

## The Gilded Age and the Self-Made Man

One of the dominant ideas in America's Gilded Age was that of the self-made man. The ideal of the self-made man celebrates a person who rises to success by virtue of his strong work ethic, can-do attitude, any special advantages and even faces formidable disadvantages. Who in America's past epitomized the self-made man?

The popularity of the self-made man ideal was also facilitated by an expansion of the availability of print literature. By far, the most successful and influential promoter of the ideal was Horatio Alger. Between 1866 and 1900, he published more than 100 short novels aimed at young boys, all with the same message: All that was needed to achieve success were hard work, honesty, thrift, ambition, and "pluck." Most titles of these books hinted at this theme, for example: *Struggling Upward; or, Luke Larkin's Luck, Sink or Swim; or, Harry Raymond's Resolve, Strong and Steady; or, Paddle Your Own Canoe, Strive and Succeed; or, The Progress of Walter Conrad, Bound to Rise; or, Up the Ladder.*

All of Alger's protagonists begin life in terrible circumstances. They achieve success by working hard, being honest, and drowning or returning a found bag of money to its rightful owner. Initially, the characters may seem to be lucky, but Alger's real message is that one should always seek opportunity and be willing to take risks.

The Alger-inspired genre was so popular in the Gilded Age that it prompted Mark Twain to pen a parody. Twain's "The Story of a Bad Little Boy" is written in the style of Horatio Alger, but at every turn, the usual uplifting scenarios fail to materialize for the protagonist, the bad little boy named James. little boy who, unlike all the bad little boys in Horatio Alger novels, does not experience a hard lesson that somehow transforms him into a good little boy destined to lead a moral and exemplary life. Here's a brief passage to give you a sense of Mark Twain's razor-sharp wit. He's writing about James:

*Once he climbed up in Farmer Acorn's apple-tree to steal apples, and the limb didn't break, and he didn't fall and break his arm, and get torn by the farmer's great dog, and then languish on a sick bed for weeks, and repent and become good. Oh! no; he stole as many apples as he wanted and he came down all right; and he was ready for that dog too, and he knocked him endways with a brick when he came to tear him...*

In the 1890's, the Reverend Russell Conwell, extolling the virtues of the new economy and the opportunities for self-made success, delivered a popular sermon titled "Acres of Diamonds." In his sermon, he proclaimed that anyone who was intelligent, hard-working, and honest could become rich. The sermon was published as a pamphlet and sold more than a million copies. Everyone's backyard, he said, was filled with diamonds ready to be harvested.

For the most part, the ideal of the self-made man was presented in nothing but positive and optimistic terms: Anyone living in this great society can overcome adversity and achieve success. But some Americans took the ideal to its furthest extreme, embracing a concept known as *social Darwinism*. We saw a hint of this in Reverend Conwell's "Acres of Diamonds" sermon, in which he said,

*I say that you ought to get rich, and it is your duty to get rich ... plenty of people to work with them. It is because they are honest men. ...I sympathize with the poor, but the number of poor who are to be sympathized with is very small. To sympathize with a man whom God has punished for his sins ...is to do wrong. ...Let us remember there is not a poor person in the United States who was not made poor by his own shortcomings...*

*Social Darwinism* argued that competition among human beings led inexorably to what is called "the survival of the fittest." In other words, those who possessed superior talents, intelligence, self-discipline, and determination. And the unsuccessful? They lacked these characteristics. Hostility toward the poor was famously expressed in a widely reprinted sermon by the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, the nation's most renowned preacher. Dismissing the claims of workers that they could not live in dignity on wages of \$1.00 a day, he asserted in 1877 that too many workingmen "insist on smoking and drinking beer." A frugal workingman could support his family on a diet of bread and water, argued Beecher, "the man who cannot live on bread and water is not fit to live."

After reading the *American Experience* biographies on Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, construct a t-chart and give examples of how each titan of the Gilded Age embodied the ideal of the self-made man defined by Horatio Alger using the characteristics of **industry, honesty, thrift, ambition, risk-taking, and "pluck."**