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Upton Sinclair

California Socialist, Celebrity Intellectual

LAUREN COODLEY

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS
LINCOLN AND LONDON

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Set in Sabon Next by Laura Wellington.
Designed by Nathan Putens.

The kid I was when I first left home
Was looking for his freedom and a life of his own
But the freedom that he found wasn't quite as sweet
When the truth was known
I have prayed for America
I was made for America
I can't let go till she comes around
Until the land of the free
Is awake and can see
And until her conscience has been found
JACKSON BROWNE, "For America"

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Contents

List of Illustrations	ix
Preface	xi
Acknowledgments	xv
1. Southern Gentlemen Drank, 1878–1892	I
2. Making Real Men of Our Boys, 1893–1904	19
3. Good Health and How We Won It, 1905–1915	39
4. Singing Jailbirds, 1916–1927	69
5. How I Ran for Governor, 1928–1939	101
6. World’s End, 1940–1949	133
7. A Lifetime in Letters, 1950–1968	153
Afterword: A World to Win, 1969–2011	171
Appendix A: Upton Sinclair’s Women Friends	183
Appendix B: Recommended Reading	187
Notes	191
Index	229

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Illustrations

1. Upton Sinclair at eight years old in 1886	10
2. Upton Sinclair's Manhattan	15
3. Cover of <i>Army and Navy Weekly</i> , June 1897	26
4. Upton Sinclair with his son, David, 1906	36
5. Picketing at the Rockefeller office in New York, 1914	62
6. Poster for the film <i>The Jungle</i> , 1914	65
7. Sinclair playing tennis	71
8. Kate Crane Gartz	74
9. Sinclairs' Pasadena house	83
10. Upton Sinclair in Hollywood, 1923	87
11. <i>Singing Jailbirds</i> cast and stage set	93
12. Poster from India for <i>Singing Jailbirds</i>	95
13. Sinclair playing violin out of doors	106
14. Program for premiere of <i>The Wet Parade</i>	109
15. Charlie Chaplin	113

16. Eisenstein at film shoot in Mexico, 1933	114
17. Eisenstein's crew filming <i>¡Qué viva México!</i> , 1933	115
18. <i>I, Governor of California</i> pamphlet	117
19. EPIC Campaign song	121
20. "Sincliar" dollar	123
21. Immediate EPIC brochure	125
22. Sinclair with his dog, Duchess	126
23. Arrival of copies of <i>The Flivver King</i> , 1937	135
24. <i>Dragon's Teeth</i> book cover	144
25. Monrovia house	151
26. Ronald Gottesman and Upton Sinclair, 1962	165
27. Walt Disney and Upton Sinclair	168
28. <i>The Upton Sinclair Quarterly</i>	177

Preface

Upton Sinclair both disrupted and documented his era. The impact of his most famous work, *The Jungle*, would merit him a place in American history had he never written another book. Yet he wrote nearly eighty more, publishing most of them himself. What Sinclair did was both simple and profound: he committed his life to helping people of his era understand how society was run, by whom and for whom. His aim was nothing less than to “bury capitalism under a barrage of facts,” as Howard Zinn describes it.¹

Upton Sinclair introduced himself to American readers in 1906 with the publication of *The Jungle*, his exposé of the meatpacking industry. He was only twenty-five years old. For the next six decades, he would remain an unconventional, often controversial, and always innovative character in American life. He was also a filmmaker, a labor activist, a women’s rights advocate, and a health pioneer on the grandest scale—a lifetime surprisingly relevant for twenty-first-century Americans.

A hundred years ago, investigative journalism was just being conceived, and Sinclair’s undercover reporting on the conditions in a meatpacking plant may have been its birthing moment. Filmmaking was beginning to change the way stories were told and how people gained access to information. His friends were experimenting with sexual freedom and birth control, but the shadow of

Preface

alcoholism was beginning to take its toll in the radical community, and Sinclair would record his own assessment of the dangers of alcohol in his novel—and later film—*The Wet Parade*.

Sinclair critiqued institutions ranging from organized religion to journalism to education. These analyses remain surprisingly relevant. The problems with education and with media concentration, which Sinclair identified so presciently in 1920, have become impossible to ignore.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, organized labor was struggling with the question of how to cope with the emergent hegemony of large-scale corporate capitalism. Sinclair responded by organizing a daily picket of Rockefeller headquarters in New York City to show support for embattled coal miners in Colorado. That same year he wrote a science fiction novel, *The Millennium*, which predicted what life would be like in 2013 with startling accuracy.

His activism was as attuned to his time—and as contemporary—as the Occupy Wall Street movement is today. Sinclair demonstrated not only how a writer attempts to change history through literature but also lends his or her personality to the political struggles of the times. A conscious creator of popular history, Sinclair himself starred in one of the first prolabor films, *The Jungle*, in 1914. He wrote *Boston* to document the Sacco-Vanzetti trial; *Oil!* exposed the depredations of the oil industry in California; *Singing Jailbirds* in 1924 recorded the imprisonment of Wobblies in Los Angeles.

In his sixties, Sinclair wrote a series of antifascist spy novels, the World's End series. The series was, as Dieter Herms has noted, “antifascist propaganda entertainingly packaged in the wrappers of popular literature.”² The books garnered him best-seller status again, and in 1942 he became the oldest author to receive a Pulitzer Prize. This biography incorporates the many lives changed by Upton Sinclair—intellectuals, union leaders, and common citizens, who were impacted by not only the World's End series but by his other novels, his plays, and by his EPIC Campaign for governor of California.

For Sinclair, his books were significant only to the degree that they exerted social influence, as the concluding pages of his autobiography reveal. He asks himself, “Just what do you think you have accomplished in your long lifetime?” and then provides ten answers.³ All involve social change in which his books were instrumental. Nowhere in this list of accomplishments is there a judgment that any of his novels represent an exclusively literary achievement. Yet, oddly enough, it has been left to literary critics to assess his reputation.

Part of Sinclair’s political analysis was that a healthy and sober personal life would make him a more effective agent of change—an early understanding of what would become a radical injunction that the personal is political. Sinclair, writes critic William Bloodworth, made “an unusually vigorous attempt to combine questions of food with political propaganda.”⁴ As the adult child of an alcoholic, Sinclair was almost alone among his radical colleagues in abstaining from alcohol for political reasons, and his embrace of temperance is one of the many aspects by which contemporary historians might reevaluate him. Temperance crusader Frances Willard’s argument that the welfare of women and children suffered from the effects of male alcoholism animated Sinclair’s crusade. He was not afraid of identifying with what many at the time considered a women’s issue. His mother’s temperance beliefs and his father’s alcoholism made him a lifelong crusader both for Prohibition and for temperance.

Indeed, Upton Sinclair was a man who challenged conventional masculinity. In that sense, he was ahead of his own time and vitally relevant to ours. He was a radical much influenced by women. His interest in communal living and communal childcare is quite unusual.⁵ His reading of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s theories on domestic labor and public life inspired his founding of the utopian colony Helicon Hall in 1906, created to allow both men and women full lives as artists and activists.⁶ Yet until now, the available Sinclair criticism has omitted discussion of Sinclair’s feminism.

This book includes, for the first time, some of the extraordinary

Preface

correspondence that Upton Sinclair maintained with many of the leading women activists of the twentieth century. Sinclair exemplifies an alternative identity for male radicals in the first half of the twentieth century; the connections between Sinclair's personal and political decisions can help us make sense of his story. This work will add to the scholarship produced by the two fine biographies published in 2006; I will be citing important insights from Anthony Arthur and Kevin Mattson. All chapter titles in my book are based on works written by Upton Sinclair.

Upton Sinclair's activism spanned half a century, and he wrote book after book in an effort to draw others to his causes. As his son, David, recalled, "My father used to say, I don't know if anyone will care to examine my heart after I die. But if they do, they will find two words there: social justice."⁷ Because Sinclair was so passionately engaged in the world around him, his story is inextricably linked to the major struggles that gave his life meaning. It is my hope that this work will offer a fresh understanding of the life and times of Upton Sinclair.

Acknowledgments

Over the past fifteen years, I became acquainted with a fascinating group of Sinclair scholars, who generously shared their work with me. I am profoundly grateful to Ron Gottesman, John Ahouse, and to Robert Hahn for their enthusiasm, their kindness, and their tremendous body of knowledge.

Along the way to this biography, I was able to edit a collection of Sinclair's writings in and about California. I thank Malcolm Margolin for bringing *Land of Orange Groves and Jails* to fruition, and the Mesa Writers Refuge for offering me the opportunity to begin my book there. I thank the Lilly Library for the Everett Helm Fellowship, which allowed me to spend time in the archives, and library staff Cherry Williams and Zach Downey for their generous assistance in this project. For their constant encouragement, I thank Harvey Schwartz, Lisa Rubens, Cita Cook, Nils McCune, Gregg Coodley, Anita Catlin, Stephanie Grohs, and Cathy Mathews.

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Sinclair project over these many years: here it is. This book is dedicated to the two Sinclair biographers, Dieter Herms and Sachiko Nakada, whose work remains to be translated into English, and to the “common reader” whose devotion paved the way for the Sinclair scholarship of today, Edward Allatt.

Danke

Arigatō

Thank you

UPTON SINCLAIR

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Southern Gentleman Drink

[1878–1892]

Whiskey in its multiple forms—mint juleps, toddies, hot Scotches, egg-nogs, punch—was the most conspicuous single fact in my boyhood. I saw it and smelled it and heard it everywhere I turned, but I never tasted it.

UPTON SINCLAIR, 1962

In 1838 twenty-year-old Frederick Douglass quietly slipped away from the shipyards of Baltimore toward a life of freedom.¹ His autobiographical account of his youth as a slave in Maryland electrified the abolitionist movement of the Northern states. Douglass developed an original and devastating style as an orator, and his fervent calls for racial justice challenged and molded the nation's conscience. In the century to follow, another famous son of this once slave-owning city, Upton Sinclair—with his fierce commitment to truth telling—would set out to educate and provoke the American people, and later, his international readers, to defend these ideals of equality. Baltimore's rich history, poised between North and south throughout the tumultuous period of the Civil War and its aftermath, inspired the passions of both Douglass and Sinclair to seek justice across lines of gender, class, and race.

Maryland had been a slave state, but its proximity to the District of Columbia prevented it from ever joining the Confederacy,

despite substantial support for the South among its white citizens. In the presidential election of 1860, Abraham Lincoln received just over one thousand votes, out of thirty thousand cast. Southern Rights Democrats controlled the state legislature, and only the refusal of Maryland's pro-Union governor Thomas Hicks to call the legislature into session prevented them from forming an alliance with the Confederacy. Baltimore's mayor barely supported the Union, and its police chief was a Confederate sympathizer. Countless buildings and homes boldly flew the Confederate flag, when the Sixth Massachusetts Regiment—the first fully equipped unit to respond to Lincoln's call for troops—entered Baltimore on its way to Washington on April 19, 1861.

There was no rail line through Baltimore, so the troops had to cross the city on foot to board a train for the capital. A mob surrounded the soldiers and attacked the rear companies of the regiment with bricks, paving stones, and pistols. A few soldiers opened fire. Four soldiers and twelve citizens of Baltimore died in the skirmish, the first combat deaths of more than seven hundred thousand during the next four years.

Within four weeks of the clash, President Lincoln had established martial law in Maryland, suspended habeas corpus, and sent troops to occupy the city, ending any chance that the state would join the Confederacy. Yet support for the Confederacy remained high among the white population. In 1862 the *Savannah Republican* reported that high-society ladies of Baltimore appeared daily in the streets in secession colors of red and white. Despite Maryland's uncertain support for the Union, Baltimore seemed poised to become an important economic center as the Civil War wound to a close.

In September 1865 Frederick Douglass made a return to Baltimore, despite warnings that he could be assassinated. There he delivered the inaugural speech of the Douglass Institute, which would go on to become the political heart of the city's African American community for the next twenty-five years. In his speech Douglass evoked a better America, telling his audience that “the establishment

of an institute bearing my name by the colored people in the city of my boyhood, so soon after the act of emancipation in the state, looms before me as a first grand indication of progress.”²

Reconstruction brought industrial power and its consequences to Maryland. Baltimore became known as the New York of the South, a destination for both European immigrants and freed slaves. Chesapeake Bay tobacco was made into cigars and exported to Europe by H. L. Mencken’s grandfather and other German immigrants. The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, one of the country’s first railroads, linked the city with western Maryland and the states beyond. City mills, powered by rivers and streams known as “falls,” produced flour and meal, while clothing, cotton goods, leather, machinery, footwear, canned oysters, pork, beef, lumber, furniture, and liquors flowed from its factories.

Rural families driven out by the rising power of banks and railroads were drawn to Baltimore’s diverse economy. Its neighborhoods were compact, with red brick rows lining an irregular street pattern. Poor families crowded into cellars and basements, where water was often contaminated and air circulation was poor. As capitalist development changed the landscape, Baltimore’s contradictory growth became plain. It had the “attractive dirt of a fishing town, the nightmare horizons of a great industrial town,” as Christina Stead put it.³ Raw sewage ran through hot streets, and infectious diseases killed increasing numbers of poor children in Baltimore.⁴

Within a decade, the contradictions of Reconstruction had brought class conflict to a head. The economic crash of 1873 began what was known at the time as the “Great Depression.” Unemployment skyrocketed as construction came to a standstill across the nation. In 1878 railroad workers called a strike in a dozen cities, including at the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. The strike began with wage cuts on the railroads, where brakemen were making \$1.76 for a twelve-hour day, and where loss of hands, feet, and fingers was routine.

In Baltimore, thousands of strike sympathizers surrounded the

armory of the National Guard. The crowd hurled rocks, and the soldiers came out, firing. At one point fifteen thousand people surrounded the depot, setting fire to three passenger cars and a locomotive. President Hayes sent federal troops to smash the strike. When the strikes were over, a hundred people had died, a thousand people were in jail, and one hundred thousand workers experienced their first labor action.

On September 20, 1878, exactly forty years after Frederick Douglass escaped from Baltimore, a Southern railroad baron's daughter, Priscilla Harden Sinclair, gave birth in the row house where she lived with her husband at 417 North Charles Street. The child, a boy, was named for his father, Upton Sinclair, a whiskey wholesaler. Within twenty-five years, this young man would change the course of American history.

The Sinclair family of Virginia had served in the navy since the country began. Great-grandfather Arthur Sinclair served as a midshipman on the U.S. frigate *Constellation* in 1798.⁵ He commanded the U.S. frigate *Argus* during the War of 1812, fought not only to expel the British but also to expand America's borders into Florida, Canada, and Indian territories. Upton Sinclair's grandfather, Arthur Sinclair II, was also a career officer in the navy and commanded one of the vessels in Admiral Perry's fleet that opened up Japan.⁶

Grandfather Sinclair had been a Confederate blockade runner, one of the most romanticized figures of the war, who would slip past fleets of heavily armed Union ships at night to bring food and armaments to Southern cities. It was a risky business, and a London newspaper reported his death after the *Leila* sailed from London in 1865 with seven hundred tons of coal and iron. In a raging storm, the boat apparently sank.⁷ Nearly five months later, a fisherman found Commander Sinclair's body ten miles out to sea wrapped in his nets. The *Fleetwood Chronicle* reported that "his skeletal remains were still clothed, even to his cravat held in place by a gold and agate pin. His overcoat was still buttoned up and he

had retained his watch in his breast pocket.”⁸ The pocket watch was stopped at 4:10—approximately the time the *Leila* sank, which led to the identification of the body.⁹

Upton Sinclair’s father was born in the 1850s in Norfolk, Virginia, and his parents had named him for the Episcopal minister Upton Beall. The once prominent Sinclair family emerged destitute from the Civil War, and Sinclair’s father abandoned the family’s naval tradition in favor of a business career. The liquor trade thrived in the ruined South, so Upton Beall Sinclair entered the wholesale liquor business, and drinking became a key element of the Sinclair family legacy. Upton Beall Sinclair’s sales trips took him to Baltimore, a city where newly impoverished Southerners often traveled, looking for a new start in life.

Here Upton Beall Sinclair met and courted Priscilla Harden, who was born into privilege as the daughter of John S. Harden, the secretary and treasurer of the Western Maryland Railroad. The Harden family emerged from the Civil War with its fortune intact, in stark contrast to the Sinclairs. Upton Beall Sinclair married Priscilla Harden shortly before the birth of their son.

Floyd Dell, an early biographer, wrote that Upton Beall Sinclair “worshipped his only son.” Although he was unable to provide for his family, “he could at least teach his son to be a kind and chivalrous Southern gentleman.”¹⁰ Upton Sinclair often described his father in fascinated detail, a reminder that an absent or unavailable parent is often the more intriguing one to a child. His father was proud of his clothing and interested in food. “What was the size and flavor of Blue Point oysters as compared to Lynnhaven Bays? Why was it impossible to obtain properly cooked food north of Baltimore? Would the straw hats of next season have high or low brims?”¹¹ Sinclair remembered these kinds of preoccupations.

Well-dressed or not, Sinclair recalled, “everywhere he went he had to have a drink before the deal was made and then they celebrated by another drink after the deal was made.”¹² His father’s drinking was responsible for the dismal living conditions of the family: “I

remember boarding-house and lodging-house rooms. We never had but one room at a time, and I slept on a sofa or crossways at the foot of my parent's bed."¹³

Wendy Gamber's research on American boardinghouses reveals that after the Civil War, "home" represented far more than merely a household. It was characterized as a refuge from the world, a site where relations between the sexes were regulated, and a location of moral guidance. Gamber notes that, in contrast, "in boardinghouses women washed, cleaned, and cooked for money, services that elsewhere they presumably provided out of love."¹⁴ Thus the boardinghouse, a place where strangers of both sexes might meet, represented the very antithesis of a respectable home.

Rather than engaging in naval battles, as paternal family tradition expected, Upton Sinclair would launch a different kind of battle against the inequities of capitalism. As a child, the first injustices he noticed were in the boardinghouse. Wendy Gamber writes that boardinghouse food—"immortalized in innumerable stories, jokes, and even songs—inspired a colorful folklore and equally colorful vocabulary: 'hirsute butter,' 'damaged coffee,' 'ancient bread,' 'azure milk,' 'antediluvian pies.'"¹⁵ Fortunately for Priscilla Harden Sinclair, she could find solace in the temperance movement and the company of other wives and daughters of alcoholics, women who could neither vote nor earn a living in America at the turn of the century.

Scholars who are rethinking the caricature of temperance advocates acknowledge how these women—and men—transformed personal tragedies into a vibrant political movement.¹⁶ After the Civil War, temperance—not suffrage—became the most powerful women's social movement, rising from the desperation to protect family members from the poverty and frequent abuse that was perceived to be caused by alcohol. Lack of clean water meant that weak beer was a healthy alternative for much of the population. Men bonded over beer; masculinity was constructed through a status ritual based on European customs of hospitality.¹⁷ Beyond

that, since the sixteenth century, men had engaged in a wave of overindulgence in distilled spirits.

Just prior to her marriage, Priscilla would have heard of the Temperance Crusade of 1873–74. The Crusaders marched from one saloon and bar to the other; they prayed, sang, argued, and begged liquor dealers to abandon their business. Suffragists such as Miriam M. Cole noted with approval the Crusaders' unconventionality: "A woman knocking out the head of a whiskey barrel with an axe, to the tune of *Old Hundred*, is not the ideal woman sitting on the sofa, dining on strawberries and cream."¹⁸ The Crusade, which brought thousands of new women to activism, was the first large-scale temperance movement created specifically by and for women.¹⁹

The Crusade's successor organization, the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), solidified women's leadership in the temperance movement. WCTU president Frances Willard envisioned temperance as a movement that would treat women's personal problems seriously and develop a public and political solution for them. By enlisting thousands of women into temperance activity, Willard would also educate them about the urgency of prison reform, child labor laws, and woman suffrage.²⁰ We know that Priscilla Harden Sinclair marched for temperance, and that she brought her young son to march alongside her. Mrs. Sinclair represented the heart of the temperance army: white, Protestant, born into a family of industrialists.²¹ Mrs. Sinclair may have spoken to her son about the many concerns of the WCTU, causes he would come to champion and fight for once grown. Sinclair said, "I gave my word of honor to my mother that I would never touch a drop of liquor in my life."²² Like other Southern women who had seen the ravages of alcohol among their men, Priscilla had brought up her son to hate liquor. She also abstained from tea and coffee.

Sinclair recounts a typical scene in his home when "Father would hide the money when he came in late, and then in the morning he would forget where he had hidden it, and there would be searching under mattresses and carpets, and inside the lining of

his clothing.”²³ Wendy Gamber explains that “visiting” other relatives was a necessary economic strategy for boarders who were unable to pay rent on a regular basis, as well as “a necessity for keeping up appearances.”²⁴ When the Sinclairs had no money to pay rent, mother and son sought refuge in the home of her father. Unlike other families where the daughter marries down and the family quietly provides a sinecure for her husband, Priscilla’s family must have actively disapproved the marriage and doubted her ability to retain any funds they might give her; indeed, she was a constant victim of the economic chaos created by her husband’s alcoholism.

Grandfather Harden, who by the 1880s had become president of the Western Maryland Railroad, was thus a source of stability in their lives. As a deacon of the Methodist Church, he did not drink or serve alcohol. Harden and his wife, Emma, lived at 2010 Maryland Avenue in a four-story brick house with white marble steps rising to the front door. A one-horse streetcar would roll by the front door every morning, taking Grandfather to his office and bringing him home for lunch each day. Upton was given a set of blocks with pictures and letters on them: “I taught myself to read, little by little, to pick out words from those blocks.” He adds, “After that I didn’t want to do anything but read.”²⁵ He especially loved *Gulliver’s Travels* and *Hans Brinker and the Silver Skates*.

Christina Hardyment has studied childrearing culture in English and American middle-class homes during this period. Parents like Priscilla Sinclair embraced fairy tales for their children, images believed to be rooted in ancient European culture. Hardyment observed that “walks in all weathers were the rule, and the windows of the nursery were to be kept open as much as possible.”²⁶ Upton was shaped by these new ideas about child rearing. Fairy tales, with their moral clarity, would set the tone for many of his novels, and his love of outdoor life was undoubtedly made possible by the flinging open of the nursery windows—although his nursery was also his parents’ bedroom.

The boy would often choose a book from his grandfather's library and set out for Druid Hill Park to read under the trees. The park, built in 1860, held a zoo, botanical gardens, and a lake for boating. Druid Hill Park's conservatory, where Upton could enjoy exotic plants, was designed by George Frederick, architect of Baltimore City Hall. Henry Adams's memoir describes Baltimore as the child Upton Sinclair may have experienced it: "The brooding heat of the profligate vegetation; the cool charm of the running water; the terrific splendor of the June thunder-gust in the deep and solitary woods, were all sensual, animal, elemental."²⁷

The freedom to be alone in nature was one of the salvations of Sinclair's childhood. Books were clearly the other: "While arguments between my father and my mother were going on, I was with Gulliver in Lilliput, or on my way to the Celestial City with Christian, or in the shop with the little tailor who killed 'seven at one blow.'²⁸ Writing followed reading, and Upton Sinclair composed his first story at age five, called "The Story of a Pin." "This pin fell into the garbage, and I remember I caused great glee because I spelled it 'gobbage.' The garbage was fed to a pig and the pig was made into sausage, and the pin appeared in the sausage." Decades later, his interviewer, Ron Gottesman, suggested to him, "Kind of anticipating *The Jungle* in that first story?" Surprised, Sinclair answered that he "hadn't thought of that aspect of it."²⁹

Back at his grandfather's house on Maryland Avenue, Upton remembered watching the terrapins lumber into the backyard, where a servant would spear them through the heads with a fork and decapitate them with a butcher knife.³⁰ He described his grandfather "carving unending quantities of chickens, ducks, turkeys, and hams," but could not recall a single word he spoke.³¹ He did remember the warmth of his Irish grandmother who "made delightful ginger cookies, played on the piano, and sang little tunes to which I danced."³²

But the boy absorbed more than the rich food and the music. One night when he was three years old, his mother's brother, Uncle



1. Upton Sinclair at eight years old, in 1886. Upton Sinclair was born on September 20, 1878, in Baltimore, Maryland, where he grew up in a series of boardinghouses. Courtesy of the Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington.

Harry, was drinking and his grandfather was trying to keep him from going out. They had a violent argument. Sinclair comments: “Uncle Harry had been an athlete, handsome, gay, with a hardy laugh. Then at the age of forty, Uncle Harry bought himself a pistol, sat on a bench in Central Park, and put a bullet through his head.”³³ Thus his mother suffered the alcoholism not only of her husband, but of her brother as well. Although Sinclair’s lifelong dedication to temperance has puzzled and amused his biographers, it makes perfect sense in light of his formative childhood experiences with alcoholism and temperance.

Upton Sinclair grew up as an only child, and there would be no other children in the Sinclair family. Abstinence was the common method used by women of Priscilla Sinclair’s class to prevent pregnancy and avoid childbirth, which were often life-threatening. In the nineteenth century, as in all previous centuries, many husbands would outlive two, three, or four wives when women died in childbirth. Certainly, the Sinclairs were also constrained in their intimate life by the presence of a child in the bedroom.

The theories of Darwin, as articulated in the women’s magazines she read, may have influenced Priscilla to have only one child.³⁴ In the work of Sir Frances Galton, a Social Darwinist, Mrs. Sinclair would have read about the importance of preventing “inferior specimens of humanity from transmitting their vices or diseases, their intellectual or physical weaknesses.”³⁵ Knowing the propensity for alcoholism on both sides of the family, she surely had reason to fear this genetic inheritance.

Priscilla Sinclair found comfort in her faith; she took Upton with her to church every Sunday, grooming her precocious child to become a bishop. The boy’s father dreamed a different future for his son. Upton Beall Sinclair thought that his son resembled his own father, Arthur Sinclair II, and hoped the boy would grow up to pursue a successful naval career. Floyd Dell imagined him as “a slight, straight, grizzled captain, something of a martinet, unquestionably brave, not very popular, a little aloof, doing his

duty, carrying on the family traditions.”³⁶ While trying to earn enough money for a room apart from that of his parents, Sinclair would incorporate his father’s fascination with the navy into his first published stories.

In the summers, Upton and his mother lodged in various dilapidated old hot springs in the South; he grew up surrounded by what Kevin Mattson aptly describes as “the bizarre and fantastic side of southern culture.”³⁷ He recalled a place called Jett’s, which they traveled to in a bumpy stagecoach: “The members of that household were pale ghosts, and we discovered that they were users of drugs. There was an idiot boy who worked in the yard, and gobbled his food out of a tin plate, like a dog.”³⁸ Later he told Floyd Dell that he could write a Dickensian novel about it “if I thought the old South was worth muckraking.”³⁹ His only novel about the South would be a Civil War novel, *Manassas*, set just before his birth.

At times, rather than going to Grandfather Harden’s, Upton and his mother sheltered at her sister’s opulent home. Pricilla Harden’s sister, Maria, married John Randolph Bland, one of the richest men in Baltimore, who became the president of the powerful United States Fidelity and Guarantee Company. The family business was housed in a seven-story building occupying a quarter of a city block in Baltimore.

During his childhood and adolescence, Upton returned again and again to this home on Howard Street. There was a bay window in one of the parlors, with a sofa in front of it. He would climb into the window, hide behind the sofa, and read picture books. He also looked at the *Christian Herald*, with its pictures of young men wasted by addiction. There in Uncle Bland’s brick house, the child watched adults at countless dances and parties. Biographer Anthony Arthur suggests that the Bland world was like the one Edith Wharton describes in *The House of Mirth*, published in 1905, a year before *The Jungle*. Sinclair recalled, “I breathed that atmosphere of pride and scorn, of values based on material possessions. . . . I

do not know why I came to hate it, but I know I did hate it from my earliest days.”⁴⁰

Arthur notes that Sinclair’s moral vision was very similar to that of Wharton, but that “unlike her he would conclude that societal flaws were economic in origin, and therefore curable.”⁴¹ Thorstein Veblen wrote *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (published in 1889) based on his experiences in Baltimore. While in graduate school at John Hopkins University, Veblen had boarded with a family of impoverished aristocrats who labored to maintain the style of their antebellum past. “Their servants came cheap, but wine and show did not. That host family spent far more on style at table than they ever collected in board money.”⁴²

Staying with his cousins offered Upton Sinclair opportunities to explore late nineteenth-century urban life. When both were older, Sinclair wrote to his cousin Howard Bland, reminiscing about their childhood journeys to dime museums. For many children who did not attend school, the dime museums, established by P. T. Barnum, were an important source of information about the social issues of the second half of the nineteenth century.⁴³ These museums taught about temperance and evolution, using lively exhibits such as Barnum’s “half-man-half-monkey” displays. Walking out of the dime museum, his head whirling with these images, the child Upton Sinclair would also have observed European immigrants, like those he would profile in *The Jungle*, men, women, and children who worked in the new Baltimore factories turning out canned tomatoes, pianos, straw hats, and umbrellas.

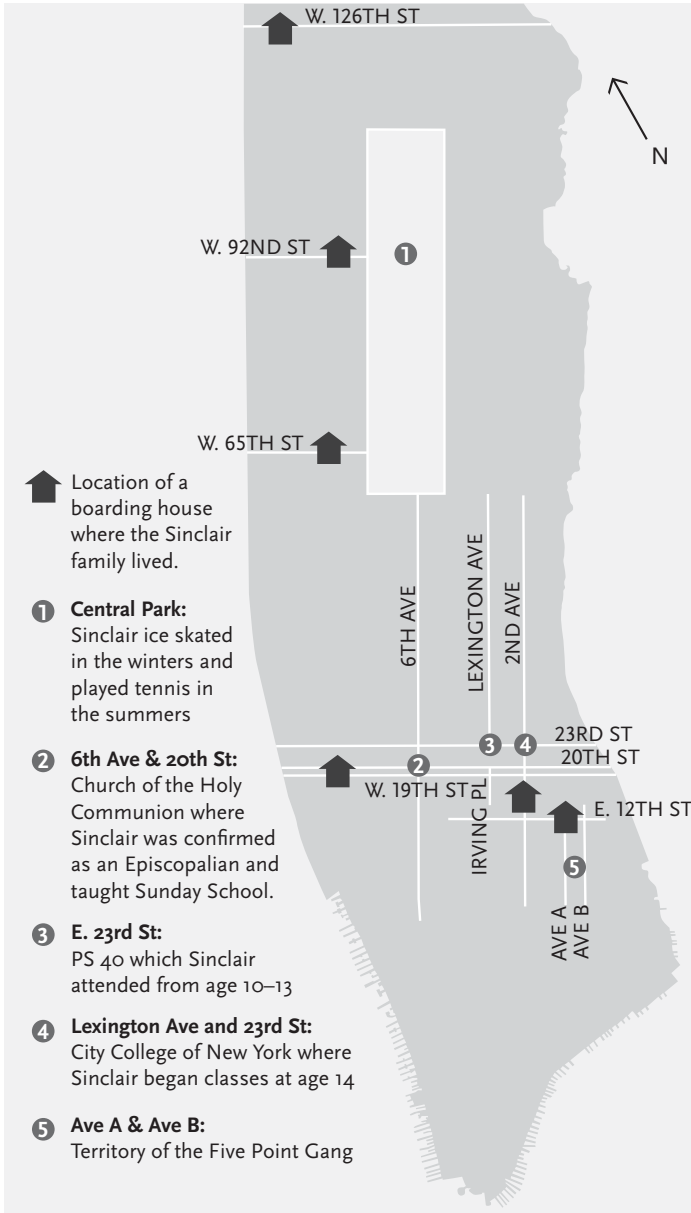
When Upton was ten, the Sinclairs decided to move to New York City, where his father would try to sell hats instead of whiskey. They gave their son the option of staying behind with his wealthy relatives. Loyal to his parents, Upton went with them to New York, a decision that would change the course of his life. Had his family stayed in Baltimore, Sinclair would never have been introduced to the publishers, the periodicals, or the disruption of the fixed social hierarchy of the South.

Gotham's Expanding Horizons

What a time to be in New York City! In 1886 the Statue of Liberty was unveiled. In 1887 electric streetcars began to carry passengers across the city. By 1890 New York's mass transit system, with both elevated and subterranean railroads, boasted a greater total mileage than London's. In 1888 New York hosted its first tickertape parade, witnessed by new arrival Upton Sinclair. In 1892 Ellis Island was constructed as the entry point for hundreds of thousands of European immigrants each year. In 1895, when Sinclair was seventeen, New York public libraries opened for the first time, allowing him to revel in books not found at home.

But New York's dynamism had a price. By the time the family arrived, ten thousand abandoned or orphaned children lived on the streets of New York. Death from starvation or preventable diseases was routine—penicillin, antibiotics, and sulfa had not been discovered. Many of these children begged. Others, singly or in gangs, stole to stay alive. During the 1890s, the most notorious gang in New York City was the Five Points Gang, named for its home turf in the Five Points (Bowery) section of Lower Manhattan, close to where the Sinclairs lived.⁴⁴ Jack Finney describes the streets, full of “carriages of black, maroon, green, brown, some shabby, some elegant and glinting with glass and polish,” which “trotted, lumbered, or rattled over the stones.”⁴⁵ Delivery wagons, loaded with barrels, crates, and sacks, were pulled by teams of enormous steam-breathing dray horses.

The Sinclair family moved frequently, usually living in boarding houses, on West Sixty-Fifth, West Ninety-Sixth, and West 126th Streets, among others. As New York City's population expanded, more and more establishments offered room and board to rural migrants, European newcomers, and assorted people who could not or would not live in “homes.” Wendy Gamber's survey of newspaper advertisements reveal that “there was indeed a boardinghouse for everyone: Swedenborgians, tailors, amateur musicians, ‘respectable



2. Upton Sinclair's Manhattan. Courtesy of Molly Roy.

colored people; Southerners, teetotalers, and disciples of the food reformer Sylvester Graham.”⁴⁶ Roughly between a third and a half of nineteenth-century urban residents either took in boarders or were boarders themselves.

The Sinclair family lived longest at the Hotel Weisiger on West Nineteenth Street, a rundown establishment where Colonel Weisiger hosted a rag-tag assortment of destitute Confederate sympathizers. Sinclair remembered how he and other boys killed flies on the bald heads of the men, coaxed tea cake from the kitchen, and pulled the pigtails of the little girls playing dolls in the parlor. He comments wryly, “One of these little girls, with whom I quarreled most of the time, was destined to grow up and become my first wife; and our married life resembled our childhood.”⁴⁷ In *Love’s Pilgrimage*, Sinclair’s autobiographical novel, he describes a summer that their two families spent together in the country, where he tried to impress little Meta by killing squirrels and chipmunks with a slingshot. Next he began raising young robins and crows, in order to keep her busy feeding them the fish that he caught.⁴⁸

Sinclair remembered the Weisiger house as a treasure trove of “comedies and tragedies, jealousies and greeds, and spites.”⁴⁹ Some evenings, residents played card games like Patience, or they read aloud from *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*. The publication provided illustrations—first using woodcuts and daguerreotypes, then more advanced forms of photography—of conflicts ranging from John Brown’s raid at Harpers Ferry through the Spanish-American War. Its cover featured pictures of manly soldiers and epic battles. In the evenings, someone played the organ and the residents sang songs like “Maryland, My Maryland!” or “The Southrons’ Chaunt of Defiance.” These former Confederate officers continued to celebrate the military pageantry and heroism of the Civil War, teaching the children that theirs had been a sacred cause.⁵⁰ And always, the old men drank.

In New York, Sinclair was often sent to hunt down his father in saloons. In *Love’s Pilgrimage*, he paints the scene: “It was the Highway

of Lost Men . . . their faces . . . gaunt with misery, or bloated with disease. . . . The boy sprang forward with a cry: ‘Father!’ And a man . . . fell upon his shoulder, sobbing, ‘My son!’”⁵¹ From such experiences, Sinclair, like other children of alcoholics, grew up hating saloons, bars, and all they represented. Sinclair’s friend, poet and socialist politician Sam DeWitt, described his own childhood in a New York tenement that contained a bordello. At the age of five, he had played “brothel” with the neighbor children, “as other children play hide and seek, and quarreling over whose turn it was to be the madam.”⁵²

Sinclair, steeped in naval history and fairy tales in Baltimore, met children like DeWitt when he finally attended a public school in 1888: “Second Avenue was especially thrilling because the ‘gangs’ came out from Avenue A and Avenue B like Sioux or Pawnees in war paint, and well-dressed little boys had to fly for their lives.”⁵³ The New York neighborhoods presented a startling contrast to the sleepy streets of Baltimore, but Priscilla Sinclair still had grand hopes to preserve gentility in her son. She took him to a church with a wealthy congregation, the Episcopal Church of Holy Communion, on Sixth Avenue and Twentieth Street. This church, like the newly completed Central Park, was within walking distance of the family’s various homes.

Central Park had been designed by Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmstead to connect rich and poor, Irish immigrants and Episcopalian aristocrats. In the park, Upton Sinclair played tennis in summer. He ice-skated in the winter on homemade skates, blades attached to wood platforms fitted with leather straps. With friends from the neighborhood, he biked all over the city: down Broadway, across the Brooklyn Bridge, through Prospect Park, and all the way out to Coney Island.

On the streets of New York City, Upton Sinclair’s education in politics began. He recalled the election when Harrison defeated Cleveland; “our torch light paraders, who had been hoping to celebrate a Democratic triumph, had to change their marching slogan

at the last minute . . . the year was 1888 and my age was ten.”⁵⁴ The boy sped through eight grammar-school grades in two years. Although academically qualified to start high school when he was twelve, he was not allowed to enroll because he was too young. So at thirteen, he attended a second year of eighth grade. Here he began to learn American history from a new perspective. Floyd Dell notes: “His hatred of the sham aristocracy of the South had made him thrill to the lessons of democracy.”⁵⁵ Sinclair would always be a fervent believer in civic participation and in mass education.

During his father’s many absences, or the times when they were evicted from a boardinghouse, the boy was often sent back to the comforts of Baltimore. At fourteen, he wrote his mother: “I will spend my money for ball & torpedoes & firecrackers. . . . Uncle B. took Howard & me to a Turkish bath. We all went into the plunge . . . had lots of fun.”⁵⁶ When visiting Baltimore, Upton discovered sets of Milton and Shakespeare in his uncle’s library. He found in Hamlet a figure to shine in his imagination alongside that of Jesus. In 1892 he was confirmed in the Episcopal Church, surely strengthening Mrs. Sinclair’s hope that he would indeed become a bishop.

When Upton Sinclair graduated, he donated his collection of several hundred books to the school, which became its library. During his final year of high school, a friend named Simon Stern, from his neighborhood, wrote a story that was printed in a monthly magazine published by a Hebrew orphanage. Sinclair decided to try his own hand. He used his hobby of hand-raising young birds: “I put one of these birds into an adventure, making it serve to prove the innocence of a colored boy accused of arson.”⁵⁷ Just before turning fourteen, Upton Sinclair sold the story for twenty-five dollars to the *Argosy*, the most popular men’s adventure magazine at the time. It was the beginning of his life as a writer.