



PROJECT MUSE®

Radical Innocent: Upton Sinclair , and: Upton Sinclair and the Other American Century (review)

Clare Virginia Eby

American Literary Realism, Volume 42, Number 1, Fall 2009, pp. 88-90
(Review)

Published by University of Illinois Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/alr.0.0034>



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/271008>

through genetic mythmaking. Still, the virtues of *Chesnutt and Realism* far outweigh its flaws and Simmons' volume is perhaps the best research lately that directs readers toward new ways of envisioning Chesnutt's conception of realism.

SALLY ANN FERGUSON

University of North Carolina, Greensboro

Radical Innocent: Upton Sinclair. By Anthony Arthur. New York: Random House, 2006. 380 pp. Cloth, \$27.95.

Upton Sinclair and the Other American Century. By Kevin Mattson. Hoboken, N. J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2006. 283 pp. Cloth, \$25.95.

Anyone who has ventured much beyond *The Jungle*, the Lanny Budd novels, and perhaps *The Brass Check*, *Love's Pilgrimage*, or *Boston* can vouch that extensive reading of Upton Sinclair is laborious. Mastering his *œuvre*—some ninety books, not counting the journalism—would require superhuman perseverance. But Sinclair remains perennially popular in spite of the fact that (or perhaps because) his historical significance trumps his literary craftsmanship. We can thus be grateful that the centennial of the publication of *The Jungle* brings us two new biographies. While both grapple with what motivated Sinclair to keep on trying to change the world, Anthony Arthur's literary biography *Radical Innocent: Upton Sinclair* provides more of a sense of the man and the artist, while historian Kevin Mattson concentrates on Sinclair's historical significance in *Upton Sinclair and the Other American Century*.

Each title captures how the biographer attempts to redefine Upton Sinclair, whose last biographer was Leon Harris in 1975. Arthur maintains that a distinctive mix of radicalism and perennial innocence captures the best as well as the worst of his subject: "Sinclair's comparative innocence concerning human psychology accounts for his limitations both as a literary artist and as a . . . husband. Although he would spend most of his career exposing what he thought was wrong with American society, he was constantly being unpleasantly surprised, like *Candide*, by the human potential for treachery. Yet Sinclair's naïveté afforded him a degree of protection, . . . allowing him to hope, against all evidence to the contrary." That passage foregrounds Arthur's strengths: interest in connecting the public author with the private man, mastery of a broad sweep of literature that proves as useful in contextualizing Sinclair's personality as his writings, and ability to deal with contradictions.

Mattson, situating the muckraker in what Henry Luce called “the American century,” proposes a less divided and less sanguine soul: “Sinclair lived in the shadow of the towering majesty of the American century, and he lived to publicize what he found in its darker corners,” those corners representing “the other American century” of Mattson’s title. For him, Sinclair was above all else a public intellectual—indeed a “hero” from a bygone era “when intellectuals still mattered.” Sinclair would delight in this assessment, which could provide a more ambitious framework than Arthur’s, although Mattson does little with the idea beyond the first chapter. *Upton Sinclair and the Other American Century* provides more of a listing of events and summaries of books than a consistent viewpoint on them. Indeed, the last chapter suggests a shift into a new framework, “a story of increasing political maturity, moving from idealism toward realism.”

Mattson presents his subject as “more a political than a literary figure,” although two of what he considers Sinclair’s three greatest accomplishments are literary: *The Jungle*, the Lanny Budd novels, and the campaign for governor of California on the EPIC (End Poverty in California) ticket. Mattson’s chapter on the EPIC campaign is one of his best, arguing that Sinclair, while losing the election, helped shift the country, including FDR, to the left. Mattson describes Sinclair’s flurry of writing immediately thereafter as “a form of sublimation, an attempt to replace the fury of his prior political engagement.” Since Sinclair positioned himself about as far removed from art-for-art’s-sake as can be imagined, there is likely much truth to Mattson’s idea. Curiously, though, Mattson backs away from the primacy of politics toward the end of the biography, admitting that Sinclair was “first and foremost a writer.”

A third again as long as *Upton Sinclair and the Other American Century*, Arthur’s *Radical Innocent* is more penetrating and thoroughly researched. (It is also reader-friendly: Arthur expertly maintains chronological markers so the reader never has to thumb back through pages to ascertain exactly when something occurred.) Especially welcome are several astute observations into Sinclair’s character, particularly regarding how consistently “his personal life and public activities were intricately connected.” Arthur presents Sinclair as a man of “two selves.” The public self was the optimistic muckraker, an “outraged progressive” who always maintained faith in America’s potential. The private self, a “frustrated artist,” was less confident or hopeful. While this Sinclair is more nuanced than Mattson’s, Arthur does not take his insights far enough. For instance, while noting that Sinclair erred in evaluating people because, notwithstanding how “easily [he] saw through and exposed crooked police chiefs or financiers, he was congenitally susceptible to being gulled by a clever pose,” Arthur

does not speculate as to why. While providing a more perceptive look at Sinclair the man, it remains unclear in *Radical Innocent* exactly what makes that man tick.

This is especially true when it comes to Sinclair's relationships with women. Sinclair depended on women throughout his life and seemed unable to work without them. He was strongly attached to his mother, a relationship intensified by Sinclair's father's alcoholism. Although "free love" charges pursued Sinclair, he was for the most part, to use the phrase of his first wife, Meta Fuller, a "serial monogamist." After a disastrous first marriage, Sinclair immediately married Mary Craig Kimbrough—or, more precisely, he took up with "Craig" before divorcing Meta. After nearly fifty years of marriage, upon Craig's death Sinclair, now eighty-three, remarried within six months (after being turned down by several women). Moreover, he repeatedly used his first two wives' experiences as fodder for his books (for instance *Love's Pilgrimage*, the *Sylvia* novels, and parts of *The Brass Check* and *The Book of Life*). Arthur best delineates Craig, who emerges as controlling, paranoid, and, as her daughter-in-law maintained, "witch"-like. But how and why did Sinclair remain so attached to such a woman? What was the nature of their decades-long relationship? Particularly given Sinclair's public persona as a feminist, we need more analysis of how and why he related to women, what roles they played in his life. In an uncharacteristically dismissive moment, Arthur remarks that Sinclair spent most of his life with "three neurotic women" (320). More sensitivity in exploring them would result not only in a more well-rounded cast of secondary characters, but also shed more light on Sinclair himself, who apparently was unable to remain *unattached* to a woman for any length of time.

Of course every biographer must stake out his or her slant, and both Sinclair as spokesman for "the other American century" and as "radical innocent" offer helpful new approaches. Written in a breezy style, *Upton Sinclair and the Other American Century* presents explanations such as "Hull House, a place where young people lived" and "Albert Einstein, the father of modern physics," suggesting that Mattson targets a more general audience. More deeply researched (Leon Harris estimates the Sinclair archives at Indiana University's Lilly Library at nine tons), Anthony Arthur's *Radical Innocent* makes a better choice for the scholar's shelf.

CLARE VIRGINIA EBY

University of Connecticut