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Five Best

Vartan Gregorian praises these biographies of American philanthropists.

1. Andrew Carnegie

By David Nasaw
Penguin, 2006

Every time I think I know all there is to know about Andrew Carnegie, some other fascinating aspect of this complex man is revealed. Until I read David Nasaw's deeply detailed biography of the rags-to-riches steel magnate who essentially invented modern-day philanthropy, I did not know, for example, that he supported the progressive income tax and favored substantial levies on inherited fortunes. Having famously declared "He who dies rich, dies disgraced," Carnegie proceeded to create more than 20 organizations in the U.S. and abroad dedicated to advancing knowledge and education, rewarding heroes, creating pensions for teachers, and promoting international peace and other noble goals. This Scottish immigrant who became a champion of American democracy gave away over 90% of his fortune (\$350 million, or tens of billions in today's dollars) and built more than 2,500 libraries. When he died in 1919, he did not die disgraced.

2. Henry Clay Frick

By Martha Frick Symington Sanger
Abbeville, 1998

The life of Henry Clay Frick -- industrialist, coke magnate and, later, Andrew Carnegie's partner in the steel business -- is fascinatingly chronicled in this volume by his great-granddaughter Martha Frick Symington Sanger. In taking a decidedly psychological approach to her subject, Ms. Sanger may have explained a mystery that has perplexed Frick's past biographers: What motivated one of the most notorious of the turn-of-the-century robber barons to begin collecting paintings and other artwork so assiduously? According to Ms. Sanger, Frick grieved his entire life over the death of a daughter in childhood, and he found solace in art. Frick, who died in 1919, bequeathed his New York mansion, a \$15 million endowment and the best of an extraordinary collection to establish a public gallery with the goal of "encouraging and developing the study of the fine arts." Today the institution is known as the Frick Collection. He left only one-sixth of his fortune to his family, with the rest given to charitable institutions.

3. Mellon

By David Cannadine
Knopf, 2006

British historian David Cannadine admits that he embarked on the research for a biography of Andrew Mellon (1855-1937) with some ill feeling about his subject: He believed Mellon to be "an unsympathetic person with unappealing politics." But after being given unfettered access to the financier's papers by the Mellon family and foundation, Mr. Cannadine seems to have developed a rapt -- if not always admiring -- interest in what he terms the "big life" that Mellon led. A passionate love of art led Mellon to amass a magnificent collection, including 21 of the Hermitage's greatest paintings. (Apparently, Stalin needed the money to advance the Soviet economy.) In 1937, Mellon deeded the collection to the American people in what Mr. Cannadine calls a philanthropic gift without "precedent or parallel" in the country's history. Thus was born the National Gallery of Art. At the time, the gift was valued at \$60 million -- priceless today in terms of both worth and significance.

4. Morgan

By Jean Strouse

Random House, 1999

Not only a banker but a force in the railroad and steamship industries, J.P. Morgan (1837-1913) purchased Andrew Carnegie's vast steel empire in 1901. He, too, embarked on an ambitious philanthropic campaign, one that seemed, at least in part, to reflect the times: As the 19th century waned, there was a growing trend among wealthy Americans to move from amassing private collections to endowing public institutions. Biographer Jean Strouse says that the cultured and generous man her study revealed was a surprise: "I went into the research, essentially, looking for the 'robber baron' of popular Morgan mythology, and eventually found someone very different." Like Mellon and Frick, Morgan was a great collector of art. He became one of the most important benefactors of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Museum of Natural History, and he created the magnificent Morgan Library. Along the way, it has been pointed out, Morgan also took the time to collect two wives, three yachts, four children, six houses and assorted mistresses.

5. Titan

By Ron Chernow

Random House, 1998

Ron Chernow says that, early in his research of the life of the taciturn John D. Rockefeller (1839-1937), he worried that he "was confronting a sphinx." But thanks in part to unprecedented access to millions of documents at the Rockefeller Archive in Sleepy Hollow, N.Y., Mr. Chernow makes the sphinx speak in this insightful work. Apparently Rockefeller was convinced that after acquiring as much wealth as possible through Standard Oil, he was morally compelled to use his fortune to improve the lot of humanity. Along with Andrew Carnegie, he helped to define modern philanthropy as a strategic system aimed at finding solutions to long-term problems. All told, Rockefeller gave away somewhere around \$550 million, the equivalent of many billions today. His many benefactions included creating the Rockefeller Foundation in 1913 (which now has assets of \$3.5 billion); building Rockefeller University in New York; funding an Atlanta

college for black women that eventually became Spelman College; and adding incalculable support to the progress of medical science.

Dr. Gregorian, the president of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, is the author of the autobiography "The Road to Home" (Simon & Schuster, 2003) and "Islam: A Mosaic, Not a Monolith" (Brookings Institution Press, 2004).