her work dealt largely with literary and religious issues and with moral reform, subjects for which women, according to the thinking of the time, were by

³⁵ Tarbell, "Women as I Have Known Them," undated typescript, Tarbell Papers; other discussions of these problems are in Tarbell, "Old Times at Allegheny," *The Allegheny Literary Monthly*, XXVII (October, 1922), 4-7, and Tarbell, *All in the Day's Work*, 40-48.

³⁶ Tarbell, *All in the Day's Work*, 47. She never did, of course, but she did think about it as the years went by, and later, when Zoe Beckley of the *New York Mail* asked her in an interview why she never married, she replied that she did not know but had always vaguely wondered why. Ishbel Ross, *Ladies of the Press: The Story of Women in Journalism by an Insider* (New York, 1936), 98.

nature uniquely prepared.³⁷ Knowing that she was helping to edit a magazine read chiefly by women, Tarbell continued to think about issues of interest to its special constituency. *The Chautauquan* published frequent articles about what it called "the woman question" during her apprenticeship on the staff, distributing its editorial point of view about evenly between home and motherhood advocates and moderate suffragists like Frances Willard.³⁸

Tarbell's own contributions to the magazine revealed her characteristic ambivalence on the question. She began to have doubts about the wisdom of or even the need of woman suffrage and in 1887 wrote a pair of articles which disputed the feminists' claim that women were a downtrodden race. The central argument of "Women as Inventors" and "Women in Journalism" was that no obstacles at all stood in the way of women in the fields of technical invention and newspaper or magazine work, that if an individual woman had will enough and skill to enter these fields, no man, no social attitudes could prevent her success.³⁹ She was obviously uncomfortable, however, with the fact, as she reported it, that of the almost 2,000 patents granted to women up to the year 1886, the vast majority of them were for household and clothing devices. She wanted to argue that this imbalance did not show that women were, despite their ingenuity, demonstrably suited to home pursuits but claimed only that women were most experienced in household management. The article on journalism stressed that male editors were among the more liberal professionals and offered little challenge to women job applicants. About the only kind of reporting

³⁷ Welter, "Cult of True Womanhood," has noted that in addition to domesticity, sexual purity, and submissiveness, women were supposed to have a unique inclination toward religious piety. See also Bertha Monica Stearns, "Reform Periodicals and Female Reformers, 1830-1860," *American Historical Review*, XXVII (1932), 678-699.

³⁸ A representative example of the home-and-motherhood point of view, expressed in almost classic terms, is Frances Power Cobbe, "Duties of Women as Mistresses of Households," *Chautauquan*, IV (May, 1884), 473-474. "The making of a true home," wrote Cobbe, "is really our precious and inalienable right—a right which no man can take from us." Frances Willard and Mary Livermore, both of whom had been guests in Tarbell's home, wrote several articles on homemaking and other subjects. Representative of *Chautauquan's* occasionally strong editorial position favoring women's rights is "The Emancipation of Married Women," *Chautauquan*, VIII (May, 1888), 455.

³⁹ Ida M. Tarbell, "Women as Inventors," *Chautauquan*, VII (March, 1887), 355-357; "Women in Journalism," *ibid.* (April, 1887), 393-395.

impossible for a woman was "police and morgue news," and since the advance of civilization made those items less and less popular, the likelihood was that journalism would soon be open to women without restriction. But then she went on to say that the successful woman journalist would have to keep her natural woman's feelings in check. "The woman who presents a carefully prepared report of what seems to her a very important event and sees the editorial 'blue' go crashing through her fine touches, or who is confronted by some vexatious oversight in her proofreading or copy-handling, feels like crying," she wrote. "An editor with a daily, a weekly, or a magazine form on his hands has no leisure for 'feelings.'" She compromised her argument further by writing that some newspaper departments were "pre-eminently" suited to women, including "the household column," "the social column," and matters involving "philanthropy and moral reform."⁴⁰

Still, the way seemed open. Tarbell wanted to study the lives of women who had figured importantly in history. She read about Marie Antoinette and Madame Roland, both fated to die in separate stages of the French Revolution, and she wrote a sketch of Madame de Staël. Yet she did more than point to famous women as models; she criticized their characters as well and in the process revealed something of her own. Her discussion of Madame de Staël, for example, concluded with a judgment that de Staël was "an unsatisfactory character" because she was too active in body and spirit. She quoted Heinrich Heine's description of her as "a whirlwind in petticoats," and said that she lacked "repose of soul" and could not, therefore, quietly contemplate the highest things in life.⁴¹ By taking up the subject of women at all, of course, Tarbell thought she was doing what she could to advance the cause of her sex, for history had forgotten the accomplishments of women and one must, therefore, re-explore the past in search of them. Yet at the same

⁴⁰ These comments were only a little beyond Frances Willard's on the same subject which the magazine published several months earlier. See Frances Willard, "Women in Journalism," *ibid.*, VI (July, 1886), 576-579.

⁴¹ Ida M. Tarbell, "Madame de Staël," *ibid.*, IX (July, 1889), 579-582. Tarbell may also have written an earlier unsigned book review about de Stael which contained this comment: "More than one have said of her that she was a man in intellect—though we do not make it our own—but it is certain she was a woman in heart." "Steven's Madame de Staël," *ibid.*, III (May, 1883), 477-478.

time by rejecting activism as inconsistent with a woman's nature, she was beginning to define the limits of what she expected to find.

This sense of wanting to rescue women from the obscurity of history was one of the things Tarbell carried with her when she left *The Chautauquan* in 1890 and sailed for Paris for three years of thinking and writing. She hoped to support herself by syndicating articles about Parisian life in the American press, but she wanted to spend as much time as she could studying women in history and, especially, researching a biography of Madame Roland, hostess of an eighteenth-century salon, moderate and doomed figure of the French Revolution. Descendants of the Roland family made it possible for her to study letters which had never been published, and when she was not meeting and talking with writers and intellectuals herself, or playing the role of matronly guardian of moral standards *in loco parentis* for the daughters of American friends, Tarbell spent long hours in Paris archives.⁴² She sent a brief, dramatic sketch of Roland back to *The Chautauquan* and, by the time she returned to the United States in 1894, she had written much of the full biography, which was published by Scribner's Sons two years later.⁴³ As in the case of her sketch of Madame de Staël, Tarbell's approach to Madame Roland revealed as much about herself as about her subject. She criticized her as an inflexible personality who could often put her hardness to good use in holding her revolutionary group together during times of uncertainty but who also suffered its fatal effect in her failure to adjust when necessary to new circumstances. Roland was also incapable of sustained analytical thinking. Her letters and her salon conversation were always brilliant, but they were also *merely* brilliant. She became famous for her talk, but at bottom it was all "outbursts of feeling" and nothing more.⁴⁴ In the end Tarbell found that Madame Roland's life repaid in sheer fascination the difficult work she put in to rescue it from the past, but it was a life not altogether worthy of emulation. Tarbell seemed to think that Madame Roland pressed herself into situations wholly inappropriate to her woman's nature.

⁴² Tarbell, *All in the Day's Work*, 107-110.

⁴³ Tarbell, *Madame Roland, A Biographical Study* (New York, 1896); Tarbell, "The Queen of the Gironde," *Chautauquan*, XII (March, 1891), 756-761.

⁴⁴ Tarbell, *Madame Roland*, 147-152.

While she was in Paris she also mined her own biography to produce a short story which she sold to *Scribner's Magazine* for a badly needed \$100. She based her tale, "France Adorée," on an experience she had trying to improve her French by conversing regularly with an immigrant French clothes dryer just before departing for Paris. It was a sentimental and highly mannered story of Bertha Lang, a young woman living in Paris but about to return home to the United States. She meets an American friend, Scott Gorham, and tells him "earnestly" and mysteriously that whether she goes or not depends on him. They had always been "matter-of-fact" and cynical together, and her new tone of seriousness and sentiment fills him with a "quaver of horror." Then Bertha explains that as she was preparing to come to Paris in the first place she had grown to love an old Frenchman back home whose sole desire in life was to return to his homeland. Finally, when he was at the point of death, she convinced him to come to Paris with her where he subsequently died and was buried in Père Lachaise. Bertha entreats Scott, and he finally agrees to care for the grave, enabling her to return home with a clear conscience. The bulk of the story rests on the character of the old Frenchman, but an underlying theme was Bertha's plea to her initially hostile male friend to be taken seriously for her woman's qualities. The story ends only when Scott accepts her emotionalism as natural and legitimate.⁴⁵

It was against this background of her own continuing ambivalence toward women's nature and role that Tarbell began in the 1890s to emerge as a significant figure in journalism. She had been sending short pieces on Parisian life and prominent Frenchwomen to a newspaper feature syndicate operated by S. S. McClure and this provided her with income enough to continue work on Roland.⁴⁶ Finally she had a chance to meet McClure the same way other people met him—in a hurry. A strong believer in personal impressions and the magnetism of his own personality, McClure spent much of his editorial time dashing around the country and from one continent to another. One day in 1892 he arrived in Paris, rushed up to Tarbell's apartment, chatted for a few minutes,

⁴⁵ Tarbell, "France Adorée," *Scribner's Magazine*, XI (May, 1892), 643-651.

⁴⁶ McClure to Tarbell, Nov. 18, 1892; Mar. 3, 1893; Apr. 5, 1893, Tarbell Papers.

borrowed forty dollars and disappeared. Yet it was a contact which marked for her the start of a new career. John S. Phillips, McClure's editorial associate and the man who would later join Tarbell in taking over the *American Magazine*, had read the handwriting of her correspondence with the New York office and put her down as a middle-aged New England school teacher.⁴⁷ McClure was more favorably impressed. He began to rely on her to handle routine editorial errands for the syndicate and was soon sending her assignments for feature interviews. By 1894, with McClure working hard to stabilize his year-old *McClure's Magazine*, she was doing enough work as an editorial representative to make her practically a full-time staff member, and, in March, McClure wrote to say he liked her work and was increasing her assignment load. He also asked what plans she had for the next five or six years. "We hope you are not planning to get married," he cautioned, "and thus cut short your career."⁴⁸ She had no such plans and soon returned to the United States to join his staff officially, continuing her work as writer and field representative.

Yet, considering the assumptions within the journalistic fraternity about the role of women in the profession, Tarbell's initial connection with McClure was still not an unusual breakthrough for a woman. The press had come a long way, of course, since the day in 1869 when a young reporter named Sally Joy came to work for the *Boston Post* in a white ball gown and found that her male colleagues had spread newsprint on the floor to keep her hem from gathering dust, but women were still in the 1890s thought to be best suited for certain kinds of journalism. While many women journalists wrote for the feature pages of newspapers on literary and historical subjects and often edited the flower-bordered woman's page, they were all but excluded from the front page because editors did not think they had a serious enough cast of mind to handle important news and could not, as reporters, deal comfortably and on a personal basis with men in business and politics. Even the woman suffrage movement was reported largely by men. If a woman journalist's name did appear on the front page it was likely

⁴⁷ Tarbell, *All in the Day's Work*, 103, 118-119.

⁴⁸ McClure to Tarbell, Mar. 2, 1894, Tarbell Papers.

to be that of a stunt reporter, like Nellie Bly, who once impersonated a lunatic in order to report on conditions in insane asylums and in 1889 made a well-publicized trip around the world in less than eighty days to build circulation for Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*.⁴⁹

The writing Tarbell did for *McClure's* in the 1890s conformed well with the general expectation of women journalists. Almost as soon as she returned to America McClure put her to work rewriting the text to accompany a *McClure's* portrait series on Napoleon Bonaparte. Another writer had prepared a biography which Gilbert Hubbard, a portrait collector and owner of the pictures McClure wanted to publish, had rejected as too unfriendly to Napoleon. McClure sent Tarbell to Washington to research and write a new biography. Its serialization with the portraits in 1894-1895 was a success, and McClure then set her to work digging out and collating personal reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln to accompany another magazine portrait series. This series, which began appearing in the November, 1895, issue gradually evolved into a full-scale biography.

Both boosted the fledgling magazine's circulation and gave Tarbell a new visibility as well.⁵⁰ Yet they were both also well within the bounds of what readers and editors expected of women journalists. They were series which, because the main feature of each one was the little-known portraits McClure wanted to publish, were artistic presentations as much as anything. Neither was "front-page" or controversial material, except in the sense that the Napoleon boom on both sides of the Atlantic and the fascination with Lincoln enabled *McClure's* to capitalize on current popular interest.⁵¹

But by 1898, her career took a new turn. While she was at work on Napoleon and Lincoln, her base of operations had been Washington, and she acted as McClure's editorial representative there. In 1898,

⁴⁹ Ross, *Ladies of the Press*, 1-13, 48-59. James Bryce commented on how few women journalists there were in *The American Commonwealth* (New York, 1888), II, 585.

⁵⁰ A full account and analysis of these series are in Robert Stinson, "S. S. McClure and His Magazine: A Study in the Editing of *McClure's*, 1893-1913" (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1971), 128-136.

⁵¹ McClure to Tarbell, Dec. 6, 1893, Tarbell Papers; Peter Geyl, *Napoleon, For and Against*, trans. by Olive Renier (New Haven, Conn., 1949), 151ff.

with the outbreak of war between Spain and the United States, an event which threw the magazine's office into a flurry of activity, she came to New York on a permanent basis and took charge of editorial matters for *McClure's* itself. She had impressed McClure with her research work and with her ability to make an attractive subject seem compelling in the pages of the magazine. His growing personal affection for her was evident in letters he sent to New York from his travels abroad.⁵² Before long, she assumed a position occupied by few other women: a responsible editor making policy and plans for a major magazine.⁵³

The clearest demonstration of her new authority and the new range of her interests came in 1901 when she suggested to Ray Stannard Baker, her colleague at *McClure's*, that he think about a series of articles investigating the steel or some other "great Trust."⁵⁴ She failed to interest Baker in the project, however, and, after consultations with McClure, went ahead herself and launched the Standard Oil series which steeped her in controversy and built her name solidly into the muckraking movement. The investigation brought her into contact with politicians and businessmen, including, of course, her sometimes heated interrogation of Standard's Henry Huddleston Rogers, in a way that was supposed to be impossible for a woman. Ten years later, a friend still wondered how Tarbell was able to bring it off and concluded that while many people said of her that "she writes like a man! She *thinks* like a man!", the reason Tarbell's Standard Oil articles were acceptable was because in her concentration on the personalities behind the oil trust she had revealed her own natural woman's inclination to seek out the human side of things.⁵⁵ Closer to the point, of course, was

⁵² McClure to Tarbell, Apr. 14, 1900; Dec. 30, 1901; July 3, (1902?); Mar. 18, (1903?); Apr. 6, (1903?), Tarbell Papers.

⁵³ The editorial structure of *McClure's* was fluid during this period, but McClure himself remained the final authority on broad editorial questions with John S. Phillips handling most practical matters for all the McClure enterprises in New York. Tarbell served under Phillips.

⁵⁴ Tarbell to Baker, Apr. 29, 1901, Baker Papers. McClure had told her that big business was the only popular interest not currently covered in the magazine.

⁵⁵ Mary B. Mullet, "A Famous Writer Who Never Wanted to Write," *American*, XCIX (January, 1925), 34ff. She *had* concentrated on personalities, with special attention to John D. Rockefeller himself, but that was wholly in conformity with a standing *McClure's* policy for crafting articles on *any* subject.

Tarbell's professional care and intelligence in the preparation of her work.

Then, within a few years, she began to speak out against feminism in a way that repelled many people who thought they knew her and made *The Business of Being a Woman* seem to be a denial of her own new career. What had really happened was not that she had embraced a new set of principles but rather that, with her career on one side and thoughts of family life on the other, she was just living out a new phase of an old ambiguity, a familiar tension. She had experienced doubt concerning women's role in society before, and what was new was not Tarbell's conversion to the nineteenth-century idea of women and the home but a fresh articulation, a *public* statement of those views with which she had lived in uneasy tension for thirty-five years. One can perhaps speculate that her life and her writing after 1909 represented only the hardening of a dichotomy: she would urge the uneasy woman to be faithful to her female nature while she personally followed other instincts toward liberation.

In that sense, Shirley Rossmore, the heroine of Charles Klein's play, *The Lion and the Mouse*, had an easier life than Ida Tarbell did. Rossmore, living in a world of fiction, moves easily from her independent career to a life devoted to marriage and family. But Tarbell, living in the world of complex reality, was caught in a conflict between independence and marriage. She could manage the conflict, perhaps, but she could not resolve it.

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