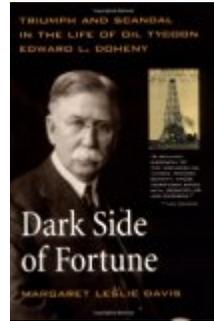


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Margaret Leslie Davis. *Dark Side of Fortune: Triumph and Scandal in the Life of Oil Tycoon Edward L. Doheny*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. ix + 339 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-22909-9.

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Published on H-Pol (November, 2001)



## The Other Side of the Scandal

### The Other Side of the Scandal

Margaret Leslie Davis' *Dark Side of Fortune* is a biography of oilman Edward L. Doheny. For many, Doheny's name will ring a bell but will not register a strong impression. Doheny's enormous success in the oil industry has been long overshadowed by "the dark side" of his role in the oil scandals of Warren G. Harding's administration. It was Doheny who was accused of bribing Secretary of the Interior Albert Fall to gain the leasing rights to the Elk Hills naval oil reserves. That affair was part of what became known as the Teapot Dome scandal, named after the reserves that another oilman, Harry Sinclair, leased. The duality of Doheny's life and historical reputation can be summed up by realizing that at the height of his career Doheny was the "Emperor of Oil" but since his death, according to Davis, he has been portrayed as the "archetypal evil Yankee and a man of unconscionable greed" (p. xiv). Further complicating any effort to give a more nuanced portrayal of Doheny has been a lack of documentation. In 1935 Estelle Doheny, Doheny's widow, burned hundreds of letters and business documents, what Davis describes as the "written remnants of Edward Doheny's life" (p. 4). Davis, however, uses several new sources in her biography: correspondence between Edward Doheny and Albert Fall from 1919 to 1935, the Estelle Doheny Collection, and the trial transcripts and Doheny's correspondence with his attorney Frank J. Hogan. The result is a first-rate biography of one of the most controversial business men of the period.

Edward Doheny began his career during the 1880s as a gold prospector in the New Mexico territory. During these rough and tumble prospecting days Doheny made several friends that he would keep for life, for better or worse. First among these friends was Charles Canfield, who would become Doheny's partner and a key player in his rise to fortune. The second of these acquaintances was Albert Fall, another young man on the make. Fall would go on to become a United States Senator and Secretary of the Interior. Following various twists and turns Doheny and Canfield failed to amass a fortune in the gold mines of New Mexico, but did succeed in the southern California oil boom.

After striking it rich in the tumultuous oil industry of southern California, Doheny expanded his business into Mexico. Eventually Doheny became one of the central figures in the "Great Mexican Oil Boom" (p. 76) making \$10 million a year and amassing a personal fortune estimated at \$75 million. In order to gain concessions and to protect his business interests Doheny became involved in Mexican politics; this, in turn, led to involvement in the Mexican Revolution and entanglement with the Wilson administration. Although he was a Democrat and had donated money to the Democratic cause, Doheny became an outspoken critic of Wilson's Mexican policies, which he saw as clumsy. Doheny then reunited with Albert Fall, now a Republican senator from New Mexico, a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, and a leading critic of Wilson's interventionism. Fall would become even more important for Doheny after Warren G. Hard-

ing appointed his old Senate colleague as Secretary of the Interior.

The election of 1920 and the Harding administration oozed oil politics. Naturally, Doheny, as one of the leading oilmen in the country, was an important figure. Doheny lobbied to protect his interest in Mexican oil, but he also secured government oil leases, which proved to be his undoing. While historians still debate the extent of Doheny's guilt or innocence, it is clear that Doheny dispatched his son, Edward ("Ned") L. Doheny, Jr. to withdraw \$100,000 from his personal bank account in New York City. Ned and his friend Hugh Plunkett then traveled to Washington, D.C., where they delivered the money to Albert Fall at the Wardman Park Hotel. Fall, in return, gave Ned Doheny a promissory note. Shortly after the transaction, Fall awarded Doheny's Pan American Petroleum and Transport Company a lucrative lease to tap the naval oil reserves at Elk Hills, California. This, of course, was the beginning of the scandal that would dominate so much of Fall's and Doheny's lives and would color their place in history.

The leases aroused suspicions and soon Albert Fall came under investigation, first by a Senate Committee chaired by Thomas Walsh (D-Montana). Doheny maintained throughout the affair that he had acted out of patriotism and loyalty to an old friend. He had been approached by representatives of the United States Navy and his companies were involved in a variety of government oil projects designed, he maintained, to improve national security. Doheny told the Senate that the \$100,000 was not a bribe but rather a personal loan to Fall. On June 5, 1924, attorneys for the United States government indicted Edward Doheny, Ned Doheny, and Harry Sinclair for bribery and conspiracy. Albert Fall was named a co-defendant.

What followed were years of complicated and sensational court trials. Business troubles accompanied the scandal. A federal judge ruled against Doheny and declared the Elk Hills lease void. The scandals had a personal cost as well. Tragically for Doheny, his son Ned was murdered by his long-time friend and personal secretary Hugh Plunkett who had accompanied Ned on his infamous trip to meet Fall and thus was also under indictment. Plunkett evidently broke under the stress of the trials. The murder and the trials left Edward Doheny a "shattered man" (p. 246). Albert Fall was found guilty of accepting a bribe and became the first cabinet member to go to prison for a crime committed while in office. Still, Doheny remained steadfast and, to his own detri-

ment, secretive. Doheny secretly assured Fall that as long as he was alive he would never want for anything and purchased Fall's ranch. Estelle Doheny eventually had Fall evicted, making national headlines in 1935. Oddly enough, Doheny was found not guilty for the bribe that Fall was convicted of taking.

*Dark Side of Fortune* is a well-written and enjoyable book. Academics and non-academics alike should find it enlightening. Davis has written a fine biography that explores both the public and private life of Edward Doheny. The real appeal and value of the book is in Davis' ability as a biographer to place the better-known moments of her subject's life into a sophisticated and nuanced context. Davis writes with sympathy and some admiration of Doheny but is not blind to his faults. The strongest part of the book is Davis' treatment of Doheny's oil dealings and his involvement with Mexico. She manages to deal clearly with the complicated and convoluted details of the oil scandals and the resulting court cases. However, Davis ultimately offers no verdict on Doheny's guilt or innocence, a somewhat baffling conclusion given that she is an attorney. She notes that historians have long puzzled over how Doheny could be innocent of giving a bribe that Fall was guilty of accepting, but the reader is left to make do with a discussion of the judge's favorable instructions to the jury. Might not historians move beyond the technical limits of the law and look at what additional meaning the scandals might have had? Davis' biography is one of a number of biographies of people involved in the Harding scandals that have gone beyond their involvement in the scandals. David H. Stratton's biography of Albert Fall, *Tempest over Teapot Dome: The Story of Albert B. Fall* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998) is a good example of this trend. Like Davis, Stratton finds more to the story in his biography of Fall than the scandals that dominated the final years of his subject's life.

Part of the reason for this seemingly belated interest in the biographies of these prominent men and women is the difficulty in finding historical documents. Doheny was part of a familiar pattern for those who came within the orbit of the Harding administration. Davis was fortunate that additional information was unearthed after Doheny's widow destroyed his papers. Joining Doheny on the list of those with destroyed papers, either by themselves or by others, are Warren G. Harding, Attorney General Harry Daugherty, and Calvin Coolidge. Davis offers new insight into Doheny's oil business and establishes the context for his dealings in Mexico and his subsequent relationship with Fall, something that has of-

ten been brushed over in classic accounts of the scandals such as Burl Noggle's *Teapot Dome: Oil and Politics in the 1920s* (New York: Norton, 1962).

While we might leave *Dark Side of Fortune* with additional questions and food for thought, Davis has written a fine biography and her accomplishment is to be appreciated.

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**Citation:** Phillip G. Payne. Review of Davis, Margaret Leslie, *Dark Side of Fortune: Triumph and Scandal in the Life of Oil Tycoon Edward L. Doheny*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. November, 2001.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5636>

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