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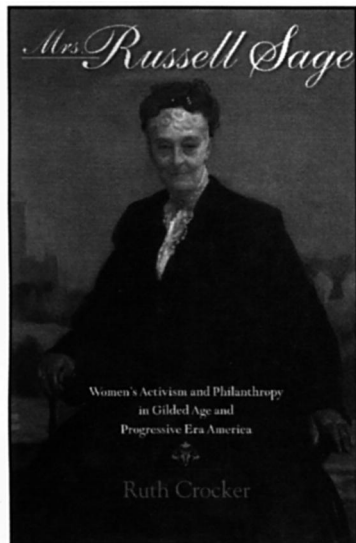
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Book Reviews



Mrs. Russell Sage: Women's Activism and Philanthropy in Gilded Age and Progressive Era America. By Ruth Crocker. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006. xx + 526 pp. \$49.95.)

Born Margaret Olivia Slocum in 1828 in Syracuse, New York, Mrs. Russell Sage (1828–1918) became one of the most generous philanthropists of the progressive era, giving away approximately \$45 million of her financier husband's amassed wealth to a wide variety of causes and institutions. Of all the robber baron fortunes established in the Gilded Age, the Sage fortune was the largest given away principally by a woman. This fact has clearly drawn the author, Ruth Crocker, a professor of history and women's studies

at Auburn University, to Olivia Sage. Working from a previously undiscovered corpus of correspondence from the later years of Mrs. Sage's life, Crocker has meticulously reassembled the philanthropist's life and activities. She divides Sage's life into thirds—Olivia's life up to her marriage at age 41, her years as Russell Sage's second wife, and her final twelve years when she could freely expend what her miserly late husband had stored up. At each stage, Crocker portrays Olivia as a woman of determination and character, though reserved about claiming too much credit for herself.

Crocker's work is a model of historical scholarship on a philanthropic life. With notes and bibliography alone running 190 pages, the book documents the intersection of Sage with leading figures and ideas of the day. The women's education leader and advocate Emma Willard was a major influence on Sage, as were lessons she learned as a student at Willard's Troy Female Seminary. Elizabeth Cady Stanton figures in several instances of Sage's growth as a philanthropist. Sage's personal giving favored women's education, Presbyterian foreign and home missions, mission colleges, and particular congregations, whether she attended them or not. Her will provided major

gifts to the Presbyterians' Women's Board of Foreign Missions, the New York City Mission and Tract Society, and the American Bible Society.

Throughout the biography, Crocker treats Sage's religious connections as peripheral, her chief critical concern being the extent to which Sage was a progressive feminist for her time. Unfortunately, Sage repeatedly disappoints Crocker by acting like the elderly, wealthy widow she was, more concerned for propriety and religion than social activism. For Crocker, Olivia Sage's life, conditioned by gender and class (including scrapes with near destitution as a young woman) is one of missed opportunities for turning wealth into activism. Had Crocker hoped for less of a heroine, she may have emphasized instead the remarkable generativity of a woman in her 80s and 90s giving away money mostly on her own terms. Even if Crocker did not uncover the Olivia Sage she had hoped to find, she nevertheless introduces us to a fascinating woman and philanthropist of the early twentieth century.

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