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Autobiography & Memoir

Dark Side of Fortune: Triumph and Scandal in the Life of Oil Tycoon Edward L. Doheny
Margaret Leslie Davis
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This biography of oil tycoon Edward L. Doheny reads like a novel, and fittingly so. For the life story of this brilliant, driven entrepreneur is the stuff of fiction, blending the quintessentially American rags-to-riches saga with elements of Greek tragedy.

Davis, an attorney and author of Rivers in the Desert: William Mulholland and Inventing of Los Angeles, calls upon her legal acumen, historian's research skills and storytelling ability to craft a spellbinding account of Doheny's rise to fame, power and great wealth-and his fall from grace as a key figure in the Teapot Dome scandal that shattered the presidency of Warren G. Harding.

Doheny embodied the cultural image of the young man who heads West to seek his fortune, although success eluded him for two decades as he worked the mines in a fruitless quest for the big strike. An episode almost too serendipitous to be real inspired the penniless, despairing Doheny to drill for oil in California. When the black gold started flowing, his energy, vision and courage took over. His relentless salesmanship was instrumental in persuading the steamship and railroad industries to switch from coal to oil, creating vast markets for a product that would fundamentally alter the U.S. economy.

Again and again he took enormous risks while building a $100 million empire in politically turbulent Mexico. Irritated by what he viewed as President Wilson's weakness in safeguarding his holdings against threats of nationalization by Mexico's government and destruction of his wells and other infrastructure by foes of Yankee imperialists, Doheny joined other industrial titans in supporting the election of a business-friendly Republican administration in 1920. Among members of the new Cabinet was Secretary of the Interior Albert B. Fall, a friend of Doheny's from their early days as prospectors who became a wealthy rancher and political boss in New Mexico.

In a move bitterly criticized by conservationists, the Harding administration decided to

lease drilling rights to western oilfields that the federal government had designated for the Navy in case of war. Among them: the Teapot Dome reserve in Wyoming. Doheny's company bid successfully to tap fields in California that he expected to yield $100 million or more in profits over three decades. In the ensuing uproar, it was disclosed that Doheny had loaned Fall $100,000 to buy a ranch and pay off debts. Both insisted the loan was a simple act of friendship, but it ignited a political firestorm and decade-long series of court battles that would forever tarnish the reputations of two proud men. Although twice acquitted of criminal charges, Doheny's spirit finally was broken by the attacks on his integrity and the mysterious murder of his only son.

Davis strikes a balance between critics who have depicted Doheny as the epitome of arrogant capitalist greed and defenders who insist he was the innocent victim of a political vendetta. Her objective portrayal lends credibility to a fascinating narrative that will enrich the historical record while appealing to casual readers who enjoy tales of wealth, fame and political intrigue.

John Flesher