**INTRODUCTION**

by

Thomas S. Crane

Charles R. Crane (1858-1939) grew up in a wealthy Chicago, Illinois family and was the product of the optimism of the industrial age. He used his wealth generously to help many individuals and aid a myriad of causes of deep interest to him, most notably advancing Russian and Slavic studies in American universities. This introduction to his working draft autobiography provides brief highlights of his career based on family stories of my grandfather, and the 2013 biography The Life and Times of Charles R. Crane by Prof. Norman E. Saul,[[1]](#footnote-1) who is also the author of the attached Preface to this autobiography.

Crane married Cornelia Workman Smith in 1881, and they had four children, Richard, Josephine (Bradley), Frances and John (my father).

Based on his father’s strongly held views, Charles Crane had little formal education. His primary education started on the shop floor of the family’s Crane Company and continued by means of travel abroad. His first overseas voyage was at the age of 19, and in total he took about 25 trips to Russia.

He was deeply involved in his early years with civic causes in Chicago, for example supporting Jane Addams’s Hull House and the Chicago Commons Association.[[2]](#footnote-2) He was closely associated with the progressive movement, and was instrumental in 1912 in getting the party’s leaders to endorse Woodrow Wilson’s presidential candidacy. Crane’s association with Wilson dated back to when Wilson was president of Princeton University, and Crane became the largest contributor to Wilson’s 1912 presidential campaign.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Crane’s first formal appointed position was as ambassador to China in 1909, but he was recalled before he had boarded a ship to take his post. The recall was more of an embarrassment to the Taft administration than to Crane, though it resulted in Crane’s permanently severing his ties with the national Republican Party. Wilson looked to Crane as a close advisor. Wilson’s first preference was for Crane to serve as ambassador to Russia, but Crane finally closed the door to that idea in May 1914 for personal reasons, most likely related to the pressing needs of running the Crane Company after his father’s death in 1912.[[4]](#footnote-4) In 1917, Wilson appointed Crane as a member of the Root Commission which was charged to investigate the prospects of the Kerensky government in Russia. Crane was particularly well-suited for that position because of his deep knowledge of many of its leaders, including personal friendships with several of the new government’s leaders, including most notably Paul Miliukov. In 1919 Wilson asked Crane to join Henry C. King, president of Oberlin College, in what came to be known as the King-Crane Commission, to go to the Middle East to advise Wilson on the division of the Ottoman Empire in that region. This work opened an important new geographic sphere of influence to Crane as prospects for human progress seemed to be evaporating in Russia with the Bolshevik Revolution. Finally, and perhaps mainly as a thank you, in 1921 Wilson appointed Crane to be ambassador to China.

Crane’s original introduction to Russia was as a businessman responsible for the company’s operations in that country. This started a life-long interest in the country and its culture. He became a frequent visitor in the homes of liberal intellectuals in St. Petersburg and Moscow. Back in the States, he befriended a handful of university presidents including Alderman (University of Virginia), Butler (Columbia), Eliot (Harvard), Harper (Univ. of Chicago), Houston (Washington University), Lowell (Harvard), Van Hise (Wisconsin) and Wilson (Princeton). Five universities awarded him honorary doctoral degrees notwithstanding the absence of a college degree. Saul capably connects these interests to Crane’s generous donations to these universities’ libraries and programs in Slavic studies.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Crane’s interest and influence in Slavic culture extended to Czechoslovakia. In the late 1890s at the suggestion of a Russian friend, he introduced himself to a professor at Charles University, Thomas Masaryk, who initially thought Crane was proselytizing him. Fortunately, Masaryk was opened-minded enough to ignore this first impression and they developed an enduring friendship. Masaryk came to Chicago in 1902 to lecture at the University of Chicago as part of a series in foreign studies endowed by Crane. His instrumental role is well-documented in promoting Masaryk’s cause to Wilson in Versailles and in getting the new country recognized. On August 7, 1928, Masaryk’s son Jan, who at that time was married to Crane’s daughter Frances, wrote Crane a congratulatory 70th birthday letter, stating: “The whole Masaryk family calls you the godfather of Czechoslovakia – I think it’s a good name.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Crane’s other children also played significant roles in the new country: Richard was America’s first ambassador (then “Minister”), John was personal secretary to the president for several years, and Alphonse Mucha’s portrait of Josephine entitled Slavia was placed on the Czech 100K note.

Crane was also a generous contributor to Slavic music, the arts and culture. He supported many Russian artists, including Gabaev, Roerich, Vereshchagin, and Zakharov;[[7]](#footnote-7) and in New York for many years a Russian choir. His two most noteworthy philanthropic contributions were his support for more than a decade to Czech painter Alphonse Mucha’s creation of the Slavic Epic and to the saving of the Russian bells, which resided for close to 80 years in the bell tower of Lowell House as a gift to Harvard University from Crane. Thanks to the enlightened leadership of Harvard, the bells have been returned to their historic home in the Danilov Monastery in Moscow.

While a significant majority of Crane’s acts of generosity were informal and unrecorded, he endowed two foundations that still exist today: The Friendship Fund and Institute of Current World Affairs (ICWA). The Friendship Fund served as his personal vehicle for giving and remains a family-controlled foundation. ICWA’s mission was, and remains today, to fund scholars and journalists studying abroad, many of whom during Crane’s lifetime served as his eyes and ears abroad, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s in Russia during the early Bolshevik era.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Crane was an early supporter of the Marine Biological Laboratory (MBL) in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. He served on its Board of Trustees for more than 20 years, the majority of which was as its Board Chairman. He gave a significant amount of land to the MBL, organized contributions to build its first permanent building, which was named after him, and gave the MBL its first endowment. He also worked with MBL director and his brother-in-law, Francis Lillie, to help establish the MBL’s sister institution, the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in 1930.

Later in life, he took a deep interest in the Middle East, visited the area many times, and befriended many noted intellectuals, most notably George Antonius, most known for his book the Arab Awakening, which Crane subsidized through Antonius’s position as an ICWA Fellow.[[9]](#footnote-9) Crane supported water and bridge projects in Yemen, and a failed attempt to find water in Saudi Arabia, which did find oil though.

Notwithstanding all of the above, I have little doubt that Crane’s most satisfying contributions were his numerous support of numerous individuals. As just one example, I was fortunate to get to know Margaret Zarudny Freeman when she was in her 1990s living in Belmont, Massachusetts. She informed me she was six years old when she first met Crane in Omsk in July 1921 when Crane was travelling across Russia by train car after leaving his diplomatic post in Peking. Crane was bringing a package of money from young Margaret’s father to help the struggling family. Margaret and her brother Sergei were the first of the Zarudny children that Crane supported by paying for travel to America and for their studies in Pomona College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Mrs. Freeman told me the story that she contacted Crane’s personal secretary Donald Brodie to inquire if Crane could possibly assist her other siblings to come to this country. As Mrs. Freeman told me, Mr. Brodie cautioned her that at that time Crane was directly supporting 50 other families. Notwithstanding, Crane funds soon opened up to assist the four other sisters.

In all, my father estimated that through all of these acts of generosity and kindness, Charles Crane gave away approximately 90 percent of his fortune.

Weston, Massachusetts

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1. N. Saul, Lexington Books (“Saul”). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Saul, pp 80, 256, 264 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Id., p. 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Id., pp 106-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Id., pp 128-32, 257-60 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Charles R. Crane Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Collection, Columbia University, box 15, folder 3.   [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Saul, p. 260-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Id. p. 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Id., pp 220-24, 241, n.51. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)