

Oil!

by Upton Sinclair

Penguin Books, 1927, 2007

Reviewed by David W. Gill www.ethixbiz.com

Upton Sinclair (1878-1968) was one of those crusading novelists and journalists called “muckrakers” by President Theodore Roosevelt a century ago. Sinclair’s most famous novel was called *The Jungle*---a fictional expose of the meatpacking industry in Chicago. The uproar caused by this novel (1906) contributed to the passage of the U.S. Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act.

Oil! was published in 1927. It is a 500-page saga of a father and son, J. Arnold Ross, Sr. and Jr. over a fifteen or twenty year time period. Jr., known as “Bunny,” accompanies his doting father to business meetings and deals as the early oil industry is developed in southern California. The father is a basically nice guy but builds his oil empire through business practices of questionable ethics and fairness (but “everybody’s doing it”), cash under the table, deceiving people into selling land where oil is suspected, buying political influence at the highest levels (Harding’s scandals were in the news for Sinclair). Bunny grows up as the beneficiary of this wealth and influence and is expected to take over the empire. However, personal friendships with the (radicalized, working class) children of some of those whose land Dad acquires, the influence of a radical professor at his university (sounded like USC to me), a growing realization of the superficiality of the lives of the privileged he hangs out with, and the injustice and suffering inflicted on the poor ---- all of this leads Bunny toward a break with his father’s chosen life and career and value system.

Oil! is a very good if not quite great story. The characters are interesting and well developed. The story is believable. The message is complex enough to be worthwhile pondering. It should be noted also that the film *There Will Be Blood* with Daniel Day-Lewis, though claiming to be inspired by or based on Sinclair’s *Oil!*, doesn’t hold a candle to the novel!