

# David Graham Phillips

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## About this Person

**Born:** October 31, 1867 in Madison, Indiana, United States

**Died:** January 24, 1911 in New York, New York, United States

**Nationality:** American

**Other Names:** Philips, David Graham; Graham, John

Full Text:

Phillips, David Graham (Oct. 31, 1867 - Jan. 24, 1911), journalist and novelist, the son of David Graham and Margaret (Lee) Phillips, was born in Madison, Ind., where his father was a banker. Educated at the public schools and privately instructed in languages, he matriculated at Indiana Asbury University (later De Pauw) but after two years transferred to the College of New Jersey, whence he was graduated in 1887. The following July he became a reporter on the *Cincinnati Times-Star* and showed such unusual talents for journalism that within a year he was employed at a higher salary by the *Cincinnati Commercial Gazette*. In the summer of 1890 he went to New York City, where he joined the staff of the *Sun*. Again distinguishing himself, he soon became one of the paper's most valuable reporters. In 1893 he left the *Sun* for the *World*, which he first served as London correspondent. After a few months he returned to the United States to do general reporting until 1895, when he was assigned to feature writing. In 1897 Joseph Pulitzer transferred him to the editorial department, later giving him charge of the editorial page in the absence of W. H. Merrill.

Despite the progress that he had made in journalism, Phillips was not satisfied with newspaper work. In 1901 he published his first novel, *The Great God Success*, under the pseudonym of John Graham, and early in the next year he left the *World* to devote himself to the writing of magazine articles and fiction. He was a diligent worker, and by the time of his death he had published seventeen novels, a play, and a book of non-fiction. He had also written nearly forty articles for the *Saturday Evening Post* and at least as many more for the *Cosmopolitan*, *Success*, the *Arena*, and other magazines. In addition to all this he had completed six novels that were published posthumously. His death came suddenly. In the later months of 1910 he received a series of threatening notes, to which he paid little attention. On Jan. 23, 1911, as he was on his way from lunch, a young musician named Fitzhugh Coyle Goldsborough suddenly confronted him and fired six shots into his body, immediately thereafter killing himself. Phillips died the next day. Goldsborough's motive, as revealed in the notes to Phillips and in his private papers, was the desire to avenge the insults that he maintained Phillips had directed against the Goldsborough family in his novels. There was no basis for Goldsborough's charge, and his papers pointed to insanity.

Though Phillips wrote many different kinds of novels, his more characteristic work aimed at the exposure of contemporary evils in business and government. In many articles, and especially in the sensational series called "The Treason of the Senate," which he contributed to the *Cosmopolitan* in 1906, he took a direct part in the muckraking movement; but his fiction of the same type was more voluminous and probably more effective. In *The Cost* (1904) and *The Deluge* (1905) he dealt with financial manipulators, and in *Light-Fingered Gentry* (1907) he capitalized the insurance scandals. In *The Plum Tree* (1905), *The Fashionable Adventures of Joshua Craig* (1909), *George Helm* (1912), and *The Conflict* (1911) he treated national, state, and municipal corruption. As his interest in muckraking declined, he began to concern himself with such problems as sexual standards for women (*The Worth of a Woman*, a play, 1908), women's social ambitions (*The Husband's Story*, 1910), and feminine independence (*The Price She Paid*, 1912). Even into these stories, however, he often introduced exposure of industrial and political corruption, as in his most ambitious novel, *Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise* (1917), though it is primarily concerned with the position of women in society.

In his own day Phillips achieved considerable popularity. There can be no doubt of the sincerity of his attacks on corruption, nor is it possible to deny that he had a comprehensive knowledge of many aspects of American life. His work is seldom, however, more than journalism. Judged by esthetic standards his literary powers were of a low order, especially his powers of characterization, and he made many concessions to popular taste. The crudities even of *Susan Lenox*, which is much his best work, are often distressing, though the book is vigorous, honest, and sometimes impressive. Indeed, it may be said of Phillips' books taken as a whole that, however biased they may be and whatever literary faults they may have, they do constitute a substantial and not wholly inaccurate record of the social movements of his day.

## FURTHER READINGS

[The only full-length biography is I. F. Marcossou, *David Graham Phillips and His Times* (1932). There is information about him in Don C. Seitz, *Joseph Pulitzer: His Life & Letters* (1924) and in Frank M. O'Brien, *The Story of the Sun* (1918). The New York papers of Jan. 24 and 25, 1911, contain long but not completely accurate accounts of his life, and there is an obituary in the *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, Feb. 1, 1911. Among contemporary magazine articles the most useful are in the *Book News Monthly*, Apr. 1907, the *Arena*, Mar. 1906, and the *Bookman*, Mar. 1911. Critical estimates may be found in Frank Harris, *Latest Contemporary Portraits* (1927) and F. T. Cooper, *Some Am. Story Tellers* (1911). The present article is to some extent based upon letters from or interviews with I. F. Marcossou, C. E. Russell, E. F. Flynn, J. A. Green, G. H. Lorimer, and other friends of Phillips. The author has also published a longer study of the man and his work in the *Bookman* for May 1931. The manuscripts of Phillips' novels are in the Princeton Library.]

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