

Lincoln Steffens to Speak at Colonial Theatre¹

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Pittsfield, MA

1908²

Most people will take advantage of the opportunity of hearing Lincoln Steffens³ speak at the Colonial Theatre next Sunday afternoon. Indeed it is a rare chance to size up one of the foremost and one of the best of those men, upon whom the more fastidious have fastened the name of "muckrakers." It may be true that we do not relish the conditions in municipal politics as they have been presented to us by these "Muckrakers," but the most repulsive thing about the conditions is that they are true. The next [most] important thing is that we should know it, and that in that knowledge we should find our weapons for warfare against the conditions we do not relish. These men have been faithful and relentless in their task of diagnosing our social diseases. They have not pretended to be surgeons, but simply have acted in the capacity of examining experts.

By no means the least important and least well known of these men is Lincoln Steffens who will speak at the Colonial Theatre next Sunday afternoon. His subject is such as will enable him to deal with the very problems that he is most familiar with, and in which all men who are alive are most keenly interested.

Now why should the men of this city wish to hear this particular man? In the first place, he is a striking contradiction of the affirmation that there is no opportunity for an adventurous life in this country. His life has been full of the most interesting and important adventure. He speaks from experience, and as "Denny Hogan" told me on the street the other day "The man who has been hit, knows it." A man who has had experience is always interesting.

¹ The top of the first page of this manuscript is cut off. So, the title and other early text is missing. There is a handwritten note in the margin, "Written on request of Y.M.C.A."

² There is no explicit date for this manuscript. However, Lincoln Steffens did give a talk in Pittsfield in 1908, and the manuscript can be dated by that talk.

³ Lincoln Steffens (1866-1936) an American investigative journalist and a leading "muckraker" of the Progressive Era.

Beyond that, this man Steffens is a scientific sort of a chap. He saw that our municipal politics were in a bad way. Everyone knows that now, and in a general way they knew it before Steffens took hold of *McClures* in 1901, but now it has been brought home to us in such a manner that we have seen the necessity of taking action. He didn't write any preachments about the sin of graft, but he just camped in half or dozen or so of our average cities, and began to get at the facts and let the people know them. The result was that people began to prick up their ears. "The Shame of Minneapolis" and his characterization of Mayor Ames as a "moral leper"⁴ was enough to set one man thinking for a while. Such an article as that in connection with the others, like the one on St. Louis⁵ and New York,⁶ just set people to thinking and to talking. It would be foolish to say that Steffens is the cause of the moral awakening that has appeared in the country, but it is true to say that he is alive to it and that he has contributed much to the knowledge that is so necessary in dealing with it. He has presented us with some mighty pointed facts, and we are fast drawing conclusions. We need to hear such a man talk.

The claim is often heard that such a man as Steffens does nothing but rake muck, and that he has no true perspective of things as they are. Of course, when a man says that he has for the moment forgotten that Steffens has told the story of Ben Lindsey, "The Kid Judge,"⁷ and Mark Fagan and Everett Colby.⁸ He has an eye for the good as well as the bad. In this he shows that he is constructive in his work and his outlook. This is another reason why we should hear the man.

⁴ Lincoln Steffens, "The Shame of Minneapolis," *McClures Magazine*, January, 1903.

⁵ Lincoln Steffens, "Tweed Days in St. Louis," *McClures Magazine*, October, 1902.

⁶ Lincoln Steffens, "New York: Good Government to the Test," *McClures Magazine*, November, 1903.

⁷ Lincoln Steffens published three articles under the shared general title of "Ben Lindsey, The Just Judge:" (1) "The Kids' Court," October, 1906; (2) "What Makes Bad Children Bad?," November, 1906; (3) "Battles with Bad Men," December, 1906, all *McClures Magazine*.

⁸ Lincoln Steffens, "A Servant of God and the People: The Story of Mark Fagan, Mayor of Jersey City," *McClures Magazine*, January, 1906.

William Allen White says of him,

The real difficulty heretofore has been that the people—the great mass of people—have not known the real facts about real government. They have seen many unpleasant things in the papers, but as each side of the political contest was abusing the other side in telling the unpleasant things, the people have paid little attention to the clamor. But now when a man as Steffens has come, with no party to advocate, with no reforms to promise or suggest, but with the plain facts—the people will eventually give heed, and sooner or later, they will act upon the judgements which the facts force upon them.⁹

The work which needs to be done has hardly begun. Steffens and such have blazed the trail. The multitudes will follow along behind. We need all the landmarks that we can get hold of.

The Y.M.C.A. has done us a great service in getting this man here, and we ought to fill the Colonial Theatre to the doors to hear him. He has something to say. We want to hear the man who has something to say, even if we do not agree with him.

⁹ William Allen White (1868-1944) American newspaper editor, politician, writer and leader of the progressive movement. This quote is from his editorial in *McClure's Magazine*, "On Mr. Steffens's Book, *The Shame of the Cities*," June, 1904.