

THE ROMANCE OF ANDREW CARNEGIE

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Except for Abraham Lincoln and Benjamin Franklin, no one is more securely enshrined as a hero of the American romance than Andrew Carnegie. The bare facts of his life forcibly thrust him into the role. Starting as a penniless immigrant, he worked his way up from bobbin factory and telegraph office to the ownership of the world's largest steel firm, with a fortune estimated at over \$400,000,000. The breath-taking ascent, the combination of hard work, skill and luck, and his good-natured optimism fit perfectly into the pattern which Benjamin Franklin first dramatized in his Autobiography and which Americans never tired of reliving in the novels of Horatio Alger. We cannot help seeing Carnegie as a living embodiment of our most compelling collective dream.

This seemingly natural characterization has unduly influenced our understanding of Carnegie. Even his most serious biographer, Burton J. Hendrick, casts his subject in the role of American hero. His two volume work is no mere panegyric in the tradition of Elbert Hubbard, playing on the passion to rise and the yearning to know how. Hendrick's book is well-informed, balanced and scholarly. But there runs through it an awesome fascination with Carnegie's dazzling success and an effort to discover the way he achieved it. In the foreword, Elihu Root easily placed Andrew's life in its proper genus: "Mr. Carnegie's business career had a general family resemblance to the course by which many poor boys become rich men in a new country, but it illustrated very sharply some of the qualities that we all wish our children to have."¹ Franklin would have appreciated those words in a foreword to his autobiography. As Hendrick tells the story, Carnegie's career was simply a variation on a common American theme.

Other biographers have objected to this interpretation, but have been no more successful in escaping romantic conventions. They have reversed Carnegie's position and made him the villain in a standard plot perhaps best characterized as the American melodrama. The selfish businessman grabs for wealth and power while cruelly stepping on associates and competitors and callously neglecting the sufferings of workers. In some respects the melodrama is the obverse of the American dream, perhaps an expression of disillusionment with it. In the melodrama the villain rises by dint of his

vices rather than of his virtues, and his chief crime is to prevent better if softer men from prospering virtuously. The villain is an anti-hero.

John K. Winkler's Incredible Carnegie is almost a parody of the form. He opens by conjecturing that

Andrew Carnegie, I suspect, was the greediest little gentleman ever created. As an infant in high chair he beat a loud tattoo upon the table enforcing a demand for two spoons wherewith to shovel double portions of porridge into his mouth.²

Other critics, exercising more restraint, have identified Carnegie's paramount motive simply as "unqualified selfishness" or the "lust for gain," and then have gone on to indict his business practices.³ All characterize him as a scoundrel subverting cherished American values.

Qualifying the extremes, which all of the authors do, does not eliminate the inaccuracies in either picture. The error lies, I suggest, in casting him as a strictly American hero or villain and then seeking to locate him somewhere between on an axis that does not apply. The conventions of our romance blur certain important features of Carnegie's self-image and distort his motivation. He was more sincerely idealistic than his critics allow and less satisfied with his virtues than his friends recognize.

We come closer to the truth if we take seriously his Scottish birth and fierce loyalty to his countrymen, and regard these facts not merely as colorful trappings but as clues to the nature of his imagination and conscience. "It was years," he commented in his autobiography, "before I could feel that the new land could be anything but a temporary abode. My heart was in Scotland."⁴ To a large degree he continued to judge himself by standards he learned there, and his aspirations and disappointments are best understood in Scottish terms.

Dunfermline, where Carnegie was born, was steeped in romance, but not of the American variety. "Fortunate, indeed, the child who first sees the light in that romantic town," he exclaimed. A boy reared there "absorbs poetry and romance with the air he breathes."⁵ But it was not the romance of ascent, of wealth or of business success. Andrew's Uncle Lauder regaled his nephew with tales of Wallace and Robert the Bruce at Bannockburn. These were heroes of the sword, battling the invading English in defense of the nation's independence. Dunfermline's sort of romance was that of Burns and of one of the city's honorary freemen, Sir Walter Scott.

Uncle Lauder breathed enough life into Bruce and Wallace to make them tangible to Andrew. "How wonderful is the influence of a hero upon children!" Carnegie later exclaimed.⁶ The influence was wonderful indeed upon Carnegie himself. When firing the boiler in the cellar of the bobbin factory and feeling about to break under the physical and nervous tension, Andrew took courage by asking what Wallace would have done under the

circumstances. "A real disciple of Wallace or Bruce could not give up," he told himself; "he would die first."⁷ His imagination was organized around the idea of a great man struggling with an enemy in a noble cause. The highest compliment he could pay anyone was to call him a hero. To the end of his days he looked for men of this sort to venerate.⁸

He yearned to be a hero himself, even in the bobbin factory. Unfortunately, as Carnegie noted, "to develop heroes there must be occasions for heroism."⁹ And while in America many Franklins might arise, few occasions demanded a Wallace. The Civil War was a rare exception. A fight for the Union might easily have enlisted one of Carnegie's boyhood greats, and he proudly vented his righteous wrath against the South. Just after the secession, his host one Sunday, a northern Democrat, disputed the right of the federal government to preserve the Union by force. Carnegie replied hotly, "we shall be hanging men like you in less than six weeks."¹⁰

Carnegie was called to Washington to help supervise railways and never got to the front, but he made the most of what heroism there was in his job. Early in the war he helped open a rail line into Washington from Annapolis. Releasing some telegraph wires staked to the ground, he was struck in the face as the wires sprang back into place. The gash, as he said, "bled profusely." "With the exception of one or two soldiers wounded a few days previously in passing through the streets of Baltimore," he commented later, "I can justly claim that I 'shed my blood for my country' among the first of its defenders. I gloried in being useful to the land that had done so much for me, and worked, I can truly say, night and day, to open communications to the South."¹¹ Carnegie came no closer to martial valor.

Carnegie's heroic impulses found still less expression in the management of a steel business. He relished the conflicts and triumphs of a business life and enjoyed seeing his enterprises grow. But where was the noble cause? Where the enemy to vanquish? The real conflicts of a business manager with competitors, with his working force, with incompetent or truculent associates, could not be portrayed as enthralling struggles for the right, and Carnegie never tried to do so. He pictured business as a kind of happy game where all businessmen were bound together in a warm camaraderie, engaged in a friendly competition for the prizes. The workers were his friends, loyal to the last man, never enemies to conquer.

Carnegie tried hard to find what romance he could in his career. "Business is not all this hard prosaic life that it is pictured," he once told an audience at Cornell. "It bears romance and sentiment in it, and the greater the business," the "more romance and imagination."¹² He advised young bank clerks hungering for excitement to think of their firms' capital invested in a hundred ways -- in railways, commerce or manufacturing, where so many wonders were performed. Or they might consider that a

letter of credit could take a traveler to the ends of the earth. The incipient industrialist could contemplate "the wonders, the mysteries connected with the recent developments in that most spiritual of all agents -- electricity -- with its unknown, and perhaps, even unguessed of powers."¹³ But this was thin gruel. Carnegie's evocations could never bring the tears and laughter that Uncle Lauder's tales of Scotland had started in Andrew and his cousin George. Carnegie's comments chiefly serve to show that somewhere inside he mourned the absence of heroism and romance.

Worrying over the erosion of idealism, he warned young men of the grave danger besetting a life in business where they were tempted to make their chief end the "ignoble aim of money-making." If entered in this spirit, he cautioned, business is "the most sordid of all careers."¹⁴ In a memorandum to himself in 1868 when he was just thirty-three but enjoying an income of \$50,000 annually, he revealed his anxiety even more poignantly.

Man must have an idol -- the amassing of wealth is one of the worst species of idolatry -- no idol more debasing than the worship of money. Whatever I engage in I must push inordinately; therefore should I be careful to choose that life which will be the most elevating in its character. To continue much longer overwhelmed by business cares and with most of my thoughts wholly upon the way to make more money in the shortest time, must degrade me beyond hope of permanent recovery.¹⁵

Carnegie then planned to give up his business in two years, go back to London, and help educate the poorer classes. For some reason he abandoned the plan and went on pursuing wealth, paying the psychic price required to reconcile his conflicting impulses.

After selling his company in 1901, he felt released from the compulsion to make money and steadily divested himself of the fortune he feared would corrupt his soul. By building libraries he realized in some measure his earlier ambition to educate the poor. He gave munificently to schools, hospitals, churches and to his own workers. But the darling among his philanthropies was the Heroes Fund, set up to reward individuals who exhibited unusual valor in saving or serving their fellow men. "I cherish a fatherly regard for it," he said of the Fund, "since no one suggested it to me."¹⁶ The idea for a gift to heroes sprang independently from Carnegie's own imagination, perhaps because it allowed him to participate vicariously in their glory.

However generous or imaginative his gifts, Carnegie could hardly pretend that his career matched the visions of his youth. America did not open a field for exploits in that sort of romance. Carnegie was driven to combat not life and blood enemies like the English on Bannockburn but abstractions -- ignorance, disease and, in his largest gifts, war. He could understand and rationalize his position: "The heroes of the barbarian past

wounded or killed their fellows," he explained at one point; "the heroes of our civilized day serve or save theirs."¹⁷ And yet compromise was disappointing, especially when the great part of his life was not devoted to serving and saving at all but to the pursuit of wealth. In his retirement, Carnegie once commented bitterly, "if I could make Faust's bargain I would gladly sell anything to have half my life over again."¹⁸

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These observations raise the puzzling question of why Carnegie did not put aside his industrial concerns and give himself to humanitarian service. That famous resolve to get out of business proves he felt the desire strongly. What kept him at the career he feared imperiled his virtue? The defenders of Carnegie's integrity duck the question or imply that the challenge of industrial development temporarily diverted him from his idealistic resolve. Hendrick attributes the contradiction to Carnegie's eagerness to develop the Bessemer process for making steel. Hendrick makes no comment on Carnegie's prophecy that to continue in business "must degrade me beyond hope of permanent recovery," and on the tensions that belief must have caused.¹⁹ McCloskey, the most judicious of the critics, suggests that fascination with business and "its idolatry of money and tangible success" was irresistible. Carnegie's "lust for gain" overcame his idealism.²⁰

Carnegie's motivation was more complex than either author allows and again has its roots in Scotland. He found himself in a dilemma because his native Dunfermline imbued him with the yearning to rise at the same time that it inspired romantic dreams. Much of the romance rose out of the town's great monuments to an ancient aristocracy. Carnegie remembered vividly how the Abbey, "the Palace where kings were born," Queen Margaret's shrine in Pittencrief Glen, and the ruins of King Malcolm's Tower "set fire to the latent spark within." He gave credit to these relics of a glorious past for his "romantic and poetic Strain," but they also impressed him with the grandeur of the nobility and social superiority.²¹ A Scottish boyhood was excellent preparation for success in America because it implanted a firm sense of social gradations and the glory to be enjoyed at the top. Though a first-generation immigrant, he knew exactly how to proceed here. One must have "an invincible determination to rise," he told young men, and that primary lesson he learned in Dunfermline.²² Childhood there implanted a powerful and enduring compulsion to overcome the inherited inferiority of common birth.

The desire to be equal to the nobility was deeply engrained in Carnegie's family, but among them was transmuted into vigorous democratic ideals. An undistinguished genealogy and the absence of economic opportunity defeated any other hopes. The motto of the Carnegie family was "death to privilege." Andrew's Grandfather Morrison was head of the "advanced

wing" of the radical party in the district, and his son, Andrew's uncle, took over as successor. The grandfathers and uncles on both sides and his father as well were active Chartists and opponents of the Corn Law. They frequently orated at agitation meetings, and one uncle was thrown into jail for holding an illegal meeting. Andrew naturally grew into a "violent young Republican." "As a child," he said, "I could have slain king, duke, or lord, and considered their deaths a service to the state and hence an heroic act."²³

America did not erase the bitterness of common birth. His resentment, like a tight shoe, always hurt, and he could not stop complaining. Americans in a new land, he once speculated, would forge ahead organizing schools, churches and all the appliances of civilization "before an equal number of British would have discovered who among them was the highest in hereditary rank and had the best claims to leadership owing to his grandfather."²⁴ He argued once that hereditary rules have "deluged the world with wars, put man against his fellow, and sought no end but their own aggrandizement."²⁵ Small wonder that Kaiser Wilhelm's first comment when he met Carnegie was, "Oh! yes, yes, I have read your books. You do not like kings." Carnegie could not deny the charge. He had written that "king" and "throne" were ridiculous words.²⁶

Still and all it is clear that Carnegie did not wish death to privilege as he claimed, but access to rank for himself. Among his treasured possessions were notes from King Edward thanking Carnegie for gifts to England. Without seeing his own inconsistency, he told Morley that one of these notes would be deeply appreciated "and handed down to my descendants as something they would all be proud of."²⁷ His friend Mark Twain understood Carnegie's weakness for aristocratic recognition:

He thinks he is a scorner of kings and emperors and dukes, whereas he is like the rest of the human race: a slight attention from one of these can make him drunk for a week and keep his happy tongue wagging for seven years.²⁸

The wonder of America was that it permitted him to become nearly the equal of these grand personages. Wealth and business power opened the doors of the great houses, invested him with immense authority, and permitted him to entertain innocent fancies of being a monarch of sorts. He loved to conceive of businessmen as aristocrats and urged young executives to "be king in your dreams," as doubtless he was in his own.²⁹ He was delighted to relate how the Emperor of Germany had wanted to make one of the Krupp's of the great steel firm a Prince of the Empire. As Carnegie told the tale, Krupp begged off, not wishing to degrade the rank he held as "King of Steel." After all a steel magnate was "a monarch equal to his Emperor." The owners of any large firm are "rulers over a domain." The larger employer "sometimes has more men in his industrial army than the

petty German kings had under their banners."³⁰ Enmeshed in that imagery, Carnegie seems to have thought of his workers as his loyal retainers and of himself as their benevolent master. It was not by chance that he chose to call his collection of essays on business practices The Empire of Business.

Wealth permitted Carnegie to play the role of the aristocrat and he accumulated all the props money could buy. For ten years after his marriage in 1887 he lived half the year in a castle at Cluny in Scotland. In 1898 he purchased the estate at Skibo on the North Sea, eventually accumulating 32,000 acres stretching twenty miles between two streams. On this land he built a vast baronial castle with castellated stone towers and all. Surrounding it were the cottages of the tenants whom the Carnegies visited on arrival and departure, presenting each child with a gold sovereign.³¹

These symbols of status, however, were only toys. Carnegie knew he was only play-acting and never threw himself into the part. What he wanted above all was to prove himself the equal of any man and compel everyone to admit it. That urge was the dominant motive of his business career, not the accumulation of money, which he really seemed to dislike, often calling it filthy lucre. The hunger for repeated conquests was what drove him on in spite of misgivings about his career. His Autobiography is a narrative of triumphs, telling how in one episode after another the white-haired Scotch boy came out on top. At the end of his life, he dealt more with statesmen and nobles than competitors or partners, but the intent of the stories was always to prove himself the superior.

This overwhelming desire is the reason he could not forget the British aristocracy. He knew they harbored a quiet sense of inherited superiority that would never honor wealth however immense. That is why he stuck to the democratic ideals of his ancestors and felt the world would suffer till all nobles were toppled from their high and mighty stations and all kings dethroned.

In 1881 Carnegie went to England and purchased a string of newspapers to continue his ancestors' war on the aristocracy. The campaign bore little fruit politically, though as always Carnegie made money in the venture.³² At another time he participated in a rally at Birmingham to honor John Bright, venerable leader of the radicals. In singing the national anthem, the crowd omitted the words, "God save the Queen," and substituted "God bless our native land." "Never crept the thrill of triumph more wildly through my frame," Carnegie confessed, "than when I lifted up my voice and sang with the exulting mass the coming national hymn which is to live and vibrate round the world when royal families are extinct as dodos."³³

One of his more ingenious enterprises was the book Triumphant Democracy. He bared his motives quite frankly in the preface where he said bluntly how burnt into his spirit was "the stigma of inferiority which his native land saw proper to impress upon him at birth," and how he cherished

the country which had made him "the peer of any human being who draws the breath of life, be he pope, kaiser, priest or king."³⁴ Carnegie was not perfectly confident he was the peer of priest or king, for the book was a laborious effort to prove the point. His strategy was to show America the superior of England to remove any question of the status of a made-in-America aristocrat. The book is a long catalogue of facts and figures demonstrating American ascendancy in every department -- manufacturing, commerce, education, literature and everything else he could think of.

Carnegie had always been inclined to measure greatness by magnitude. As a boy he was appalled to learn that there were more square miles in England than in Scotland. His uncle comforted him with the assurance that if the highlands were rolled flat, Scotland would be the larger. He laughed at the story in his Autobiography, and yet it gave him satisfaction to tell Englishmen that because there were more people of English descent in the United States than in Britain, the President was greater than the King.³⁵

The facts and figures, however, were only a build-up for the climactic proposal. In the preface, he addressed himself to the common people of Britain and expressed his desire to show them that a republican government was a better foundation of "individual happiness and of national growth" than a monarchy.³⁶ In the last chapter, having made his case, he urged reunion of the United States and Britain. Monarchical government and the English nobility, of course, stood in the way, but the House of Lords was already a dead letter and the Crown was fast declining. What an opportunity for Victoria to renounce the throne, abolish the peerage, and pave the way for reunion! "Never in the history of the world has it been in the power of any human being to perform so great an act. . . . All the Saints in the calendar would give place to St. Victoria."³⁷ Carnegie would certainly be among her devotees because on the day of reunion his long battle with privilege would be won and he would be the equal of everyone in native and adopted countries.

This quixotic crusade was as tragic as it was comic, for it revealed the conflicting impulses Carnegie had to reconcile to achieve peace. Only once did he come near to fulfilling his aspirations simultaneously and that was when he purchased Pittencrief Glen, the seat of the Laird of Dunfermline. "In all my childhood's -- yes and in my early manhood's -- air-castle building (which was not small)," he said, "nothing comparable in grandeur approached Pittencrief." The victory was the more sweet because his Uncle Morrison, and with him all other Morrisons including Andrew, had been debarred from the grounds for having led in the destruction of a wall the citizens of Dunfermline claimed was unjustly raised. When the deal was finally closed, Carnegie's agent wired the good news with the greeting, "Hail, Laird of Pittencrief!" A joyous sound. If the honor was bought and not bestowed, nonetheless Carnegie could exult in being "the happy posses-

sor of the grandest title on earth," superior even to the King by the standards of a white-haired Scotch boy.³⁸

Carnegie was unable to indulge fully in the fantasy of being Laird. However enticing the prospect, he could not in good conscience abandon the American citizenship he had made so much of in Triumphant Democracy. Rather than keep Pittencrief for himself, to bask in the title, he turned the Glen over to the citizens of Dunfermline as a public park. That too thrilled him. "Pittencrieff Glen," he recorded in his autobiography, "is the most soul-satisfying public gift I ever made, or ever can make. It is poetic justice that the grandson of Thomas Morrison, radical leader in his day, nephew of Bailie Morrison, his son and successor, and above all son of my sainted father and my most heroic mother, should arise and dispossess the lairds, should become the agent for conveying the Glen and Park to the people of Dunfermline forever. It is a true romance, which no air-castle can quite equal or fiction conceive."³⁹

So far as it could go, that was the romance of Andrew Carnegie. Not merely to rise to the pinnacle of American industrial society, but to dispossess and become the Laird of his native Dunfermline, to make himself almost the equal of the noble figures who occupied his childhood dreams, and then, acting the part of popular hero, to give over the Laird's park in a democratic gesture to the common citizens.

The momentary satisfaction the gift afforded helps explain Carnegie's despairing wish in old age to relive his life. As a boy he had dreamed dreams that were tragically self-contradictory. Besides aspiring to a career of heroic service, he nurtured an ambition to become the acknowledged equal of everyone, including the lords of England. An industrial career in America furnished the wealth to purchase an estate and create a manner of life as stunning as that of any duke or prince, even to mingle with them as equals and feel their respect. But the passionate concentration on making his fortune left little in his best years to devote to great causes. Of his two early ambitions he chose to be high before being heroic. Had Carnegie been securely placed by birth in a noble line, he might have expended his formidable force in satisfying service to mankind. Or born a commoner, had he sought only a measure of equality with England's aristocracy, American fecundity could have afforded that. But starting low and aspiring to be both high and heroic, he was doomed to disappointment. Buying the Glen and opening it as a public park thrilled him, for in making that gift he lived in both dreams: he was for a rare instant Laird and champion of the right, both peer and hero.

Footnotes:

¹ Burton J. Hendrick, The Life of Andrew Carnegie (2 vols., New York, 1932), I, ix. Elbert Hubbard, Little Journeys to the Homes of Great Business Men: Andrew Carnegie (East Aurora, New York, 1909) is the classic romantic biography. If somewhat more moderate, Alvin Harlow, Andrew Carnegie (New York, 1953) proves there is still mileage in the American dream.

² John K. Winkler, Incredible Carnegie: The Life of Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) (New York, 1931), 3.

³ James Howard Bridge, The Inside History of the Carnegie Steel Company: A Romance of Millions (New York, 1903), viii; Robert Green McCloskey, American Conservatism in the Age of Enterprise: A Study of William Graham Sumner, Stephen J. Field and Andrew Carnegie (Cambridge, 1951), 134.

⁴ Andrew Carnegie, Autobiography of Andrew Carnegie (Boston, 1920), 19.

⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁶ Ibid., 17.

⁷ Ibid., 35, 36.

⁸ Ibid., 6, 22, 38, 79, 261, 283.

⁹ Andrew Carnegie, Triumphant Democracy: Sixty Years' March of the Republic (Rev. ed., New York, 1893), 530.

¹⁰ Autobiography, 82.

¹¹ Ibid., 100.

¹² Andrew Carnegie, The Empire of Business (New York, 1902), 214.

¹³ Ibid., 220-221.

¹⁴ Ibid., 219.

¹⁵ Hendrick, Carnegie, I, 146-147.

¹⁶ Autobiography, 263.

¹⁷ Ibid., 265.

¹⁸ Hendrick, Carnegie, II, 157.

¹⁹ Ibid., I, 147-149.

²⁰ McCloskey, American Conservatism, 145, 134.

²¹ Autobiography, 7-8.

²² Empire of Business, 11.

²³ Autobiography, 8-12.

²⁴ Ibid., 137.

²⁵ Triumphant Democracy, 447.

²⁶ Autobiography, 367; Triumphant Democracy, 9.

²⁷ Autobiography, 326; cf. 264-265.

²⁸ Quoted in Robert Green McCloskey, American Conservatism, 137-138.

²⁹ Empire of Business, 4.

- 30 Ibid., 222-223.
- 31 Hendrick, Carnegie, II, 148-149, 152.
- 32 Autobiography, 330.
- 33 Triumphant Democracy, 9.
- 34 Ibid., vii.
- 35 Autobiography, 330-331, 345.
- 36 Triumphant Democracy, vii.
- 37 Ibid., 540.
- 38 Autobiography, 287-289.
- 39 Ibid., 291.