

Taming the giant

How a journalist exposed the Standard Oil monopoly

By David Walton
Special to The Courier-Journal

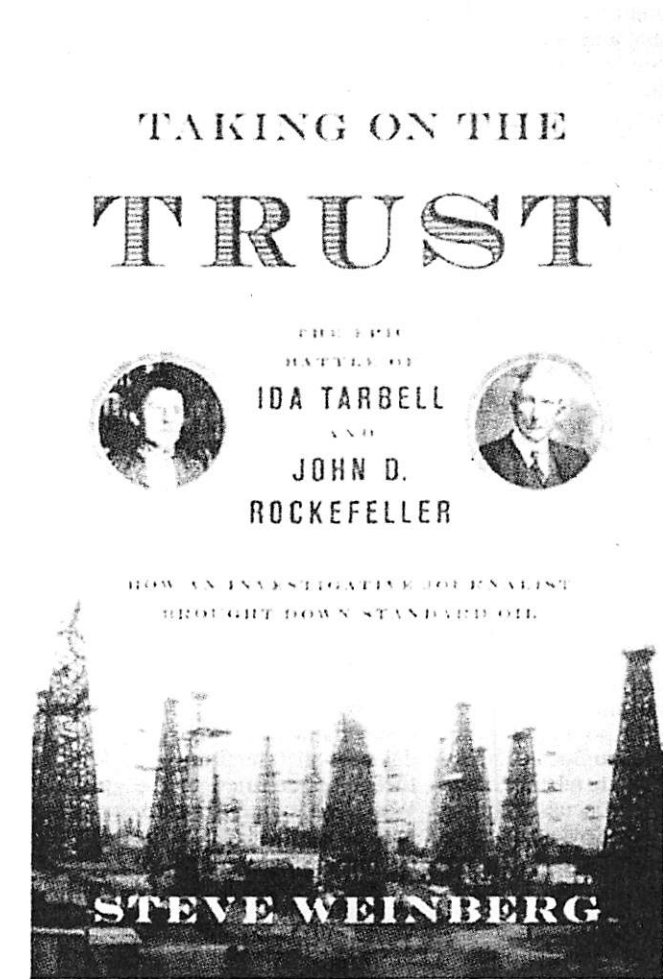
Three times in American history has a book been powerful enough to change public opinion and shape events: Tom Paine's *Common Sense*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and Ida M. Tarbell's *History of the Standard Oil Company*.

Separate biographies have been written about Tarbell and Rockefeller, but Steve Weinberg's *Taking on the Trust* is the first book to link biographically and historically "The Epic Battle of Ida Tarbell and John D. Rockefeller."

Tarbell, born in 1857, just as oil was being discovered in western Pennsylvania, grew up in Titusville surrounded by America's first oil boom and bust. There, in a process now well documented by historians, over the next half century a single man and a single company took monopolistic control of one of America's chief industries.

John D. Rockefeller of Cleveland, Ohio, an obscure businessman who never in his lifetime dirtied his hands at an oil well, foresaw that he who controlled the refining of oil would control its distribution and sales.

A superb planner, with an exacting attention to detail, and a devout Baptist who gave abundantly to charities throughout his life, Rockefeller was relentless, rapacious, and hated competition on principle — he took the name "monopolist" as a compliment. First he squeezed out the independent refiners, then took control of the pipelines, then used the volume of his rail shipments to squeeze rebates out of the railroads — and even a rebate on his competitors' shipments.



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All this was conducted outside the public eye, and against massed protests by the independent drillers who one by one he either ruined or absorbed, first in western Penn-

sylvania, then state by state as other oil discoveries were made.

In 1901, when the average American income was \$10 a week, Rockefeller was taking

BOOK REVIEW

Taking on the Trust

The Epic Battle of Ida Tarbell and John D. Rockefeller
By Steve Weinberg
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home \$3 million from Standard Oil each year. And this was before the age of the automobile.

In November 1902, *McClure's Magazine* began serializing Ida Tarbell's carefully researched history of "the processes" by which an industry "passes from the control of the many to that of the few."

Combing through public records and documents, relying only on verifiable fact, employing, and in fact inventing, what we now call investigative journalism, Tarbell revealed how Standard Oil grew upon "special privileges obtained by persistent secret effort in opposition to the spirit of the law."

Tarbell revealed how the company kept an espionage force to spy on competitors and practiced "predatory competition," singling out and underpricing independents until their businesses collapsed. Her exposé led directly to the breakup of history's greatest "trust," a word that survives today, Weinberg points out, only as "antitrust."

Tarbell, the "child of the oil fields," and Rockefeller, the secretive capitalist, are intriguingly matched in Weinberg's book. Weinberg, author of several books on journalistic history and practice, highlights the exacting standards that made Tarbell's reporting so effective.

"Above all," he says, in a phrase that seems as fresh as this morning's newspaper, "she insisted on accuracy."

David Walton is a writer and critic who lives in Pittsburgh.