

A philanthropist's palace

LUCINDA LAMBTON

Heroic American steel tycoon Andrew Carnegie paid for 3,000 libraries and built glorious Skibo Castle in his native Scotland

'A man who dies rich dies disgraced,' thundered my hero Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919).

In an essay – his foundational work on philanthropy, *The Gospel of Wealth* – he wrote, 'The problem of our age is the proper distribution of wealth, so that the ties of brotherhood may still bind together the rich and poor in harmonious relationship.'

Having made a vast fortune as an industrialist, particularly with steel, iron and the railways, he was responsible for the stupendous architectural, as well as philanthropic, achievements of building some 3,000 libraries worldwide. Not only that; he also gave more than 7,600 organs to churches, as well as creating and endowing myriad organisations dedicated to education, music and scientific research.

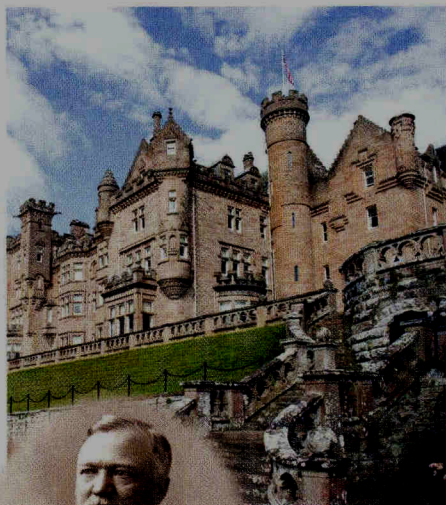
From 1899-1903, he built many-towered Skibo Castle in Sutherland, originally a 13th-century castle, overlooking the Dornoch Firth. He loved and lived in it on and off until his death.

Splendid, rather than beautiful, it is now a luxurious club which has barely changed since Carnegie's day. The bagpipes are still played at breakfast. Here the illuminati gathered: Mark Twain, Rudyard Kipling and John B Stetson – who in the 1860s invented the cowboy hat. Booker T Washington and President Woodrow Wilson were also guests.

Then there was the deaf and blind Helen Keller, who came to lunch with Mrs Carnegie, praising Skibo as an 'enchanted place'. She wrote, somewhat piously, 'How often the dwellers in that castle, when they look out from their windows, must think of the Psalm "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hill."

'People who think they see often wonder what good there is in life for us who are blind. But you and I know we are happy when we are given a task we take pride in, or when our hands are plunged into a good book. These are the greatest, the purest, and most perfect pleasures which God has provided for his creatures.'

Skibo's glorious hall rears up in the middle of the house with a staircase that



Skibo Castle, Sutherland; Andrew Carnegie

sweeps skyward towards an immense stained-glass window, designed in 1902 by Gerald Moira. Scenes of Carnegie's life shine forth in brilliant hues: a ship sails off to America; the Statue of Liberty stands over all, while the Dunfermline cottage he was born in makes a proud appearance.

A great Brindley & Foster organ flanked by marble pillars, with a multitude of golden pipes, makes a tremendous din throughout the house. Beethoven's Fifth Symphony was Carnegie's favourite.

Another splendid survivor is the swimming pool, with a glass roof and stone arches enhancing the parkscape, which has been immaculately restored. Giving Skibo an up-to-date seal of approval was Madonna's wedding to Guy Ritchie in 2000, when there was a dramatic fire in the roof – all now happily restored.

Carnegie was born a pauper. His father was a hand-loom weaver. His mother sold potted meats at a 'sweetie shop' – in that three-room weaver's cottage at Dunfermline. There were two

bedrooms: one for the Carnegies, the other for the family next door, with the living room to share between them.

In 1848, the Carnegies emigrated to America, where Andrew, their eldest son, became a 'bobbin boy' for \$1.20 a week. Later, when he was a telegrapher, his quick-wittedness, as well as his Scots accent, greatly appealed to his superintendent, James Reid. Reid's first advice was that our hero invest in the inventor of the sleeping car, the most pleasingly named Theodore Tuttle Woodruff.

By 1891, Carnegie had built the thumping great Carnegie Hall on Manhattan's Seventh Avenue. As a bumper bonus, he arranged that Tchaikovsky should be the guest conductor on the opening night. The building was in the neo-Renaissance style, as was the great Peace Palace in The Hague, his splendid endowment to the Permanent Court of Arbitration.

Great indeed were his philanthropic achievements. Having declared, when he was only 35, that 'the amassing of wealth is the worst species of idolatry', he set forth on his noble route. He determined that 'The day is not far distant when the man who died leaving behind him millions of available wealth which were free for him to administer during life will pass away unwept, unhonoured and unsung.'

By 1901, the banker J P Morgan was able to buy Carnegie's colossal steel empire for \$303,450,000. Morgan shook him warmly by the hand, saying, 'Mr Carnegie, I want to congratulate you on becoming the richest man in the world.'

Carnegie never looked back. He assiduously beavered away with charitable trusts, foundations and museums and of course his most brilliant libraries. How I have delighted in seeking them out, so wildly diverse and in such wildly diverse places. There's the vast, neoclassical pile in Washington, now the Historical Society of Washington. Then there was a palace-like 'Italian Renaissance' library in Springfield, Massachusetts.



The great staircase sweeps up beneath Gerald Moira's 1902 stained-glass window

What about the Carnegie Library in Castries, capital of the Caribbean island of St Lucia? In the main square, the library shelters clay-pipe-smoking ladies from the sun. Today, it sports smashed windowpanes and has a lack of lavatory seats. But, by its very existence, it has promoted the studies of two Nobel Prize-winners, economist Sir William Arthur Lewis and the poet and playwright Derek Walcott.

By way of contrast, in far-off Lancashire, I shall never forget the welcoming lights of Rawtenstall's domed Carnegie Library one dark evening. It was open when everything else was closed. Its librarian was working away, as proud as Punch to show off a bust with an etched citation celebrating Andrew Carnegie.

'The diminutive titan' as he was often called – he stood only five foot two inches high – came in person to the opening ceremony of this modest establishment in 1907. He can be seen in a photograph – top hat gleaming – peeping out from the crowd.

Two years earlier, with the laying of the foundation stone, a councillor had lauded the desire 'to secure for our children, and their children to the third and fourth generation, the blessing of a free lending library and reading room, which they will appreciate and be grateful to its founders for in years to come'. Some hope: in the early 2000s, the Kensal Rise Library in London – opened by Mark Twain, no less, in 1900 – was threatened with closure. After long and bitter battles, now, at long last, it is safe. HURRAH!

I'm afraid that I must deafeningly

blow my own trumpet, with a story that makes me prouder than anything else I have done in all my life.

Having followed the trail of my hero Carnegie through Scotland and America, I discovered he'd been buried in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, at Tarrytown, upstate New York. What could and should be done adequately to honour the memory of such a man?

Determined to so do, I had chipped a little piece of stone from the wall of the tiny cottage in which he had been born in Dunfermline. Later I had gathered a bunch of heather from his vast estate at Skibo in the Highlands.

Having clutched them close for many weeks – it was a precious load – I reverently buried them beside Carnegie's remains in America, beneath the elaborate Celtic cross that marks his grave. 