



Sir Thomas Lipton: The Man Who Invented Himself

James Mackay

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Thomas Lipton burst onto the national scene in 1897, the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. The Princess of Wales had launched a £30,000 fund to provide a Jubilee dinner for the poor, but, with only weeks to go, no more than £5,000 had been subscribed. Lipton saved the day by writing a cheque for £25,000. The anonymous gift created massive press speculation and even greater publicity when the identity of the donor leaked out two days later. Lipton's generosity earned him a knighthood and propelled him into society at the highest level, a personal friend of the future King and Queen.

Many of the myths that surrounded Lipton in the latter part of his life were created at this time and would be fixed for ever in his autobiography, published shortly after his death in 1931. Until now, what we know of Sir Thomas Lipton, grocery millionaire and yachtsman, is what he chose to tell the world about himself. Now literally detective James Mackay has uncovered the true story of one of the turn of the century's most extraordinary, larger-than-life characters, a story which is indefinitely more dramatic than the accepted version.

Virtually everything Lipton tells us about himself is now shown to be untrue - even the origins of his family, his name, his date of birth and the place where he was born. The man who was hailed as the world's most eligible bachelor (his name was linked romantically with Rose Fitzgerald, the future mother of John F. Kennedy) had at least two skeletons in the closet - a youthful indiscretion which led to a forced marriage, and a homosexual affair which lasted for thirty years.

As a self-publicist he was a genius, and this was the key to his remarkable success. Beginning with a small shop in Glasgoe in 1871 he created a nationwide grocery chain second to none. In the process, he revolutionised the grocery retail trade, dealing direct with producers and eventually controlling production himself, with tea estates in Ceylon and meat-packing plants in Chicago. He combined a flair for organisation with superb showmanship, with stunts such as five-ton cheeses stuffed with gold sovereigns. In 1898 his company went public in one of the most successful share issues in stockmarket history.

Lipton developed an interest in yachting which he pursued with the same single-mindedness as his business ventures. Between 1898 and 1930 he challenged for the America's Cup with a succession of yachts called *Shamrock*, but the rules of the race were heavily weighted in favour of the American defenders. The saga of his challenges, his near triumphs and the disappointments that would have destroyed a less heroic figure has become the most stirring in the annals of sport, and provides a fitting conclusion to the life of a maverick and outsider who was also one of the most colourful and flamboyant tycoons of all time.

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