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BOOKSHELF

A Muckraker Looks Ahead

From battling graft and corruption to admiring the Bolsheviks' 'very, very beautiful' revolution.

By Robert K. Landers

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"I think that there's got to be in every ward somebody that any bloke can come to—no matter what he's done—and get help. Help, you understand, none of your law and your justice, but help." Thus did the notorious Boston ward boss Martin Lomasney justify himself in 1908 to investigative reporter Lincoln Steffens. And Steffens, whose exposés of "shameful" graft and corruption in American cities had made him famous, was impressed. He considered Lomasney "honest," as he later said, and "one of the best men in Boston. . . . He lifted the Boston Irish from agents to partners in the game and they played it as Martin saw it played by his betters."

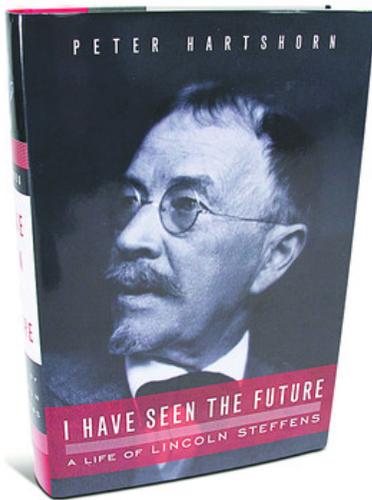
But Steffens's recognition that the political machines he'd specialized in exposing sometimes served worthy ends did not alter his later, mature conviction that the "system" was rotten, American democracy was a sham, and capitalism was at fault. As he came to see it, the progressive reform he had once believed in was futile—and his and others' sensational journalistic exposés had served only to put off the day of reckoning. For him, the future belonged to the communists.

Starting in 1902 for McClure's magazine, Steffens had spent the next half-dozen years raking urban muck. He, Ida Tarbell, Ray Stannard Baker and other writers functioned, in effect, as the leading edge of the progressive movement, their revelations helping to bring about apparently needed social changes. "Reform came to housing, insurance, elections, prisons, taxes, child labor, and food processing; and industry goliaths, notably Standard Oil and Southern Pacific Railroad, were broken up," observes Peter Hartshorn in his well-researched and well-written Steffens biography, "I Have Seen the Future."

A gifted reporter, Steffens (1866-1936) had the ability to induce even the powerful "bad guys" to open up to him. In 1906, William Randolph Hearst, then a congressman contemplating a run for governor of New York, "called him the most effective interviewer he had faced." Steffens was "the greatest of the muckrakers," Mr. Hartshorn asserts, arguing that Steffens's approach to his work "led the way in transforming the role of journalists from collectors of news, often from company or government cronies, to more professional investigators and literate reporters."

Steffens had some faults as a reporter, however. The McClure's publisher-editor, Sam McClure, became increasingly troubled by what seemed to him Steffens's blind prejudice against capitalism. "Steffens," McClure protested in 1903, "has a notion that the business man is a coward, and that the business man is to blame for political corruption, and he makes every fact bend to this notion." In taking such a stance, Steffens was, in part at least, rebelling against the example of his father, a highly successful California businessman. Mr. Hartshorn, perhaps sympathizing somewhat with Steffens's critical slant on business, neglects to note this rebellion.

In seeking to make the muckraking Steffens out a hero, Mr. Hartshorn runs up against the rest of his life. When Steffens left muckraking behind, he soon displayed what Ray Stannard Baker was to call "a kind of messianic complex." As Justin Kaplan noted in his incisive 1974 biography, "Lincoln Steffens," Steffens began to involve himself in what "proved to be, in many respects, an accelerating series of disasters." Hoping as a Christian socialist to get labor and capital to lie down together in peace, Steffens in 1911 stepped into a fierce clash over two unionist brothers charged with murder in connection with a Los Angeles dynamite explosion that left 21 dead; he wound up being denounced by both labor and capital.



Steffens was later drawn to the “beautiful” Mexican Revolution and soon boasted: “I’m putting ideas into the heads of Mexican leaders and they like them, and me. In fact, I’m pretty well in on the inside of the Mexican revolution.” He became an apologist for that chaotic upheaval, which had turned into a civil war and in the end claimed nearly a million lives. For Steffens himself, however, it was a “rich experience”—and a prelude to his encounter with the Russian Revolution.

I HAVE SEEN THE FUTURE

By Peter Hartshorn

(Counterpoint, 517 pages, \$30)

His introduction to Russia came in the spring of 1917, when he was part of an unofficial fact-finding mission for the Wilson administration. He thought little of Alexander Kerensky’s “bourgeois” provisional government; his sympathies were with that nascent government’s enemies, the Bolsheviks, who were making a “very, very beautiful” revolution, he said after his return.

Two years later, with the Bolsheviks in power (though the civil war was not yet over), Steffens went back to Russia, again as part of an unofficial mission. He interviewed Lenin, sized up him and his associates as “idealists sobered by the responsibility of power,” and persuaded himself that “the most autocratic” government he’d ever seen was necessary if the revolution was to succeed. The revolution’s terror phase, he thought, was over. On his return, Steffens uttered the much-rehearsed, oft-repeated and unutterably fatuous words that would be forever associated with his name: “I have seen the future, and it works.” For the rest of his life, and even after he became aware of the terror under Stalin, Steffens clung to this, his mantra.

Despite Mr. Hartshorn’s strange choice of part of that mantra for his title, he does not attempt to defend the indefensible. But he does try to minimize its importance, insisting that it was Steffens’s work as a journalist, not as “an enthusiastic commentator” on the Russian Revolution, that “left an indelible mark on America.” True enough, but even so, Steffens’s post-muckraking life deserves to be remembered, if only for the cautionary lessons it offers journalists and other dispensers of the latest wisdom.

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