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Five Best: Books on Philanthropy

Selected by Karl Zinsmeister, the author of 'The Brothers: A True-Life Saga of the Remarkable Family Who Made America Free.'

By Karl Zinsmeister

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An American radar system used to direct anti-aircraft guns in World War II. PHOTO: BOYER/GETTY IMAGES

Tuxedo Park

By Jennet Conant (2002)

1. Philanthropists have been central to eradicating diseases, championing education and fighting poverty, but they have also been integral to American successes in biomedical engineering, aeronautics and many other fields. During World War II, it wasn't a government agency but

rather a philanthropist who jump-started radar and then rescued the effort to create atomic weapons after the project bogged down in the defense bureaucracy. These heroics, documented in Jennet Conant's "Tuxedo Park," were accomplished by Alfred Loomis (1887-1975), a financier who presciently exited the stock market just before the 1929 crash. His true love was science, and when he retired from Wall Street he set up one of the world's great laboratories next to his home in Tuxedo Park, N.Y. From there he poured his money and expertise into brilliantly defending his country. A coda to Ms. Conant's book: Loomis's great-grandson is Netflix's co-founder Reed Hastings, an innovator in both business and charity.

George Eastman

By Elizabeth Brayer (1996)

2. George Eastman popularized photography by building Eastman Kodak into one of the great companies of the 20th century. He then applied his inventive genius and entrepreneurial energy to philanthropy, dispensing vast sums of his own money without any staff. "Men who leave their money to be distributed by others are pie-faced mutts," he said. "I want to see the action during my lifetime." Eastman almost single-handedly transformed the Massachusetts Institute of Technology from a small commuter school on the brink of shutdown into a science-and-technology trailblazer. His love of music and his distinctive ideas on education sprouted one of the world's finest conservatories—the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, N.Y. Eastman became the largest contributor of his generation to African-American schooling. He brought dental and medical care to thousands of patients. Elizabeth Brayer's chronicle makes clear that Eastman's most impassioned quest was improving the lives of others.

Titan

By Ron Chernow (1998)

3. John D. Rockefeller Sr. remains one of the most influential philanthropists in history, and Ron Chernow's "Titan" is the best account of his successes as a business mogul and donor. The loss of a grandson to scarlet fever made medical research a priority for Rockefeller, and the extraordinarily flexible labs he funded churned out thousands of breakthroughs. "The Almanac of American Philanthropy" calculated that more than 60 Nobel laureates in medicine, biochemistry and health had their work accelerated by Rockefeller gifts. Much of the money Rockefeller earned from creating Standard Oil ended up in a bureaucratic foundation after his death in 1937. But over 97 years he made many wise giving decisions that enhanced our living standards and improved science, religious life, agriculture, education and much more.

Reclaiming the American Dream

By Richard Cornuelle (1965)

4. Giving in America isn't just a hobby of the rich. The vast majority of the roughly \$800 billion of charity we offer up each year in cash and volunteer labor comes from the middle of society, not the wealthy. Foundations and corporations provide only about a quarter of U.S. cash donations. In his groundbreaking work, Richard Cornuelle assesses the mass nature of U.S. charity. "As a frontier people, accustomed to interdependence, we developed a genius for solving common problems. People joined together in bewildering combinations to found schools, churches, opera houses, co-ops, hospitals, to build bridges and canals, to help the poor." Cornuelle coined the term "independent sector" to describe the panoply of American institutions that are neither private companies nor agencies of government, yet take responsibility for solving public predicaments. Take the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, for example, which "set out to conquer polio with dimes—and did it." Our tradition of decentralized community repair is one of America's greatest strengths compared with other societies. Yet it's now at risk. Cornuelle warned that we are increasingly trained "to think of responsibility as something that should be promptly bundled off to Washington." If America is to thrive, independent private action and grassroots philanthropy must be protected.

The Warden

By Anthony Trollope (1855)

5. Giving away money in constructive ways is often much harder than making it. Yet when done effectively, charitable problem-solving is one of the most satisfying accomplishments in life. Anthony Trollope's "The Warden," about a retirement home for impoverished workmen, unpacks some of the abiding risks and dilemmas of philanthropy: administrators making a fat living by serving out benefactions to the poor; dilettante givers doing more harm than good because they are skittish about tough love; feelings of entitlement afflicting both the recipients of aid and the professional distributors; the temptation to ignore a donor's intentions. In "The Warden," elites use the needy as pawns to force their visions of social justice on society. "The manners of the present times do not admit of a literal adherence to the very words of the founder's will," observes an administrator in "The Warden." Trollope reminds us that savvy philanthropy isn't easy; charitable people must be assiduous in their giving.

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