

THE CARNEGIE NOBODY KNOWS

BY GEORGE SWETNAM*

EVERYBODY KNOWS about Andrew Carnegie: He was the man who gave away libraries.¹ Someone a little more knowledgeable might say that Carnegie was a Scottish immigrant who started his career as a bobbin boy, then made millions in steel in some mysterious way while others were going broke in the same field, and gave much of it away.

Most historians who have paid him any attention know that Carnegie made his first important money in oil, not iron. During the oil excitement late in 1861, Carnegie invested about \$11,000 in the Storey Farm in the Oil Creek valley. Costing \$40,000, it repaid his share more than \$17,000 the first year and eventually returned a total of more than \$5 million.² One biographer asserts with no basis of fact that the investment was on credit and was paid for from the dividends.³ Another, who had access to Carnegie's papers and was a careful researcher, states that the shares were paid for with profits from the Woodruff sleeping cars.⁴ Winkler also states, quite without proof, that some of the \$30 million of bonds Carnegie sold overseas "turned out to be worthless as October leaves."⁵ Quite the contrary, much of Carnegie's success and the profit he turned in selling securities came from his reputation for handling only good ones.

But every biographer, including his latest who has written the only good one on him, has proved virtually oblivious to one important side of the industrialist: his literary ability. Burton K. Hendrick mentions most of Carnegie's books and includes a partial and inaccurate list

* The author, a retired journalist and historian, lives in Glenshaw, Pennsylvania. This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Pennsylvania Historical Association at Westminster College in 1975.

1. Even official Carnegie corporation estimates differ as to how many, but the most commonly accepted number is 2,811.

2. Joseph F. Wall, *Andrew Carnegie* (New York, 1970), p. 176.

3. John K. Winkler, *Incredible Carnegie* (New York, 1931), p. 85.

4. Burton K. Hendrick, *The Life of Andrew Carnegie* (New York, 1932), 1:123.

5. Winkler, *Incredible Carnegie*, p. 105.

of his magazine articles and published speeches in his appendix. But he never seems to realize either Carnegie's importance as a writer or his literary impact on the world in which he lived.⁶ Except for a few instances, he seems to look upon Carnegie's writing as an innocent and sometimes profitable hobby.

Joseph Wall mentions only a few of Carnegie's literary works and is almost oblivious to this important side of his subject. During an interview shortly after the appearance of his splendid biography, I happened to mention that Twayne Press had commissioned me to write a book on Carnegie for its United States Authors Series⁷. He seemed surprised, saying, "I remember he wrote a little, but never realized it was of much importance."

"Before his stature as a steelman had made him widely known outside the Pittsburgh area and the industry," I replied, "he was one of the most sought-after writers for the top British and American reviews, such as *Forum*, *Contemporary Review*, *North American Review*, *Nineteenth Century* and the like. He wrote eight books,⁸ all successfully published, and they were translated into French, German, Swedish, Hungarian, Spanish, Italian, and other languages."⁹

Wall's jaw dropped, and he said, "I didn't know that." But far from being irritated, this splendid scholar provided me with useful help, including typescripts of Carnegie material in United States Steel Corporation files, which were opened briefly for him and are now indefinitely closed to scholars.

Worse still, in a review of R. G. McCloskey's excellent *American Conservatism in the Age of Enterprise*,¹⁰ Fritz Redlich criticized the author

6. Hendrick, *Carnegie*, 2:389-392. He lists with some errors the eight books published under Carnegie's name, but only about one-half the articles and printed speeches I have been able to locate for my forthcoming book. Indeed, I doubt if even my list includes them all.

7. Hopefully it will be published in the near future. It is waiting its turn in this busy series.

8. *Round the World* (n.p. [New York], 1879), revised and published by Scribner's (New York, 1884); *Our Coaching Trip*, (n.p. [New York], 1882), revised and published by Scribner's, (New York, 1883) as *An American Four-in-Hand in Britain; Triumphant Democracy*, (New York and London, 1886), revised and reissued, (New York and London, 1893); *The Gospel of Wealth*, (New York, 1900); *The Empire of Business*, (New York, 1902); *James Watt*, (Edinburgh, London and New York, 1905; *Problems of Today* (New York, 1908); *Autobiography of Andrew Carnegie* edited by John C. Van Dyke (Boston, 1920).

9. *National Union Catalog of Pre-1956 Imprints* (Chicago and London, 1968) German, 96; French, 25 et passim; Spanish, Dano-Norwegian, 27 et passim; Polish, 28; Greek, Swedish, Hungarian, 29; Esperanto, 30; Italian, Dutch, 31.

10. (Cambridge, Mass., 1951).

for saying or implying that the ideas expressed by Carnegie in his *Triumphant Democracy* were his own.

When a wealthy and powerful American business leader "writes" a book or pamphlet, the assumption is that he hired a ghost writer.

In the case of Carnegie we know (at least for the period in which *Triumphant Democracy* was written) who the ghost writer was: James Howard Bridge . . . had been Herbert Spencer's secretary from 1879 to 1884. In the latter year he became Carnegie's "literary assistant,"¹¹ resigning from that post in 1889. How much he contributed to the *Forum* essays in 1886 and to *Triumphant Democracy*, and in turn how great was Carnegie's share therein is not known to the reviewer, nor does he know who Carnegie's later "literary assistants" were. . . . In this case the line runs from Spencer to Bridge, then to Bridge plus Carnegie. . . .

Bridge . . . may have had a more than fifty per cent share in the book, and a considerable influence on Carnegie's thinking, the latter thereby absorbing Spencerism.¹²

This criticism shows a staggering ignorance of or disregard for the period in which the writing in question occurred. There were as yet no ghost writers, and Carnegie was the first modern American businessman who could properly be called a writer. Furthermore, Carnegie was an announced Spencerian by 1870 (when Bridge was only fourteen years of age) and in 1882 he and Spencer were close friends.¹³

Oddly enough, while Wall,¹⁴ Edward Kirkland,¹⁵ and others have questioned and rejected such suggestions of ghost writing and strongly asserted that both internal and external evidence support Carnegie's authorship, I have found no one who pointed out how utterly impossible and ridiculous Redlich's arguments really are.

For a man so busy at making money as he was, Carnegie did an amazing amount of writing, including two books of travel,¹⁶ both of

11. I have been unable to find any evidence that Bridge or anyone else ever held such a title or post. Bridge made no such claim. Carnegie always refers to him as his "secretary."

12. *American Historical Review*, 57 (April 1952):707-708.

13. Wall, *Carnegie*, pp. 381-383.

14. Interview referred to above.

15. *The Gospel of Wealth etc.*, edited by Edward C. Kirkland (Cambridge Mass., 1962), introduction, xix.

16. *Round the World and Our Coaching Trip*.

which he completely revised; a biography and an autobiography;¹⁷ four on economics and politics;¹⁸ and probably one on railroad telegraphy.¹⁹ Also he penned almost seventy important magazine articles, more than seventy-five speeches which were published in pamphlet form, and hundreds of highly important letters, most of them—unfortunately—still unpublished, and some unavailable for study.²⁰

Carnegie corresponded with six presidents,²¹ who often appear to have taken his advice, and with British and American statesmen on internal and foreign policy. During the Spanish-American War (one of only three of which he ever approved) he cabled General Nelson Miles in Cuba, "Withdraw Santiago. Proceed full force to Porto Rico." Miles laid the advice before McKinley, got his approval, and did as Carnegie advised.²² Carnegie also corresponded with other world leaders including King Edward VII, Kaiser Wilhelm II, and William E. Gladstone.²³

We even know how Carnegie wrote—usually on a pad on his knee, using a stub pencil. His style was crisp and interesting, often sententious and argumentative, and his ideas were mostly liberal for his day.

From mid-teens, in correspondence with an uncle and cousin in Scotland, Carnegie wrote not only to express his ideas, but to convince others that they were right. This habit of correspondence he kept up almost until his death. In early youth he turned his pen (or pencil) to securing private actions he desired and influencing the public²⁴ through published speeches and writing letters to newspapers, another practice he kept up all his life.

But in the wider field of authorship he began with travel writing,

17. *James Watt and The Autobiography of Andrew Carnegie*, which was very badly edited by John C. Van Dyke.

18. *Triumphant Democracy, The Gospel of Wealth, The Empire of Business, and Problems of Today*.

19. *Rules for the Government of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company's Telegraph*: Earliest known edition, perhaps first, (Harrisburg, Pa., 1863).

20. In the limestone cavern archives of United States Steel Corporation, referred to above.

21. They were Benjamin Harrison, Grover Cleveland, William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and Woodrow Wilson. Hendrick, *Carnegie*, 1:407, 428; 2:274–276, 303–339, 379–380.

22. Nelson A. Miles, *Serving the Republic*, (New York, 1911), p. 274.

23. Hendrick, *Carnegie*, 1:271–273, 280, 344–345, 355; 2:172, 298–316, et passim.

24. Carnegie, *Autobiography*, pp. 30–62 et passim.

apparently inspired by his admiration for Bayard Taylor's *Views A-Foot*.²⁵ Taylor had financed his first journeys by writing for newspapers. When Carnegie planned a walking tour of Europe with two companions, he arranged to write travel letters to a journal in Pittsburgh.

So far as his correspondence and existing newspaper files (and these are pretty complete) indicate, Carnegie wrote only three such letters, all to the *Commercial*, of which two were published. The first, dated at Inverness, Scotland, 21 August 1865, deals with fish breeding. He was far ahead of his time in suggesting it would be a useful practice in Western Pennsylvania. But before launching into the subject, he devoted a paragraph to his philosophy of travel writing:

Descriptive letters from abroad are now-a-days so readily prepared from the omnipresent guide books, which give not only dates and particulars, but pages, written in excellent style, upon the memories and associations which a visit calls forth, that one feels a laudable disinclination to seek such publicity as your columns would afford, for what the guide would mostly be entitled to the credit of. But what we saw yesterday is so utterly foreign to the domain of the professional *litterateur* that we are prompted to write you in regard to it, in the hope that the subject may receive some attention at home.

The letter is a careful and accurate report of a salmon hatchery near Perth, including the investment and profits. As a youth he had dreamed of becoming a newspaper reporter, and he proved that he would have been a good one, by featuring the local angles that would interest a regional paper. It ran to something like 1200 words and was published 11 September over his initials.

Eighteen days later Carnegie wrote to W. S. Haven, a printer, stationer, and news dealer, thanking him for sending the paper, and telling of another letter "giving you my views on Protection, a subject Mr. Brigham²⁶ is stirring up thoroughly and well. . . . Mr. Brigham, I suppose, will give my protection letter his care. It isn't the Pittsburgh doctrine, I know. . . ." ²⁷ Apparently Brigham disapproved of the variation from the "Pittsburgh doctrine," for it never appeared.

25. Hendrick, *Carnegie*, 1:137.

26. C. D. Brigham, editor of the *Commercial*.

27. Travel letters in the collection of Margaret Carnegie Miller, typescript lent by J. F. Wall.

Carnegie's third and final letter to the *Commercial* is dated from Amsterdam, 15 November (although he was in Berlin by that time). Printed 13 December it was almost wholly devoted to the dikes and reclamation of land from the sea.

It was almost fifteen years later that Carnegie fell into commercial writing, almost by accident, with his first book. In 1878 he had taken an eight-month trip around the world, writing an account of his travels—first person and dated day by day in the manner of Taylor. But if he borrowed the format, that was the only thing. The writing and content are pure Carnegie. Reaching New York 24 June 1879, he wrote the two final paragraphs at Cresson (his summer home) the following day. He almost immediately had it printed (and there were numerous subsequent printings) by Charles Scribner's Sons, as a sort of thank-you gift to "my brother, and trusty associates, who toiled at home that I might spend abroad."

Three years later Carnegie took another trip (aside from his annual voyages to and from Europe) entertaining his mother and a group of friends on a coaching trip from Brighton to Inverness—almost the entire length of the island kingdom. He took only brief notes, but at twenty sittings on snowy days that winter turned out *Our Coaching Trip*, for private distribution.²⁸ It was also published by Scribner's, whose J. D. Champlin became interested, and suggested it might be revised for commercial distribution.

Carnegie took the revision seriously, making sixty-seven principal changes, including fifty-eight additions (mostly of guidebook-type material), three corrections, and six omissions—one of them a 53-page newspaper account of their stop at Dunfermline. In all, the length was increased by about one-third. The title became *An American Four-in-Hand in Britain*, and it was published in 1883. It was reprinted eighteen times and was still paying royalties in 1912.

The book's success suggested a revision of *Round the World*, which proved more extensive than that of its mate. Disregarding minor variations, it included 123 changes, of which eighty-eight were additions, twenty-six adaptations, and nine omissions. Only thirty-one of the additions were to insert guidebook-type material. The others were to advance his ideas, including twenty-two on economics and fifteen on religion. Even the guidebook material is significant, most of it being chosen to illustrate or prepare for his ideas. Although not so

28. Carnegie, *Autobiography*, p. 203.

successful as the former work, *Round the World* was reprinted at least eight times, through 1902.²⁹

Carnegie's career as a magazine writer—which led to his highest glory in the writing field—came almost by accident. During his years as a lion in London he had formed a friendship with John Morley, editor of *Fortnightly Review*. While the coaching trip was creating much attention, a “noted politician” (never named) suggested, “Why don't you give us, in one of our reviews, some account of your coaching trip . . . and tell us what your dozen of American guests thought of us?” Carnegie passed the suggestion along to Morley, who approved it. But to everyone's surprise, instead of its being a sweet tribute to scenery, hospitality and other delights of the trip, Carnegie—who was beginning his drive to reform Britain and overthrow the monarchy—made it a bitter criticism of the political and social situation in the country. The solution, of course, was to change Britain into a republic.

Titled *As Others See Us*, the article appeared in *Fortnightly* in February 1882. Carnegie quickly prepared another for the same review, but in the meantime, Morley had gone into politics, being succeeded as editor by T. H. S. Escott. Apparently he rejected the article, and Carnegie never wrote for that review again.

In fact, he did not write for any magazine for nearly three years. A statistical compendium³⁰ and a conversation with Gladstone³¹ launched him on *Triumphant Democracy*, a book designed to show that Britain's monarchical system, and those of other nations were holding them back, while democratic America was overtaking them and forging ahead on the economic front. He put his “clever secretary” to work gathering applicable facts and information, and within about three years completed the entire book of nearly 150,000 words—all his own writing except part of one chapter which he credited to Bridge, explaining why it was so used.

Perhaps from long association with newspapermen he had started each of his travel books with a “slam bang” opening like the “lead” of a spot news story. He followed the same custom with his third book:

The old nations of the earth creep on at a snail's pace; the Republic thunders past with the rush of an express. The United States, the growth of a single century, has already reached the

29. Hendrick, *Carnegie*, 1:237.

30. M. G. Mulhall, *Balance Sheet of the World for Ten Years, 1870-1880*, (London, 1881).

foremost rank among nations, and is destined to outdistance all others in the race. In population, in wealth, in annual savings and in public credit; in freedom from debt, in agriculture, and in manufactures, America already leads the civilized world.

His first chapter was titled "The Republic," and he lost no time in presenting the argument that America's political system was at least the third most important factor in this achievement, and had benignly affected the other two—ethnic character and environment. The next eighteen compared the American people, cities and towns, conditions of life, occupations, education, religion, pauperism and crime rates, agriculture, manufactures, mining, trade and commerce, transportation, cultural advance, unity, foreign affairs, government, and finances with those of the older nations, in almost everything creditably to his adopted land. The final chapter reinforced his conclusions as stated in the opening one. The book is pure Carnegie. Much of its thesis and argument may be found in his boyhood letters to a cousin in Scotland thirty years previously.

Triumphant Democracy was a highly successful book. In the United States it went through four printings and sold more than 30,000 copies—a large sale in that day. In Britain it did almost as well in boards, besides a paperback edition whose sales passed 40,000 copies. It was translated into several languages, and sold all over Europe.³²

Encouraged by this success, Carnegie completely revised the book following the 1890 census, with the subtitle changed from "Fifty" to "Sixty Years' March of the Republic." There was some moderation in his attacks on the British monarchy, but no significant change in the author's thinking. The second *Triumphant Democracy* is a better work than its predecessor, but somewhat heavier reading, and its sale never approached that of the first.

Even before the completion of work on *Triumphant Democracy*, Carnegie had returned to the magazine field with an article on the oil and gas wells of Pennsylvania, printed in *Macmillan's Magazine* early in 1885, and articles the following year in *North American Review* and the newly founded *Forum*, and *The Scottish Leader*.

Then came a hiatus of more than two years because of his bout with typhoid fever and the death of his mother and brother, all in the autumn of 1886, and his marriage the following April. But in 1889 Carnegie was back with five articles, and from then until stricken with

31. Carnegie, *Autobiography*, pp. 318–320.

32. Wall, *Carnegie*, pp. 442–444.

age twenty-five years later he averaged about three published articles a year.

The year 1889, however, marked his peak literary success: articles (or a two-part article) in the June and December *North American Review*, titled "Wealth" and "The Best Fields for Philanthropy." In them, Carnegie poured out his philosophy that the wealthy should give away their fortunes while still alive, and that to die rich is to die disgraced. Reprinted in England, it was titled *The Gospel of Wealth*,³³ and under this title it spread like wildfire over Europe, translated into many languages. In 1900 it was printed in book form along with other articles and an address, again under the British title, and became Carnegie's best known and most successful work. Many charged Carnegie with being insincere, but he lived up to his creed. By the time of his death in 1919 he had given away \$311 million.³⁴

Other groups of his articles and speeches appeared in book form in *The Empire of Business* (1902) and—with much new material, as *Problems of Today* (1908). Both were reasonably successful, despite the fact that much of their material had previously appeared in periodicals or in published addresses.

Two other works deserve notice: Soon after the turn of the century the Edinburgh firm of Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier invited Carnegie to write a biography of James Watt for its Famous Scots series. He declined, saying that his thoughts were on other matters. But reflecting that Watt's inventions had paved the way to his own fortune, and that writing a book was the surest way to amend his lack of knowledge of his subject, Carnegie wrote the publishers again, offering to do the work. His *James Watt*, published in 1905, is interesting, though not a good biography. Reading between the lines, the public may learn more about Carnegie than Watt. It was a successful publication, however.

Carnegie employed much of his time in old age in writing notes for the *Autobiography*, already referred to. Unfortunately his failing memory and tendency to recall things as he wished they had been, together with Van Dyke's poor editing when it was brought out following the death of the industrialist, greatly detract from its value as a historical source. But it is charmingly written, and has been printed over and over again.

Carnegie was a man of his own day, with many of the faults

33. Kirkland, ed., *Gospel of Wealth*, 14n.

34. *Ibid.*, introduction, xix. This was about 95% of his entire fortune.

and foibles of his fellows. Yet, despite the ill taste left by Homestead and the work of many detractors, he was a true liberal.

Much of what Carnegie wrote still has meaning for today and every day. And he not only had wide influence in setting the pattern of America's best period of journalism, but he initiated the development of one of the most important innovations in American letters—the vocal and literary industrialist and businessman. He was the first great American industrialist to be a writer, and the greatest writer of all principal industrialists.

Even on its merits alone, Carnegie's writing is worthy of a wider attention and acceptance than is accorded today. His style is crisp and attractive, and despite a tendency to moralize, was far better than the average American writing of its period. He avoided the artificiality and flights of fancy so common in that day, substituting plain fact and clear reasoning. Perhaps most important of all, he helped to frame and promote the American dream. He also, regrettably, forced businessmen who lacked his facility at expression to invent and foist on the public a new mouthpiece—the ghost writer.

PRODIGAL SON DEPARTMENT

... a large portion of our young people at present, crowd into a few years, enjoyments which might last for life; and hence, it too often happens, that daughters tenderly reared, and who have brought handsome fortunes to their husbands, are obliged to return home to their aged parents, who have to maintain them, their husband, and an increasing brood of children; a deplorable fate for old age. The young men are highly culpable, who, through their imprudence or extravagance, make such a return to the parents of their wives, for their cares and anxieties, and expenditures.

[Mathew Carey, "Autobiography of Mathew Carey," Letter IV, *The New England Magazine*, December 1833.]

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