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The Road to *Triumphant Democracy*

WHEN IT BURST into the British-American world of politics and ideas in mid-April 1886, there could be no mistaking the importance and theme of Andrew Carnegie's *Triumphant Democracy*. Running over five hundred pages, the ornate and massive volume commanded immediate attention. More than the great majority of his fellow captains of industry, Carnegie was conscious and articulate about the role of industry and society. It mattered significantly that Carnegie was enormously wealthy. In 1881, when Carnegie Brothers and Company had been formally organized, and capitalized at \$5,000,000, Carnegie held fifty-five percent of the capital. In 1886 America, steel was king, and Carnegie was steel.¹ When Carnegie spoke, people listened.

Carnegie announced the theme of his book with loud, unqualified clarity in the book's title and subtitle: *Fifty Years' March of the Republic*. He had written a comparative analysis of the progress of the two nations to which he was immediately affiliated: the Britain from which his parents had emigrated in 1848 when he was a teenager, and the United States in which he had flourished. His theme was patent enough. In half a century, the United States had become the most productive and affluent nation in the world. The reason why was no less patent: America's basic principle was democracy. The clear contrast he found between American and British productivity he ascribed to what he considered to be the clear contrast between democracy and monarchy. Democracy rested on the political equality of its citizens; monarchy, on their inequality.

The book's theme was sounded clearly and blatantly on the book's cover, a resplendent binding in red buckram, with figures stamped in brilliant gold and quotations imprinted in heavy black letters. There was nothing unmistakable about the meaning of the four gold figures: a solid pyramid representing the "republic" standing firmly on its base; another pyramid representing the "monarchy," capsized and standing insecurely on its apex; a scepter broken in two; and a royal crown turned upside down. The quotations were tributes to the American political system from the two principal British political leaders of the day. William Ewart Gladstone, the head of the Liberal Party, hailed the American Constitution as "the most wonderful work ever struck off at a given time by the brain and purpose of man." The Marquess of Salisbury, the head of the Conservative Party, celebrated central features of that Constitution: "The Americans have a Senate—I wish we could institute it here—marvelous in its strength and efficiency. . . . Their Supreme Court gives a stability to their institutions which under the system of vague and mysterious promises here we look for in vain." The triangle cartoons were a judgment and a wish. The quotations were major testimonials to the republic for which Carnegie's book was itself a prodigious testimonial.

Carnegie's purpose in writing *Triumphant Democracy* represented his long-standing involvement in British politics. The involvement had grown strong when Gladstone became prime minister in April 1880. Bound to the Liberal Party by his own political convictions and emotionally inclined to Gladstone as a fellow Scotsman, Carnegie was gratified to be introduced to the prime minister at a small dinner party in June 1882. He was more than pleased to tell Gladstone all about America's great economic progress and why the United States was rapidly outstripping the mother country.

Impressed by the torrent of industrial statistics that gushed from Carnegie's lips, Gladstone asked: "Why does not some writer take up this subject and present the facts to the world—in a simple and direct way?"²

Carnegie had already begun work on *Triumphant Democracy*. Meeting Gladstone was a spur to making it his principal enterprise. He wished to promote the radical Liberal doctrines that coincided with the Chartism to which his family had subscribed. In the early 1880s these doctrines were finding new voices and a propitious moment in British politics. Always in touch with public affairs in the United Kingdom, and especially ambitious to find a vehicle for voicing his ideas and playing an active role in British politics, Carnegie joined with some radical members of the Liberal Party

in starting a chain of newspapers that his money helped underwrite and whose doctrines he subscribed to and dictated. The newspapers accepted as dogma that the British aristocracy should be dismantled and that America could serve as a model for how it was to be dismantled.

Triumphant Democracy, so Carnegie argued, was a ready answer for the major crises, indeed the deep constitutional issues, that were at that very moment rending the British body politic: the role of the House of Lords, the status of the aristocracy, the claims of the new enfranchised classes, indeed, the instability of the whole constitutional order. The book was, in this way, a preachment for conversion, a gospel to the heads of the British establishment, a call by the very wealthy “star-spangled Scotchman” (as Carnegie was dubbed) for them to mend their ways and find a ready salvation.

THE STEEL MAGNATE of fifty-one who sounded his paean to American democracy in 1886 was, in considerable measure, reciting the ideas he had learned at his family table in Dunfermline over a half-century earlier. The ancient residence of Scottish kings, near the Firth of Forth and directly across from Edinburgh, Dunfermline long been the center of the Scottish damask trade, in which his father was a prosperous weaver. But hand-weaving was running into problems brought on by machine production that compelled its being moved from the home loom to the factory. Hard times would very soon force his father to sell his looms and give up his trade. Meanwhile, young Andrew was learning from the teachings of his immediate family—his maternal grandfather Thomas Morrison and his uncle George Lauder, Sr. (his mother’s sister’s husband)—the principles he would cling to all of his life.³ A vociferous orator and head of the advanced wing of the radical party in his Dunfermline district, Thomas Morrison was also a friend of William Cobbett, a passionate British reformer of the post-Napoleonic years. Grandfather Morrison was “radical to the core and an admirer of the American Republic.”⁴

The 1830s and 1840s were the heady decades of Chartism, a collection of radical movements that expressed the great disaffection of those British classes who had been shut out of the advantages of the great reform bill of 1832. The Chartist program—its famous six points—was immediately political of course, but its goal was economic: to relieve the plight of the working classes. Though its principal centers were in England, Chartism also had a Scottish location and definition. The Scots had been disaffected by the 1707 Act of Union, which subsumed Scotland under

English rule. Thus, Scottish Chartism expressed not merely the working-class distress over the economic troubles of the 1830s and 1840s but, however much aristocratic Scots had long since entered the doors of British government, also a patriotic and political disaffection with the hegemony of England over Scotland. In the company of his family members, young Carnegie heard bitter words. "The denunciations of monarchical and aristocratic government, of privilege in all its forms, the grandeur of the republican system, the superiority of America, a land peopled by our own race, a home for freemen in which every citizen's privilege was every man's right—these were the exciting themes upon which I was nurtured."⁵ When at last, in 1848, his father's failing fortune compelled the family to seek a better life in the United States, young Carnegie took these nurturing ideas with him. The question was: How far would they be validated by American realities?

The answer, for the very ambitious, ever-achieving young man, was: very far. And so he kept reiterating to his very close "brother-cousin" Dod (as he called him) in Scotland, George Lauder, Jr. To sharpen their political knowledge and capacity to argue, both cousins had been encouraged by George Lauder, Sr., to debate subjects that engaged their interest. Nothing was more interesting in the years after the "flitting" (as the Scots called emigration) of Andrew Carnegie's family to the United States than whether their hopes in the new land had been realized. In Britain by the early 1850s, the great distress of the earlier decades had abated considerably, so it was fair of cousin Dod to argue the virtues of the British system and to persist in questioning those of the American. Young Carnegie's deservedly famous response, written in 1853 when he was seventeen, bears repeating.

We have perfect political Equality, every one has a voice in the Gov't. [sic]. . . . It is strange that with your immense army and policy you cannot keep the peace. Look at Ireland, for instance. . . . Here [the Irish] find no Royal Family (increasing with fearful rapidity) to squander their hard made earnings, no aristocracy to support, no established church with its enormous sinecures, no electoral districts made for a class to overrule the majority, no primogeniture and entail to curse the land and stop improvements in the soil. . . . They find the various reforms which they struggled for at home in successful operation here—indeed I can think of no reform which you have that we do not

possess. We have all your good traits, which are many, with few or none of your bad ones which I must say are neither few nor far between. But we go ahead. We now possess what the working classes of Your Country look forward to as constituting their political millennium. *We have the charter [for] which you have been fighting for years as the Panacea for all Britain's woes, the bulwark of the liberties of the people.*

The United States, added Carnegie, has had the people's charter "from the very beginning. But we are not at a standstill. We have only begun the great work of reform."⁶ Here, rough-hewn, insistently argumentative, reductive, astonishingly precocious, were all the essential elements of Carnegie's creed of American democracy.

Three factors shaped his life during the 1860s, encouraging him to translate his personal creed into a public political activity. First, the creed was tested and affirmed by the Civil War. The young man, playing a significant role in the War Department by helping to direct railroad and telegraph operations from his center in Pittsburgh, thoroughly espoused the cause of democracy and freedom that, in his mind, the Union clearly stood for. Second, he became very wealthy. Driven by ambition and a remarkable ability to invest in burgeoning industries (particularly those linked to railroads), he very early amassed a great fortune. Third, he arduously sustained his Scottish affinity, and with it his strong interest in British politics. Letters and gifts flowed regularly between Allegheny and then Homewood, in nearby Pittsburgh, where the American Carnegies had settled and their Scottish family, the Lauders and the Morrisons, back in Dunfermline. Overwork and ill health during the early months of the Civil War afforded him time for a vacation back in Scotland, where his success and wealth were celebrated and where his ambitions as to how he might use them took on a certain definition. In his letter of June 21, 1863, he wrote his cousin Dod a remarkable statement of his own plans:

Isn't it strange how little ambition most of our Scotch acquaintances have to become independent *and then enjoy the luxuries which wealth can [and should] procure?* For my part, I am determined to expand as my means do and ultimately to own a noble place in the country . . . and be distinguished for taking the deepest interest in all those about my place. The position most to be envied, outside the ring of great men, I think is that of a British

gentleman who labors diligently to educate and improve the condition of his dependents and who takes an independent part in National politics, always laboring to correct some ancient abuse—to curtail the privileges of the few and increase those of the many. . . . For my part I sometimes think I would like to return to Scotland and try the character myself.⁷

These ambitions he reformulated five years later, after the Civil War had ended, in his famous memorandum of December 1868. He was then thirty-three. His income for the year was \$50,000, an astronomical sum in then current terms. He took stock of his life. What would he do with all his money?

Beyond this never earn [he wrote to himself]—make no effort to increase fortune, but spend the surplus each year for benevolent purposes. Cast aside business forever, except for others. Settle in Oxford and get a thorough education, making the acquaintance of literary men—this will take three years' active work—pay especial attention to speaking in public. Settle then in London and purchase a controlling interest in some newspaper or live review and give the general management of it attention, taking a part in public matters, especially those connected with education and improvement of the poorer classes. Man must have an idol—the amassing of wealth is one of the worst species of idolatry. . . . Whatever I engage in I must push inordinately; therefore should I be careful to choose that life which will be the most elevating in its character.⁸

Burton J. Hendrick, the first of his principal biographers, validly called this memorandum the first edition of Carnegie's "gospel of wealth." But one should not miss the equally important point that, as his wealth accumulated, Carnegie used it to spread his gospel of democracy. Democracy, the creed in which he had been reared, was an idol to which he could wholeheartedly consecrate himself. And, in serving his idol, he spelled out the exact path he meant to follow.

In 1868, he planned to concentrate less on earning and more on learning: to go to the summit of English scholarship, Oxford, rather than to the raucous, internecine markets of American business. But realizing his plan was delayed more than a decade. In the 1870s he built his for-

tune far beyond his earlier imaginings. His wartime experience on the railroads had impressed upon him that a new American industrial world was rapidly taking shape, that its essential ingredient was steel, and that his own “inordinate pushing” (as he had put it) drove him to making steel and to becoming the steelmaster of America and the world. Yet, although a truly self-educated Scotsman (he had had one year of formal schooling), he did not lose his passion for learning. If he could not go to Oxford in England, he would find its variant form right at home: among the literati of New York City (where he had settled after the war) and among their several circles. Carnegie was invited to join one of the more notable ones, that of Mrs. Anne C. L. Botta, through whom he came to know many of the major authors and journal editors of the day. The sodality of American literati was in fact transatlantic, indeed Anglo-American; inevitably Carnegie came to learn about and often enough to meet some of the foremost contemporary English authors and editors, including, among so many others, Matthew Arnold, James Anthony Froude, Herbert Spencer, and John Morley. That he had met and soon befriended John Morley was to prove important in Carnegie’s life. Morley was a radical member of the Liberal Party and editor of the influential *Fortnightly Review* (and of the *Pall Mall Gazette*). Indeed, it had been for the *Fortnightly Review* that Andrew Carnegie wrote his first important transatlantic article, “As Others See Us” (February 1882), in which he derogated British aristocracy and glorified American democracy.⁹ So building an empire of steel and gaining a higher education were not mutually exclusive: indeed, they were remarkably mutual.¹⁰

The year 1881 was a pivotal one for Carnegie. He organized Carnegie Brothers Ltd. at a capitalization of \$5,000,000 in which he himself held a safely dominant share of \$2,721,000.¹¹ He could now turn to Britain and his always intense preoccupation with British politics. That year, from mid-June to early August, he conducted the first of several such trips, a remarkable coaching tour of some eight hundred miles from Brighton to Inverness with a company of several American friends, the “Gay Charioteers,” as he called them. The group of coachmen might vary from one part of the journey to the next, including some old friends of the rich steelmaster, but also some ultra Liberal members of a government then under the ministry of the presiding Liberal, William Ewart Gladstone. It was a remarkable tour: the tourists traveled in a luxurious coach of the most “brilliant equipage,” were well-provisioned, well-housed, well-advertised, and well-received, and they jocularly and

boisterously drove through (with prior permission, of course) the vast estates of the aristocracy. Carnegie kept a record of the trip, which he first published for private circulation (1882) and then a year later as *An American Four-in-Hand in Britain*. He interlaced his journal with strong republican sentiments, denunciations of the monarchy and the aristocracy, regrets about the flaws and failures of his mother country, and suggestions that it might well consider the great progress of the American republic. Indeed, it was, in this way, a first edition of *Triumphant Democracy*. Always with a plan of ambition in mind, Carnegie took pains to meet the men with whom he would soon be joining in a grand, obviously well-financed syndicate of radical Liberal newspapers. In effect, this was a journey of fulfillment. The poor Scottish lad who had left with his impoverished family thirty-three years before was now returning with all the self-proclaiming advertisements of his success and wealth. When he met Gladstone in 1882, he was already collecting the materials for his truly major evaluation of the kindred polities. He had promised the great Liberal leader, whom he had long admired and studied, the comparative analysis of America and Britain. And he fulfilled his promise in April 1886, with the publication of *Triumphant Democracy*.¹²

WHAT WERE THE many significances of *Triumphant Democracy*? First, Carnegie's road of success, ambition, wealth, constant interest in British politics, and increasing affiliation with men of prominence in public life and literature had projected him to a position of high recognition in British-American affairs. He had himself anticipated its great impact. Having worked on his manuscript for several years, and particularly arduously in 1885, he wrote to his fiancée, Louise Whitfield, in mid-October that his book was "all right. . . . It's going to be a stunner!"¹³ He was justified in his expectation. When the book appeared, it "made a tremendous sensation." The book went through many printings by its American publisher (Scribner's), bringing sales to 17,000 in merely a few months, a great success in its day. At the same time, several expensive English editions were published, followed directly by a shilling reprint, making the book of democratic doctrine available to the British working classes whose cause it advocated. In short order, the book was translated into several European languages, most significantly into French and German.¹⁴ Carnegie's prediction was right: *Triumphant Democracy* had an immediate and continuing transatlantic resonance.

The book's importance was due to a certain degree to the nature of its subject: a comparative evaluation of two kindred nations. It testified as well to the special role of its author, a great industrialist who was also a conspicuous man of letters. Indeed, he sought the last role as assiduously as he played the first. Andrew Carnegie conjoined both roles, making him virtually unique in American entrepreneurial history. But even more: his book's rare perspective was that of a Scottish-born industrialist who knew intimately the workings of the two polities he inhabited virtually simultaneously and who was, in many respects and paradoxically, an outsider in both. Carnegie understood very well the importance of *Triumphant Democracy*. Of all the books he had written, he "would always regard [it] as his magnum opus, his remarkable book."¹⁵

Triumphant Democracy marked the highest point of his ambition. It advantaged him to play low in American politics; it glorified him to play high in British politics. His intense interest was British public affairs. In American society where wealth was an equalizer and great wealth the best calling card to high society, and where a career in politics most often a pursuit for men of no esteemed talent, Carnegie's ambition needed no further office. But in British society, where aristocracy and wealth often went together and where both were celebrated by a seat in Parliament, it surely spurred Carnegie's drive for success to get a seat. British high society was parliamentary society. Carnegie did not merely want success; he wanted it with a passion. According to his famous personal memorandum of 1868 he planned, after making his fortune, to settle in London, get a newspaper or review, and take part in public matters. By 1886, he had done all that. He advanced the Liberal doctrines he had already announced in his earlier books and articles. He needed only entrance into the Commons to gratify, more than ever, his zealous drive for acceptance and success. His correspondence shows that many of his friends were urging him to stand for Parliament.¹⁶ He always knew his inner heart and zeal: "Whatever I engage in, I must push inordinately."¹⁷ The lodestar of his inordinate pushing was, it is fair to say, to sit in Parliament. The chronology of Gladstone's second ministry and of Carnegie's hard work on his great book runs a parallel and interactive course. Forging London friendships, writing well-published essays, owning a chain of republican newspapers in England all form a meaningful chronological sequence. Seen in this perspective, *Triumphant Democracy* might well emblazon the road for Carnegie's entrance in Parliament. That was part of its great importance. It was his best-formulated,

most resounding political statement. But unanticipated events radically changed the course of his life and the aim of his ambition. Shortly after the book appeared, Gladstone and the Liberals fell from power because of the sundering issue of Irish Home Rule. A few months later, Carnegie's own life was severely battered by the deaths of his mother and his brother and by his own near-fatal illness, and he laid aside his parliamentary interests.

No less impressive than its publishing success were the reviews that *Triumphant Democracy* evoked in the United States and Great Britain. To say that it was widely covered in the presses of both countries misses no small part of its importance. The reviews were frequently strong responses to Carnegie's book of doctrine, and often enough impassioned commentaries on the kindred polities—the British and the American—whose modes of governance he was assaying. They amounted to an Anglo-American dialogue on the success of their respective institutions. But, more than that, the reviewers were commenting on the major problems each nation was facing. Many dramatic changes were taking place in 1886, particularly in Britain, where politics was electric with crises, and where Carnegie's words were almost literally alive with that electricity. His book compelled each nation both to specify the problems they were facing and to ask how far the other political society could offer a model for solving them. *Triumphant Democracy* evoked powerful national sentiments on both sides of the Atlantic. Thus, because it was a book both of espousal and indictment, it stirred its reviewers to deeply felt responses both about their own nation and the kindred nation across the sea. The many reviews, no less than the book itself, constituted a major event in the Anglo-American relationship.

Triumphant Democracy urged a doctrine of political equality; very much part of Carnegie's doctrine of democracy was his doctrine on the uses of wealth. Carnegie is probably best known for what is called his "gospel of wealth." A devotee of Herbert Spencer, he viewed the accumulation of wealth as part of the natural evolution of society. He regarded plans for economic equality as unnatural and therefore specious. The only resolution lay, as he saw it, in opening wide the doors to education and allowing the disadvantaged to rise as high in economic success as their ready educational access would now allow them. The members of aristocratic society, he said in *Triumphant Democracy*, were vain and self-absorbed, and used their wealth only to perpetuate their families; those of democratic society, as the many American examples he cited indicated, regularly used their wealth to endow educational insti-

tutions, thereby facilitating the access to success and status of the less advantaged classes. If he was self-made, Carnegie also saw himself as made by the books and libraries of America's democratic society; and he accordingly carried on a lifelong enterprise of building the libraries that he deemed the hallmark of a democratic society. Thus, Carnegie's gospel of wealth was one feature of his gospel of democracy. His famous essay on wealth appeared in 1889. It had been fully anticipated, three years before, in *Triumphant Democracy*. But the fact is that Carnegie had strongly subscribed to the "gospel" throughout his life. This dimension of the great importance of *Triumphant Democracy* had its roots in his Scottish origins and his early years in the United States. His gospel of books and learning gives meaning to his quotation from Confucius at the beginning of his famous chapter on education: "There being education, there will be no distinction of classes."

The scores of reviews of *Triumphant Democracy* made clear that the century-long division between America and Britain remained profound and intense. There had been so much to keep the animus alive. The Civil War, one should recall, had brought the two nations almost to the brink of another recourse to arms, creating problems that were, in the 1870s and 1880s, slowly being resolved. And yet, beneath the surface of the patriotic tensions between them, another current was running. A transatlantic sodality was emerging, a vocal group of political leaders and men of affairs, of editors and educators, of writers and intellectuals. They were reaching out to each other, forming a network of power and ideas, of politics and the press. They spoke from positions of status, influence, wealth. They stressed the community of ideals and institutions the United States shared with the United Kingdom. They shared a common language, a common literature, common parliamentary institutions, a common law, a common history. In that fervent age of nationalism and nation-building, many leaders in Britain and America were almost suddenly aware that they belonged to the English-speaking peoples.

These Pan-Angles knew each other. They met in each other's literary circles, in their respective salons and soirées. Not men of arms, indeed often enough believing in arbitration if not themselves outright pacifists, they surely felt that the pen was mightier than the sword. Their essays and editorials often molded Anglo-American politics. Their books shaped opinion. And here indeed was one of the notable features of what Andrew Carnegie had written. *Triumphant Democracy* was a very important Pan-Anglian book. And its author was a powerful Pan-Angle.

Did Carnegie plan to stand for Parliament? The question surely relates both to the reason for his writing *Triumphant Democracy* and to the importance of his magisterial volume. His life can be seen as tracing a patterned trajectory, rational if not always uninterrupted. His preoccupation with British political leadership began in his childhood, continued through his young adulthood, and was always vitalized by his constant connection with friends and family in Dunfermline and Scotland. One has to go back to his memorandum of 1868, written to himself, to remember that he wished to “settle in London & purchase a controlling interest in some newspaper or live review & give the general management of it attention, taking a part in public matters especially those connected with education & improvement of the poorer classes.”¹⁸ By 1885 his private plan had almost entirely been fulfilled. He had entered the inner circles of the Liberal Party, and he had financed a whole chain of advanced Liberal newspapers in England, sounding ideas that were very consistent with those of prominent Liberal leaders such as Joseph Chamberlain, John Morley, Charles Bradlaugh, John Bright, and Charles Dilke. Gladstone's second ministry had taken office in April 1880, with the certainty of five years in power and the possibility of having its mandate renewed. While he was coaching through Britain and spreading his republican doctrines through his newspapers, Carnegie was working assiduously on *Triumphant Democracy*. Meanwhile, he was being courted by Liberal party leaders to stand for Parliament. Several seats were proposed for his possible candidacy.¹⁹ The money he was giving to the party, the newspapers he was financing, the friendships he was cultivating, the trips he was regularly taking, and the great book he was now writing: they all cohere, they belong to the great age of Gladstone's secondary ministry, and they form a meaningful context for *Triumphant Democracy*. It was, in April of 1886, very possibly Carnegie's great campaign statement that he might, indeed could, stand for election.

The immense book dwarfed all other statements Carnegie had made on Britain and America, on the kindred nations, on the two societies to which he belonged, on the Anglo-American connection that invested him with a distinction that no other member of either society could claim.

If Carnegie did indeed plan standing for election in Parliament in that spring of 1886, his plan was badly shattered. The Liberal world he had so wondrously entered came tumbling down around him. The chronology should be noted. Gladstone's second ministry fell in June 1885. There was a distinct prospect that Lord Salisbury's Conservative government could

last five years. Carnegie decided immediately to get out of the newspaper business. But the writing of his great Liberal Party manifesto, *Triumphant Democracy*, was well on its way. And it would indeed appear in April 1886, when Gladstone had resumed power and was pushing for Irish Home Rule. His bill would hopelessly splinter the Liberal Party and put beyond any realization whatever ambition Carnegie may have had about standing for Parliament.²⁰