

# An American Family

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*From left, John D. Rockefeller Jr. and his sons, David, Nelson, Winthrop, Laurance, and John III, waiting at the railroad station for the arrival of the coffin of John D. Rockefeller Sr., Tarrytown, New York, May 25, 1937*

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**Memoirs**

by David Rockefeller.  
Random House, 517 pp., \$35.00

1.

David Rockefeller has good reasons to leave memoir-writing to others. He has been a successful banker, turned down presidents who wanted him to be secretary of the Treasury, met a mind-numbing horde of celebrated people, been happily married, is gloriously rich, and is now well into his eighties. At this age trying to master the literary craft must feel like heavy lifting, but, not content with so many blessings, he has written a memoir anyhow.

One cannot help wondering why. Memoirs are commonly written by former presidents and similar fading human monuments who need money, entertainment celebrities who need money and an ego massage, and people who have an irresistible compulsion to write but haven't the creative power to write fiction.

Now and then a good book emerges. Ulysses S. Grant, who did it because he needed money, discovered that he liked writing, did it surpassingly well, and produced an American literary classic. On the other end of the spectrum lie the scores of Hollywood libido ticklers struggling to rise to the standards of Errol Flynn's *My Wicked, Wicked Ways*.

Nowadays the best memoirs come from unfamous people who tell wonderful stories. *Angela's Ashes*, one of the best, was written by Frank McCourt, a New York City high school English teacher in his sixties. *The Road from Coorain*, equally fine, is by Jill Ker Conway, the scholar-daughter of an Australian sheep farmer.

Rockefeller, too, has a wonderful story to tell: a family saga, and the family is not just another run-of-the-mill saga-type family either, but one of the world's richest, a family said to be rooted in infamy—or were those evil deeds unjustly imputed to Grandfather?—a family torn by sibling jealousy, scarred by religious repression, scandalized by a dynamic son's sexual hunger and ambition for power... and so on.

For years material like this has kept journeyman novelists high on best-seller lists. David Rockefeller, alas, is not up to handling it, for the storytelling gift has not been granted him. Apparently he never learned its basic rule—"Show, don't tell." For nearly five hundred pages he persists in telling too little while showing even less. His book is all bones and no flesh, no blood, or tears, or even cheap sentimentality.

Glimpses of a fascinating tale can be caught now and then, and even a hint of passion, as near the end when he suddenly, surprisingly reveals a sense of disgust for his brother Nelson. He is too much the banker—or is it too much the Rockefeller?—to provide many such moments. As a result, the reader must constantly read between the lines, always a treacherous place to look for truths.

The heart of the tale, if told directly, would seem to be the conflicts within

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the Rockefeller family over a century and a half. What a cast of characters to write about! How reluctant David Rockefeller is to let them shine.

His great-grandfather, William Avery Rockefeller, for example, flits across page seven and is never heard of again after being described as "something of an absentee parent" who "had a shady past." Anyone curious about that "shady past" may turn to Ron Chernow's 1998 book *Titan* and learn that Great-Grandfather was a medical quack and snake-oil salesman, and that "something of an absentee parent" is David's way of saying he was a bigamist.

This typifies a stultifying diplomatic style in passages where one yearns for plain talk, passion, and humor. When the style is not State Department genteel it often lapses into the narcotic prose of the stockholder's report, leaving the reader with a sense that the most interesting piece of the story is being left out. Reticence about the customers is probably vital to success in banking, but it does not make for lively reading.

The chapters devoted to the author's banking career can be slow going for those not well versed in *The Wall Street Journal*. Though the lives of great international bankers are reputed to be glamorous, romantic, and filled with intrigue, nothing here supports the idea that it is much more thrilling than the loan officer's at the corner bank branch. Rockefeller travels the world tirelessly and meets a huge assortment of movers and shakers, but seems never to suspect that many may be scoundrels and swine.

He wages a ten-year struggle with George Champion for mastery of the Chase bank. Champion is eleven years older, has devoted his life to Chase, and is widely admired in the industry.

Reading between the lines, we suspect he considers himself the natural and entitled successor to retiring CEO John McCloy and views young Rockefeller as a whippersnapper whose main qualification for his job is his name. Champion would not have to be paranoid to think so. There is a story going around that Nelson Rockefeller told McCloy the Rockefellers used their family influence to make him chairman and one of his jobs is to make sure David succeeds him. It is "quite possible" that Nelson, who "could be quite high-handed," did say some such thing, David concedes, but neither he nor the family ever took such a tack.

In any event, Chase's board is in a pickle when David says he will resign if Champion is made CEO with "unchecked authority." Its bizarre solution: make Champion the bank's chairman, David its president, and make the two of them co-chief executive officers, thus insuring endless conflict. Reading between the lines, we suspect Champion must have despised David for spoiling the prize of the chairmanship. Even David senses that since Champion was "never allowed to run the bank entirely on his own," he might justifiably have felt some bitterness.

With Champion's retirement, David is supreme at last, and when Champion uses his position as a director to make a nuisance of himself David persuades the board to lower its retirement age to sixty-eight, which was, "not coincidentally, George's age at the time."

Because this story is scattered piecemeal across a hundred pages of unrelated material we never hear or see what must have been a highly emotional clash of egos or feel that anything of much consequence is at stake. A drowsing reader may think longingly of the exciting novel J. P. Mar-

quand could have extracted from this fight for power.

The dark figure at the center of David Rockefeller's account of family life turns out to be his father, always referred to with a respectful capital "F" as Father. He is John D. Rockefeller Jr., only son and heir of the richest man in America, John D. Rockefeller Sr., or Grandfather, as David calls him. Grandfather was once a very dark figure to many Americans, but he is not to David. There are photographs of baby David on Grandfather's lap. To this day David remembers him as a sweet-tempered old man. "Often at dinner he would start to sing softly one of his favorite hymns," David recalls. "He wasn't singing to anyone; it was as if a feeling of peace and contentment were welling out of him."

Ida Tarbell's 1904 book *The History of the Standard Oil Company* had helped make Grandfather one of the country's most hated men. It was unfair, David thinks. He attributes Grandfather's low reputation to "tabloid press" accusations that he used rapacious and criminal tactics, "including murder," to create his oil monopoly. What of charges that Standard Oil cheated widows, bombed rival refineries, and hounded competitors into ruin?

All "absolute fiction," David says, though Grandfather, who lacked the modern taste for savoring a bout of guilt, never let it upset him. In fact he read Tarbell's book and "remarked to everyone's consternation that he 'rather enjoyed it.'"

What? No guilt at all?

"Grandfather never breathed a sigh of remorse to my Father, his grandchildren, or anyone else about his business career. He believed Standard Oil benefited society, and he felt comfortable with his role in creating it," David writes. He suggests that devout adherence to the tenets of the Baptist faith accounted for Grandfather's "placid self-assurance in the face of personal attacks." This strict Protestantism was drilled into Grandfather's only son from his cradle, mostly by Grandmother, who dominated his childhood. Grandmother was Laura Spelman Rockefeller and may have been even more devout than Grandfather. Descended from early Massachusetts Puritans, she inherited the Puritan fear of pleasure and passed it on to her son. Her own parents had been ardent abolitionists active in the underground railroad before the Civil War, and she herself was a pioneer of the temperance movement. When young John was ten years old she had him sign a pledge to shun tobacco, vile language, and intoxicating drink. Her portraits, David says, "reveal a formidable individual not easily given to mirth."

Religious piety clung to young Rockefeller even after he went off to Brown University, and it was destined to cling to him, often to his own children's discomfort, for the rest of his life. Chernow says in *Titan* that he did not play cards, go to the theater, or read newspapers on Sunday. In a bibulous age, visitors to his room were served crackers and hot chocolate. It

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was a proud achievement when, as president of the junior class, he got his classmates to desist from drinking alcohol at the class dinner. Visiting England after his sophomore year he saw his first plays: two of Shakespeare's and *Charley's Aunt*, and wrote his mother that he would not have done it at home "on account of the example, but thought it not harmful in London, where I knew no one." Here surely was a man eager for a life of holy joylessness.

In college, however, he did take up dancing, and in dancing he experienced a new kind of happiness, for it introduced him to Abby Aldrich. As John Junior is a dark presence in the Rockefeller saga, Abby Aldrich is the bringer of light. The two were married in 1901.

It was a marriage of Puritan and Cavalier. Abby had been taught to enjoy the world, John to suffer it with fortitude. To John, life was a test contrived by an easily angered God to determine who was fit for admission to heaven. To Abby it was meant to be filled with beauty and pleasure. There is a story that when she first saw the huge house she and John would occupy in Manhattan a friend asked what she could possibly do with so much space and Abby replied, "Fill it with children."

They had six. The oldest, named Abby after Mother, was called Babs. The next five were boys: in order of birth, named John, Nelson, Laurance, Winthrop, and David. All were born in the new century's golden years before America entered World War I.

The marriage to Abby softened and then dissolved Puritanism's iron grip on the family. The family name might still be Rockefeller, but Abby brought

with her a set of genes and a culture that would change the family character. She was the daughter of Senator Nelson Aldrich of Rhode Island, a dominant Washington power at the end of the nineteenth century. Though no Rockefeller on the money scales, Aldrich could afford to live grandly. In an age when the political pickings were plentiful he was chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, where he had been a generous friend to the nation's richest companies. In Chernow's indelicate phrase, he had turned public service into "a lucrative racket" which enabled him to amass \$16 million, build a ninety-nine-room chateau on Narragansett Bay, and sail a two-hundred-foot yacht with a crew of twenty-seven.

His was a world indifferent to religious severity. There was a touch of the aesthete in him. He enjoyed the culture of Europe and took Abby to Rome, London, and Paris. She was alert to the new painting in European museums. She was well read in English literature from Jane Austen to George Eliot. For young John, David says, the marriage was "a godsend." Abby brought him "a sense of joy and fun that he desperately needed." For the children she was a warm, loving, emotional shelter providing ease from Father's insistent efforts to train them in the scriptural rigors.

As baby of the family, David was spoiled a bit by Mother but seems to have found Father almost as burdensome as Father found life: not that Father was cruel, or even unkind, but

rather that he was stiff to the verge of being inhuman. When “an issue with significant emotional content” had to be dealt with, David recalls, Father’s “preferred mode of communication even when we were all living under the same roof” was an exchange of letters. Father dictated his letters to a secretary “who typed and mailed them—with one copy for the files!” The exclamation point is David’s.

Father was not related to Chummy Old Dad of modern advertising and self-help literature. He was “formal, not cold, but rarely demonstrably affectionate.... On the emotional level he was distant.” David writes, ascribing “his inflexibility as a parent” to his “rigid upbringing.”

Mother was of another world, and David adored her. Though now in his

eighties, he writes, “whenever I think of Mother even today, it is with a sense of great love and happiness.” That Father adored her equally created one of those Freudian conflicts beloved by popular novelists of family life. Because Father’s need for Mother’s attention was “practically insatiable,” David writes, Abby became the prize in a competition between husband and sons:

He wanted her to be with him always—if not immediately by his side, then immediately available. He wanted to retreat with her into their own private circle of two.... We grew up realizing that if we were to have any of Mother’s attention, we would have to compete with Father for it.... It was a never-ending struggle for her and

the cause of great stress; and it was something she was never able to resolve.

Mother is indeed a lovely presence in David’s book, but it is repressed, insecure, joyless, pious Father who keeps us reminded of what we most hoped to learn upon opening it; to wit, vulgar though it be, what is it like to be as rich as Rockefeller, and are the rich really different from you and me, and is it true that money can’t buy happiness?

## 2.

David’s portrait of Father argues persuasively that happiness seekers should avoid multibillion-dollar inheritances. The roots of Father’s trouble seem to

have been Baptist morality and lack of the business instinct. To be named John D. Rockefeller yet have no zest for making money might very well lead to serious depression, and seems to have done so in Father's case.

He was "plagued with feelings of inadequacy." What son could possibly measure up to the name he bore through life? Nevertheless, being the only son and exceedingly dutiful, Father tried. For a brief time he became one of many vice-presidents of Grandfather's oil monopoly, only to find himself, he said afterward, in "a race with my own conscience." David offers no guidance on how to read this intriguing piece of self-analysis.

In his early thirties Father had "a 'nervous collapse'—we would now call it depression," David says. A month's recuperative vacation with Abby in the south of France stretched to six months. Returning to New York, he rarely left the house during the next six months. When he went back to the office it was only part-time, and he ended by resigning from Standard Oil and starting what was to become his life's work: guiding the philanthropies that would give away much of the money Grandfather had accumulated. This he did extremely well and with great satisfaction. Grandmother Rockefeller's lessons in Christian philosophy must have dwelt heavily on the difficulty of passing a camel through the eye of a needle, for his charities were to become prodigious and noble.

For his daughter and five sons, being Father's children was heavy duty. Mornings began with prayer meetings in his study. The children were expected to recite Bible passages they had been told to study, and Father explicated their meaning. The Aldrich factor was felt, however. Mother never attended.

"It wasn't lost on us children," David recalls, that Mother preferred "to stay comfortably in bed" reading newspapers or answering letters.

The children didn't seem to take the proceedings very seriously either. Nelson, the family cut-up, "surreptitiously shot rubber bands at the rest of us during our morning prayers and was not the slightest bit concerned when Father reprimanded him," David writes.

The children noted other Aldrich influences. Mother liked modern art. Father didn't. He thought it "unlifelike, ugly, and disturbing" and discouraged her from hanging it in parts of the house he frequented. Father preferred ancient and classical art, Gobelin tapestries, and Chinese porcelains.

Undiscouraged by his dislike of the new, Mother helped create New York's Museum of Modern Art and, with Nelson, helped the Mexican artist Diego Rivera obtain the infamous contract for the front lobby of Rockefeller Center's RCA Building. A small public-relations disaster ensued when Rivera, a Communist and proud of it, insisted on painting Lenin into the mural and Nelson, unable to persuade him to paint Lenin out, had the wall torn down.

Though "quite brilliantly executed," it was "not appropriate for the lobby of the RCA Building," David says. Later Rivera reproduced the mural in Mexico City and included Father drinking a martini with some "painted

ladies." Such were the hazards that Rockefellers invited by alliance with Aldriches.

David suggests that his two oldest siblings, Babs and John III, were psychologically damaged by Father's Calvinist zeal. He "badgered" his daughter "constantly with lectures on good behavior and the obligations of wealth." Babs rebelled. If Father wanted her to do something, she either refused or did the opposite. Knowing he hated tobacco, "she smoked as ostentatiously as possible" in front of both parents. The children were expected to give 10 percent of their allowance to church and charity; Babs "adamantly" refused to give a cent.

David is irritatingly vague about the true depth of hostility between the two. We are invited to read between the lines of the following and find what we will:

The rebellion was not a happy one on either side. Father was dis-

tressed by her behavior and hurt by her animosity toward him. For Babs, life just became more and more difficult. . . . [Eventually] she retreated into herself and ceased being the gay, fun-loving party-goer she had been. . . . At first she saw marriage as a way to escape from Father, and while she attended major family events and kept in touch with Mother, she lived a very separate life.

Something about his oldest brother, John, also plunges David into deep discretion. We read that John was hard-working and conscientious like Father, had a strong sense of duty but a "nervous disposition," was "shy and awkward in social situations," and might "agonize for days over things he had said or thoughts he was thinking." This sounds like an ineffectual ditherer, yet late in the book David tells us that John waged a fierce and successful struggle against brother Nelson's power grab for control of the family's affairs.

As the family specialist in philanthropy, John spent his life dealing with social problems and so developed a sympathy for life's losers. An excessive sympathy, David obviously thinks. The social upheavals of the Vietnam years left him partial to antiwar sentiment and other unorthodox doctrines of the age's hairy, love-drunk young. As a result John "drifted ever more to the liberal side of the spectrum" and late in life became "what we used to call 'a parlor pink.'" The reason for David's



Kathy Willens/AP/Wide World

David Rockefeller and Fidel Castro  
at the UN, October 22, 1995



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discreet tone is suddenly obvious: Rockefellers had begot a liberal. Worse, a parlor pink! Later, writing in a gentler vein of John's death in 1978, he praises him for a legacy in philanthropic work "of which even a Rockefeller could be proud."

Father's fourth son, Winthrop, was the Rockefeller misfit. Of all the brothers he seemed uniquely determined to live life his own way and in the end became a progressive governor of Arkansas, a state where one might least expect a Rockefeller to feel at home. There he did much to reform the state's barbaric prison system and had some small success in advancing civil rights for blacks.

He must have had a miserable childhood. (Not "particularly happy," says David.) He was too young to find companionship with John, and brothers Nelson and Laurance were like an exclusive club dedicated to keeping him out. They nicknamed him "Pudgy" for being overweight and tormented him with cruel tricks. To the end of his life he bitterly resented "the condescending treatment he felt he had always received from Nelson."

He seemed happiest working out-of-doors with Texas oil-field roustabouts and later on his showplace Arkansas farm. Any place, it seems, that Rockefellers did not go. He hated school, got expelled from Yale, was uncomfortable with the kind of people Rockefellers were supposed to be comfortable with. In World War II he enlisted in the infantry and was seriously wounded in a kamikaze attack on his troopship at Okinawa. In the postwar years, as a woman-chasing New York playboy, he became a darling of the tabloid press by marrying Barbara

"Bobo" Sears, the handsome blond daughter of Lithuanian immigrants. Father and Mother did not attend the nuptials, and the marriage lasted only a year. Though he "desperately craved Father's approval," David says, his manner of living "meant that Father rarely granted him the acceptance and approval he sought."

In *Titan*, Chernow quotes him saying, after a quarrel with Father, "By God, if I ever have children, I'm going to *talk* to them, not just make an appointment to see them and then get up after five minutes to go get a haircut."

### 3.

Nelson, the second son, and Laurance, the third, forged a close partnership which bound them into old age. Nelson was the more aggressive, but Laurance was assertive enough to make them a formidable team, as Winthrop knew too well. Nelson was far more Aldrich than Rockefeller. His middle name indeed was Aldrich, and he was the son who became a dominant national political leader.

David describes a childhood charmer:

Nelson was politically astute, even wily, within the family. He was a natural leader and radiated self-confidence. The burdens of duty, as defined by Father, did not weigh him down... He was also the mischievous one in the family... Mother enjoyed his liveliness and independence and, perhaps, in the secret and subtle ways that mothers can, encouraged his jaunty behavior."

In childhood David "idolized Nelson" because he "knew how to have fun" and Father could not crush his spirit. Childhood idols are seldom built to endure, however, and as the years passed David noted that Nelson was merely human, and then that Nelson had disturbing human flaws.

As soon as Nelson was elected governor of New York in 1958 his sights were set on the presidency. He launched a costly publicity campaign to raise his national recognition. Family members were asked to pitch in. Laurance was exceedingly generous. Nelson dug into his own capital, tapping a trust fund Father had set up for him in 1934.

The 1960 Republican nomination went to Richard Nixon, but Nelson had the satisfaction of having Nixon call upon him in New York to tailor the Republican platform to Nelson's liking. Thus was it proclaimed that Nelson was a power to be reckoned with, and when Nixon was defeated by John Kennedy that fall Nelson seemed a sound bet to be the next Republican nominee. Nelson, however, had other projects afoot.

In the fall of 1961 the country was startled to learn that he and his wife, formerly Mary Todhunter Clark, had agreed to divorce. Family members were not surprised. They had been aware for some time of Nelson's affair with Mrs. Margaretta ("Happy") Murphy. David was astonished nevertheless. He and his wife, Peggy, had counted Happy and her husband, Robin Murphy, among their closest friends.

Here David passes one of the few harsh personal judgments to be found

in all his nearly five hundred pages. It was "the beginning of my disillusionment with Nelson, when the scales fell from my eyes and I no longer saw him as the hero who could do no wrong but as a man who was willing to sacrifice almost everything in the service of his enormous ambition," he writes.

The divorce, its aftermath, and conservative capture of the Republican Party seemed to end Nelson's best chance for the presidential nomination, but the prospect opened again when President Ford picked him for vice-president in 1974. The opening closed in 1976 when Ford replaced him on the ticket with Robert Dole.

Nelson believed Ford's decision was engineered by his chief of staff, Donald Rumsfeld. "There was no doubt—in Nelson's mind, at least—that Rumsfeld's own presidential ambitions had played a significant role" in dropping Nelson from the ticket.

Devastated and deeply embittered, Nelson left politics forever, but the bitterness remained. There were ugly family quarrels about furniture, real estate, and family enterprises that Nelson wanted to control. Toward the end he seemed "a very unhappy man," seemed to have "lost the will to live."

He died of a heart attack during a philandering episode covered extensively in the newspapers. David declines to rehash the press clippings. One owes as much to a brother.

After forty-seven years of marriage, Abby died in 1948, and in 1951 Father married Martha Baird Allen, widow of an old friend he had known since college. After the marriage, he became

increasingly distant from his children. Father died in 1960, the year before Nelson divorced and remarried. David suspects that Nelson might have acted earlier had he not been worried about how divorce would affect Father.

The dominant feeling with which one finishes this book is a sense of sorrow and pity for Father. Though he was heir to the richest man in America, his life seems to have been all duty and little delight. His determination to live by a stern religious faith earned him the dislike—perhaps hatred—of his only daughter. His inability to soften a character hardened by early indoctrination in a harsh Calvinism made him seem cold and unloving to his sons.

As eminent men go in America, he was a good man, but he owed his good life to a man who was certainly not entirely good and may have been quite a bad man, and this must have troubled his morally finicky spirit. Although his moral code made him seem archaic to his family, it promoted the idea that capitalism has a moral duty to play a generous role in advancing the public good, and this now seems archaic too in light of the devil-take-the-hindmost economics gospel currently prevalent in Washington and America's corporate boardrooms.

There is a striking photograph of Father and his five sons awaiting the arrival of Grandfather's coffin at the Tarrytown railroad station in 1937. All but son John are wearing homburgs, that mark of affluent Republican propriety. John's is in his hand. Nelson has posted himself in the center of the picture, arms folded across his chest.

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looking at the camera with imperial authority, as though he, not Father, might be the great tycoon's true heir.

Because he had been born on Grandfather's birthday, Nelson liked to suggest "that he was the true *Rockefeller* standard-bearer," David recalls. His biography of course tells of a man with very little in common with Grandfather and a personality that Grandfather would have deplored in a close relative and exploited in a competitor. Still, as a legendary giant of capitalism, it was Grandfather, not Father, whom an ambitious grandson might naturally have wished to emulate.

Among Father's five sons it is David's career that seems most like Grandfather's, although the differences can hardly be exaggerated. Even running a gigantic bank is not as awesome as winning control of almost all the oil in the world, but a man with big dreams could pursue them without interference from government busybodies in the nineteenth century. The twentieth was harder.

Grandfather died at his Florida estate shortly before his ninety-eighth birthday. A funeral service was held at his Pocantico estate on the high east bank of the Hudson River. David was then twenty-one. After the service the man who had long been Grandfather's valet called him aside. "You know, Mr. David," he said, "of all you brothers, your grandfather always thought you were the most like him.... You were very much his favorite."

David was startled. "I thought it would have been Nelson," he writes. "but I couldn't pretend I wasn't pleased." —