1911 PHOTO

John D. Rockefeller Sr.: Until Bill Gates, the richest of the rich.

The Titan

Chernow offers a rich portrait of John D. Rockefeller Sr.

By DAVID WALTON
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HE IS THE most hated, envied, reviled man in American history. Until recently he was the richest man in American history, but he's been outstripped by Bill Gates, who has now become literally "richer than Rockefeller," and whose career, and the controversies it has provoked, parallel in intriguing ways Rockefeller's own.

Book Review

Titan

The Life of John D. Rockefeller Sr.
By Ron Chernow
Random House
774 pp., $30
Random House Audiobooks; $25.95.

In the mid-1890s, when the average weekly wage was less than $10, John D. Rockefeller was earning $10-million a year from his holdings in Standard Oil, the nation's richest monopoly. This in a time when petroleum's principal product was kerosene, for illumination.

When he retired in the early 1900s, Rockefeller (who was born in 1839, during the presidency of Martin Van Buren, and lived to be almost 98, into Franklin D. Roosevelt's second term) was worth around $200 million, the equivalent of $3.5 billion today. But by 1913, thanks to the advent of the automobile, his fortune had multiplied fivefold — making his the richest retirement in American history.

He remains America's foremost philanthropist, funding Spelman College in Atlanta, the University of Chicago, the campaigns to eradicate hookworm and yellow fever, and some of the most important medical research of this century.

Unlike his fellow moguls, he was "lean as a greyhound," in a time when the measure of a man's prosperity was his "embonpoint." Under growing public criticism for Standard's methods of acquiring its 90 percent share of the American petroleum market, Rockefeller developed alopecia, the loss of all hair including eyebrows and eyelashes. That gaunt, pericranial face stares, with haunting effect, from behind the towers of New York's Rockefeller Center on the cover of Ron Chernow's powerful, meticulously researched life of John D. Rockefeller Sr., properly titled "Titan."

Devoutly Baptist, Rockefeller lived simply all his life, opposed alcohol and tobacco, and believed his money and success were rewards from God. These he felt duty bound to disperse frugally and wisely — Chernow calls him "an implausible blend of sin and sanctity."

Rockefeller has been famously excoriated: by Henry Demarest Lloyd in "Wealth Against Commonwealth," by Ida Tarbell (a more complex and problematic figure here than legend has made her) in McClure's Magazine and by Matthew Josephson in "The Robber Barons." Chernow, too, views Rockefeller as "the purest embodiment of the dynamic, acquisitive spirit" of the post Civil War era, and never shies away from documenting Rockefeller's "lust for domination, his messianic self-righteousness, and his contempt for those shortsighted mortals who made the mistake of standing in his way."

But Chernow presents Rockefeller as a paradoxical rather than an ironic figure. "Those who would like to see Rockefeller either demonized or canonized in these pages will be disappointed," he writes in his foreword, and he acknowledges a special debt to his wife Valerie, "for she enabled me to find that often elusive voice — neither too sympathetic nor too sharp — that would capture the complexities of Rockefeller's character."

Along with his compelling protagonist, Chernow assembles a colorful cast of secondary characters, often in unexpected guises: Mark Twain; Teddy Roosevelt; Rockefeller's docile and adoring son, always called Junior, who, if the father was a Shakespearean figure, was himself a character out of Dickens. Most arresting is Rockefeller's vagabond father, William Avery "Wild Bill" Rockefeller, a traveling salesman of "herbal medicines," a charmer and a sharpie who, just as his oldest son was setting out in business, deserted his wife and five children in Cleveland and took a second wife in Illinois, under the name Dr. Levingston.

"In his incarnation as Dr. Levingston," Chernow writes of this endearing scoundrel, "Bill had to endure not only the silent lash of John's indignation, but to forgo any claims to his money. Could God have devised a more excruciating curse for his sins?"

Chernow, who received a National Book Award for "The House of Morgan," encompasses better than any writer before him the powerful contradictions and polarities in Rockefeller's character. "Titan" is immensely long, but worth its length. Its excruciatingly small print often left my eyes swimming, however. For those not up to the full challenge, the six-hour audiobook, abridged by Joan Castagnone with Chernow's oversight and approval, captures the pith of Chernow's story; and George Plimpton as reader is an inspired choice — neither too sharp nor too sympathetic — for the subtle, paradoxical values of Chernow's narrative.

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