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A writer but not a prophet

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The Testimony of the Life, Character
and Opinions of Thomas Carlyle
to Mr Froude's Claim that Carlyle
is a Prophet and a great religious
Teacher comparable with St. Paul.

J. L. Hillman

A Writer but not a Prophet.

The French Revolution closed in 1795. During the same year the greatest historian of that terrible political was born in the little Scotch village of Ecclefechan. Thomas Carlyle was born of peasant parents. But even among the Scotch peasantry famous the world over for qualities of head and heart, the Carlyles were especially marked for their rugged thrift, earnest and intelligent piety.

Thomas was the oldest and the favorite of many children. His mother was his first teacher and he ^{could} not recall the day when he did not read. He did good work in the village school and at ten years he was enrolled among the students of the grammar school at Annan, the birth place of Edward Irving. Bayly's help helped to make life here disagreeable.

At fourteen his college life began at the University of Edinburgh. During the four

years he was connected with that University, he practiced the most rigid self-denial. Those connected with him in the University never suspected his future eminence. He was not among the first of his class. His best work was done in Mathematics.

Teaching occupied his attention for a time after graduation. While thus engaged he met Edward Irving and there sprang up between these two brilliant young men a strong and beautiful friendship, one very useful to Carlyle and one that might have been more useful to Irving. Irving's recommendation and help secured Carlyle's employment and Carlyle's warning to Irving if it had been more seriously regarded might have saved the brilliant young preacher from the precipice.

Carlyle's parents had always designed their son for the ministry. These hopes were doomed to disappointment, for after a little study Carlyle abandoned all thoughts of the ministry. Law became for a time his mistress. He supported

himself the meanwhile by tutoring in private families. One of his pupils was Sir Charles Buller whose career in English politics was meteor like in brilliancy and brevity. But law could not hold Carlyle's restless mind. Irving was urging him to write. He hesitated, doubted but at last decided. He began by writing articles for a Cyclopaedia, for reviews and by a translation of ~~David~~ Legendre's Geometry from the French and some articles from the German. The early part of his literary career was devoted chiefly to attempts to popularise German literature, to make English people see Schiller and Goethe as they appeared to him. While thus employed he became engaged to Miss Welch. After considerable delay they were married and lived in Edinburgh.

Carlyle was now thirty years of age possessed a wonderful fund of general information which was about all his stock in trade. During his two years stay in Edinburgh he led for the most part a secluded life, read voluminously

and did not a little writing. Thence he ~~went~~^{went} to live on a Dumfriesshire moorland, a part of his wife's ancestral estate. There for seven years they lived in seclusion, battling with poverty, disease and dyspepsia, Foster Rescator was the great production of this period of his life. That wild Scotch moor with its craggs, headwinds, its seclusion and its constant roar of the sea was much to Carlyle's taste and its influence can be traced throughout his after life. Many were the disappointments and hardships that came to that strangely matched pair during the years of exile ~~so~~ terrible to Mrs Carlyle. Carlyle was not an attentive husband and Mrs Carlyle in frail health accustomed all her life to every luxury and to the best society was compelled to turn her hand to the heaviest and most distasteful work. But she did it heroically. Her was the altar on which she sacrificed herself to the only divinity she knew - her ambition for her husband. There while she saw her own splendid faculties slowly decay. Because of seclusion, ill health and overwork she consoled herself in the

process of development she witnessed in her husband. Did he falter, she was at his side to urge him forward? Did his heart fail, hers was twice courageous. It was the old story of the Roman maiden who when her lover shrunk from battle, took the dagger from his side and plunging it deep in her own snow white breast said as she smilingly looked in his face "See it doesn't hurt"

Up to the close of his stay in Craigmyleputlock, Carlyle had earnestly sought a professorship in the Scotch Universities and in the London University or a government position, and at one time he entertained hopes of being made editor of the Edinburgh Review. All his efforts were vain. When thirty nine years of age he moved to London where he spent the remainder of his life. No sooner was he settled in London than he began in earnest his French Revolution. After much struggling and gloom, many disappointments, much fear of want, and some serious thoughts of emigrating to America, the French Revolution appeared. It came from the depths of his soul and established his position as a man

of letters. His own remarks with reference to this book were, "I know not whether the book is worth anything nor what the world will do with it, or misdo or entirely forbear to do, as is likeliest; but this I could tell the world: You have not had for one hundred years a book that comes more direct and flamingly from the heart of a living man, do what you like with it, you—". A little later in a letter to Sterling he characterised it as a wild savage book, itself a kind of French Revolution. Carlyle now tried lecturing and for four seasons he delivered courses of lectures in London. As a lecturer, he was well received, his best course was perhaps Heroes and Hero Worship. The revenue from the Revolution, from the lectures and some remittances from America removed forever the fears of want that had so hampered him heretofore.

His next great work was Oliver Cromwell. It came forth from months of study, struggling, despondency and urged to meet with a very favorable reception. Carlyle having finished Cromwell cast a glance at the political condition of Europe. The Irish people were starving, England

statesman were forerunners of progress and reform,
France was in the throes of her second Revolution.
All Europe was quaking in dread of a volcanic
eruption about to break forth, no one knew where.
Carlyle by no means contented with himself, far
less contented with the political situation and
outlook determined to tell England and English
statesman what he thought of them, the institu-
tions of their founding and their legislatures,
and he did not do it in a graceful manner,
nor in a pleasant humor. No more vigorous
or biliary series of political pamphlets ever appeared
than the Latter Day Pamphlets. They came as
the disordered dreams dictated by a horrid
nightmare. This effusion did England no harm
and it was of immense benefit to Carlyle. He
had had his say and felt better. His life of
Sterling was now a pleasant past time before
he should turn his attention to his last great
work, his life of Frederick the Great - a book
long premeditated and one that occupied him
until his seventieth year. His work was inter-
rupted by the terrible blow that came to him in the

death of his mother, by the destruction founded of the Crimean war, and by a very painful and almost fatal accident to Mrs Carlyle. At last the work was done, his last of importance and in some respects, his greatest. He laid his pen aside. He found little use for it afterward.

Iron came a crushing blow. While he was absent in Scotland where he had gone to be installed as rector of the University of Edinburgh, Mrs Carlyle died very suddenly while she was being driven about the streets of London in her carriage. Carlyle never fully recovered from the blow. The remaining years of his life were darkened with the regret that he had so grossly neglected his wife. He survived her fourteen years. His right hand had so failed him that he could write but little, he could not learn to dictate. A few sketches and a few political letters, notably one to the Times during the Franco-German war closed the literary career of the Sage of Chelsea. He was given much to reflection, to speculations with regard to the future, often bemoaning that death was so long denied him, regretting

even that he was denied the privilege of
breaking jail with a suicides hand. Shortly
before his death he said to his physician. The only
thing you could do, you must not do - that is, help
me make an end of this". The end so long delayed
came on the morning of Feb. 5, 1881, and the
little village of Ecclefechan received back in
her church yard the body of the great man whose
birth she announced eighty five years before.

It is not at all strange that so many and
so varied opinions of Carlyle have been entertain-
ed by capable men. His character was angular,
irregular and massive. The viewpoints are many.
From the standpoint of the evangelical
Christian he is not a towering peak all bathed
in celestial light. Heavy and deep shadows
settle around him, but only the most bigoted
will be ready to unqualifiedly denounce him.
He has left his mark upon the thinking world.
Morality and Christianity will use many of
the weapons he has forged.

In character and opinions Carlyle possessed
a striking originality. And yet he was not a

certain degree the product of certain influences - for no man however great his natural endowments can throw off all allegiance to circumstances. He only makes them his allies. In any country and at any time Carlyle would have been a great a marked man. Under any other conditions and at any other time he would not have been Thomas Carlyle. He was very susceptible of impressions without yielding to them. That which touched him made no impression on the surface, but thrilled him to the heart.

The strongest external factor in the life of Carlyle was the early influence and teachings of his parents. Most prominent here was his fathers intellectuality, his mothers deep and earnest piety. The fathers manner of thinking and speaking live for us to-day in the books of his son, and however far Carlyle may have wandered from his mothers faith, its early impress was deep and lasting, both in his intellectual and moral make-up. The natural scenery with which he was surrounded in his boyhood and in his early manhood was a

factors of no mean importance. The circumstances and privations of his school life affected him far more than the courses of study he pursued and the instructors with whom he came in contact and had a far deeper significance than the dyspepsia they left ~~behind~~ ^{with him}. Germany had much to do with what he should be and do. Early he was a close student of German literature. Of all men Goethe influenced him most. And but for the stimulant and encouragement and cooperation of Jane Welsh Carlyle the outcome of his life in word and character would have been far different.

Germany, England and Scotland each contributed to Carlyle's make up - Scotland most largely and while he would have been recognized the world over as a Scotchman, yet he was by no means the typical Scotchman. I have often thought of him in connection with John Knox and Thomas Chalmers. Chalmers was nearer the typical Scotchman than either of the others. Each influenced Scotland, England and the thinking world. Chalmers has deeper perhaps than the other two, yet more briefly

Carlyle will perhaps be more widely known. Knox was the more daring but no one of them knew what it was to fear. Each possessed a vigorous intellect and rugged character. Chalmers had the richest heart and his life had most sunshine. Knox awakened fear, Chalmers excited love, Carlyle provoked admiration and wonder. Knox was the Reformer, Chalmers the Preacher and Carlyle the Doctor.

Carlyle possessed an undomitable will a violent and petulant temper, an imagination of rare brilliancy and fertility and too powerful at times for his judgement. At times he was impatient moody irritable and even violent. By nature he was shy, yet he possessed an unusual degree of arrogance. He was frank even to rudeness. Collision with those who differed from him fostered his imperiousness. He could brook no contradiction and was too little inclined to credit those who disagreed with him with common honesty. His nature was one of wild restlessness and naturally distrustful of women both he and his wife lived in an atmosphere of perpetual scorn, scorn for themselves as well as for others.

through which a humor played dazzling and destruction as the lightning. Yet strange to say he remained high minded to the last. Sad by nature, such a development could but deepen ~~his~~ ^{the natural} gloom in which he lived. He was uncomfortable and dissatisfied and possessed the faculty of making everybody around him ² uncomfortable if not misery. His natural disposition and his ill health were yoked together. This must go far toward excusing some of his shortcomings. But on the other hand it must be said that Carlyle more often plied the whip to those steeds of ~~rough~~ ^{darkness} than tightened rein.

It must be said however that Carlyle carried his worst side out. He was kind hearted and at times even benevolent. His heart was better than his head and did not always acknowledge the supremacy of the head.

Some of his benevolences, his thought and his care for his mother, his self denial in order that he might assist his brother John to an education, his inspiring words to his faltering brother afford a pleasant relief from the impatience that he too often

exhibited in his own home over the petty annoyances of life. When we see how he could play the hero at times we are impatient with him when he so far forgets himself as to cry "murder" over a little dyspepsia or sleeplessness, or become petulantly peevish and unreasonable as a squalling child, if his neighbors daughter happened to strike the key of a piano or his cocks welcomed the approach of day.

The key word of Carlyle's character is force. I might almost say destructive force. He was a man of war and not of peace. He admired the wildness of the storm rather than the gentle rays of the sun. In nature that which attracted him was the wild, the rugged, the ragged and the awful. His heroes were men of force, violence and generally men of blood. He loved the past largely because it was blood red. Cromwell and Frederick were his heroes largely because of what they destroyed. This was the element in Luther, John Knox, Mohammed, the old Norse kings and even the Hebrew prophets that attracted him. Wherever Carlyle found force

little matter how it was employed, there he built his altar and there he worshipped. He loved to see the multitude sway before the power of one man. The periods of history that he studied were those of conflict, the tendencies that he traced destructive rather than constructive. He had rather see the building fall than watch it rise, no matter with what skill and rapidity it was constructed.

In his own word he was true to the ideals he worshipped. He professed deep sympathy for the constructive forces of society, yet his own hand was lifted to throw down rather than to build up, his voice was raised to denounce rather than to commend. In his eagerness to point out the faults of society he forgot to suggest a remedy. He drove men rather than called them. He commanded but did not lead. If men obeyed him it was because they had to rather than because they wanted to. His language and his tone were never conciliatory. He worshipped force and used force. When he dealt with men, he lashed them

unmercifully. Mankind in general were created
only for the special convenience of the strong.

As we read the life of Carlyle, we cannot but
notice the lack of tenderness. His Character
was not adorned by those milder, softer traits
He was strong but he was terribly stern. Love had
but little place in his character, and received but
little recognition from him.

Second to force perhaps came sincerity. I
think you would call it sincerity yet it was strangely
mingled with self-consciousness and even egotism.
The effect was a strange one. It produced in Carlyle
a sort of self-deception to which he gave the name
of "Eternal Verity" and to which he clung with
all the tenacity of his nature.

Few men entering upon a literary career have
set before themselves a higher ideal, and none have
adhered more closely to self-prescribed rules. He
determined never to write an insincere word, never to
write what he did not believe and never to write for money
simply. It was a hard fight for him through those
long dreadful years of his poverty. Tempting offers
were held out to him. His loyalty to himself cost him

the Editorship of the Edinburgh Review, a position on the times, the favor and patronage of the Whig leaders whom he sadly needed it. Yet he could truly say at the close of his life, "I have kept my faith."

We can but admire the persistency with which he called the attention of England to German literature; when he knew it was costing him his popularity. He did not stop when England cried enough, but claimed the right of judging for himself.

His earnestness bears testimony to his sincerity. Jeffreys objected to him that he was too terribly in earnest. This earnestness confronts you in his every sentence. Yet I cannot help believing it was in part due to his self-consciousness. Carlyle never quite forgot himself. The lack of simplicity in his style betrays self-consciousness. His opinion was not that obtrusive spirit, neither was it that shortsighted love of self, so often witnessed in little men, ~~his plain sincerity before truth~~. No ^{other} man has written such denunciations of Shaws. Whether he was utterly free from what he denounced as cant or not, can be seriously questioned. Just what he believed cant to be he has never told us. Was Carlyle deceived? He never suspected it. He was sincere in what he said and did and

He was generally consistent.

Force and Sincerity, then, were the striking element in his character. Had they been directed and unkindled by love, the outcome of Carlyle's life would have been far different. Margaret Gordon, a brilliant young woman who for a time dazzled Carlyle, the original of Blumine in Sartor Resartus very correctly estimated his character and advised him well in the letter that closed their correspondence. "And now, my dear friend, a long, long adieu; one advice and as a parting one consider, value it. Cultivate the wilder dispositions of your heart. Subdue the more extravagant visions of your brain. In time your abilities must be known. Among your acquaintances they are already beheld with wonder and delight. By those whose opinion will be valuable they hereafter will be appreciated. Genius will render; may virtue render you beloved! Remove the awful distance between you and ordinary men by kind and gentle manners. Deal gently with their infirmities and be convinced that they will respect you as much and like you more. ~~Why~~ Why conceal the real goodness that flows in your heart? Let your light shine before men and think them not unworthy the trouble. This exercise will prove its own adieu." The advice was not heeded. The prophecy was fulfilled. The prayer

was not answered. Genius did make him great. "The awful distance" was not removed and Carlyle never ceased to think contemptuously of his inferiors.

Many of Carlyle's opinions have already been suggested. A few of the more important ones demand greater prominence. In speaking of the opinions of great men, we can generally distribute them among a few well known general classes. But Carlyle is an exception. In politics he belonged to no party; in religion to no sect. He is a solitary figure. He had a creed of his own and that creed was at the same time political and religious. He believed in "a gospel of force," rather than a gospel of love. The political workings of his creed is shown in his French Revolution and in his Latter Day Pamphlets, while in Sartor Resartus we have a highly wrought history of his own spiritual conflicts. His life of Sterling also reveals much of the workings of his spiritual nature. He drank deeply of the Calvinistic spirit. This spirit manifested itself in both his political and religious opinions. He began with a very low estimate of the capacity, the importance or the desert of the ordinary man. He saw little possibility for development of character. Men were made to work and if they did not choose to work they ought to be made to work under the lash. As he turned with all the

fierce-ness of his nature upon the idleness and pleasure-seeking of the aristocracy while on the other hand he considered slavery the best condition of very many negroes. Very naturally he regarded with disfavor all democratic tendencies and all movements in the direction of popular government. His attention was called to America as disproving all his theories and he answered, "Cease to brag to me of America, her model institutions and constitutions. America's battle is yet to fight." The following extract from his published works will be interesting as indicating something of Carlyle's views with regard to our civil war.

"Peter of North (to Paul of South) Paul you unaccountable scoundrel, I find you hire your servants for life, not by the month or year as I do. You are going straight to hell, you —"

"Paul: Good words Peter. The risk is my own. I am willing to take the risk. Hire your servants by the month or the day and get straight to heaven; learn me to my own method."

"Peter: No I won't. I will beat your brains out first. (And is trying dreadfully ever since but cannot yet manage it.)" To his mind liberty was more disastrous to the slave than slavery.

Entirely in line with this was his bitter words about
prison reform, his contempt for the character and work
of Howard and Elizabeth Fry, whom he regarded as
sickly sentimentalists. As a corollary to his opposition
to democratic tendencies came his terrible denunciations
of Mr Gladstone and Mr Bright. He took little comfort
in the advancement of science and ^{while he was a leading spirit in the founding of the London Library he} generally opposed
any movement in the direction of popular education.

But on the other hand he had the profoundest contempt
for the Utilitarian Philosophy of his day. His French
Revolution was written to tell the world that he believed
most thoroughly in a retributive providence in the
affairs of nations. He clapped his hands in an almost
childish glee over the Franco Prussian war, "Told you so."

In religion Carlyle has been called a Calvinistic
sceptic. Religious, he was, but not Christian. Yet he
showed great respect for the Christian religion. It was
a species of old Hebrew clothing that the world had long
since outgrown. Yet he admitted at present there was
nothing to take its place, and to cast it off entirely would
therefore be perilous. It was much better than nakedness.
This made him reluctant to put forth some of his opinions
on what he called an "Exodus from Horeb's ditch."

Speaking of the Church of England, he once said, "Your rusty kettle will boil your water for you if you don't try to mend it." He was very impatient with the Altheimer tendencies of his time and reproached himself that he had seemed at times to advance that tendency. Yet Carlyle's God was after the model of the Calvinistic Conception of the Divine Being. Power and Retribution frowned upon him from the Eternal Throne. He held to the doctrine of a special providence, yet he regarded life as something essentially bad, but bearable because it might be so much worse. He did not believe in a special revelation from God, yet never stated the considerations that led him to this conclusion. The miraculous and the Supernatural never disturbed him. Everything was miraculous. In his letters he referred frequently to prayer. But his notions of prayer were Pantheistic. "Silence was the most sensible prayer". In one place he says, "No prayer, I find can be more appropriate still to express my feelings ^{ideas} and wishes in the highest direction than the universal one of Pope.

Frederick says the Scandinavian Gods were nearer to him than the Hebrew's God. He clung desperately to the doctrine of immortality while he rejected the

Resurrection of Christ. Says Mr. Froude "He did not believe in Historical Christianity. He did not believe the facts alleged by the Apostles had ever happened. The Resurrection of Christ was to him only a symbol of a spiritual truth. As Christ rose from the dead so man will rise from the death of sin to the life of righteousness. Not that Christ had actually died and risen again. He was only believed to have died and believed to have risen ^{in an} ~~age~~ age when legend was history, when stories were accepted as true for their beauty or significance."

Farrar in his Critical History of Free Thought says that "Carlyle is the highest type of the antagonistic position which literature now assumes in reference to the Christian faith. In every branch of literature which he has surveyed he has made it his mission to expose the hollow formalism; the cold materialism which he considers that the Utilitarian Philosophy had produced. 'Self in the sense of selfishness and God as the artificial property of a party' these have been said to be the two faults which he sees in politics, in science, in law, in literature, in religion; and to oppose the march of objective knowledge, to call man to a recognition of himself, to the unaltering spiritual laws stamped in the spiritual structure of the human

Consciousness and to God as the Eternal Infinite Divinity whose presence fills Creation this is the mission he has striven to effect

"Yet can there be no doubt that the victory of this great truth is won at the sacrifice of others -- In elevating the doctrine of the revelation of the soul, he regards as unnecessary the revelation in a book, his teaching tends to inculcate a worship of earnestness and to ignore all consideration of the object toward which the earnestness is directed. In asserting the reality of spiritual laws in the soul he has implied the veracity of all religions caring only for the subjective zeal of the believer, not for the objects of his belief. In opposing the mechanical view of the universe, he is so overwhelmed with the mystery that belongs to it that the soul recoils in the hopelessness of speculation to rest content with work rather than belief. And his readers attracted by his power of satire and depth of insight expressed in a style full of force because of its peculiarity, return to their daily life after imbibing his teaching excited to greater earnestness and faithfulness, but filled it is to be feared with a contempt for objection systems, with dogmatic truth and for the Christian Creed."

We may admire Carlyle, we may take advantage of much that he did, for he did much good, but we

must regard him as a doubtful ally. Mr. Froude would make him a great prophet comparable with St. Paul, the greatest religious teacher since the days of the great apostle, but Carlyle's life, his character and the opinion he advocated rise up against such a claim. The brightness of that self-denying life and the teachings of him who was the light of the world reveal to clearly great imperfections. Love was absent, despair had conquered hope and faith was weak. We are not called to witness splendid examples of self-sacrifice or self-denial. We do not find in Carlyle patience and resignation. Whatever may be his eminence in literature and however authoritatively he may speak in that department, we cannot admit Mr. Froude's claim for him. He was not a prophet. The world has had many ~~and~~ better and safer religious teachers. The only comparison with St. Paul is by contrast. Their whole lives are contrasted. The most striking contrast is the way in which they approached the end. "The only thing you can do, you must not do, that is help me make an end of this" is the will of

Carlyle. "For I am now ready to be offered,
and the time of my departure is at hand.
I have fought a good fight; I have kept the
faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me
a crown of righteousness, which the Lord the
righteous judge shall give ~~and~~ me at that
day: and not to me only, but unto all
them that love his appearing," is the shout
of St. Paul. The one is a wail, the other
a shout. Humanity knows how to wail
better for it that it should learn to shout.

John L. Hillman

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B. U. A. G. }