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## Ellen Browning Scripps

Molly McClain

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New Money and American Philanthropy*

“McClain offers a riveting portrait of how one woman’s pragmatic yet free-spirited generosity greatly enhanced the region by privileging social justice over personal gain.”

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—ERIC T. HASKELL, professor of French studies and humanities and director of the Clark Humanities Museum at Scripps College

“This definitive and comprehensive examination of Ellen Browning Scripps and her wide-ranging contributions to women and the larger community is greatly welcomed by those of us who value the power of the written word, especially at this time in our history when the stories of women’s accomplishments can serve as a beacon to girls and young women everywhere.”

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“Compelling. . . . Molly McClain has an extraordinary ability to bring this amazing lady alive as a role model for women of all ages and backgrounds.”

—DOUG DAWSON, executive director of the Ellen Browning Scripps Foundation

“This book is well written, extraordinarily thorough and informative, and is a strong contribution to California, media, and women’s history. This is a terrific story.”

—KATHLEEN A. CAIRNS, author of *The Case of Rose Bird: Gender, Politics, and the California Courts*



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*New Money and  
American Philanthropy*

MOLLY MCCLAIN

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*To my beloved sister, Cady*



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## PREFACE

California, 1903.

She was a plain woman. Soft-spoken, with only a trace of an English accent. Just over sixty-six years old, she attracted little interest among the travelers on the train that wound its way along the Pacific Coast from the seaside colony of La Jolla to its terminus in San Diego, California. Her clothes, though expensive, were several years out of date.

Then she smiled. Her face softened, and the lines around her eyes creased with pleasure at the sight of three small children seated on a horse-drawn wagon. When the train stopped at the station, she rose quickly, went to the door, and waved.

Startled, a fellow passenger nearly said aloud, “Oh, how beautiful she is!”<sup>1</sup>

The woman was Ellen Browning Scripps. In her youth, she had been an editor, a writer, and an active supporter of women’s suffrage. She worked alongside hard-drinking journalists in Detroit newsrooms and campaigned for Susan B. Anthony. A shrewd businesswoman, she invested her money in the rapidly expanding Scripps chain of newspapers until she became a millionaire several times over. Like other nineteenth-century women, she endured the kind of discrimination one can only

imagine today. She had earned her wrinkles and the right to wear an old-fashioned hat.

Life experiences, however, had not hardened Scripps but made her more compassionate. Recognizing that many people struggled to compete in an increasingly capitalist society, she worked to improve educational opportunities for ordinary men and women. In the faces of children she saw the potential for a new world governed by hope and guided by a sense of community. She trusted—and invested—in that.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1926 the cover of *Time* magazine was graced with a portrait of a ninety-year-old philanthropist named Ellen Browning Scripps. Each week the magazine profiled men (and a few women) who were making the news: politicians, industrialists, actresses, and heavyweight champions. Franklin D. Roosevelt appeared on the front cover, as did Henry Ford, Ethel Barrymore, and Jack Dempsey. Scripps may have been one of the richest women in the country, but she was far from being a celebrity, much less a household name. In fact, *Time* introduced her to its readers as if it had discovered a new planet in the solar system or an unknown element for the periodic table. Who was this immensely rich woman? Why was she determined to give millions upon millions of dollars away?<sup>1</sup>

Born in London, Scripps grew up in rural poverty on the Illinois prairie. She went from rags to riches, living out that cherished American story in which people pull themselves up by their bootstraps with audacity, hard work, and a little luck. In the late nineteenth century this meant overcoming rigid class barriers, racism, sexism, and hostility to ethnic groups. She came of age at a time when farmers and factory workers invested in the dream of upward social mobility, believing that they could improve themselves by their own efforts. They made best sellers out of Horatio Alger's tales of good-hearted boys who escaped

poverty and achieved middle-class status in great urban capitals like Boston and New York.

It helped that there were examples of self-made millionaires such as Andrew Carnegie who started life in the United States as an immigrant textile worker and became the richest man in the world. Other titans of industry rose from modest backgrounds: Cornelius Vanderbilt, who built his wealth in shipping and railroads; John D. Rockefeller, the founder of Standard Oil; Jay Gould, railroad developer and speculator; and J. P. Morgan, banker and financier. Often described as “robber barons,” these men lived in a country that prized industry and ingenuity; encouraged the development of new technologies; and tolerated the existence of corruption, exploitation, and greed. Mark Twain humorously described the period as the Gilded Age, when glittering fortunes could be made through graft, speculation, and other dubious schemes.

Despite the lack of female role models, Ellen Browning Scripps made an astonishing amount of money without either manipulating the stock market or exploiting the masses. She and her brother Edward Willis “E.W.” Scripps (1854–1926) created America’s largest chain of newspapers, linking midwestern industrial cities with booming towns in the West. Scripps newspapers were cheap to produce, easy to read, and pitched to a working-class audience. Less well known today than the papers run by Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, Scripps newspapers transformed their owners into millionaires almost overnight. By the 1920s Ellen was worth an estimated \$30 million (equal to \$416 million in 2016 dollars), most of which she gave away.<sup>2</sup> In 1903 she established the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in La Jolla, California, the oldest and largest center for ocean and earth science research. She appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine after founding Scripps College in Claremont, California. She provided major financial support to The Bishop’s School, the La Jolla Recreational Center, Scripps Memorial Hospital, the San Diego Zoo, the San Diego Natural History Museum, and Torrey Pines State Park. She also donated millions of dollars to organizations worldwide that promised to advance democratic principles and women’s education.

Despite the myths that sustained ambition, no one really expected a poor farm girl to accumulate so much wealth, least of all Ellen herself. Ellen knew more about knitting stockings and milking cows than reading a balance sheet. She grew up in a rough-and-ready farmhouse in the small town of Rushville, Illinois, a railway stop at the edge of civilization, among other British immigrants who hoped to make their fortune in the United States. Known as the Prairie State, Illinois had been admitted to the Union less than two decades prior to Ellen's birth. Its only substantial city, Chicago, was still a ramshackle settlement with mud paths for streets and nearly as many cattle as people.

Ellen first strayed from the path of conventional behavior when she attended Knox College, one of the few educational institutions to admit women, even if it did not yet grant college degrees. She studied science and mathematics, graduating in 1859 with a certificate from the Female Collegiate Department. Afterward, she returned to Rushville to teach in the stereotypical one-room schoolhouse. Classroom attendance was sporadic, with long gaps timed to major farming chores. When the American Civil War broke out a few years later, she moved in with her sister and helped cook, clean, and wash clothes at the end of her school day. Her life was characterized by constant, ceaseless toil, to which she silently acquiesced.

Ellen made another unusual choice when she decided to give up her job as a schoolteacher and head to Detroit in 1865, at that time a burgeoning industrial center in the West. She joined her brother James E. Scripps (1835–1906) in publishing the *Detroit Evening News*, the start of the Scripps family fortune. Tall, with a nervous disposition and a short temper, James was determined to succeed where other newspaper owners had failed. He kept costs down with ruthless efficiency, going so far as to save every scrap of paper in the office so that it could be used again. He employed family members in order to keep wages low. George H. Scripps, a Civil War veteran, operated the business office; William A. Scripps ran the printing department; the teenaged Edward W. Scripps sold subscriptions; and Ellen worked the copy desk. They lived together with James's growing family in a modest Victorian house not far from the railway tracks along Michigan Avenue.

Between the ages of thirty and forty-five, Ellen worked long, hard, twelve-hour days at the *Detroit Evening News*, returning home to her brother James's house to care for his small children. She traded child-care for rent and invested the bulk of her income. There was no indoor plumbing, no electricity, and only one servant to do the scrubbing and cleaning. After the evening meal, she and James sat down with the cash box to count their nickels and pennies; they also prepared newspaper copy for the next day. At seven o'clock the next morning, they were back in the office again. There was no reprieve. Her younger brothers could escape from work, but Ellen shouldered both a woman's duties and those of a man.

It took a great deal of courage and determination for Ellen to deviate from the roles that Victorian women were expected to play. If she had followed the example of her female relatives, she would have married, had children, and led a domestic life as the wife of a farmer or a small-town tradesman. Instead, she attended college. After she began her career as a teacher, she could have chosen to marry if for no other reason than to supplement her substandard wage. But Ellen went to Detroit, where she and her brothers used their newspaper to wage war on capitalist elites. For the first time in her life, she had a purpose that absorbed her energy and utilized her considerable intelligence. She neither sought nor needed a male protector and, as a result, remained single for the rest of her life. Ellen felt herself to be an "anomaly," a woman who did not fit into any known classification scheme.<sup>3</sup>

Ellen's values, however, were characteristic of many women her own age. Like most Victorians, she glorified home and family, even if she did not have one of her own. She was devoted to her relatives—brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, in-laws and cousins—and felt it her duty to care for and protect those in need. She admired moral courage, self-sacrifice, and cooperation, and she hero-worshiped men such as President Abraham Lincoln. An abolitionist, she was committed to ending the practice of slavery and aiding the helpless and downtrodden. Still, when she tried to practice the female virtues so admired in the Victorian era—patience, piety, and submission—her intelligence and

good sense (not to mention good humor) usually got in the way. She was better with frugality and industry, at least in the early years.

It was her good fortune to invest in newspapers at a time when nineteenth-century Americans had become mesmerized by the printed word. Newspaper subscriptions increased exponentially during the Civil War as people hungered after news about troop movement, battles, and casualties. Once the habit was formed it was hard to break. Subscriptions kept rising during the 1870s and 1880s when publishers introduced “one-cent” or penny papers to booming western cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and St. Louis. In the 1890s a journalist remarked, “It was during the war that the American people contracted the newspaper habit, from which they have never recovered.”<sup>4</sup> Cheap prices encouraged working-class readers to indulge their taste for sensational gossip, true crime, sports, adventure stories, and fashion. Advertisers quickly jumped on board. By 1900 news had become a commodity to be shaped, packaged, and marketed with an eye to profit. James Scripps had been there at the beginning, and Ellen had thrown in her lot with him. She took her salary in shares, made loans to bridge cash-flow gaps, and never withdrew her principal. A working woman, she understood both the value of property and the insecurity of wealth in the modern age.

Ellen made a staggering fortune through her investments in both the *Detroit Evening News*—one of the most profitable newspapers in the country—and the Scripps-Howard newspapers, now the E. W. Scripps Company. In the 1890s she encouraged E.W. to leave Detroit for new horizons in the West and loaned him the money to build the first economically efficient chain of newspapers in America. They lived together for several years at a ranch called Miramar on a chaparral-covered mesa in San Diego, California. The land, though cheap, had little to recommend it; even the Pacific Ocean was fifteen long, dusty miles away. From Miramar, E.W. directed the beginnings of what would become a great newspaper empire while Ellen began to wonder if she would ever be free from her family. Far from being the ideal Victorians, the Scrippses were divided into feuding camps that clashed over power, personality, and property. In her darkest hours, Ellen imagined living

on a desert island “where no one shall . . . make me afraid; and where the air that I breathe will not be tainted, nor my ears polluted with the foul smell and sound of money.”<sup>5</sup>

At the turn of the century, San Diego was not quite a desert island, even if it resembled one. While a small population of Anglos had settled along the border in the wake of the U.S.-Mexican War, California was still a newly acquired territory rather than a well-populated American state. The real estate market had crashed just before Ellen arrived, leaving behind cheap land, abandoned homesteads, and empty hotels. It took a lot of imagination and foresight to suppose that San Diego would one day be a cultured urban center, much less an earthly paradise of sun, sea, and sand. This is what Ellen would help it to become by financing schools, hospitals, parks, libraries, and museums.

Like many women born into the Victorian era, Ellen understood philanthropy as a form of social advocacy. Unable to vote, she exercised her power to define what was important to her community by investing money in institutions that would contribute toward the greater public good. This meant education for ordinary men and women without regard to their race, class, or religion. It also meant civic engagement. She believed that people, no matter what their views, should be free to speak their minds without fear of harassment from authorities. Their participation in political life could only further democracy. In this way, she set San Diego’s public agenda for decades to come.

San Diego’s development coincided with the antimodernist movement that swept through Europe and America in the late nineteenth century. Urban life—fast-paced, individualistic, and profit-driven—had been a source of anxiety for centuries, particularly among the landowning classes. By the 1880s, however, doubts about modernity had become widespread. Industrial advances, together with the rapid expansion of cities, caused people to think anew about the world they had built. They began to recognize that the triumph of modern culture had not produced greater freedom but, in the words of one historian, “a spreading sense of moral impotence and spiritual sterility—a feeling that life had become not only overcivilized but also curiously unreal.”<sup>6</sup>

San Diego offered newcomers the opportunity to build a different kind of city, one with farms, not factories, geraniums, not smokestacks. Property owners drew on the aesthetic philosophy of John Ruskin and adopted new approaches to urban planning such as the Garden City and City Beautiful movements. Utopian novels as different as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888) and William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) informed debates about the future of the city, as did dystopian accounts of the rise of an urban proletariat and the decline of American industry. It was here that Ellen reconsidered her future as a capitalist and experimented with a new way of life.

When she was sixty years old, Ellen made a new life for herself in La Jolla, a rustic arts colony overlooking the ocean. She built a modest bungalow, befriended her neighbors, and began experimenting with utopian ideas about personal expression and progressive social change. Through book clubs and other civic organizations, she and other La Jolla women delved into the great issues of the day: efforts to extend scientific knowledge, suffrage, the peace movement, and a variety of other progressive causes. During World War I they channeled their activist agenda into the war effort. Ellen wrote, "We are the women to whom the world looks; upon whom the world depends in these crucial times. Each and every one of us is part and parcel of the great whole."<sup>7</sup>

Unlike many of her wealthy contemporaries, Ellen became a capitalist with a conscience. She led crusades against the corruption and injustice of urban life, advocated social and political reforms, and championed the labor movement against big business. She joined the National Woman Suffrage Association in 1873, not long after it was founded, and considered herself to be a Republican before she had the right to vote. She would go on to support the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the League for Industrial Democracy, among other left-wing causes.

For all her millions, Ellen did not act the part of the wealthy woman. She kept few servants, lived frugally, and wore out her old clothes. She ate sparingly, slept under the stars on a roofless porch, and took public transportation around San Diego until she was eighty years old. She spent money only on items that would benefit the greater community.

She opened her extensive gardens and grounds to the public and made her car available for use by neighbors and friends. In the words of one journalist, she regarded her wealth as “a trust for the benefit of humanity” rather than a source of status for her family or herself.<sup>8</sup>

Although she was generous to members of the Scripps family, Ellen did not help any of them get rich. She disapproved of inherited wealth, taking the view that men and women ought to be responsible for their own welfare rather than enjoy lives of privilege based on the work of earlier generations. Having come from a modest background, she had no desire to further the growth of an American aristocracy. She wanted instead to help ordinary people improve themselves through access to science, art, literature, and education. In summing up her philanthropy, she wrote modestly, “I feel that I have been instrumental in the inception and development of . . . progressive educational factors for the people.”<sup>9</sup> In fact, she supported “the people,” defined broadly, in a generous way.

While Ellen’s unwillingness to be recognized for her philanthropic work has prevented her from becoming as well known now as Carnegie, Rockefeller, and other male peers, she did not lack acclaim. The *New York Times* described her as “a pioneer in modern American journalism” who had perfected the art of philanthropy. *Success* magazine wrote that her influence helped to leaven “the selfish materialism that too often goes with the accumulation of wealth.” The *Peoria Sunday Morning Star*, meanwhile, described her as “one of the really great women of America,” one who was committed to giving money wisely “where it will do the most good—with the least harm.”<sup>10</sup> Her lawyer, J. C. Harper, was so confident of her legacy that he collected every letter, memorandum, and scrap of paper that he could find, storing them in the offices of the E. W. Scripps Company for posterity. More than fifty years later, her story can be told.

Ellen’s letters and diaries—now in the archives of Scripps College—reveal a woman whose modern and democratic ideas about wealth speak to us today. She believed that education could improve the conditions of ordinary men and women and gave money to institutions that worked for social and political change. She felt that investments

in the community—rather than gifts to her family—would lead to a better and more progressive future for children yet unborn. Finally, she drew friends and neighbors into her projects, encouraging them to think about philanthropy as a grass-roots effort rather than a shower of gold from above.

Ellen’s story is particularly important in light of the concentrated wealth being produced in our “New Gilded Age.”<sup>11</sup> Since the late 1970s, a growing number of entrepreneurs, financiers, and chief executives—many of them women—have become immensely rich. Fortunes exceeding \$1 billion are often made in one generation and handed down to the next. How will these new capitalists spend their money? What forms will philanthropy take? Perhaps the life of Ellen Browning Scripps will inspire both billionaires and those still seeking the American Dream.