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Upton's Downside

Sinclair's socialist message may have foiled his literary aims. Or did the author of 'The Jungle' just lack a novelist's sensibility?

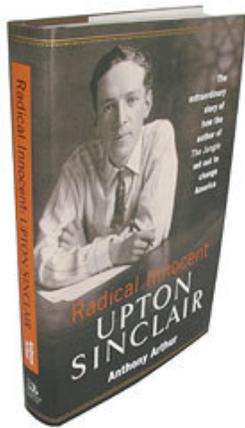
By ROBERT K. LANDERS

Radical Innocent

By Anthony Arthur

Random House, 380 pages, \$27.95

"I aimed at the public's heart and by accident I hit it in the stomach," Upton Sinclair famously said of "The Jungle," published a century ago this year. In fact, though he never fully admitted it, to get the muckraking novel published, he had allowed his political rhetoric at crucial points to be toned down, shifting the book's aim toward the lower organ.



The young author had originally wanted to expose the depredations of the meatpacking industry in Chicago not in the hope that he would change the way food was processed but in the hope that he would provoke enough outrage about "wage slavery" in the capitalist "jungle" to incite a socialist revolution. In the published novel, however -- as Anthony Arthur notes in "Radical Innocent," an absorbing and mostly clear-eyed biography -- Sinclair's realistic depictions of the workers' lives and the dangerous conditions under which they labored were overwhelmed for many readers by the shocking passages describing how meat products were made. "Rats were nuisances," he wrote in one grisly passage about sausage processing, "and the packers would put poisoned bread out for them; they would die, and then rats, bread, and meat would go into the hoppers together."

Though reform had already been in the works in Washington, Sinclair's best seller in 1906 added to the pressure for what became the landmark Pure Food and Drugs Act, signed into law that same year. President Theodore Roosevelt carefully read the book, sent to Sinclair "an extraordinary three-page letter of literary criticism," Mr. Arthur reports, and invited him to the White House. While recognizing the power and usefulness of the documentary novel (despite "the ridiculous socialistic rant at the end"), TR came to consider the author himself a "crackpot."

Sinclair (1878-1968) preferred to think of himself as an idealist. A precocious and indulged only child of an alcoholic salesman and a woman from a wealthy Baltimore family, he graduated from City College of New York in 1897 when he was just 18. He quickly launched his writing career, churning out 8,000 words a day for a series of juvenile adventure novels. After three years, "he made a conscious decision," Mr. Arthur writes, "to become a literary artist of the first rank." Then, in 1904, Sinclair fell hard for socialism, for which he became a determined "propagandist" (his word). It would be his ruling passion, but not his only one. He also fell for vegetarianism, fasting ("the secret of perfect and permanent health"), mental telepathy and spiritualism.

"The Jungle" made Sinclair famous and affluent. But he swiftly began to undermine his reputation and squander his fortune by establishing a utopian community of writers and intellectuals at Helicon Hall -- a former boys' school in

Englewood, N.J. -- in November 1906. The press derisively speculated about the role of "free love" in his experiment in communal living (and it did play a part). When Helicon Hall burned down less than five months later and a carpenter, possibly drunk, died in the flames, the prominent champion of the working class was strongly criticized for having failed to provide fire escapes for those in his care.

As an author, Sinclair was nothing if not prolific: When he died at 90, he had published almost as many books. His "greatest artistic achievement," in the view of Mr. Arthur, an emeritus professor of literature at California State University, was a popular 11-novel cycle on which Sinclair embarked when he was 60, about a charming spy named Lanny Budd who turns up amazingly often at crucial events in 20th-century history. Despite Mr. Arthur's generous appraisal and a Pulitzer Prize for one of the novels, the impression persists that the cycle is not very much more than a series of boys' adventure stories for adults, unburdened by socialist cant. (Though still an adherent, Sinclair made a "late-in-life renunciation of propaganda" in his writing, Mr. Arthur says.)

Earlier in his career as a scourge of capitalism, Sinclair showed an impressive breadth of indignation in his novels and tracts. He attacked not only the practices of the coal, oil, liquor and auto industries but also the defects of journalism, religion, education and even literature, which, he argued, was all propaganda, mostly for the capitalist status quo.

From the post-"Jungle" and pre-Lanny Budd fiction, Mr. Arthur singles out "Boston" (1928), about the Sacco-Vanzetti case, and "Oil!" (1927), about the oil industry, as "good novels, but not great." Surprisingly, perhaps, Sinclair ended "Boston" without unambiguously endorsing the innocence of the two men, anarchists convicted of murder in a payroll robbery in 1920 that left two dead. Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were executed in 1927.

It turns out that a defense lawyer in the case, which was a socialist rallying point at the time, had confided in Sinclair while the writer was working on "Boston." The attorney had said that he was certain of Sacco's guilt and suspected that Vanzetti had knowledge of the crimes. But after publication of the novel, the intrepid muckraker kept silent for a quarter-century about what the lawyer had told him -- a fact that Mr. Arthur does not highlight. Sinclair's loyalty to the left also made him long turn a blind eye to Stalin's crimes: It wasn't until the late 1940s -- well after the Stalinist show trials and Nazi-Soviet pact had disabused many Western sympathizers -- that Sinclair could bring himself to sharply criticize the Soviet Union.

Mr. Arthur thinks that socialism made the self-centered Sinclair "a better person" -- less selfish than the driven artist otherwise would have been. Maybe so, though Sinclair's incredibly insensitive treatment of his first wife and long neglect of their son during his second marriage are hardly evidence of it. In any case, Sinclair clearly allowed his allegiance to the socialist ideal not only to blind him to unwelcome facts but also to weigh down his art.

Not that he would have been a great novelist except for that. Sinclair was not introspective and seems never to have been able to see very far into the psyches of his fellow humans. As a literary artist, observes Mr. Arthur, this was his "greatest handicap." Perhaps with more insight into others, he would have succeeded in striking the public's heart when he aimed for it.

Mr. Landers is the author of "An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell" (Encounter, 2004).

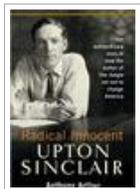
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