



A Newly Acquired Thomas Carlyle Letter, Likely to Moncure Conway

THIS BRIEF LETTER CAME ON THE AUCTION MARKET FROM THE Swann Gallery as Sale 2333, Lot 266, late in 2013, and, typically, Melvin Schuetz of the Armstrong Browning Library at Baylor University was the first to bring it the attention of editors of *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*. In the Swann catalog, only the reverse side of the letter was exhibited, and the recipient was listed as “unnamed.” Schuetz and his library did not bid for this item, but Will Hansen of the newly endowed David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Special Collections library at Duke University submitted the winning bid of \$313, and now the complete letter is available to all Carlyle scholars. Though the print edition has chronologically passed the point of 1863 events, this “Too Late” letter will be added in due course to *The Carlyle Letters Online*.



Chelsea, 20 May 1863

Dear Sir,— I have got a Horse again; and usually go riding, instead of walking. However, if you will come Tomorrow (Thursday) a little after 3 p.m.,—say, a quarter past three, and not beyond half past, we shall have a walk together, and I shall be glad to hear your news.

Yours sincerely
T. Carlyle



Thomas Carlyle (TC) had received the horse “Noggs” on 16 May 1863 as a gift from Lady Ashburton, and he had immediately restored to his daily schedule a regular afternoon ride in place of an afternoon walk as a constitutional digestive. The unnamed recipient of this letter was almost certainly

the Virginia abolitionist and Ralph Waldo Emerson acolyte Moncure Conway, who had first met TC on 1 May at Cheyne Row at a somewhat bizarre evening tea that included another American, the racist Ambassador James Shepherd Pike, Republican of Maine. TC was frequently visited by Americans, mostly Southerners who in one way or another were seeking his support for the Confederate cause, and his positive views on involuntary servitude, if controversial then, are now entirely repugnant to most modern readers (for which read the MS fragments from *Shooting Niagara: And After?* [pages 11–23 of this issue] and the earlier “Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question” [*Fraser’s Magazine* (December 1849): 670–79]). Whereas another Virginian, the Confederate emissary and editor John Reuben Thompson, brought TC gifts of choice Virginia tobacco for his pipe, Conway, the son of slave owners with a plantation on the Rappahannock River a few miles northwest of Fredericksburg, Virginia, brought to England the manumission gospel espoused in Concord, Massachusetts, and other enlightened Northern communities. TC listened to him politely, perhaps with some pity. The “news” that TC was “glad to hear” was likely within a letter from Emerson to Conway, recently received. Six days later, 27 May, in a letter to his brother John, TC reported: “My Emerson man came back, insisting on ‘a Walk’ with me and got his poor heart shocked by my views upon the Nigger Question, upon Philanthropy &c &c: a good creature but extremely mad [*CL* 39: 138].”

Conway remembered the occasion with considerable Christian charity and forgiveness:

My second interview with him was during a walk which he had invited me to take with him. On the appointed moment of the afternoon I arrived, and was shown into the room at the top of the house where he was writing his history of Frederick. . . . When we started on our walk he began at once upon America, the ballot-box, and negro emancipation. . . . “A lie can never be uttered in this world but those who utter it will be paid for it what they deserve. Nothing I have ever witnessed so fills me with astonishment and sorrow as the present condition of things in America. I see it all as fire rained out of the heavens.” I said I quite agreed, but should probably differ from him as to the evil the fire was raining on.

He said, "Ah, I was once an emancipator, too . . . but I came to see that I was following a delusion." . . . It was impossible not to love this man, however much I might deplore his opinions about slavery, so entirely was he speaking what he regarded as truth, and so guileless was his whole expression. The humility that is characteristic of all real genius was very striking in Carlyle. In his talk the personal reference was rarely made unless it was to mention, as in the above remark, some error into which he had fallen. . . . It was impossible with this frank, outspoken man not to enter at once upon the great social problems of the hour; though he seized upon them and went on in wonderful monologue, with pressure full and high whether going with or against the sentiment around him. It was formidable; whilst he spoke I felt a dreary skepticism chilling me, and seemed to hear cries of despair coming out of the heart of nature. All was going wrong; our ballot-boxings, our negro emancipations, our cries for liberty, all showing nothing but that nations were given over to believe a lie and be damned. Possibly, indeed, the only way to Paradise lay thus through hell; but what the people were seeking thus they would never obtain. Not New Jerusalem but New Gehenna they would find it. . . . "Ballot-boxing! Why we have tried that *vox populi* in England As soon as your ballot-box is opened, out springs the most whippable rascal that can be found. You know well that in America, for years, you have had your meanest men in the White House." (Conway, *Autobiography* 1: 352-54).

Several pages later Conway offers an illuminating and fascinating coda:

Once when his brother, Dr. John Carlyle, was present, we two and Mrs. Carlyle being the only listeners, Carlyle referred to slavery. "I have no dislike of the negroes. By wise and kindly treatment they might have been made into a happy and contented labouring population. I do not wish for them any condition which I would not under like circumstances wish for myself. No man can have anything better than the protection and guidance of one wiser and better than himself, who would feed and clothe him and heal him if he were sick, and get out of him the exact kind of work that he is competent

to achieve. Many a man is driven by cruel mastery of circumstance and want to do whatever will yield him a crust of bread, and others never master what they have ability to achieve in these days of emancipation. . . .” When the Union war had nearly closed, Carlyle spoke so stormily against emancipation that Mrs. Carlyle—the only other present—interrupted him. “Carlyle,” she said “you ought not to talk so about his cause to a man who has suffered and made sacrifices for it.” Carlyle, who always took his wife’s reproof meekly, turned to me and said softly, “You will be patient with me. All the worth you have put into your cause will be returned to you personally; but the America for which you are hoping you will never see; and never see the whites and blacks in the South dwelling together as equals in peace.” . . . How often in these last years have I reason to remember that prophecy! (Conway, *Autobiography* 1: 357–58)

David Southern



A Checklist of the Carlyle Letters and Manuscripts Held at the Armstrong Browning Library, Baylor University

SCHOLARS KNOW THE ARMSTRONG BROWNING LIBRARY, LOCATED in Waco, Texas, at Baylor University, as a world-class research library devoted to the study of the lives and works of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. In addition to housing the world’s largest collection of books, letters, manuscripts, and memorabilia related to the Brownings, the ABL houses a substantial collection of primary and secondary materials related to nineteenth-century literature and culture, including works by literary figures who were contemporaries and associates of the Brownings such as Matthew Arnold, Charles Dickens, George