

## H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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Ruth Crocker. *Mrs. Russell Sage: Women's Activism and Philanthropy in Gilded Age and Progressive Era America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 200. ix + 526 pp. 28 b&w photos, biblio., index, 6 1/8 x 9 1/4. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 0-253-34712-2.

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### "Opportunities and Responsibilities of Leisured Women": M. Olivia Sage and Her Philanthropy

One can well imagine the excitement of social welfare historian Ruth Crocker, Professor of History at Auburn University, on reading the Rockefeller Archive Center announcement that some five thousand letters of "Mrs. Russell Sage, philanthropist (1828-1918)" were open to researchers. Most covered the twelve years of her widowhood before her death, the period of her "outstanding philanthropy."

Surprised that the career of this influential ruling-class woman took her back to themes addressed in her earlier book, *Social Work and Social Order* (1992), themes that included class-based benevolence, gift as relationship, welfare thought and an emerging social work profession, women's education and new identities for women in Gilded Age and Progressive Era America, Crocker soon set out "in search of Mrs. Sage," the foremost female philanthropist of the early twentieth century. The search was "lengthy" and "rewarding;" the same can be said about this biography that resulted.

The roots of Olivia Sage's philanthropy lie in her early life. Crocker attributed them to "a convergence of good intentions, a belief in Christian stewardship, feminist discontent and an ambitious, restless temperament spurred on by a sense of social superiority" (pp. 5-6). Her distinguished colonial lineage was a factor as well. Sage's maternal grandfather was a wealthy Sag Harbor, Long Island, merchant. Believing her father to be a sixth lineal descendant of Miles Standish, Sage gave money for a Harvard dormitory, Standish Hall. A great grandfather on her mother's side founded New York's common school system, and she later memorialized the maternal side of her family through a gift of \$650,000 to purchase the Pierson-Sage campus for Yale University.

Once a successful merchant and state assemblyman, Olivia's father Joseph Slocum was done in by the depression of 1837, and deal after business deal failed, threatening Olivia's education beyond local schools in Syracuse. Headed for Mount Holyoke Seminary in 1846, she fell ill in Troy, New York, but her life changed forever when an uncle paid for her to attend the Troy Female Seminary, headed by pioneer educator Emma Willard. There she first met entrepreneur-politician Russell Sage whose later business "machinations", ironically, would later help drive her father toward bankruptcy. In Emma Willard, Olivia Slocum found a model of womanhood she came to admire, and Crocker concluded that Olivia "saw the rest of her life as seeking to fulfill the principles that she learned at Troy" (p. 42).

Over the next two decades Olivia Slocum's life bounced between teaching at different women's schools, acting as governess for elites in several cities, and bouts of invalidism. Becoming Mrs. Russell Sage in 1869 at age forty-one, following the death of the businessman's first wife, elevated Olivia from a state of penury and uncertainty to a Fifth Avenue brownstone and thirty-seven years as benevolent society matron, albeit without resources she could call her own and in her husband's shadow. In gaining financial security, she lost the independence she had come to enjoy.

Russell Sage's climb to the top of the economic ladder through railroad development and endless "puts and calls" on the New York Stock Exchange was dizzying and tainted. His close partnership with Jay Gould targeted him still further, but it facilitated a close relationship between Helen Miller Gould, Jay's wife, and Olivia Sage. Both served as "lady managers" for the Woman's Hospital of the State of New York specializing in treatment of women's diseases, over much of the late nineteenth century, and Olivia eventually coaxed \$50,000 from her stingy husband for a new hospital building. She remembered this institution far more generously in her will (\$1.8 million), and her experience as lady manager was pivotal in her negotiation of a public identity and sensitivity to women's advancement.

Beyond childbearing age and in a marriage of considerable contrast, Olivia Sage constructed an identity around "the work of benevolence." Convinced that her social standing, her education and her evangelical Presbyterian upbringing bestowed both superiority and responsibility for improvement of society, views Mrs. Sage later articulated more fully in an article in *North American Review* in 1905, Olivia joined several women's voluntary associations. Two notable memberships begun in the 1890s, the Emma Willard Association and the New York Exchange for Women's Work, provided useful arenas for "creative philanthropy" and supported women's advancement into paid work and the professions. Contact with Elizabeth Cady Stanton at the dedication of a new building at the Troy Female Seminary in 1892 and follow-up meetings soon led Sage to become a convert to the cause of woman suffrage. She was actively involved in the New York State "political equality" campaign in 1894. Sage would never, however, be a major suffrage patron.

Confident in the power of Protestantism to Christianize and civilize "lesser races" as the century ended, Olivia joined with Jay Gould's daughter Helen in vigorously supporting the Women's National War Relief Association. Earlier involvement in the Woman's Union Missionary Society of America for Heathen Lands and "Americanizing" of Native Americans at the Carlisle School (the Sages reputedly underwrote the education of forty Indian children) reflected a benevolent racism not uncommon among elites in the period.

With Russell Sage's death in 1906 and a fortune of over seventy-five million dollars (\$1.5 billion in 2004 currency) now hers, Olivia Sage moved, together with her attorney, philanthropic adviser and long-time president of the New York Charity Organization Society (COS), Robert de Forest, to what Ruth Crocker labeled "her most significant achievement" (p. 236), establishment of the Russell Sage Foundation (RSF) in 1907. Signing off on its mission: "the improvement of the social and living conditions in the United States of America," Sage proclaimed "I am nearly eighty years old and I feel as though I were just beginning to live" (p.226).

A star-studded “feminized” foundation in its first decade, with Mary Richmond, Mary van Kleeck, Crystal Eastman and Margaret Byington among those heading departments and conducting investigative studies, the Foundation pioneered in its multi-year Pittsburgh Survey scrutinizing the conditions under which the people of that city, especially women, lived and work. Other city surveys and a diversity of reform crusades flowed from the Pittsburgh Survey. Crocker concluded that the Foundation “played a significant role in the development of America’s welfare state in the years before the New Deal” and that RSF funding “set up the framework of modern social work education and professional practice” (pp. 235-236). Though she suppressed herself in creating the Foundation as a memorial to her husband, Olivia was its president from its inception until her death in 1918. She presided over meetings, took part in decision-making and considered the work of RSF an extension of her own personal philanthropy, funding it generously throughout her life.

In addition to welfare, education and religion claimed the major share of Olivia Sage’s gifts and estate, although she gave untold sums in small amounts to a wide-range of causes and was sometimes quirky and idiosyncratic in giving as she aged. Her interest in women and education was enduring, especially her fondness for Emma Willard and Troy. Funding, directing and editing an alumnae survey of more than twelve thousand women who attended Troy Female Seminary from 1822-1872 had a powerful and lasting effect on Olivia. In 1910 Mrs. Sage gave a new campus to the institution, now known as Emma Willard School, and in 1916, at the suggestion of the school’s principal, Eliza Kellas, she remade its old campus and buildings to found Russell Sage College for women’s vocational education. Sage left final bequests of \$800,000 to thirteen leading Eastern men’s and women’s colleges as well as two African-American institutions, Tuskegee and Hampton. She believed strongly in practical education and instruction in self help and moral responsibility for the poor.

Olivia Sage philanthropy rewarded dozens of individual churches. Long interested in the cause of foreign and home missions, she invested “boldly” in overseas philanthropy to seminaries, mission-run colleges and schools and foreign-mission societies. Her final will gave two parts of her estate to the American Bible society and the New York Bible Society, both to be administered through the New York Female Auxiliary Bible Society. Limiting most of her giving to the state and city of New York, Sage made sizeable bequests to the city’s arts and sciences, including the American Museum of Natural History, the New York Public Library and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (though she was neither a collector nor connoisseur of art). Animal welfare also concerned her. Denouncing society women for the “barbarous fashion of wearing for her adornment the plumage of small birds” (p.287), Sage supported the National Audubon Society, its Junior clubs, the Wild Life Protection Fund and the New York Zoological Society.

Olivia Sage died on November 4, 1918, just after her ninetieth birthday. She was buried between her parents in Syracuse and 150 miles away from Russell, who was interred at Troy.

In a nice turn of phrase, Ruth Crocker concluded that “Olivia had the opportunity to give, and she gave splendidly” (p.316). Her philanthropy mixed altruism with a range of other motives including nostalgia and memorializing husband and family, patriotism, moral authority and Christian stewardship, and advocacy for the advancement of women. Her benevolence was also mixed with snobbery, self-righteousness and social conservatism, but over a broad expanse of

time she funded a wide spectrum of progressive reforms that had a lasting impact on American life and institutions. Crocker claims that for Sage, spending "became a form of speaking" (p.312), and she more often than not carried out her public-private work within the confines of her Fifth Avenue home or her "unpretending" Long Island summer cottage.

The 160 pages of footnotes in Ruth Crocker's biography often seem like too many trees in the forest. Crocker also has a habit of asking lots of questions in her narrative, not all of which get answered. Occasional chapter subdivisions such as "Reader, She Married Him" are distracting or unclear.

Nevertheless, Ruth Crocker's wonderfully researched biography adds immeasurably to our understanding of growing scholarly work on oft-neglected elites during the Progressive era. Indeed her work can serve as a model to examine others who formed what Crocker labeled as "the upstairs of the woman's movement" (p.312). It is also part of a growing body of work in the field of philanthropy which last year resulted in biographies, in addition to the one reviewed here, that examined the personal giving philosophy and habits of industrial magnates Andrew Carnegie, Julius Rosenwald, and Andrew Mellon. All of those works make clear, as was surely true of M. Olivia Sage, that philanthropy is intensely personal.

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