

**“All is Well, Since All Grows Better”:**

**Social Darwinism and the Complexities of Andrew Carnegie and his Gospel of Wealth**

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“The amassing of wealth is one of the worst species of idolatry.” – Andrew Carnegie, 1868<sup>1</sup>

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Gilded Age steel magnate Andrew Carnegie (b. 1835 - d. 1919), the same man who labeled wealth amassing “the worst species of idolatry,” is paradoxically considered by many modern economists to be the wealthiest man to ever make his fortune in America. When he sold Carnegie Steel to J. Pierpont Morgan in 1901 for \$480 million, his personal worth grew to over \$300 million.<sup>2</sup> Economists estimate an equivalency to \$300 billion today when measured in correlation to its percentage of the Gross Domestic Product.<sup>3</sup> His story of rising from an immigrant bobbin boy to a wealthy industrialist is compelling, but his radical philanthropy is equally significant historically. From a note he wrote to himself at age thirty-three containing the first seedlings of his giving goals, to his 1889 essay “Wealth,” in which he encouraged America’s extremely rich to better society by giving away nearly all their wealth before their deaths, Carnegie demonstrated an unusually strong preoccupation with his wealth.

Upon retirement, Carnegie embarked on a mission to do as he preached – give away nearly every dollar he had amassed; however, in retrospect, it is hard to reconcile this spirit of generosity with the other side of Carnegie – a ruthless industrialist whose employees suffered under brutal labor practices. It leads to questions of what truly motivated Carnegie’s radical “Gospel of Wealth” philosophy, and how did he reconcile his nearly single-minded pursuit of

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<sup>1</sup> David Nasaw, *Andrew Carnegie* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 113.

<sup>2</sup> Nasaw, *Andrew*, 585.

<sup>3</sup> Jacob Davidson, “The 10 Richest People of All Time,” *Money*, July 30, 2015, accessed January 23, 2022, <https://money.com/the-10-richest-people-of-all-time-2/>.

wealth and status with his own words – “The amassing of wealth is one of the worst species of idolatry?” A look at his upbringing, actions, choices and his own words reveals a picture of a conflicted man who spent a lifetime trying to justify and reconcile internal moral conflicts that arose when his want of wealth and status butted up against the lessons of his humble beginnings. Influenced by his poor upbringing in Scotland, Andrew Carnegie used industrial innovation and aggressive productivity methods to earn historical wealth in nineteenth-century Pittsburgh, where he latched onto his “Gospel of Wealth” philosophy and the convenience of selective social Darwinism to justify his ruthless methods and to reconcile internal moral conflicts.

### **Historiography**

Andrew Carnegie stood at a crossroads his nineteenth-century industrial contemporaries never paused to contemplate at the length he did. He foresaw a future in which criticism against the *laissez-faire* free market would inhibit the ability of the industrious few to earn and manage the majority of America’s wealth. Behind him lay the protection of the Industrial Age’s unfettered capitalism; before him lay his coming judgment as a player in the game of wealth acquisition. As historians turned their eyes on Carnegie, there was an effort to analyze his legacy with balance, the same balance Carnegie sought – between baron and philanthropist, individualism and collective social responsibility. Through historical research, a picture of a complex, conflicted man emerged. Historians sought a gray balance in a man many judged within the absolutes of black and white, and as the decades progressed, schools of thought have emerged as they relate to his wealth amassing and philanthropic intentions and motivations.

The earliest historical peer-reviewed analyses of Carnegie’s life addressed the influence of philosopher Herbert Spencer’s Darwin-adjacent theory of social evolution. That Carnegie saw in Spencerism a way to reconcile his desire for wealth and his moral leanings is not debated, but

rather, to what extent and at what impact? One of the earliest looks at this topic – the 1951 doctoral dissertation of Robert Green McCloskey – argues that where capitalism met morals, Carnegie found conflict and contradiction, and Spencerism allowed him to reconcile “contradictory standards of value.”<sup>4</sup> For McCloskey, Carnegie used social Darwinism to justify internal moral conflicts. By the late 1970s, a new focus on *external* conflicts of social Darwinism emerged, questioning whether Carnegie fully understood the philosophy. In his look at Carnegie and Spencer’s relationship, historian John White exposes the times when Carnegie’s words and actions came into direct conflict with Spencer’s teachings and argues that Carnegie either didn’t understand social Darwinism or found it a convenient way to justify his actions. For White, Carnegie’s attachment to Spencer’s theories was “instinctive rather than intellectual.”<sup>5</sup>

A second school of thought emerged in the 1960s, that rather than social Darwinism being the major driving force behind Carnegie’s wealth acquisition and eventual philanthropy, it was his want of status and the respect of his peers, countrymen, and the American literary elite. In his 1965 look at Carnegie’s philanthropy, historian Richard Bushman points to the “romance” surrounding Carnegie’s early life. Bushman argues it wasn’t the cash value of money Carnegie sought, but the romantic value – the respect, status, and glory he idolized as a child aware of the unreachableness of aristocracy and royalty. Bushman writes that Carnegie’s “childhood there implanted a powerful and enduring compulsion to overcome the inherited inferiority of common birth.”<sup>6</sup> Carnegie achieved his want of equality with nobility via the continued acquisition of wealth, and earned admiration via philanthropic actions. Historian Charles Harvey expanded on

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<sup>4</sup> Robert G. McCloskey, *American Conservatism in the Age of Enterprise 1865-1910* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), 129.

<sup>5</sup> John White, "Andrew Carnegie and Herbert Spencer: A Special Relationship," *Journal of American Studies* 13, no. 1 (1979): 57, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27553661>.

<sup>6</sup> Richard L. Bushman, "The Romance of Andrew Carnegie," *Midcontinent American Studies Journal* 6, no. 1 (1965): 34, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40640534>.

this set of ideas in the 2010s, deeming it “entrepreneurial philanthropy.”<sup>7</sup> Harvey put aside social Darwinism to research how philanthropy intersected advantageously with entrepreneurship in Carnegie’s life, allowing him to earn economic, cultural, symbolic, and social capital. To Harvey, Carnegie’s wealth acquisition and philanthropy were less about the love of money and more about his “lifelong quest to be somebody in the world, to make a big difference, and to be known for having made a difference.”<sup>8</sup> Harvey’s theory explains why Carnegie accrued wealth decades after planned retirement. Based on Harvey’s work, economic historians and social scientists have more recently attempted to quantify the alternate capital that Carnegie earned.<sup>9</sup>

A third school of thought arose more strongly in the progressive 1970s, with historians exploring the exclusionary Anglo-Saxon ideals that drove Carnegie’s wealth acquisition, and how his philanthropy was a veiled form of social control. In his 2009 piece on social Darwinism’s intersection with the field of historiography, Christopher Versen argued that historians’ heavy-handed use of social Darwinism to explain nineteenth century industrialists’ wealth and philanthropy was “misleading because it glosses over what is more important: widely held notions of ethnocentrism, deep-seated racism, militarism, and imperialism that framed evolutionary ideas rather than derived from them.”<sup>10</sup>

Carnegie was complex and his story doesn’t fit neatly into any one school. His story spans from the Gilded Age to the Progressive Age, from poverty to unimaginable wealth, from a friend of labor to a greedy villain, and from a wealth-hoarder to a radical giver. This paper will

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Harvey, et al., “Andrew Carnegie and the Foundations of Contemporary Entrepreneurial Philanthropy,” *Business History* 53, no. 3 (June 2011), 425.

<sup>8</sup> Harvey, “Andrew,” 432.

<sup>9</sup> John H. Humphreys, et al., “The Narrative Cleansing of Andrew Carnegie: Entrepreneurial Generativity as Identity Capital,” *Journal of Management History* 25, no. 2 (March 2019): 203–20. doi:10.1108/JMH-06-2018-0031.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher R. Versen, “What’s Wrong with a Little Social Darwinism (In Our Historiography)?,” *The History Teacher* 42, no. 4 (2009): 404, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40543493>.

explore Carnegie's life and the contradictions that arose as he earned his wealth and co-opted social Darwinism to reconcile material desires with moral conscience. His story starts in 1835 in Dunfermline, Scotland where a childhood in the shadows of radical progressivism and old-world romance and nobility instilled the moral code that would require a reckoning in his adult life.

### **Carnegie's Childhood**

Andrew Carnegie was born, in his own words, to "poor but honest parents" in a small Scottish textile town around the tail end of the Industrial Revolution.<sup>11</sup> In perhaps the first great paradox of his life, the revolution that destroyed the livelihood of his family of artisans in Scotland, created in Pittsburgh the basis for a thriving center of industry in which Carnegie would one day earn his fortune. By his own admission, and as documented by historians, Carnegie was a rosy-eyed optimist who painted most of his life experiences in a positive light, sometimes undeservedly so. As he wrote in his autobiography, "Sunny disposition is worth more than fortune."<sup>12</sup> That same optimism weaves itself into his account of his poor Scottish childhood with an extended family of progressive activists and a father who largely failed at being an adequate provider for his family of four. Radical progressive views, pro-labor agitations, and social activism were interwoven into Carnegie's upbringing via his maternal grandfather, Thomas Morrison, a radical politician, writer, and speaker, and via his uncle, Bailie Morrison, who inherited the activist role upon his father Thomas' death. Young Carnegie took deep interest in activist discussions, meetings, and protests, and some of the more dramatic moments of his exposure to this activism were imprinted clearly and permanently in his memory.<sup>13</sup>

Outside of the progressive political and ideological influences of his upbringing, young

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<sup>11</sup> Andrew Carnegie, *The Autobiography of Andrew Carnegie and His Essay The Gospel of Wealth* (1920; repr., New York: Signet, 2006), 9.

<sup>12</sup> Carnegie, *Autobiography*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Carnegie, *Autobiography*, 12.

Carnegie was also influenced by Scotland's aura of monarchical romance, which he indicated played a role in motivating him toward greater achievement and higher status. He wrote, "No bright child of Dunfermline can escape the influence of the Abbey, Palace and Glen. These touch him and set fire to the latent spark within, making him something different and beyond what, less happily born, he would have become."<sup>14</sup> Bushman makes note of these divergent aspects of Carnegie's childhood – the romance of nobility and the radical progressive pro-labor activism of his family, and how they influenced his adulthood, observing, "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."<sup>15</sup> Bushman notes it wasn't just Carnegie who coveted status; he writes, "The desire to be equal to the nobility was deeply engrained (sic) in Carnegie's family, but among them was transmuted into vigorous democratic ideals."<sup>16</sup> Between these two contradictory facets of his childhood, young Carnegie landed firmly on the side of progress and the common people. He took the Carnegie family motto, "Death to privilege," to heart and believed the powerful, wealthy, and birth-granted aristocracy weren't respectable unless they paired those undeserved attainments with good works.<sup>17</sup> Carnegie admitted his childhood's impact on his views of the higher echelons of society, writing, "It was long before I could trust myself to speak respectfully of any privileged class or person who had not distinguished himself in some good way and therefore earned the right to public respect."<sup>18</sup> This ideal marriage of wealth and good works as the recipe for a respectable person of status remained with him into adulthood.

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<sup>14</sup> Carnegie, 12.

<sup>15</sup> Bushman, "The Romance," 34.

<sup>16</sup> Bushman, 34.

<sup>17</sup> Bushman, 34.

<sup>18</sup> Carnegie, *Autobiography*, 12.

In addition to the romance of Scotland and the progressive political flavor of his upbringing, there is a third facet of Carnegie's childhood that impacted his future wealth amassing and philanthropy – poverty. As the Industrial Revolution brought steam-loom weaving to Dunfermline, and as trade declined with America, resulting in a decline in the worth of weaving skills, the weaving industry collapsed, and the Carnegie family came to know true poverty. Seeing his father's destitution and demoralization in the wake of the market collapse created in young Carnegie "the resolve that I would cure that when I got to be a man."<sup>19</sup> Here we can see how his father's impoverished existence was the genesis of Carnegie's desire to leave poverty behind and never return to it.

But Will Carnegie wasn't merely rendered obsolete by technology. Nasaw reveals that Carnegie's first biographer, Burton Hendrick, discovered but didn't reveal that Will's reputation in Dunfermline was of a man who didn't enjoy work and who had a penchant for idleness and laziness.<sup>20</sup> That left supporting the family up to Andrew Carnegie's mother Meg, who became the sole earner in the family, and by his own admission, Carnegie's hero. Poverty settled deep into the homes of Dunfermline's weavers because they weren't eligible for relief from the town or churches that believed such alms would deter the artisans from seeking work. (It is of note that this concept of the "worthy poor" reappears as a running theme in Carnegie's future philanthropy). With Will Carnegie a broken man and the fortunes of her family in her hands, Meg Carnegie decided the family would join her sister in Allegheny City, just across the river from Pittsburgh. Just how strong an emotional connection Carnegie had to Scotland is evidenced in his words about his departure: "I remember that I stood with tearful eyes looking out of the

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<sup>19</sup> Carnegie, 14.

<sup>20</sup> Nasaw, *Andrew*, 14.



window until Dunfermline vanished from view ... During my first fourteen years of absence my thought was almost daily ... ‘When shall I see you again?’”<sup>21</sup>

When he sailed for America with his family in 1848, young Carnegie took with him the influence of a progressive family, the romance of nobility, the belief that respect was earned only when status was paired with good deeds, and the aching desire to leave a life of poverty in the past for good. Each of these played a part in how Carnegie eventually earned his wealth, the inner conflicts that arose because of it, and his use of philanthropy to reconcile them.

### **Carnegie’s Pittsburgh**

The Pittsburgh of Carnegie’s childhood was a smoky, teeming center of industry populated by about 80,000 people.<sup>22</sup> As Charles Dickens wrote of it in 1842, it was “an ugly confusion of backs of buildings and crazy galleries and stairs” with “furnace fires and clanking hammers” and “a great quantity of smoke hanging about it.”<sup>23</sup> Built on the manufacturing of glass, ships, and railroad iron, Pittsburgh in the late 1840s and early 1850s had clear class and labor divisions. Iron puddlers used their collective power to form unions to push for better pay and working conditions. Interestingly, when workers went on strike around the time the Carnegies arrived in Allegheny City, the iron puddlers were fighting for a ten-hour workday – the very thing Andrew’s grandfather Thomas and uncle Bailie fought for in Scotland.

In America, thirteen-year-old Carnegie contributed to the family household by securing work with his father as a bobbin boy in a cotton mill working twelve-hour shifts. Will Carnegie continued his shiftless ways and quit the mill to attempt reentry into the weaving market, but

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<sup>21</sup> Carnegie, *Autobiography*, 21.

<sup>22</sup> Edward K. Mueller and Joel A. Tarr, *Making Industrial Pittsburgh Modern* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019), 51.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation and Pictures from Italy* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1913), 129, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/675/675-h/675-h.htm>.

again failed.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, Carnegie's driven work ethic caught the eye of several immigrant Scottish businessmen who employed him as a cotton-mill boiler attendant and eventually, as a telegraph messenger. He used his remarkable memory to at first memorize Pittsburgh's complex street grid, and then Morse Code by ear, becoming a telegraph operator earning four dollars a week at age fifteen. By age seventeen, he was earning thirty-five dollars a month as the personal messenger of Thomas Scott of the Pennsylvania Railroad – opening the door to his future in industry.<sup>25</sup> Under the guiding wing of Scott, Carnegie's role as a laborer shrank while his business acumen grew, and consequently, his political views began to shift away from the progressive ideology of his childhood to a pro-capitalist stance. As Nasaw writes, "Carnegie, as he approached the age of twenty, though very much a Chartist and a radical in Scottish affairs, was every bit the company man in Pittsburgh."<sup>26</sup>

At the Pennsylvania Railroad, Carnegie learned a business method that thematically weaved through the patterns of his adult life – "exploiting his position to enhance his personal finances."<sup>27</sup> A loan from Scott and payoff funds from his mother enabled Carnegie to acquire stock in Adams Express Company, earning him a set monthly income. His first dividend check of ten dollars from "the goose that lays the golden eggs" elated Carnegie because he was finally earning by means other than "the sweat of my brow," as "a return from capital was something strange and new. How money could make money."<sup>28</sup> Henceforth, Carnegie set his sights on increasing his wealth through capital, investments, and the market, rather than his own personal labor. Carnegie was now a capitalist, abandoning "the moral economy of his Scottish forefathers

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<sup>24</sup> Nasaw, *Andrew*, 34.

<sup>25</sup> Nasaw, 54.

<sup>26</sup> Nasaw, 58.

<sup>27</sup> Nasaw, 59.

<sup>28</sup> Carnegie, *Autobiography*, 46.

for the political economy of his new employers.”<sup>29</sup> But, as we will see, as Carnegie’s wealth increased, he was never completely free from the activist progressive lessons of his childhood.

Carnegie’s wealth continued its upward trajectory through the early 1860s by way of the railroad industry with the help of kickbacks and insider trading, including serving as a kickback passthrough for his railroad bosses – something Carnegie whitewashed in his own telling of the story.<sup>30</sup> In the years he spent climbing the ranks in the railroad industry, overworking his railroad laborers (by his own admission) and earning his business acumen at the feet of Thomas Scott, Carnegie sought to improve himself via self-education, language, and appearance because he had become aware of the “immeasurable gulf that separates the highly educated from people like myself.”<sup>31</sup> Now aware of his unrefined, rough Scottish edges compared to those to whose social classes he wished to ascend, he set about to make himself worthy of the noble status he desired, worthy of the romance of nobility – becoming “gentle in tone and manner, polite and courteous to all,” as well as improving in dress and displaying less “general roughness.”<sup>32</sup>

By the Civil War years, Carnegie had enough successful investments in a variety of industries to seek new investments for his dividends. He chose oil and as the saying goes, “struck gold,” leaving him very rich by 1863 – earning nearly \$50,000 a year at age twenty-eight, according to his first independent biographer Joseph Frazier Wall. “Oh ... I’m rich! I’m rich!” Wall writes of Carnegie’s ecstatic words to a friend that year, yet his historic steel wealth was still on the horizon.<sup>33</sup> His new wealth pushed his desire for status into overdrive – specifically the trappings and respect that came with the nobility he once disdained in Scotland. In a letter to his

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<sup>29</sup> Nasaw, *Andrew*, 60.

<sup>30</sup> Nasaw, 62.

<sup>31</sup> Carnegie, *Autobiography*, 54.

<sup>32</sup> Carnegie, 54.

<sup>33</sup> Joseph Frazier Wall, *Andrew Carnegie* (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), 189.

beloved Scottish cousin Dod, he wrote some of the first hints at his future philanthropic doctrine. In a call-back to his belief that status was only respectable when paired with good works, Carnegie expressed his desire to not only purchase that which most obtained by lucky heritage (“own a noble place”), but also to “expand as my means do,” to become “a British gentleman” working “to educate and improve the condition of his dependents.”<sup>34</sup> This language speaks much less of familial relationships and more to a liege lord/serf relationship – again, a reach for nobility all the while keeping his eyes on helping others. A worthy royal, so to speak.

While his previous mentions of philanthropy were loose and floating, by 1868, at the age of thirty-three with an astounding worth of over \$400,000, Carnegie wrote his philanthropic goals in concrete terms for the first time. In a note to himself that he likely never intended to be published, and written at the St. Nicholas Hotel in New York City, he totaled his income and investments and then laid down plans for his generous future – that important pairing of status and good deeds. Carnegie jotted down his plans to work for two more years and then “make no effort to increase fortune, but spend the surplus each year for benevolent purposes.” He then wrote that fateful line that would haunt his legacy in perpetuity, “The amassing of wealth is one of the worst species of idolatry. No idol more debasing than the worship of money.” He admitted that his thoughts up to that time had been “wholly upon the way to make more money in the shortest time,” and fretted that continuing to do so would “degrade me beyond hope of permanent recovery.”<sup>35</sup>

This remarkable note is more than mature, honest introspection by a wealthy young man from a poor Scottish background; as Wall writes, it also revealed that Carnegie was “struck by

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<sup>34</sup> Nasaw, *Andrew*, 82.

<sup>35</sup> Wall, *Andrew*, 225.

the discrepancy between the Dunfermline past and his American present”<sup>36</sup> – specifically his past of poverty and progressive activist influences and his present of previously unimaginable wealth. Using the same piece of paper to take quantitative account of his wealth and to lay down specific plans to help others with it, allowed Carnegie to soothe his inner conflict and to reconcile these two divergent worlds of his. Carnegie did not retire from earning money, nor attempt to stop increasing his fortune in two years’ or ten years’ time from the date of that letter. Rather, he increased his wealth many times over for the next three decades, starting first in iron, and then for the rest of his career, Pittsburgh steel.

### **Carnegie and Steel**

The city of Pittsburgh was made for steel, or rather made for steel production. Sitting near the valuable forty-mile-long Connellsville bituminous coal seam, hugged by a trio of transportation-capable rivers, and crisscrossed with the railroads Carnegie dedicated his twenties and thirties to, it was an ideal spot to manufacture “King Steel,” as Carnegie called it.

The discovery of the seam of coal with fewer impurities was vital to the process of superior steelmaking, and Pittsburgh’s future as an industrial center and the world’s steel headquarters for more than a century. Such coal was heated to extraordinary temperatures in beehive ovens to release volatile chemicals before liquifying and solidifying the coal. Once hard again, the resulting product is referred to as “coke” – porous, rich in carbon, and when mixed with iron ore and limestone, the main ingredient of steel. While Carnegie was transforming into a capitalist and ruthless manager in the railroad industry, the coke industry in Pittsburgh was flourishing due to westward expansion’s demand for railroad iron, as coke is also a necessary ingredient in the iron-making process. The leading industrialist in the coke industry in Pittsburgh

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<sup>36</sup> Wall, 224.

in the 1870s was Henry Clay Frick, who like Carnegie was “an astute capitalist and a tough manager,” and more importantly, a proponent of exponential expansion.<sup>37</sup> Frick, the coke man, and Carnegie, the railroad man, had a historic partnership ahead of them.

There was another factor that compelled Carnegie to “put all good eggs in one basket and then watch that basket,”<sup>38</sup> – steel being the basket – the U.S. congressional passage of a hefty tariff on all imported steel in 1870. England, America’s leading steel supplier, would need to significantly increase prices to meet the tariff. As a result, the door to profit in the American steel market was thrown wide open and Carnegie was ready to enter. As Nasaw writes, Carnegie claimed the tariff was “the single most important event in prompting him to enter the steel business.”<sup>39</sup> Watching his single basket of eggs and ensuring success in steel involved a laser-focus on market-saturation levels of production at low cost via new technologies and, in particular, vertical integration.

To make steel, coke, iron ore, and limestone byproducts are smelted inside of enormous vertical blast furnaces – a “technology” that had been around since the time of Columbus but made modern by the industrial age. In 1872, to support the needs of the railroad industry, Carnegie and a partner constructed the Lucy blast furnace in Homestead, just a few miles upriver from Pittsburgh’s confluence. Lucy, along with a competitor’s Isabella blast furnace, expanded production to the point that between the two, they “broke all records for iron smelting for both America and Great Britain.”<sup>40</sup> Because turning pig iron into steel was an expensive process due to the need for fuel, puddling labor, and metal manipulation, Carnegie sought new methods to increase production. He found it on a visit to England where he saw a technology created by

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<sup>37</sup> Mueller, *Making*, 52.

<sup>38</sup> Carnegie, *Autobiography*, 92.

<sup>39</sup> Nasaw, *Andrew*, 141.

<sup>40</sup> Mueller, *Making*, 53.

Englishman Henry Bessemer which was patented in 1856. As Carnegie wrote in his autobiography, while engaged in the iron business, “I had not failed to notice the growth of the Bessemer process. If this proved successful I knew ... that the Iron Age would pass away and the Steel Age take its place.”<sup>41</sup> The Bessemer process converted pig iron to steel by reducing the amounts of carbon, manganese, sulfur, and phosphorus via oxidation created by blasts of cold air to generate chemical reactions that created immense heat without the need of significant coal fuel. The Bessemer process revolutionized the steel industry by allowing greatly increased output of better-quality steel at a lesser cost and with less labor.

Recognizing that the future steel needs of the world would be met where coal, water, and rail converged with the new Bessemer technology, Carnegie went all-in on steel by buying the competing Isabella and building an integrated steel mill in Braddock on the banks of the Monongahela River where three major rail lines intersected. Integrated steel mills were enormous complexes “with a chaotic assemblage of huge brick and metal sheds, towering blast furnaces, hot ovens, Bessemer converters ... rolling mills, giant ore loaders and ore yards.”<sup>42</sup> Named the Edgar Thomson Works (ET Works) in honor of the rail man Carnegie expected to become a major customer, the new mill “became the premier rail maker in the nation producing as much as three thousand tons of steel rails daily and close to a quarter of the national rail output.”<sup>43</sup> Thanks to Frick’s coke and Carnegie’s blast furnaces, integrated mills, and Bessemer converters, steel was on its way to replacing iron as Pittsburgh’s major industry, and Andrew Carnegie was leading the way, his pockets growing richer, his status reaching higher, and his methods growing brutal.

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<sup>41</sup> Carnegie, *Autobiography*, 95.

<sup>42</sup> Mueller, *Making*, 17.

<sup>43</sup> Mueller, 53.

With the technology in hand to increase production, Carnegie set his sights on decreasing costs of raw materials particularly via vertical integration – the process of streamlining operations by taking direct ownership of the stages of production. In his autobiography, Carnegie wrote of the importance of vertical integration to industrial manufacturing, noting, “The one vital lesson in iron and steel that I learned in Britain was the necessity for owning raw materials and finishing the completed article ready for its purpose.”<sup>44</sup> For Carnegie, the finished product of steel was not as profitable as it could be so long as he had to pay markups for raw materials. Vertical integration was the answer, because to Carnegie, as he wrote in a letter to his cousin Dod, it was “clear that profit is to be made in steel manufacturing only by the concerns which do every step in the process themselves.”<sup>45</sup>

Vertical integration – owning the means of production – meant lower costs, greater profits, and for Carnegie, more wealth. He addressed the pig iron supply by building blast furnaces to make it, and purchased a limestone mine in Center County, Pennsylvania to supply the raw materials. He removed his dependence on foreign ferro-manganese (a necessary material for the operation of Bessemer converters) by manufacturing it at ET Works – the first mill in America to do so. The final piece of the means-of-production-ownership puzzle was the coal and superior coke to meet fuel and pig iron-making needs, and as such, in 1881 he entered a partnership with Frick, the nation’s coke man, and purchased half of the stock by 1882. At a time when the world’s demand for the strength of steel was increasing, Carnegie controlled the means of production and had the makings of an empire in his hands, but success would require brutal cost-cutting, market saturation and unprecedented economies of scale.

“Cheapness is in proportion to the scale of production. To make ten tons of steel a day

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<sup>44</sup> Carnegie, *Autobiography*, 112.

<sup>45</sup> Nasaw, *Andrew*, 517.



would cost many times as much per ton as to make one hundred tons. Thus the larger the scale of operation, the cheaper the product.”<sup>46</sup> Thus wrote Carnegie in a 1900 essay for *Century Magazine*, describing a manufacturing ideology vital to his creation of a market-saturating steel monopoly – economies of scale – that is to say simply, the more you make, the cheaper for which you can make it. Carnegie himself admitted that his “appetite for ... increased production” was “insatiable.”<sup>47</sup> Free from foreign competition thanks to the tariff, Carnegie focused on creating the economies of scale necessary to undersell all domestic competitors. The Panic of 1873 threatened Carnegie’s basket of eggs and by extension his livelihood, his wealth prospects, and his status. Forced to protect his investment and future, Carnegie sold stocks, put a stopgap on new investing, and turned his complete focus to securing the future of ET Works in Braddock. If it failed, the repercussions would set Carnegie back in the areas that mattered most to him – money and status. Truly, all his eggs were in one basket; he needed to succeed by any means.

Carnegie’s ability to control the domestic steel market was a result of steel manufacturers taking production capacity into account and then proactively allocating market shares. Carnegie, with an integrated mill and ownership of the means of production, was the largest producer and therefore received the largest market share. This circular loop of economies of scale, market share, and market growth allowed Carnegie to undersell, undercut, and overwhelm, and gave Carnegie Steel a monopoly on the domestic market. As Nasaw writes of Carnegie, “The key to his success was the scale of his operation and his insistence on producing more each year than he had the year before.”<sup>48</sup> This was certainly true at ET Works where Carnegie insisted the mills run 24/7 at full production without worrying about the wear such efforts placed on equipment,

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<sup>46</sup> Carnegie, *Timely Essays*, 63.

<sup>47</sup> Carnegie, *Autobiography*, 61.

<sup>48</sup> Nasaw, *Andrew*, 168.

particularly the linings of the converters and furnaces. Repairs could be made during winter shutdowns; production must be king. Wall evidences Carnegie's obsession with production via two particularly revealing responses to telegrams announcing record breaking production at ET Works. To one, Carnegie replied, "What about next week?" and to another in regard to a specific record-breaking furnace, wrote, "What were the others doing?"<sup>49</sup>

Accompanying his economies of scale ideology was his obsession with controlling costs because doing so led to and protected profits, and for that reason he regularly encouraged the strongest focus on controlling costs over profit. This obsession allowed Carnegie Steel to ride out and even continuously improve the efficiency of operations during dips in the market, while profit-focused competitors found themselves floundering and failing. Despite residing for the most part in New York City, Carnegie was kept abreast of the operation costs at ET Works via detailed monthly reports of materials, labor, etc. Nasaw writes that Carnegie was "preoccupied with getting the lowest possible costs" and demanded explanation from mill managers when he questioned specific transactions. "If the explanation were not forthcoming or insufficiently enlightening, he followed up with a rebuke and a warning to pay more attention in the future."<sup>50</sup>

Carnegie's methods for reducing costs were not always palatable. Wall makes note of Carnegie's penchant for making bets with his competitive mill manager Captain Jones that he could not reduce costs from quarter to quarter, resulting in ever increasingly brutal operations methods. As McCloskey notes, "Carnegie's method of handling supervisory personnel ... was so calculatingly inhumane that some found life in his service impossible to bear."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Wall, *Andrew*, 346.

<sup>50</sup> Nasaw, *Andrew*, 176.

<sup>51</sup> McCloskey, *American*, 145.

When ET Works was beginning production, the winner-takes-all, no-holds-barred, no-rules free market capitalism that allowed Carnegie to earn his wealth had not yet been significantly tamped down by progressive pro-labor, anti-monopoly attitudes, or antitrust laws. Railroad owners were in bed with steel mills via investments, and so gamed the system to ensure the success of their chosen mills. Cronyism and price-fixing were in abundance and backroom deals stifled true competition in the market. Carnegie used his vast and close connections in the rail industry to secure rail orders over his competitors, whom he undersold once informed of the details of their bids by his railroad insiders.<sup>52</sup> Any pushback from his managers on his questionable and overly aggressive methods was met with Carnegie's rebuke and laser-focus on success. As he wrote to one such manager who warned him that other steel companies were becoming "bitter" over his practices, "Let us manage our own business – take orders whenever a fair profit is secure."<sup>53</sup> These words and actions are a hypocritical contrast from the words he spoke in a lecture to Union College in 1896 when he said, "Be always fair ... every unjust advantage taken in business sooner or later proves a serious disadvantage! Men who become great millionaires must ... bear a reputation as being in all things fair, liberal, and considerate."<sup>54</sup>

By 1875, Carnegie's methods, both traditional and ethically questionable, were paying off thanks to ET Works, which he referred to as "a grand concern, and sure to make us all a fortune."<sup>55</sup> And it did. By 1887, he was earning an annual salary of 370,000 pounds, the equivalent of \$38 million today<sup>56</sup>, and by 1890, his net worth had grown to nearly \$15 million

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<sup>52</sup> Wall, *Andrew*, 348.

<sup>53</sup> Wall, 349.

<sup>54</sup> Andrew Carnegie and Daniel Butterfield, *Andrew Carnegie's College Lectures "Wealth and Its Uses" in the (Butterfield) Practical Course, Union College, Schenectady, N.Y. "Business", Founder's Day, 1896, Cornell University, Ithaca, N. Y. With the Story of How He Served His Business Apprenticeship* (New York: F.T. Neely, 1896),16.

<sup>55</sup> Nasaw, *Andrew*, 170.

<sup>56</sup> Nasaw, 300.

(roughly estimated at \$450 million today).<sup>57</sup> Despite this, his part in the most brutal of cost-cuts – labor – has not yet been detailed by this author because we must first take a look at how Carnegie’s attitudes toward wealth and philanthropy were formed, before we can understand how those attitudes extended to labor and thereby the lives of those who worked his mills.

### **Herbert Spencer, Social Darwinism, and “The Gospel of Wealth”**

As Carnegie’s wealth increased through the 1860s and 70s, he never fully lost sight of what he believed to be that important second half of a worthy rich noble – good works. His philanthropic endeavors did not only begin once he had earned all of his wealth; his ideas about giving peppered his words and actions from early on. He regularly pondered his place in the natural order of the world, particularly his role as a wealthy industrialist with humble, progressive roots that he claimed to cherish.

The results of that conflict were some very marked contradictions. The same Carnegie who claimed “a sunny disposition is worth more than a fortune,” crushed competitors who stood in the way of his personal fortune.<sup>58</sup> The same Carnegie who openly admitted that he was “determined to make a fortune,” called the amassing of wealth “the worst species of idolatry.”<sup>59</sup> The same Carnegie whose beloved progressive pro-labor forebears fought against twelve-hour work shifts with a young, admiring Carnegie in the room, was working his own employees to the bone in even more brutal twelve-hour shifts, six to seven days a week that biweekly called for a dangerous twenty-four hour shift as night and day workers shift-swapped. How to reconcile these dichotomies? Was money the most shameful idol or his religion? How to justify his actions? Was labor the salt of the earth or just another costly cog in his wealth machine? How to reconcile

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<sup>57</sup> Nasaw, 359.

<sup>58</sup> Carnegie, *Autobiography*, 9.

<sup>59</sup> Carnegie, 74.

his conflicts in a way that still allowed him the coveted status of a noble? Carnegie's watershed moment came around 1867 when he discovered the social evolution philosophy of Herbert Spencer (b. 1820, d. 1903) and "a light came as in a flood and all was clear."<sup>60</sup> In social Darwinism, Carnegie found the release for his shame, the justification for his actions, and the reconciliation of his dichotomies.

Contrary to popular belief, it wasn't Charles Darwin who coined the phrase "survival of the fittest;" it was Herbert Spencer, an English philosopher, sociologist, and author who wrote his theories of social evolution several years before Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species*. To Spencer, the survival of the fittest was not limited to animals; it pertained to humanity as well, and interfering with the biologically superior individual man's march toward the top in favor of the health of the community interfered with nature and actually hurt societal progress. Those who succeeded, those who earn wealth, did so because evolution – factors outside of man's control – ordained them with the skills to win out over competition. The inescapable, unstoppable laws of nature, competition, and evolution created a world where wealth was concentrated into the hands of the fittest few. Here was what Carnegie needed to hear! Here was his justification, his reconciliation, and the salve for his shame all rolled into one. Or so he believed.

To Spencer, the unavoidable law of natural selection turned the homogeneity of man into a heterogeneous class order. Humankind, once on a level playing ground as hunter-gatherers, had progressed due to natural selection to the point where differences – class and wealth hierarchies – separated them based on their evolutionary fitness. In his landmark 1857 work outlining his theory in *The Westminster Review*, Spencer referred to this as "the process of continuous

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<sup>60</sup> Carnegie, *Autobiography*, 173.

divergence.”<sup>61</sup> Spencer specifically spoke of the division of labor as a naturally occurring phenomenon created outside of man’s individual actions or supernatural influences. He wrote, “It has not been by command of any ruler that some men have become manufacturers while others have remained cultivators of the soil.”<sup>62</sup> This naturally occurring combination created a society in which, “every citizen is supplied with daily necessities, while he yields some product or aid to others.”<sup>63</sup>

For Carnegie, a once-poor boy from a progressive family now holding immense wealth and status, Spencerism told him that his upward climb was a result of his evolutionary superiority, not greed, and that the current division of the classes was beneficial for the progress of society. Reading these words, Carnegie considered his own role in the division of labor and saw the industrial revolution as spontaneous evolution that worked for the benefit of the whole, trickling down to those at the bottom via affordable goods that allowed them to live as kings once did. And in that aspect of Spencerism, he found his missing piece of a worthy noble – good deeds. By manufacturing steel and contributing to the natural growing heterogeneity of society, he was assisting those at the bottom of the evolutionary ladder by improving their lives via jobs and more affordable goods. His existence at the top of the ladder created naturally occurring benefits. He was, without trying, already doing good works! More importantly, Spencerism went hand-in-hand with Carnegie’s belief in *laissez-faire* capitalism – the market ideology that the laws of nature, not government and regulations, created societal progress. (It is worth noting here another paradox: that Carnegie’s wealth was substantially augmented by government intervention that ran counter to the ideology of Spencerism and *laissez-faire* – namely the tariff

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<sup>61</sup> Herbert Spencer, *Progress: Its Law and Cause* (New York: J. Fitzgerald, 1881), 239.  
<https://archive.org/details/progressitslawca00spen/page/n1/mode/2up?view=theater>.

<sup>62</sup> Spencer, *Progress*, 269.

<sup>63</sup> Spencer, 269.

on steel imports. While he perhaps believed in the free market, he had no qualms about taking advantage of the government's intervention and helping hand, and even donated to the campaigns of Republicans who supported tariffs.<sup>64</sup>)

True adherence to Spencerism should have stopped there for Carnegie, because progress and heterogeneity were natural occurrences outside of man's control. Instead, he co-opted the philosophy and modified it to fit his needs, likely in an effort to secure respect and status in a world that increasingly believed in *created* progress and *intentional* good works.

There were a few claims Carnegie needed to make in order to satisfy his belief in social Darwinism and to justify to the public his actions and reputation as a “robber baron” and brutal wealthy industrialist. First, he would need to argue that those who begin at the bottom of the social Darwinism evolutionary ladder were at an advantage – there was something to be gained by poverty, particularly childhood poverty, which Carnegie often called a gift. For if Carnegie was going to spend the next decades in his life pushing the concept of the “worthy poor” while ignoring the poverty of his own workers, he needed to argue there was value in their suffering. As historian Alun Munslow writes, because Carnegie knew poverty would be perpetual in a Spencerist world, he rationalized it “as the ultimate education.”<sup>65</sup>

As a youth in Scotland, his father demoralized by poverty, Carnegie “resolved ... that the wolf of poverty should be driven from our door some day, if I could do it.”<sup>66</sup> In America, as his father's fortunes still struggled, Carnegie wrote that he was “indignant” that poverty meant his father traveled as a deck passenger rather than a cabin passenger.<sup>67</sup> Contrast those words with

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<sup>64</sup> Nasaw, *Andrew*, 331.

<sup>65</sup> Alun Munslow, “Andrew Carnegie and the Discourse of Cultural Hegemony,” *Journal of American Studies* 22, no. 2 (1988): 218, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27555005.218>.

<sup>66</sup> Carnegie, *Essays*, 4.

<sup>67</sup> Carnegie, *Autobiography*, 38.

these he wrote in 1901: “I know how sweet and happy and pure the home of honest poverty is.”<sup>68</sup> That doesn’t seem like the descriptor of a home from which one would drive out the very thing supposedly keeping it happy and pure – the wolf – yet Carnegie wrote these two sentences mere paragraphs apart, evidence of deep conflict. Carnegie, who sought nobility, status, and yes, even palatial castles, also claimed in published writings, “There is more genuine satisfaction, a truer life, and more obtained from life in the humble cottages of the poor than in the palaces of the rich.”<sup>69</sup> In other words, *for me, but not for thee*. To relieve himself of the knowledge that for every dollar he amassed or for every dollar he spent on a lifetime of exotic luxuries, one less dollar was in the hands of the less fortunate, Carnegie wrote, “We should be quite willing to abolish luxury, but to abolish honest, industrious, self-denying poverty would be to destroy the soil upon which mankind produces the virtues which enable our race to reach a still higher civilization than it now possesses.”<sup>70</sup> And therein Carnegie linked poverty to evolution and Spencerism. Poverty, Carnegie argued, was necessary for the progress of the human race (albeit, likely, to Carnegie and certainly to Spencer, evolution favored the Anglo-European race). However, Carnegie lived to abolish poverty from his own life and adored the luxuries his wealth afforded him. Spencerism was the public-facing reconciliation between those conflicting existences.

The second claim Carnegie needed to make in order to satisfy his belief in social Darwinism was that he had a passive role in his wealth acquisition – that it was not created intentionally by his own hand while holding others down with his remaining hand, but by the unstoppable laws of nature due to his high rung on the Spencerian ladder of evolution. Several

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<sup>68</sup> Carnegie, *Essays*, 6.

<sup>69</sup> Carnegie, *Essays*, 6.

<sup>70</sup> Carnegie, 6.



variations of Carnegie's written words on this subject appear in his lifetime writings. Of particular interest is this which he wrote in *The Empire of Business*: "In the world's progress, scientific discoverers and mechanical inventors appeared and adapted the forces and materials of nature to the uses of man, followed by the commercial and industrial age in which we live, in which wealth has been produced as if by magic, and fallen largely to the captains of industry, greatly to their own surprise."<sup>71</sup> What exceedingly passive language from a man who calculated every risk and move in order to grow his own wealth to historic proportions, and a man who openly admitted to dedicating himself to earning a fortune and working to banish the "wolf of poverty." He used this sort of passive language often, even while dedicating his Pittsburgh library in 1895, saying, "Pittsburgh knew I was one of themselves, for here it was that fortune came to me," rather than acknowledging it was his brutal policies and actions that *created* the fortune.<sup>72</sup>

Finally, in order to satisfy his belief in Spencerism, Carnegie would need to argue that the accumulation of wealth was not evil, or, as he once claimed, "the worst species of idolatry," but was beneficial for society. In other words, risking harm to his moral health via devotion to the pursuit of wealth (which technically ran afoul of his claim that it was a happy, magical accident), was actually a sacrifice he made for the collective good of the community. It was upon this third and final claim that he built his philanthropic ideology and legacy. In his radical guide to giving, "Wealth," published as an essay in *The North American Review* in 1889, Carnegie wrote, "Not evil, but good, has come to the race from the accumulation of wealth by those who have the

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<sup>71</sup> Andrew Carnegie, *The Empire of Business* (New York City: Doubleday Page, 1902), 190.

<sup>72</sup> Robert J. Gangewere, *Palace of Culture: Andrew Carnegie's Museums and Library in Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011), 3.

ability and energy that produce it.”<sup>73</sup> How far his ideology changed. He had shifted from “the amassing of wealth is the worst species of idolatry” to championing the accumulation of wealth as beneficial for the progress of the human race. This is further evidence that in Spencerism, Carnegie found justification for his wealth and methods, and reconciliation of his inner conflicts.

Carnegie added “Gospel of” to his “Wealth” piece title in later publications, but a vein of theology ran through it from its first incarnation. He invoked Christianity in the essay, and as historian John Higgins noted, his “idea on surplus wealth was no more than the ancient Christian doctrine of stewardship in modern dress.”<sup>74</sup> However, Carnegie’s loose religious connections as a child and adult were not the main source of his moral conscience – his progressive poor upbringing was, and adopting Spencerism as his new religion was quite freeing from the conflicts that arose as a result. As Bushman writes, Carnegie, as an adult, “judged himself by standards he learned [in Scotland], and his aspirations and disappointments are best understood in Scottish terms.”<sup>75</sup> It can be argued that “Wealth” indicated another shift in Carnegie’s theology – a new gospel combining aspects of Spencerism with his own philosophies on wealth and philanthropy to excuse his means, justify his ends, and elevate himself to the vaunted and respected role of evolution’s choice for a steward of wealth for the improvement of the race.

“Wealth” was published for the masses and exhorted the extremely wealthy to commit to redistributing the near entirety of their earnings during their lifetimes for the benefit of society. Simply put, “Wealth” was a call for fiduciary stewardship of labor-generated earnings. Carnegie claimed the rich and poor were not enemies, but that the wealth of the rich could bind the two in

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<sup>73</sup> Andrew Carnegie, “Wealth,” *The North American Review* 148, no. 391 (1889): 656, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25101798>.

<sup>74</sup> John E. Higgins, “Andrew Carnegie, Author,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 88, no. 4 (1964): 452.

<sup>75</sup> Bushman, “The Romance,” 31.

a harmonious “brotherhood.”<sup>76</sup> This flowery language masked startling divisions between luxury and squalor, between ease and suffering. Carnegie linked his new Gospel to Spencerism in the opening paragraphs, claiming that evolution created the division of classes but that such division was “not to be deplored, but welcomed as highly beneficial” to “the progress of the race.”<sup>77</sup> It was better, he wrote, that some have mansions and palaces full of art and refinement, rather than return to the homogeneous society of ancient times where no one was afforded such luxury. “Much better this great irregularity than universal squalor,” he wrote, seemingly not willing to consider a possible society in which the only choice didn’t lie between such two extremes.<sup>78</sup>

To historian Norton Garfinkle, in writing “Wealth,” Carnegie indicated his “acceptance of the depressed condition of late nineteenth-century industrial workers (conditions that ... he himself played no small role in creating) as not simply an ugly stage in history, but a permanent fact of nature.”<sup>79</sup> Carnegie didn’t consider that a fairer distribution of wealth could eliminate the concentration of it into a few hands – or perhaps he merely didn’t want such a world to exist and so ignored it as a societal possibility. In fact, Carnegie claimed such thought exercise was “a waste of time” because it was the law of evolution at work and attempts to stand in the way of the forces of nature were futile.<sup>80</sup> Carnegie demanded that the law of social evolution “is here; we cannot evade it; no substitutes for it have been found; and while the law may be sometimes hard for the individual, it is best for the race, because it insures the survival of the fittest.”<sup>81</sup> It is as if Spencer himself were writing the words.

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<sup>76</sup> Carnegie, “Wealth,” 653.

<sup>77</sup> Carnegie, “Wealth,” 653.

<sup>78</sup> Carnegie, 653.

<sup>79</sup> Norton Garfinkle, *The American Dream vs. The Gospel of Wealth: The Fight for a Productive Middle-Class Economy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 64, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1npfr6.7>.

<sup>80</sup> Carnegie, “Wealth,” 654.

<sup>81</sup> Carnegie, 655.

Carnegie outlined in “Wealth” how manufacturers such as himself were instruments of evolution and progress which allowed “the poor [to] enjoy what the rich could not before afford.”<sup>82</sup> In other words, poverty wasn’t true poverty thanks to men like Carnegie whom evolution pushed to create goods more cheaply. Such an argument erased Carnegie’s active and intentional role in using technology, economies of scale, vertical integration, undercutting, etc. to saturate the market, drive competitors out of business, and thus concentrate fantastic amounts of wealth into his hands. Making himself into a passive player in his own story removed any accountability he might face for his actions and wealth were he the star of his own show.

In “Wealth,” Carnegie further justified his ongoing wealth amassing by claiming the “law of competition” essentially took advantage of the management and organizational talents of men like him, creating a market where they reaped economic rewards for the betterment of society and as such, must and inevitably would continue to accumulate wealth to keep their society-supporting operations running. There was no in-between to Carnegie. It was either squalor or riches. Evolution gave him his riches, he claimed, nearly beyond his control.

Having established that poverty was a gift, that his continued amassing of wealth was beneficial for the greater good, and more importantly, an unstoppable law of nature, Carnegie laid the foundations for his Gospel. Specifically, in order to be good stewards of the wealth that evolution had bestowed upon the very rich, they must use that wealth to benefit the people. He put forth that by adopting his Gospel, “the surplus wealth of the few will become, in the best sense, the property of the many.”<sup>83</sup>

The first tenet of Carnegie’s Gospel was that the wealthy should “set an example of

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<sup>82</sup> Carnegie, 654.

<sup>83</sup> Carnegie, “Wealth,” 660.

modest, unostentatious living, shunning display or extravagance.”<sup>84</sup> It should be noted that Carnegie spent his life living in luxury hotels, regularly traveled the world for months at a time with entourages of friends and servants, and purchased and resided in two castles for a time. The second tenet of his Gospel was Carnegie’s exhortation that his wealthy peers not leave their wealth to descendants, but instead, give it away to society while living. Under Carnegie’s Gospel, family members of the wealthy should only receive enough inheritance to survive while they sought out their own means of income. One might ask if Carnegie was leaning toward distributing wealth to those who labored to earn the rich their wealth. Not so. Carnegie’s third tenet of his Gospel eschewed small giving in favor of large institutional gifts. He wrote that wealth “administered for the common good . . . , passing through the hands of the few, can be made a much more potent force for the elevation of our race than if it had been distributed in small sums to the people themselves.”<sup>85</sup> Here we have plainly run into Carnegie’s justification that allowed for reconciliation of his progressive childhood and his wealthy capitalist adulthood. His claim was that he would not better “the race” via “small” giving directly to those in need, i.e., his laborers – which an astute observer might note would have brought about the middle class he claimed couldn’t exist. Instead, Carnegie pushed a gospel that large institutional giving was better for the progress of the race – libraries, museums, music halls, parks, and schools – all “ladders upon which the aspiring can rise” for “lasting good.”<sup>86</sup>

Reaction to Carnegie’s essay ranged from tempered praise from his friend William Gladstone, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, to comparisons of his Gospel to the Christian tenet of stewardship, to outright scorn from the likes of Methodist clergyman Hugh

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<sup>84</sup> Carnegie, 661.

<sup>85</sup> Carnegie, “Wealth,” 660.

<sup>86</sup> Carnegie, 663.

Price Hughes who wrote that Carnegie grew richer while the poor grew poorer, and called him “an anti-Christian phenomenon, a social monstrosity, and a grave political peril.”<sup>87</sup> While advocating for an ideal society where “no man will have too little because no man will have too much,” Hughes accused Carnegie of merely co-opting British theologian John Wesley’s philosophy of “get all you can ... save all you can ... give all you can.”<sup>88</sup>

Carnegie’s Gospel was more than a public push for the redistribution of wealth – it made specific recommendations for who he considered worthy of the redistributed wealth. In fact, he published a follow-up piece, “The Best Fields for Philanthropy,” that same year and outlined specific recommendations for where his wealthy peers should direct their giving to trickle-down most effectively to those willing to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps.<sup>89</sup> These themes of almsgiving and “the worthy poor” will be visited in the following section examining Carnegie’s relationship with labor. First, understanding what we do about both social Darwinism and its intersection with Carnegie’s Gospel raises the question of whether it adhered to true social Darwinism, which would reflect a complete inner justification and reconciliation, or if Carnegie modified it because he still hadn’t found them.

In his piece examining the impact of social Darwinism on the Gilded Age businessmen, history professor Irvin Wyllie portrays Carnegie as one of the few Gilders to have truly believed and been impacted by Spencerism compared to his wealthy peers. For the Gilded Age businessmen, social Darwinism “served as an ideological shield and buckler for the Robber

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<sup>87</sup> Hugh Price Hughes, “Irresponsible Wealth,” *The Nineteenth Century* 28 (1890): 891, <https://archive.org/details/dli.bengal.10689.14557/page/n895/mode/2up>.

<sup>88</sup> Hughes, “Irresponsible,” 898.

<sup>89</sup> Andrew Carnegie, “The Best Fields for Philanthropy,” *The North American Review* 149, no. 397 (1889): 682–98, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25101907>.

Baron generation of businessmen.”<sup>90</sup> In Spencer, they found justification for their market-dominating, wealth amassing actions – evolution, or, as Wyllie puts it, “a welcome pseudo-scientific sanction for free competition.”<sup>91</sup> Despite his staunch belief in the philosophy, there is considerable evidence that Carnegie’s Spencerism and Herbert Spencer’s philosophy had significant divergences. In writing of Carnegie and Spencer’s friendship, John White notes that “Carnegie’s much-vaunted evolutionism” went against some of Spencer’s beliefs because Spencer was “highly critical of American competitive mores, monopolistic practices and pervasive materialism.”<sup>92</sup> On a Carnegie-encouraged visit to Pittsburgh in the late 1800s, Spencer spoke to an audience of businessmen including Carnegie and said,

I hear that a great trader among you deliberately endeavoured (sic) to crush out everyone whose business competed with his own; and manifestly the man who, making himself a slave to accumulation, absorbs an inordinate share of the trade or profession he is engaged in, makes life harder for all others engaged in it and excludes from it many who might otherwise gain competencies.<sup>93</sup>

It would be difficult to find a man more encompassed in such a description than Andrew Carnegie himself. Spencer had plainly laid out the *modus operandi* of his “disciple.” The very creator of the philosophy Carnegie used to support his claim that amassing wealth was “good,” had referred to it as a form of slavery. Had Carnegie been a true disciple of Spencer’s, he would have taken to heart that which Spencer wrote in 1857, well before Carnegie became aware of him: “A system of keen competition, carried on ... without adequate moral restraint, is very

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<sup>90</sup> Irvin G. Wyllie, “Social Darwinism and the Businessman,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 103, no. 5 (1959): 629, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/985421>.

<sup>91</sup> Wyllie, “Social,” 630.

<sup>92</sup> White, “Andrew,” 57.

<sup>93</sup> White, 59.

much a system of commercial cannibalism.”<sup>94</sup> Certainly, Carnegie’s business practices were unrestrained and in opposition to this philosophy. This was not the only contradiction that arose between Spencer’s philosophy and Carnegie’s words and actions.

As Munslow points out, Carnegie’s Spencerism was “reductive” and highly modified to suit his own needs.<sup>95</sup> For instance, with Carnegie’s brand of Spencerism, the poor could work their way to riches and leadership if they intentionally acquired necessary skills. True Spencerism, though, focused on eugenics and genetic superiority as the basis for the ascendance of leaders – beyond their control regardless of skills they added. In fact, as White points out, Carnegie’s regularly written and spoken themes of genius and self-made success were entirely against true Spencerism because they operated outside of natural evolutionary law.<sup>96</sup> Spencer didn’t believe in saving those whom evolution deemed unfit, but Carnegie believed the *worthy* unfit could become fit via their own efforts to overcome evolution – complete contradictions.

Another contradiction between Carnegie and Spencer is that in some respects, Carnegie believed the intervention of the State was necessary for progress, whereas Spencer’s theory of evolution decried any attempts of the State to push or restrain progress by interfering with the law of competition.

White argues that “Spencer’s social evolutionism appealed to Carnegie’s innate and cherished belief in human progress,” but it is this author’s argument that Carnegie’s language doesn’t reflect adoption of a philosophy merely because it gelled with his already existing innate beliefs, but instead reflects a found treasure that changed his life because it was a completely new idea that justified his actions in light of his upbringing.<sup>97</sup> For instance, when Carnegie wrote,

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<sup>94</sup> Herbert Spencer, “The Morals of Trade,” *Westminster Review* 71, no. 140 (April 1859): 209.

<sup>95</sup> Munslow, “Andrew,” 220.

<sup>96</sup> White, “Andrew,” 66.

<sup>97</sup> White, 67.



“Few men have wished to know another man more strongly than I to know Herbert Spencer, for seldom has one been more deeply indebted than I to him and to Darwin,” his language speaks not merely to gratitude for information, but indebtedness, as if he gained something he sought.<sup>98</sup> This is reflected in his autobiography in which he wrote that once he found Spencerism, “‘All is well since all grows better’ became my motto, my true source of comfort.”<sup>99</sup> The comfort was the reconciliation and the justification. But like White, this author agrees that in Spencerism, Carnegie found a philosophy “he could mould (sic) to his own purposes,” and “accepting the general proposition of social evolution, he readily filled in his own details.”<sup>100</sup>

With these paradoxes plain, it becomes increasingly clear that Carnegie latched onto Spencerism not due to absolute and total belief in the philosophy, but for relief. It wasn't the ethical implications of traditional religion that weighed on his conscience, as many historians argue, for if that was the case, Spencerism would have completely relieved him of that notion. Carnegie himself, while acknowledging in passing his Calvinistic childhood understanding, wrote that when he found Spencerism, he had already denounced theology and was without religion, “At sea. No creed, no system reached me.”<sup>101</sup> The moral conscience and ethical tenets created in his childhood still gripped him and he modified Spencerism in attempted reconciliation between his progressive pro-labor anti-nobility upbringing and his “robber baron” capitalism.

In Darwinism and Spencer's extension of it to societal progress, Carnegie, a man who never fully committed himself to any religion, found his religion, writing, “Not only had I got rid

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<sup>98</sup> Carnegie, *Autobiography*, 173.

<sup>99</sup> Carnegie, 173.

<sup>100</sup> White, “Andrew,” 68.

<sup>101</sup> Andrew Carnegie quoted in: McCloskey, *American*, 138.

of theology and the supernatural, but I had found the truth of evolution.”<sup>102</sup> As historian Peter Mickelson writes, “Reading Spencer he thought he discovered ... a natural replacement for all theology and all notions of the supernatural.”<sup>103</sup> Such language indicates Carnegie sought relief of some sort in Spencerism – relief from the nagging weight of his inner moral conscience. His biographer Wall argues the same, writing, “Carnegie had never accepted the Calvinist view of either man or God, but the ethos of Scotland had been bred into him.”<sup>104</sup> An agnostic with Calvinistic influences in his youth, Carnegie referred to Spencer as his master, himself as his disciple, and his own wealth philosophy as a gospel; he even attempted to have Spencer enshrined as a religious figure in Westminster Abbey upon his idol’s death. To Carnegie who deified him, Spencer “was never guilty of an immoral act or did an injustice to any human being,”<sup>105</sup> and his social evolutionary philosophy was “true and high religion ... around [which] lie the wrecks of theology.”<sup>106</sup> In Spencerism, Carnegie not only found religion, but paradoxically found a way to *free* himself of religion because Spencerism “asserted that ... survival is determined not by divine providence but by the relentless struggle between species and individuals.”<sup>107</sup>

One must ask then, with Carnegie finally seemingly free from the moral constraints that nagged his conscience, why did he turn to philanthropy? If Spencerism, as he adopted it, gave him free reign to amass more and more wealth under the guise of eventual trickle-down stewardship, why did he write his Gospel?

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<sup>102</sup> Andrew Carnegie, *Autobiography*, 173.

<sup>103</sup> Peter Mickelson, “American Society and the Public Library in the Thought of Andrew Carnegie,” *The Journal of Library History (1974-1987)* 10, no. 2 (April 1975): 119.

<sup>104</sup> Wall, *Andrew*, 224.

<sup>105</sup> Carnegie, *Autobiography*, 172.

<sup>106</sup> Andrew Carnegie quoted in: White, “Andrew,” 61.

<sup>107</sup> White, 63.

The likely answer is that while social Darwinism seemed on the surface to solve his conflicts, they evidently still nagged at Carnegie. When he wrote his 1868 note to himself at age thirty-three, outlining plans to earn for two more years and then retire to better himself and work for the benefit of others, he had already been exposed to Spencerism for a year. Because Spencerism, at its purest, didn't fully soothe his inner moral turmoil, a pivot to philanthropy was necessary to fulfill his good works to earn the respect of his purchased nobility. And his pivot to philanthropy would be historic. But first, a look at how Carnegie's adoption of Spencerism impacted his relationship with labor is a vital piece of the philanthropy puzzle, for his modification of social Darwinism justified his wealth acquisition via ruthless methods.

### **Carnegie and Labor**

Trying to pin down Carnegie's views on labor is as difficult as straddling the wide gap between his words and actions on wealth amassing. Was labor to be harmoniously reconciled to the upper class via wealth, as Carnegie claimed, or was labor to be driven to exhaustion at destitution wages by profit-focused owners? Were laborers to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, or to satisfy themselves with the "riches" of poverty? Was Carnegie really, as he claimed, "warmly sympathetic to the working man?"<sup>108</sup> Historian Jonathan Rees argues, likely, the truth lies in the middle, for "when unions helped Carnegie make money he bargained with them; when bargaining with unions threatened profitability he ousted them."<sup>109</sup> Labor was a cost item and, as we've seen, Carnegie focused on cost above all else, even profit. He believed in paying his workers their market rate to keep them dependable, but not at the expense of his bottom line.

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<sup>108</sup> Carnegie, *Autobiography*, 120.

<sup>109</sup> Jonathan Rees, "Homestead in Context: Andrew Carnegie and the Decline of the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 64, no. 4 (1997): 509, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27774021>.

Carnegie's writings in the late nineteenth-century earned him a public reputation as a champion of labor who elevated the working class to a vital component of social evolution's march toward progress. In his 1891 essay, "The Advantages of Poverty," written in response to theological criticism that he grew richer while the poor grew poorer, he claimed, "Millionaires make no money when compelled to pay low wages. Their profits accrue in periods when wages are high, and the higher the wages that have to be paid, the higher the revenues of the employer. It is true ... that capital and labor are allies ... and that one cannot prosper when the other does not."<sup>110</sup> Those are certainly admirable words reflective of one who values labor and believes in livable wages; however, in that same piece, Carnegie claimed that millionaires like himself were duty-bound to increase their wealth in order to administer it for the good of others.

In an 1886 *Forum* essay, "An Employer's View of the Labor Question," Carnegie spoke highly of profit-sharing, writing, "Now the poorest laborer ... who can handle a pick or a shovel, stands upon equal terms with the purchaser of his labor."<sup>111</sup> Profit-sharing created a "contented body of operatives" with no need for strikes.<sup>112</sup> To Carnegie, proper care of labor negated the need for unions, but as a magnanimous and astute manager, he supported collective bargaining because there was no danger to him from unions full of his supposedly content employees. Just five years before the events of Homestead, he wrote, "The right of the working-men to combine and to form trades-unions is no less sacred than the right of the manufacturer to enter into association ... with his fellows," and that "trades-unions, upon the whole are beneficial both to labor and to capital."<sup>113</sup> It's easy to see how Carnegie had secured his reputation of a friend of labor. In his public writings, he was a man of the people who cared about his laborers' happiness

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<sup>110</sup> Carnegie, *Essays*, 43.

<sup>111</sup> Carnegie, 72.

<sup>112</sup> Carnegie, *Essays*, 74.

<sup>113</sup> Carnegie, 76.

and who had forged strong relationships with them; labor disputes weren't an issue.

Working as a laborer in a Carnegie steel mill was exhausting, sweaty work in dangerous conditions for wages as low as \$1.35 per day as determined via a sliding scale based on net prices for steel products.<sup>114</sup> The smoke and soot of their working hours followed them home in a city with skies so blackened by smoke, streetlamps glowed to light the way at high noon. As Pittsburgh shifted from the skilled laborers of iron to the steel industry, where innovations like the Bessemer process gradually created a less-skilled workforce largely of eastern European immigrants willing to work for lower wages, the job and wage security of steel workers became more fragile. In her work examining mill town in Pittsburgh, S.J. Kleinberg writes, “The extreme integration of the larger works, such as Andrew Carnegie’s, contributed to the callous attitude prevalent in the steel industry that workers were merely another factor in the cost of production, to be bought as cheaply as possible.”<sup>115</sup>

In an 1886 *Forum* essay, Carnegie, the friend of labor who once toiled twelve hour shifts as a bobbin boy, claimed eight hour shifts were best for the well-being of workers, writing, “The time approaches, I hope, when it will be impossible, in this country, to work men twelve hours a day continuously.”<sup>116</sup> What he failed to disclose was that just the year prior, in an effort to reduce costs, ET Works closed in December of 1884 and only allowed the Amalgamated to return to work in February if they agreed to an increase in the workday from eight to twelve hours in order to eliminate a shift and bring down costs.<sup>117</sup> The men had been without pay for months; any longer without work would threaten their homes, many of which were mortgaged by Carnegie

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<sup>114</sup> Nasaw, *Andrew*, 522.

<sup>115</sup> S. J. Kleinberg, *The Shadow Of The Mills: Working-Class Families in Pittsburgh, 1870–1907* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 7, doi:10.2307/j.ctt9qh60w.

<sup>116</sup> Carnegie, *Essays*, 91.

<sup>117</sup> Nasaw, *Andrew*, 259.

Steel. They returned to work at lower wages for longer hours, including a 24-hour shift every other week. The mill was their life now, and to Carnegie, they were the means by which he earned his wealth and status. These men toiling for him “opened the doors of the great houses, invested him with immense authority, and permitted him to entertain innocent fancies of being a monarch.”<sup>118</sup> A far cry from the poor Scottish boy whose family motto was “death to privilege.”

In 1886, the steel industry experienced an uptick in prices and the sliding scale by which wages were determined meant a ten percent increase for the mill men, but those working the blast furnaces went on strike to protest the twelve-hour workday. Captain Jones’ response was to replace the workmen with scabs. That same year, in that same *Forum* essay, Carnegie, the friend of labor, used strong language to speak out against that very same practice. He wrote, “To expect that one dependent upon his daily wage for the necessaries of life will stand by peaceably and see a new man employed in his stead, is to expect much,” and that “the employer of labor will find it much more to his interest, wherever possible, to allow his works to remain idle and await the result of a dispute, than to employ the class of men that can be inducted to take the place of other men who have stopped work.”<sup>119</sup> The hypocrisy and cognitive dissonance is nearly breathtaking and cannot be chalked up to the passage of time or the gradual shifting of perspective. Because “he consulted with and approved every step Jones took,” Carnegie’s actions were in concurrent and complete opposition to his words.<sup>120</sup> *For thee, not for me.*

While the public was not yet aware of the hypocrisy of Carnegie’s words, the Homestead Works Strike of 1892 at the mill he acquired in 1883, peeled away his carefully crafted “friend of labor” facade to reveal once and for all what lie beneath – a wealth-loving capitalistic “robber

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<sup>118</sup> Bushman, “The Romance,” 35.

<sup>119</sup> Carnegie, *Essays*, 92.

<sup>120</sup> Nasaw, *Andrew*, 262.

baron” who would tamp down labor uprisings using the very tactics he so harshly criticized in his *Forum* essays. The result, though, was loss of lives.

Carnegie, ever the cost-conscious manager, saw labor less as a group of men toiling in the Spencerian evolutionary progress to earn money for his use to better the race (as he publicly claimed), and more as a cost item to be managed and reduced to the lowest possible number. He already had his eyes on the wages of the Homestead union in 1891 and he put out instructions to seek a wage reduction in the forthcoming contract. By spring of 1892, while in Europe, he was in regular communication with Frick about Homestead, encouraging him to break the union, cut labor costs, and increase productivity.<sup>121</sup>

Carnegie, who claimed, “Labor has only to bring its just grievances to the attention of owners to secure fair and liberal treatment,” allowed Frick to shut the workers out of the mill when they rejected the final offer on June 24.<sup>122</sup> Weeks later, Carnegie, who criticized the use of scabs in his *Forum* essay, made no effort to intervene when Frick informed him of the plans for Pinkerton guards to escort scabs into the mill in view of marching strikers.<sup>123</sup> By the end of the day on July 6, 1892, when a gun battle erupted between Pinkertons and Carnegie’s employees, seven of the mill workers were dead as were three Pinkerton guards. Andrew Carnegie was in Scotland dedicating a donated library. He who wrote, “I consider that all the agencies immediately available to prevent wasteful and embittering contests between capital and labor, arbitration is the most powerful and most beneficial,”<sup>124</sup> also “explicitly endorsed the goal of eradicating the union and tacitly endorsed the deployment of Pinkertons.”<sup>125</sup> He who insisted that

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<sup>121</sup> Nasaw, 411.

<sup>122</sup> Carnegie, *Essays*, 90.

<sup>123</sup> Nasaw, *Andrew*, 419.

<sup>124</sup> Carnegie, *Essays*, 76.

<sup>125</sup> Rees, “Homestead,” 510.

good labor management meant “no interruption ever to occur to the operations of the establishment,”<sup>126</sup> wrote in a cable to Frick upon learning the news of Homestead, “All anxiety gone since you stand firm ... let grass grow over the works. Must not fail now.”<sup>127</sup> And Carnegie, who claimed to adhere to the Spencerist philosophy that “any interference in the natural human competition for survival – particularly by government – was utterly unproductive,” expressed his desire that the State step in to control the union workers and secure the mill.<sup>128</sup>

By the time the strike ended in November, after months of regular communications in which Carnegie encouraged Frick to stand his ground and “keep the public with you,” scabs had taken many of the jobs of the Amalgamated and the lean winter months were on the horizon.<sup>129</sup> Homestead, a mill-shadowed town full of families reliant on Carnegie wages, was about to experience a new level of destitution while their mill-owner lived a life of luxury half the world away, fully aware of their circumstances.

It wasn't Carnegie who came to the aid of the starving workmen and families of Homestead in the strike aftermath; it was *The Pittsburgh Press* and the people of Pittsburgh. *The Press* opened a relief fund for the Homestead strikers with subheads of “Women and Children Who Want for Bread” and “Extreme Destitution in the Unfortunate Borough.” *The Press* reporter who broke the story wrote of seeing “empty cupboards, half-clothed and hungry children ... men upon the streets hopelessly wandering about, their spirits broken.”<sup>130</sup> On December 15, 1892, *The Press* printed observations from one writer's visit to the struggling mill town: “Look with

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<sup>126</sup> Carnegie, *Essays*, 80.

<sup>127</sup> Nasaw, *Andrew*, 427.

<sup>128</sup> Garfinkle, *The American*, 58.

<sup>129</sup> Nasaw, *Andrew*, 432.

<sup>130</sup> “In Humanities Name: The Press Appeals for Aid for Suffering Homestead,” *The Pittsburgh Press*, December 9, 1892, Pittsburgh Press Archives.



me into the little hovels in Homestead, where hunger and sickness have stealthily entered. Look with me at the women and children, crouched over a handful of fire. They need help first, because women and children starve more quickly than men. By and by we may think of the men, they who have tasted nothing all day that there (sic) little ones might not cry.”<sup>131</sup> Stories of shoeless, starving, shivering children and families trying to survive the winter ran next to *Press* pleas for donations to the fund. While *The Press* chose to largely keep Carnegie’s name out of their appeals, it did run an anonymous front-page letter to the editor, which stated, “Now is the time for Carnegie to show his true colors, now to test the manhood of the capitalists. Let them come forward and give, and give freely, to the suffering men of Homestead.”<sup>132</sup>

Exacerbating the situation, Frick closed Homestead Works for equipment repairs. Not only were the Amalgamated who lost their jobs suffering, but Carnegie’s non-union workers were too. Carnegie’s thoughts on alleviating hardship for his workers (not the Amalgamated and their families) was only expressed as a means to improve his hurting public image. He suggested giving the workers “some part future earnings to tide them over” to “prevent suffering and ... show ‘heart’” to the public whose anger was growing at Homestead conditions.<sup>133</sup> Carnegie, ever the public relations man due to his lifelong desire for respect and status, encouraged his partners to shift “the mass of Public Sentiment” by pushing the narrative that Carnegie benefited his employees in ways other than wages – including libraries.<sup>134</sup> He asked the partners to come up with new ways to assist the employees (not wages), not because he was concerned for their well-

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<sup>131</sup> “Homestead. Relief Coming Promptly for the Suffering,” *The Pittsburgh Press*, Dec. 15, 1892, Pittsburgh Press Archives.

<sup>132</sup> “This is Magnificent. Pittsburgh Extends Generous Aid to Homestead,” *The Pittsburgh Press*, Dec. 10, 1892, Pittsburgh Press Archives.

<sup>133</sup> Nasaw, *Andrew*, 458.

<sup>134</sup> Nasaw, 458.

being, but to show the public that “Non-unionism [is] better for the men than Unionism.”<sup>135</sup>

Carnegie’s concern remained with his public perception and crushing the union, not relieving the suffering of his men out of, as he wrote in seemingly facetious quotation marks, “heart.”

Carnegie’s secretary and author of a critical insider’s look at the history of Carnegie Steel, James Howard Bridge, argued that the Homestead Strike and Carnegie’s reaction to it increased the profits of the company because the aftermath of the strike crushed the union and returned the men to twelve-hour shift work, eliminated breaks, and canceled nearly all grievance rights. He wrote, “It is believed by the Carnegie officials, and with some show of reason, that this magnificent record [of profit] was to a great extent made possible by the company's victory at Homestead.”<sup>136</sup> Indeed, from Homestead on, the profits of Carnegie Steel, no longer beholden to the Amalgamated at any plants, were nearly exponential, increasing ten-fold from 1892 to 1900, its last year of independent operation. Carnegie, already an exceedingly wealthy man, was growing richer every year. In 1894, author Hamlin Garland visited Homestead Works and described the conditions in stark detail. He wrote lyrically,

The streets of the town were horrible; the buildings were poor; the sidewalks were sunken, swaying, and full of holes ... Everywhere the yellow mud of the street lay kneaded into a sticky mass, through which groups of pale, lean men slouched in faded garments, grimy with the soot and grease of the mills. The town was as squalid and unlovely as could well be imagined, and the people were mainly of the discouraged and sullen type to be found ... where labor passes into the brutalizing stage of severity.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Nasaw, 458.

<sup>136</sup> James Howard Bridge, *The Inside History of the Carnegie Steel Company: A Romance of Millions* (New York: Aldine Book Co., 1903), 295.

<sup>137</sup> Hamlin Garland, “Homestead and its Perilous Trades: Impressions of a Visit,” *McClure's Magazine*, June 1894, [https://ehistory.osu.edu/exhibitions/Steel/June1894-Garland\\_Homestead](https://ehistory.osu.edu/exhibitions/Steel/June1894-Garland_Homestead).

At the time, Carnegie lived in a castle in Cluny, Scotland and purchased Skibo Castle on 7,000 acres just four years later. Garland's guide to the mill told him the "men work twelve hours, and sleep and eat out ten more ... You can't see your friends, or do anything but work."<sup>138</sup> That same year, Carnegie, who traveled in luxury with an entourage of friends and servants, went abroad to Europe, Egypt, and England, and Carnegie Steel profited \$4 million (\$130 million today) but gave employees no raise or reduced shift hours.<sup>139</sup> Garland's piece did additional damage to Carnegie's public reputation, which had already been harmed by the events of the Homestead Strike. Carnegie had, to some, taken a flame to his claim of "friend of labor" and firmly cemented his place among the greedy robber barons of the day. Keenly aware of the magnitude of damage to the reputation he had been building his entire life, he had one method available to him to repair it and ensure his legacy – his philanthropy.

### **Carnegie and Philanthropy**

One must wonder how Carnegie, who just three years before Homestead had publicly and regularly encouraged radical generosity from his wealthy peers, could let his employees suffer when he had the means to alleviate it. But when his actions are taken into account with his adoption of social Darwinism, the natural law of progress, and Spencer's classification of "the unfit," the picture becomes less confusing. Carnegie's ideological hero Spencer saw indiscriminate giving as an attempt to save the unfit and therefore a futile attempt to alter the natural progress of the race. To Spencer, those wasting away in poverty were likely "incapable ... imprudent ... idle and weak," and their early deaths benefited the race.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Garland, "Homestead."

<sup>139</sup> Nasaw, *Andrew*, 469.

<sup>140</sup> Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics* (London: John Chapman, 1851), 323.

Some historians, like Christopher Versen, claim that Carnegie misinterpreted Spencer's ideas on giving to the poor, and argue that Spencer merely meant that government shouldn't step in to give aid. However, in *Social Statics*, Spencer plainly criticized "spurious philanthropists, who, to prevent present misery, would entail greater misery upon future generations," by attempting to alleviate the immediate suffering of the poor via direct giving.<sup>141</sup> Carnegie, as White points out, "adhered firmly to this article of the Spencerism creed," and as such, "between 1887 and 1907, he dispensed an estimated \$125 million in philanthropic enterprises, but none of this went for the direct relief of the poor."<sup>142</sup> Almsgiving was thoughtless to Carnegie who believed in large institutional giving that allowed man to better himself. It must be noted that in rejecting alms, but embracing "bootstrap" giving, Carnegie was modifying Spencerism for his reconciliation and justification needs. True Spencerism meant the very innate biological nature of a man determined his fitness, and attempts to artificially improve his standing wasn't worth the effort because of the unstoppable law of social evolution. To Spencer, the unfit were and always would be unfit; to Carnegie, the unfit could become fit with his libraries, music and art halls, and schools – i.e., his intentional public-facing, respect-earning good works.

For Carnegie, his reputation was everything and he had worked hard to earn his as "a man of letters," prolific author, magnanimous philanthropist, and self-taught intellectual who intermingled with the highest social circles of scholars, artists, authors, and philosophers. How would he remain a worthy noble with such damage to his esteem? Carnegie's actions and words in the immediate aftermath of Homestead reflected a man who was attempting to salvage a crumbling reputation destroyed by think-pieces, newspaper op-eds, political cartoons, and other writings. When reached the morning after the deaths at Homestead, Carnegie, who had been in

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<sup>141</sup> Spencer, 323.

<sup>142</sup> White, "Andrew," 65.

regular contact with Frick and who had received a telegram outlining the exact timing and usage of the Pinkerton guards, said to a *Pulitzer* papers reporter, “I have nothing whatever to say. I have given up all active control of the business, and I do not care to interfere in any way with the present management’s conduct of this affair ... the men have chosen their course and I am powerless.”<sup>143</sup> His telegrams with Frick prove otherwise.

In July of 1893, when again pressed about the events of Homestead, Carnegie outright lied to the Associated Press, saying, “I have not attended to business for the past three years.”<sup>144</sup> These lies in the immediate aftermath of Homestead should not be seen as a manifestation of internal guilt, for he privately expressed none at the time and was focused only on managing the growing negative public opinion. Instead, his lies should be viewed in light of his desire for nobility and status, for it was not to his wealth, but to these precious possessions, that he saw a threat. Without his reputation, he was not a worthy noble with status – he was merely a once-poor boy from a progressive pro-labor family who had severed his Scottish roots to become a ruthless robber baron. The unworthy noble.

Still fully dedicated to increasing his wealth, in 1900, Carnegie bought out Frick, with whom his relationship had deteriorated, created The Carnegie Company, and increased annual profits to a staggering \$40 million using non-union labor.<sup>145</sup> In 1901, having ascended the pinnacle of business toward which he had long climbed, Carnegie, aged sixty-six, made an offer to rival J. Pierpont Morgan to whom he sold The Carnegie Company for \$480 million. His worth increased nearly overnight by \$226 million (nearly \$120 billion today), and he became the richest man in America – perhaps in American history.<sup>146</sup> It was time to fulfill his own Gospel.

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<sup>143</sup> Nasaw, *Andrew*, 428.

<sup>144</sup> Andrew Carnegie quoted in: Bridge, *The Inside*, 233.

<sup>145</sup> Bridge, *The Inside*, 295.

<sup>146</sup> Nasaw, *Andrew*, 587.

That is not to say Carnegie had not been generous until 1901. Quite the contrary. His first major donation was as far back as 1874 – a health club in Dunfermline. In 1884, he donated \$50,000 to New York’s Bellevue Hospital for teaching laboratories, while he built libraries for Braddock and the men of his Keystone Bridge Works in 1885. Some of his largest and most well-known gifts were to the City of Pittsburgh, “the great community to which I owe so much,” such as his music hall, library, and museums – all donated around the time of his 1889 “Wealth” essay.<sup>147</sup> Other music halls were built via his donations in Allegheny City, Braddock and New York, even while his cash-on-hand paled in comparison to his non-liquid investments. At least in his giving Carnegie practiced what he preached, and doubly dedicated himself to it in retirement.

Carnegie’s first major retirement gift was to create a Carnegie Relief Fund of \$4 million to assist injured employees and the dependents of those who died on the job (though likely he did not consider the Homestead dead in this group), as well as small pensions to elderly employees. Was this finally Carnegie’s pivot away from Spencerism and toward almsgiving? Was Carnegie seeing the callousness and shallowness of his mantra “He who is dependent ... can hardly be counted among the worthy citizens of the republic?”<sup>148</sup> No. As Nasaw notes, Carnegie gave instructions that the fund was to be used only for employees in “exceptional circumstances ... and who would make a good use of it,” and that such wording “made it clear that these pensions were not to be given indiscriminately, but only to those workers specifically recommended by the superintendents as ‘worthy.’”<sup>149</sup> Again, these actions should not be considered a reflection of guilt, for true guilt would have catalyzed restitution of some sort to the Homestead union workers and their families who suffered and never recovered from the strike aftermath. Carnegie

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<sup>147</sup> Nasaw, 359.

<sup>148</sup> Carnegie, *Empire*, 97.

<sup>149</sup> Nasaw, *Andrew*, 589.

wasn't seeking a relief from guilt; he was looking to reward those who he deemed worthy in an effort to do his good works and better his public reputation while still adhering to his version of Spencerism and the "worthy poor."

In fact, nearly all of Carnegie's giving adhered to his philosophy long ago shaped by his attitudes toward the poor, but perhaps not completely to Spencer's beliefs about the unfit.

Carnegie saw no value in assisting those who displayed no potential for upward mobility. He was content to let the suffering suffer while he built institutions dedicated to bettering the future of the race. Carnegie donated over 2,000 libraries throughout the world for he believed self-education could transform the unfit into the worthy – counter to true Spencerism – because he himself had done so via a library as a child seeking freedom from the shame of his father's poverty-creating failure. But what of the rest of his giving? Did he end his life having fulfilled his own Gospel? And if so, what is his legacy, and does it still ripple today?

### **Carnegie's Legacy**

Carnegie's upbringing in Scotland left him desirous of status equal to nobility and since he was not born into it, he had to purchase it, first by accumulating – earning the respect of his peers, and then by giving – earning the respect of the rest of the world. Carnegie carefully crafted his public persona of a poor bobbin boy from Scotland who became a wealthy philanthropist on par with Scottish nobility – his writings were celebrated and prolific, he counted presidents, prime ministers, authors and artists among his friends, and established himself as an intellectual. But Homestead had done remarkable damage to Carnegie's reputation and there is evidence that his regret regarding Homestead was not guilt over his actions, but shame that his adult philosophies contradicted so heavily with his childhood mores.

In 1908, in "The Future of Labor," Carnegie continued to paint himself as a friend of

labor, encouraging labor and management to “learn each other’s virtues, for that both have virtues none knows better than [me], who has seen both sides of the shield as employee and employer.”<sup>150</sup> His public claims aside, privately, Carnegie expressed more regret that his public reputation had taken a hit than he did guilt for his actions. Jonathan Rees relays the story of Carnegie, in 1914, asking a business friend to write an article that would help set his reputation “right with the public.” His friend declined.<sup>151</sup> Rees, like some historians, attributes Carnegie’s post-Homestead actions and expressed regret to guilt, but it is this author’s contention that it was the closely related shame. Guilt would have resulted in a greater attempt to provide reparations to those whom his actions directly hurt; not focus instead on changing his public image of a greedy robber baron to one of a radically generous benefactor. These actions speak more to general shame about *who* he had become, not *the process* by which he became it. A fine, but clear line of distinction that is supported by historians like Humphreys who writes, “While his writings imply he felt no guilt because he had accumulated great wealth, the same cannot be said about his sense of responsibility for personal moral failings.”<sup>152</sup>

That is not to say Carnegie didn’t express regret, or change his attitudes, at least publicly, during the retirement years he dedicated to philanthropy. In 1912 he wrote, “No grief of my life approaches that of Homestead,” but again, this must be weighed against his effort two years later to convince his friend to write an article to repair his public image. Where was the effort to right the wrongs directly for those who suffered? Where was that clear manifestation of true guilt? Carnegie never sought forgiveness, a hallmark of acknowledged guilt, but rather public forgetfulness of his faults.

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<sup>150</sup> Andrew Carnegie, “The Future of Labor,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 33, no. 2 (1909): 18, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1011559>.

<sup>151</sup> Rees, “Homestead,” 509.

<sup>152</sup> Humphreys, “The Narrative,” 206.



It should not be minimized or dismissed that Andrew Carnegie, during his lifetime, gave away over \$350 million – an historic amount. The families of the Mellons and Heinzes and other Pittsburgh scions held court in Pittsburgh’s high-society circles for generations thanks to legacy wealth; not so with the Carnegies, for Andrew had kept his promise and died having disposed of nearly his entire fortune for the benefit of others in the manner he outlined in his Gospel.<sup>153</sup> Believing education the most worthy institution for philanthropists to do the most societal good, he established the Carnegie Institution in Washington and Carnegie Tech in Pittsburgh (now Carnegie Mellon University). Libraries, of course, received a large portion of his wealth, in tribute to his attribution of his own success to his access to free books as a youth. He established hospitals/medical schools and laboratories, donated public parks including Skibo, built music halls, swimming baths, and funded a science yacht and a handful of observatories. He donated over 7,000 organs, and established endowments and funds that remain for the advancement of the arts and sciences. All told, Carnegie gave away nearly all his wealth as promised; about one percent of it went directly to the men who built his fortune in his mills.

But Carnegie’s legacy is still rich. His use of vertical integration is held up as an example of controlling the means of production in order to maximize profits. His early adoption of technology has lessons that reverberate for many modern industries, not just manufacturing. His radical philanthropy pushed the use of wealth for the collective benefit of society to a more prominent place among lasting American ideals. The schools he established, particularly Carnegie Mellon University, have arguably contributed to society quantitative and qualitative benefits and advancements many times beyond Carnegie’s initial monetary investment. His

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<sup>153</sup> Gregory R. Witkowski, “Captains of Philanthropy? The Legacy of Pittsburgh’s Most Famous Donors,” in *A Gift of Belief: Philanthropy and the Forging of Pittsburgh*, edited by Kathleen W. Buechel (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2021), 102.

libraries continue to lend books and his music halls continue to bring music and art to the people, while his parks provide the fresh air and recreation he wished to gift as an escape to those who needed it. His donations were in line with the ladder-providing philosophies he espoused for decades – that “there is no use whatever ... trying to help people who do not help themselves. You cannot push anyone up a ladder unless he be willing to climb a little himself.”<sup>154</sup>

That is not to say he remained without criticism over where he chose to give his money. In an 1899 booklet outlining criticism of Carnegie, the authors wrote that Carnegie employees “sneer at the philanthropy that rears magnificent edifices with money that should rather be paid in good living wages.”<sup>155</sup> The authors questioned why Carnegie built libraries instead of homes for the needy, adding, “He has erected many buildings, but there is not one charitable institution among them.”<sup>156</sup> In 1901, just months before Carnegie sold to Pierpont, the president of the Amalgamated said in a speech to striking union members, “[Carnegie] erects libraries and donates organs to churches. I want to say ... it would be a difficult matter for me, if I were a preacher, to get any inspiration from the strains of an Andrew Carnegie organ. It would sound to me like ‘Carnegie, Homestead. Homestead, Carnegie.’”<sup>157</sup> Perhaps had he not been so prolific a writer, so public a champion of ethical tenets, his actions would not be critically analyzed today, but Carnegie left behind a wealth of evidence that his private actions didn’t always reflect his virtuous words.

Carnegie’s legacy of giving – conflicts, criticisms, and all – have important implications in our modern times, as now more than ever the wealthy increase their coffers many times over

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<sup>154</sup> Carnegie and Butterfield, *Andrew Carnegie's*, 28-29.

<sup>155</sup> M. F. Campbell and J.C. Campbell, *Anti-Carnegie Scraps and Comments* (Pittsburgh: J.C. Campbell, 1899), 56-59, <https://archive.org/details/anticarnegiescra00camp/page/n3/mode/2up?q=philanthropy>.

<sup>156</sup> Campbell, *Anti-Carnegie*, 68.

<sup>157</sup> “An Address to Steel Strikers,” *The Pittsburgh Post*, August 9, 1901, The Pittsburgh Press Archives.

year after year while minimum wage remains stagnant, tuition rates skyrocket, and inflation pushes ever higher. Jeff Bezos, like Carnegie did his first investment, used a loan from a parent to start Amazon; he is now the richest man in America with a worth well over \$150 billion. His former spouse MacKenzie Scott is worth approximately \$50 billion and has donated nearly 20% of her wealth in an effort to, like Carnegie, give every cent of her money away while living. Bezos has donated 1% of his wealth and has made no such commitment. It is within the space between Bezos and Scott that we find Carnegie's legacy – one foot firmly planted in exponential wealth acquisition and a laser-focus on profit while cutting costs at the expense of labor's well-being, and the other foot firmly rooted in the belief that the money must be given back to the people. Without ever mentioning his name, in her letter promising to give her wealth away, MacKenzie Scott continued the legacy of Carnegie's Gospel of Wealth by committing to "thoughtful philanthropy" while encouraging her fellow billionaires to join in her pledge to "keep at it until the safe is empty."<sup>158</sup> For all his faults, Andrew Carnegie fulfilled his promise to himself and society, died without riches, and took with him the comfort that whether his methods were noble, his good works surely were, and in doing so, he finally earned his nobility.

### **Conclusion**

By looking deeper into Carnegie's childhood influences, it becomes clearer how the richest American to ever live could have ever called the amassing of wealth "the worst species of idolatry." Carnegie's existence had a life-long undercurrent of conflict beneath the surface of his cheerful, optimistic charm. His desire for the status of nobility conflicted with his humble beginnings of disdain for those in unearned positions of power. His experience with personal poverty conflicted with his later attempts to define the "worthy" poor. His progressive pro-labor

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<sup>158</sup> MacKenzie Scott, "MacKenzie Scott and Dan Jewett," The Giving Pledge, May 25, 2019, accessed February 17, 2022, <https://givingpledge.org/pledger?pledgerId=393>.

activist upbringing conflicted with his life as a money-loving *laissez-faire* capitalist. His unshakable understanding that extreme wealth was not a worthy pursuit conflicted with his lifelong pursuit of wealth. His desire to be known as a friend of labor conflicted with his desire to create steel at the lowest possible cost with the highest possible output. His desire for respect conflicted with the brutal methods he utilized to earn the wealth that in turn earned him that respect. In all these conflicts, Carnegie found the salve of reconciliation via a mix of co-opted selective social Darwinism and philanthropy. Carnegie did not give his money away out of guilt for his actions, but out of shame for who he truly knew himself to be, because it conflicted with who his childhood principles told him he *ought* to be. In social Darwinism he found the means to outwardly justify who he was and his place in the larger scheme of nature and order. He was the steward of the dollar on behalf of those who nature deemed unworthy of earning it. He was the faucet that would eventually trickle down life-giving water to those who long ago died from thirst. To Carnegie, the poor weren't as important as the libraries full of books. The laborers weren't as important as the next roll of steel. The present wasn't as important as the future. The struggle of man wasn't as important as the progress of the race. The ends, and social Darwinism, justified the means, for "all is well, since all grows better."

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