

“MRS. RUSSELL SAGE:  
Women’s Activism and Philanthropy in Gilded Age and Progressive Era America”

Ruth Crocker  
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The first study of this important but overlooked philanthropist. Now we can add wealthy women such as Margaret Olivia (Mrs. Russell) Sage to the categories of activist nineteenth-century women. Their roles in founding institutions and expanding state capacity have remained elusive, their self-representation was often misleading or deliberately self-effacing. Olivia Sage's story shows in detail how women donors put their money to work for the cause of women's advancement and along the way experienced their own consciousness-raising. Sage philanthropy represents self-activity and intentionality, not mere largesse. She invested in a variety of causes, from animal welfare and conservation to women's higher education, and gave to dozens of hospitals, churches, and schools. At the same time, her activism was circumscribed by her position of class- and race-privilege, as well as by the many practical barriers to the free exercise of her spending power as a wealthy but elderly widow, the prey of many schemers and false friends.

The author writes: *"I began with the five thousand letters of Mrs. Russell Sage in the Russell Sage Foundation Records at the Rockefeller Archive Center, N.Y. I was dismayed to find that not only were they from the last 18 years of a ninety-year life, but that most of them were addressed to Sage, not written by her. 'This life can't be written,' I thought."*

STANLEY N. KATZ, Director, Center for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies, Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University, writes:

*"A major accomplishment . . . Prof. Crocker has done what many of us who studied the Russell Sage Foundation thought was impossible -- to find untapped manuscript sources that reveal the active and crucial role played by Olivia Sage (a.k.a. Mrs. Russell Sage) in the creation and early management of America's first social welfare philanthropic foundation. . . . This is a story of strength and intentionality, and it is exceptionally well-told. Finally, we understand who Olivia Sage, the first important American philanthropist, was!"*

EILEEN BORIS, Hull Professor of Women's Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara

*"This is a model biography. Mixing empathy with historical acumen, Ruth Crocker has uncovered the life of a woman who left few personal papers and hid behind her husband's name, but managed to emerge in her old age as one of the most influential philanthropists of the 20th century. . . . Here is finally the other side of the street, the upstairs long missing from a women's history long focused on the downstairs. . . . Most impressive is Crocker's ability to fuse big historical themes with an individual story." "The best discussion yet of Emma Willard's feminism of difference."*

NANCY HEWITT, Professor of History, Rutgers University, N.J., writes:

*"Through this engaging biography of one of the most intriguing women of the Gilded Age, Mrs. Russell Sage, Ruth Crocker illuminates the critical role that female philanthropy and philanthropists played in the advancement of women in the twentieth century. Mrs. Russell Sage is a wonderful read and a major contribution to the literature on class and gender in American history."*

SONYA MICHEL, Professor of History, Director, Nathan and Jeanette Miller Center for Historical Studies, University of Maryland, writes:

*"In this age of towering figures like Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett, it is illuminating to examine the life of a woman who, a century ago, became one of the most noted philanthropists of her day. . . . Ruth Crocker's sensitive, richly documented, and beautifully written biography brings Sage and her times alive, reminding us that there is, indeed, value in visiting the neglected 'upstairs' of women's history."*

