

The myth of the robber barons by burton w. folsom jr. essay sample

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The Myth of The Robber Barons by Burton W. Folsom, JR. illustrates an exclusive tale about industrial tycoons in 19th century America. The main theme of the book is that these great entrepreneurs set an impetus for great industrial progress in United States by their personal endeavours. Business historian of Murray State University in Kentucky unfolds the manufactured myth of Robber Barons and manifests the misplaced victory of industrial and economic progress of America. It tells the story of earliest entrepreneurship in America and depicts six large and inspiring entrepreneurs behind the industrial revolution.

The history fabricated by many historians[1] illustrates that 19th century of American history is marked with the economic exploitations of “ robber barons” that deprived American citizens of the potential benefits of industrialization and collected huge profits for themselves. But some of the great industrialist and businessmen of the 19th century America have also been equated with “ robber barons” and their accomplishments have been labeled as the result of exploitation, theft and treachery against their fellow countrymen. According to this myth of “ robber barons”, great entrepreneurs like Carnegie, Vanderbilt, and Rockefeller who helped America to establish itself on sound economic footings and constructed huge infrastructures of banks, railroads, steel mills and cities, have been displayed as incarnations of exploiters with hideous agendas. Political entrepreneurs include Robert Fulton, Edward K. Collins and Samuel Cunard to name a few.

Dr. Folsom tries to cast away these fabricated notions and manifests a clear distinction between the exploiters and those entrepreneurs who struggled in

an opposite way. These leaders worked to eliminate disparities in the industrial milieu and to break the monopolies. They further helped to create a just and progressive society by tackling social issues such as poverty, illiteracy etc. Folsom does not deny that there were no corrupt and malicious entrepreneurs.

He describes that there were numerous entrepreneurs who established their influence in the political and official sectors in order to serve their own vested interest. These entrepreneurs were political in nature and worked only to establish and strengthen their business empires. Folsom explains these two distinguished types of entrepreneurs in details and his in-depth analysis of these distinct types shows apparent differences among them. He categorizes these entrepreneurs as “ market entrepreneurs” and “ political entrepreneurs’ but further clarifies that no entrepreneur can be classified into a single category as their activities and objectives are overlapped. Additionally, he displays the both trends i. e. political and market intermingles with each other and most entrepreneurs possess the characteristics of the both categories. [2] Folsom derives this thesis from the noted author Matthew Josephson who popularized the term of *The Robber Barons*. He writes;

“ In short order the railroad presidents, the copper barons, the big dry-goods merchants and the steel masters became Senators, ruling in the highest councils of the national government, and sometimes scattered twenty-dollar gold pieces to newsboys of Washington. But they also became in even greater number lay leaders of churches, trustees of universities, partners or

owners of newspapers or press services and figures of fashionable, cultured society. And through all these channels they labored to advance their policies and principles, sometimes directly, more often with skillful indirection. (317)

Josephson illustrates only this side of the picture and asserts that all industrialists has same mindset as explained above and their indulgence in charities, political spheres and social activities were due to their own vested interests. But Folsom is of the view that this was not the case with all industrialists. Most of them performed social services on humanitarian grounds. Folsom assertions can be supported by providing philosophies of life and ideas of social services of these “ Robber Barons”. Carnegie’s philosophy and ideas can be extracted from his famous essay “ *Wealth*”. He says;

The highest life is probably to be reached, not by such imitation of the life of Christ as Count Tolstoï gives us, but, while animated by Christ’s spirit, by recognizing the changed conditions of this age, and adopting modes of expressing this spirit suitable to the changed conditions under which we live; still laboring for the good of our fellows, which was the essence of his life and teaching, but laboring in a different manner. (Carnegie 18)

Folsom’s analysis is further supported by Livesays with special reference to one of the greatest big Barons i. e. Andrew Carnegie. Livesays manifests that his (Carnegie’s) ability “ to recognize the potential of a new service or product and to seize upon an auspicious moment to associate himself with

it. Time and again he manifested this acumen, shifting his talents from factory to telegraph, from telegraph to railroad, from railroad to iron and then steel, meanwhile investing his money in express companies, oil fields, sleeping cars, and telegraphs before he finally fused his energies and capital in Carnegie Steel" (Livesays 19). Another entrepreneur that Folsom describes in detail and highlights his entrepreneurial achievement and social services is J. J. Hill.

He constructed the Great Northern Railroad without indulging in political entrepreneurship. Even he did not accepted government aid in his projects. (Malone 197) History is a manifestation of this great achievement and he himself declares that he constructed the Northern Railroad " without any government aid, even the right of way, through hundreds of miles of public lands, being paid for in cash..."(Martin 411) Rockefeller is another prime example of " market entrepreneur" who also contributed greatly toward the well-being of his workers in particular and the welfare of Americans in general. Folsom highlights their accomplishments in social services. Unlike other research scholars and historians who are of the view that giving money to charities and establishing other social services were acts of repentance on the part of these entrepreneurs, Folsom is of the view that although they had ambivalent personalities at certain occasions but mostly there messiah rather than exploiter. They were the industrial captain of the day who pushed America toward real progress and prosperity.

Folsom is of the view that creation of this myth has political motives as well i. e. to justify and establish government monopoly over the business and to

capacitate government to intervene in the affairs of the entrepreneurs. He says that each “ abuse” committed by a “ robber baron” was a justification to establish governmental control and a motive to introduce reforms. Folsom further discloses that this reformation process suits the interests if the government as it takes away power from entrepreneurs and forward it to different states institutions. Folsom further criticizes textbooks mainly for not providing correct information about these great entrepreneur and only describes political entrepreneur side of businessmen. He also says that historians must eradicate their pre-conceived notions about these entrepreneurs i. e. entrepreneurs cut costs and made many contributions to American economic growth, but they also marred political life by bribing politicians and misusing government funds.

All the above-mentioned arguments and supporting evidence from other sources clearly manifest that Folsom’s prepositions are verified and verifiable. This powerful work, *Myth of the Robber Barons*, blows up the misperceptions and fabricated realities about the nineteenth century entrepreneurs and reveals that all the entrepreneurs were not of “ Robber Baron” category but there were market oriented businessmen like Andrew Carnegie, Rockefeller and J. J. Hill. These market-oriented entrepreneurs contributed not only contributed in the industrial and business sector but their contribution to the social sector cannot be denied. The initiative, entrepreneurship and social services of these tycoons paved the way for real economic revolution. This book augments already established truth[3] that

the myth of Robber Baron is a fabricated one that suits the interests of the government and it has not real grounds.

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