

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE ELUSIVE INITIATOR OF THE AMERICAN DREAM
A REVIEW OF RON CHERNOW'S
TITAN: THE LIFE OF JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER, SR.

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John D. Rockefeller is a name that most people have encountered at some point, whether in regards to medicine, philanthropy, or education. Rockefeller's life is the epitome of the American Dream; he began life with nothing and ended with the success and riches of royalty. Ron Chernow's¹ biography, *Titan: the Life of John D. Rockefeller, Sr.*,² traces the oil magnate's life even before its beginning starting with the commencement of his parents' relationship, followed by his nomadic childhood, and concluding with his peaceful death at age ninety-eight. The biography reads like a smoothly flowing narrative, and is peppered with numerous black and white photographs of Rockefeller, as well as his family, friends, and various business ventures. The book provides a rich history of the times, relating the effects of the world in which he lived on Rockefeller's life and decisions, while analyzing his personality and characteristics. The biography also explores the lives of those closest to Rockefeller, including his wife and children. Chernow's account provides a balanced view of Rockefeller's personal and business personas. Many consider this work to be a business biography, as it details the business deals and assessments of history's most successful entrepreneur. However, Chernow gives the reader insight into Rockefeller's business genius and foresight without dwelling on tedious details, resulting in a pleasurable and informative biography.

Chernow explores both sides of the man who succeeded in remaining a mystery both during life and after death. He details the beginning of Rockefeller's voracious appetite for business through an account of Rockefeller's desperate search to find his first job as a young man, fraught with failures and rejections. The biography also reveals Rockefeller's strained relationship with some of his business partners, and how he broke from these partners by outsmarting them.³ Dubbed the

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¹ Mr. Chernow graduated with degrees in English Literature from Yale College and Cambridge University. He is well known for his biographical portraits of some of history's most influential business figures.

² RON CHERNOW, *TITAN: THE LIFE OF JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER, SR.* (Vintage Books 1998).

³ *Id.* at 84, 88.

“Robber Baron,”⁴ Rockefeller was an infamous businessman. Throughout the book, Chernow reminds the reader that many saw Rockefeller as a villain; his brainchild, the Standard Oil Company, was feared and hated by the masses. By 1905 he received regular death threats and was forced to hire Pinkerton detectives for protection.⁵ In 1887, one critic wrote:

When the 19th century shall have passed into history, the impartial eyes of the reviewers will be amazed to find that the U.S., supposed to be conservative of human liberty and human right, tolerated the presence of the most gigantic, the most cruel, impudent, pitiless and grasping monopoly that ever fastened itself upon a country.⁶

The other side of the fierce and hated businessman was a charitable and well-grounded family man whose struggle to maintain a balance between business and religious faith was never resolved. Regarding the struggle for balance between business and religion, Chernow states that Rockefeller’s “career as a trust king would be for him a Christian saga, a pilgrim’s progress, where he was the exemplary man, rescuing sinful refiners from their errant ways.”⁷ Chernow cites a number of heartwarming anecdotes about Rockefeller as a husband and father. He was fond of telling his four children fairy tales, playing blind man’s bluff, and performing endearing tricks such as balancing crackers on the tip of his nose before flipping them in the air and catching them in his mouth.⁸ Furthermore, he enjoyed playing outside with his children; he purchased a pony for each child and he dammed streams on his property to create areas for swimming, fishing, and ice skating.⁹ However, the author provides a balanced view of Rockefeller; he includes stories about the strictly religious and sometimes parsimonious upbringing that the Rockefeller children experienced. Chernow also provides a glimpse into other relationships in Rockefeller’s life. An especially poignant relationship was that between Rockefeller and his younger brother Frank. Rockefeller was constantly canceling the debts incurred by Frank, who was both unlucky and irresponsible in his business ventures. At one point, Frank’s debts

⁴ *Id.* at 670.

⁵ *Id.* at 501.

⁶ *Id.* at 292.

⁷ *Id.* at 153.

⁸ *Id.* at 122.

⁹ *Id.* at 186.

reached \$800,000 (a value of roughly \$13 million today).¹⁰ Despite Rockefeller's undying patience, effort, support, and love, Frank went to his grave cursing his older brother, racked by jealousy and hatred.¹¹

The author devotes much of the book to Rockefeller's various philanthropic activities. During his lifetime, Rockefeller donated \$530 million to various philanthropies.¹² Chernow portrays Rockefeller as a generous philanthropist as he digs into the reasoning behind the donations and the results that followed. He credits Rockefeller with the title of "the greatest philanthropist in American history."¹³ For instance, Rockefeller financed the University of Chicago Foundation,¹⁴ was very involved in the abolitionist cause, contributing thousands of dollars to educate former slaves,¹⁵ and he contributed over \$40 million to the General Education Board in an effort to expand education in the south.¹⁶ The majority of Rockefeller's philanthropic donations were made in the medical arena, amounting to roughly \$450 million.¹⁷ For example, he supported and helped to finance the eradication of hookworm in the south,¹⁸ and he founded the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research,¹⁹ which was responsible for groundbreaking research and numerous medical advances.

Rockefeller and his company, Standard Oil, were instrumental in shaping the modern antitrust and monopoly laws. Chernow meticulously explains the questionable business practices of Standard Oil throughout the narrative, providing the reader with a full understanding of the Company's inner workings. Today, many of the actions taken by Rockefeller and his fellow associates in the name of business would be in violation of antitrust and monopoly laws.²⁰ For example, at one point in

¹⁰ *Id.* at 394.

¹¹ *Id.* at 631.

¹² *Id.* at 570.

¹³ *Id.* at 566.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 312-329.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 241.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 483, 486.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 570.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 488-491.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 472.

²⁰ *Id.* at 151.

its life, Standard Oil refined 90% of the oil in the United States.²¹ Rockefeller negotiated numerous deals with the railroad lines and consequently squeezed out any refiners who tried to compete with Standard Oil. There were times when it was impossible to tell Standard Oil and the railroads apart.²² On May 15, 1911, the Supreme Court dismantled the Standard Oil Company after forty-one years of business. Ironically, Rockefeller made the majority of his fortune on the dismantling of Standard Oil.²³ According to Chernow,

[t]he antitrust suit against Standard tested whether the American legal system could cope with the new agglomerations of wealth and curb their excesses. The paradoxical lesson learned was that government intervention was sometimes necessary to ensure unfettered competition.²⁴

In an effort to provide insight directly from Rockefeller himself, Chernow successfully uses quotes, gathered from numerous sources, and applies them throughout the work. The author also incorporates quotations from Rockefeller's largest critic, Ida Tarbell, in an effort to portray the viewpoints of those who were not so fond of the quintessential businessman. Chernow gathered hundreds of sources and organized them into a comprehensive narrative of Rockefeller's life. In addition to a bibliography and index, Chernow provides the reader with extensive notes about the sources he used, broken down by chapter, numbering over fifty pages. Throughout this work, Chernow manages to maintain a narrative tone, while allowing the quotations from the past to mold the readers' thoughts and opinions. The book also provides telling glimpses into the "true" Rockefeller through little-known facts and stories. For instance, Rockefeller got his first job on September 26, 1855, and every subsequent year he celebrated September 26th as "job day," even more vigorously than his birthday.²⁵ Whenever the subject turns to money, which is fairly often, Chernow provides estimates on present value based on today's economy.

Overall, the New York Times was correct when it called *Titan* "[a] biography that has many of the best attributes of a novel Wonderfully fluent and

²¹ *Id.* at 205.

²² *Id.*

²³ *Id.* at 556.

²⁴ *Id.* at 555.

²⁵ *Id.* at 45.

compelling.”²⁶ Chernow has succeeded in compiling the voices of family members, business associates, critics, and even the oil tycoon himself. However, at 676 pages, completing *Titan* is a daunting task; it is no leisurely read. At times, the dates seem to overlap and can be confusing. Even so, the dedicated and unintimidated reader will be entertained from start to finish, satisfied with his newfound knowledge and respect for the one who so successfully achieved the American Dream.

²⁶ Christopher Lehman-Haupt, *Books of the Times: A Man Who Saw Around the Corner*, N.Y. TIMES, July 20, 1998, at E7.