

# The gospel of wealth

By Pia de Jong

Carnegie Hall, the Carnegie Corporation, the Carnegie Hero Fund, the Peace Palace in The Hague, Carnegie Mellon University, Carnegie libraries, and I can go on and on. Andrew Carnegie left his mark everywhere. Even in Princeton, where he left Lake Carnegie for the crew team. "We needed bread," Woodrow Wilson told Carnegie at the time, "and you gave us cake."

You cannot be more American than the Scotsman Andrew Carnegie. In 1848 his parents fled poverty in Scotland only to soon find just as much misery in America. Thirteen-year-old Andrew began as a helper in a steel mill. Fifty years later, his company was Carnegie Steel, the wee Andrew was the world's richest man. The personification of the American dream. And the inspiration for the irrepressibly greedy comic strip character, Scrooge McDuck.

But wealth should not be his only claim to fame. That should belong to his revolutionary ideas about philanthropy. The very rich Americans then left their money mainly to their children and grandchildren. Carnegie took the opposite view: personal wealth should benefit the common people and the public good. He thought it was immoral to keep money for yourself. His motto was: A man who dies rich, dies in dishonor.

In 1889 he put his ideas on paper in a book he called *The Gospel of Wealth*. Today the lessons of the steel magnate are preached by the high priests of generosity. I see this when I enter the historic New York Public Library for the presentation of the Carnegie Medals for Philanthropy, the unofficial world championships of enlightened giving.

Upon entering we are greeted by men



Illustration by Eliane Gerrits

in kilts playing bagpipes. Once a Scot, always a Scot. The hall is filled with well-wishers and beneficiaries of extreme largesse. Cultural, scientific and medi-

placed around the necks of eight generous men. During their speeches, the apostles quote liberally from the gospel: No one is truly rich unless that wealth

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Deaton would rather see the super rich helping to develop good government instead of riding their personal hobby horses.

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cal America would be much less without these super-rich benefactors, who last year gave away a combined \$358 billion.

One after another, the medals are

enriches others. Life is simple, giving is a privilege. The real value of your life is determined by how much you've helped others.

As Carnegie said, getting rich is easy, spending it is difficult. The money spigot must constantly be open; you do not want to die without honor. The Carnegie laureates praise the many goals that are dear to their hearts: the eradication of polio, cancer research, the arts, programs for poor children. I get the impression that these men are also in competition with each other. Who will give the most away and who will do it first? For, as one of the winners said, leaving money after you die does not count, because you would never have given the money away if you were still alive.

Later that afternoon, I speak with another Scot, the Princeton economics professor and newly crowned Nobel laureate, Angus Deaton. He is particularly critical of the growing inequality in the world and the circus of benefactors. He would rather see the super rich helping to develop good government instead of riding their personal hobby horses.

Deaton told me about how his life was turned upside down by the telephone call from Stockholm. They celebrated his award in his native village in Scotland. I ask what are his memories of his youth there.

Oh, he tells me, as a boy he rode on the bus every day for an hour to school in another town. If he missed his bus, he would have to wait a long time for the next one.

Fortunately, the bus station was next to a library he could use. One of the 2,500 Carnegie Libraries.

Pia de Jong is a Dutch writer who lives in Princeton. Her bestselling memoir, *Charlotte*, was published in January in Amsterdam. She can be contacted at [piadejong.com](mailto:piadejong.com).

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