

“Freedom to point out the way”:
James Fitzjames Stephen’s Essay on
Thomas Carlyle in *Fraser’s Magazine*,
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WRITING TO HIS BROTHER JOHN ON 2 DECEMBER 1865, Thomas Carlyle commended a review of the collected edition of his works by James Fitzjames Stephen (1829–94; *ODNB*) in the December issue of *Fraser’s Magazine*: “[It] is really goodish; thinking you w^d wish perhaps to read it . . . I mean to despatch it on monday. . . . Stephen is the late Sir James Stⁿ’s Son; a rising Lawyer, and really an honest intellig^t kind of man” (MS NLS 526.35, published with kind permission of the National Library of Scotland). Stephen first visited Cheyne Row in the early 1850s in the company of his father, Sir James Stephen (1789–1859; *ODNB*), colonial under-secretary, and his younger brother, Leslie (1832–1904; *ODNB*), future editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Fitzjames had recently graduated from Trinity College Cambridge and was studying law at the University of London. At the Cambridge Union he enjoyed a reputation as a “merciless exposor of platitudes and shams” (Leslie Stephen 98), and his intellectual abilities had won him election to the Cambridge Apostles. He was intrigued by Carlyle’s craggy bluntness and he persisted in his visits, despite being mistaken on one occasion as an American tourist by Jane Welsh Carlyle. It was not merely Carlyle’s prickly and idiosyncratic personality that appealed to him. Though he professed to be a Benthamite, he quietly realized the validity of Carlyle’s pointed assessment of the movement in *Heroes and Hero-Worship* (1841):

“Benthamism has something complete, manful, in such fearful committal of itself to what it finds true; you may call it Heroic, though a Heroism with its *eyes* put out!” (*Heroes* 148).

The publication of John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* (1859) reinforced Stephen’s growing skepticism of the “felicitific calculus” and its leveling effects on the civic life of Victorian democracy. A distinguished lawyer as well as a brawling and prolific journalist, Stephen observed society from an eclectic range of vantage points. He was a bluff believer in what his younger brother Leslie referred to as “virility” of judgment and he deeply distrusted Mill’s “bloodless” and abstract “philosophical asceticism.” Fitzjames felt it was rooted in Mill’s impulse to subordinate history to a pattern of political and economic progress, which reflected his inveterate desire to “turn [his] eyes away from the dark side of the world.” For Mill, Stephen declared, “half the feelings which moved mankind seemed . . . simply coarse and brutal” (Leslie Stephen, 230, 316, 314, 316). But as Carlyle had memorably demonstrated in *The French Revolution* (1837), great movements could be driven by sentiments that at first appeared to be “coarse and brutal.” Mill shared the conceptual flaws that he inherited from his father James and his mentor Bentham. The “greatest happiness of the greatest number” diminished human worth by measuring individuals too closely in relation to their habits of consumption and production in a free market economy. Utilitarians promoted a bland equality that disregarded natural distinctions and gave priority to self-satisfaction, efficiency, uniformity, and average ability.

In *On Liberty*, Mill himself had acknowledged the pervasiveness of these trends: “In sober truth, whatever homage may be professed, or even paid, to real or supposed mental superiority, the general tendency of things throughout the world is to render mediocrity the ascendant power among mankind.” He conceded that Carlylean heroes were vital to the health of society—“The initiation of all wise and noble things comes and must come from individuals; generally at first from some one individual”—but he adamantly refused to countenance “the sort of hero-worship which applauds the strong man of genius for forcibly seizing on the government of the world and making it do his bidding in spite of itself. All he can claim is freedom

to point out the way" (73–74). But in circumstances in which a "smug, placid, contemptible optimism is creeping like a blight over the face of society, and suppressing all the grander aspirations of the more energetic times" (Leslie Stephen 314), Fitzjames argued, more liberty was not necessarily a welcome antidote. In his writings Carlyle had raised legitimate and enduring concerns about this "blight" that Mill failed to address adequately. Stephen was determined to redeem Carlyle as a social critic of the first rank who deserved to be taken seriously, especially by Benthamite liberals. They might discover that Carlyle had cleared a path for them to follow, if they were prepared to penetrate the smoke of his rhetoric and heed the fire at its core.

Stephen's Benthamite apostasy can be discerned in his changing attitudes towards Carlyle's writings. In his essay "Mr. Carlyle" that he wrote in the 19 June 1858 issue of the *Saturday Review* and reprinted in *Essays by a Barrister* (1862), he praised the author's artistry and genius, but faulted him for "the turn of mind which leads its possessors to sit on a hill retired and make remark upon men and things instead of taking part in the common affairs of life" (243). According to Stephen, Carlyle's chief defect was his remoteness from his surroundings: "When a man or things stands far enough from Mr. Carlyle to enable him to view it and paint it as a whole, he does so with admirable artistic effect, though with questionable correctness. . . . He is, on the whole, one of the greatest wits and poets, but the most untrustworthy moralist and politician, of our age and nation" (253). Stephen's emphasis shifted notably in a review that he wrote of Carlyle's *Frederick the Great* in the *Saturday Review* of 22 April 1865. Carlyle's biography, marked as it was by "a passion for accuracy of detail," reflected the author's balanced approach to his subject. Contrary to popular perceptions, there was no trace of hagiography in the book. Frederick was "neither too bad nor too good. He worked towards ends that cannot be called mean or purely selfish, and he showed unconquerable tenacity in his manner of working" (476).

Though Carlyle was unaware that Stephen had written the review of *Frederick*, he was typically receptive to its criticism. He thanked John Carlyle for sending him the piece, which he "found really entertaining in a degree,—and greatly superior

to some balderdash of the *Times* wh^h Miss Jewsbury [Geraldine Jewsbury] left here one day" (24 April 1865; MS NLS 517.89, published with kind permission of the National Library of Scotland). The *Times* reviewer had merely summarized the contents of the final two volumes of *Frederick*, noting that "Mr. Carlyle . . . may repose on his laurels. The great soldier of the 18th century is indebted to him for the best conceivable history of his military exploits and his domestic administration" (18 April). Such appraisals offended Carlyle because they bracketed him with his antiquarian nemesis, "Dryasdust." In his view, history was a living phenomenon that should always be urgently engaged with the controversies of the present as well as the past. In the *Saturday Review* piece, Stephen shrewdly gauged what Carlyle had achieved in *Frederick the Great*. He had represented the Prussian king as an embattled foe of fashionable Enlightenment "doggeries": liberty, democracy, *laissez-faire*, individualism, private property, the rule of law, and constitutional government. "Fritz" was a wise and successful governor because he steadfastly refused to endorse these panaceas.

Stephen probed Carlyle's motives with trenchant irony. The author's persistent reservations about his "questionable hero" (*Works* 12: 14) seemed to contradict his instincts as a hero-worshipper: "[T]he life of Frederick totally fails to give Mr. Carlyle scope for his power of seizing that which is pious, noble, and good in the characters of pious, noble, and good men" (476). Yet despite these qualms about Frederick's amorality and cynicism, Carlyle persevered in the biography. Stephen explains, "It is not so much [Frederick's] aim, as the mode in which his carried out his aims, that gives [him] so high a place in Mr. Carlyle's estimation. He was wholly inattentive to the doggeries, and this is what makes him so dear to his biographer" (476). Carlyle overlooked his subject's personal flaws as long as he continued to defy sacrosanct Enlightenment orthodoxies. For example, he lauded the King's intervention in the dispute between a poor Miller and a rich property owner who lawfully took his mill-water away. A lawyer and future judge, Stephen briskly summarizes Carlyle's perverse logic in endorsing the King's heavy-handed actions: "[Frederick's] unerring sagacity taught him that what a poor man says must be true, and that what a poor man claims must be just; and for not seeing this,

but for honestly abiding by their own views of law, he sent the judges themselves to prison—thus showing, as Mr. Carlyle says, that he had very little sympathy for mere respectability” (477).

Still, Stephen insisted that Carlyle’s skepticism about the “questionable” Frederick suggested that the author was less hostile to the liberal “doggeries” than he pretended. Carlyle “is a very honest man,” Stephen observes, “and he never consciously carries his theory further than he thinks it warranted; and if an objection to it crosses his mind, he lets his readers know his thoughts” (476). Evidently fascinated by the contradictory fault-lines that ran through the writings of Carlyle, Stephen began to compose an extensive commentary on his collected works, including *Frederick the Great*. Leslie Stephen later remarked that “[a]lthough Fitzjames views changed, he could never become a thorough Carlylean.” He was commissioned by John Morley to write a study of Carlyle for the English Men of Letters series, which began in 1878, but Fitzjames “abandoned the attempt chiefly because . . . he found that he should have to adopt too frequently the attitude of a hostile critic” (Leslie Stephen 203). Yet his remarkable essay in *Fraser’s* betrays little sign of outright hostility. On the contrary, it richly exhibits Carlyle’s ability to inspire his opponents to challenge his verdicts.

In undertaking to discuss Carlyle’s “general principles” and his “view of the social and political condition of the country,” Stephen also pledged to correct some of the false accusations that were directed against him. Ironically, the most frequently expressed complaint—“that Mr. Carlyle is a mere Jeremiah, and that his lamentations have no practical issue or application”—was one that Stephen had articulated in 1858. In the *Fraser’s* essay, he firmly rejects this charge: “Mr. Carlyle’s object is to exhort his readers to truth, industry, fortitude, justice, belief and trust in God, and other things admitted by moralists at all times and countries to be the cardinal and fundamental virtues.” Moreover, in these exhortations, Carlyle tenaciously grounded his reasoning in lived experience. Particularly in his role as a historian, Stephen contends, Carlyle exhibits a stubborn fidelity to the evidence: “In all English literature there is not to be found an instance of a historian who shows such industry and shrewdness in the investigation of matters of fact.” Employing a metaphor familiar to his profession, Stephen

declares, "No attorney preparing a brief for counsel could have taken so much pains to get legal evidence of every fact which could possibly be relevant to the cause, as Mr. Carlyle has taken to elucidate everything which can in any way be brought to bear upon the history of his various heroes." Carlyle's bias in favor of the actual is not incidental but central to his character and to his vision: "It is entirely in harmony with the whole of his philosophy, which might almost be described as fact-worship."

Having established Carlyle's exemplary credentials as a practical seer, Stephen then boldly enlisted him as an ally in the Utilitarian cause. Carlyle had anticipated the two leading "doggeries" of the day, "Benthamism and Democracy." In *Latter-Day Pamphlets* he castigated Benthamism as the "pig philosophy" that underpinned democracy, "which is its political equivalent." But unwittingly, he also provided the advocates of these "doggeries" with luminous historical examples of "the essential identity of might and right." In his analysis of Protestantism, Islam, Puritanism, and Sansculottism, he showed how "might and right" intersected and prevailed against injustice, corruption, and despotism. "Benthamism and Democracy" had now advanced beyond these movements. They "constitute one of the greatest works that was ever done in the world, and that in a way in which no Cromwell, Mahomet, or other individual hero could possibly do it, however much his heroism and kingship might be recognized by mankind." Through patient debate and arduous negotiation, "the collective king" of Benthamite democracy has emerged as a force of good, seeking "to do justice, to benefit mankind, and to produce gradually a higher form of life than we see at present." Carlyle's connection to this process remains enigmatic, or as Brent E. Kinser has framed it, "purely accidental" (14). On the one hand, Carlyle strengthened it by helping to unleash its moral and emotional fervor. On the other, he obstructed it by deriding its ideals and objectives. Whereas Kinser contends that Carlyle was "perhaps too fond of trying to reach those who refused to listen by shocking them" (13), Stephen regrets that Carlyle "does not see that in pouring upon us the vials of his wrath, he is really hitting his friends, who have been guilty of no other offence but that of trying to give a definite practical shape to much of his own teaching." In Stephen's estimate,

Carlyle was a prophet without disciples only because he has failed to comprehend the repercussions of his own divinations.

Adroitly recalling Carlyle's description of Benthamism as "eyeless Heroism" (*Heroes* 149), Stephen unflinchingly confronted the most egregious instance of Carlyle's myopia as a social thinker. His support of slavery, buttressed by his antipathy to the "cash nexus" of *laissez-faire*, highlighted the dangers of his self-proclaimed love of paradox. Carlyle's effort to strike a shocking and unexpected pose in relation to slavery—characteristic of a thinker who believed that "it is only by the use of humour and paradox that he can give full scope to his feelings"—backfired because he failed to see that the issue was inimical to his approach. He assumed that he could ridicule both sides in the debate by juxtaposing their certitudes, but his literary predilections obscured his historical judgment. His injunctions to "save the precious thing in [slavery]" was brutally contradicted by the facts. Stephen's recapitulation exposed the naïveté of Carlyle's outlook: "Abolish slavery says the one—reform it says the other. Mr. Carlyle entirely omits to notice the fact that it was precisely because long experience and repeated trials showed that it could not possibly be reformed that it was at last abolished." Such blindness linked Carlyle to Bentham, between whom there was "a curious analogy." Yet from Stephen's supple perspective, Utilitarians had much to learn from Carlyle. At once echoing John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty* and undercutting his assumptions, Stephen paraphrased Carlyle's personal credo: "All I can do is to point out to you the general means by which all the evils of human life must be remedied, if they are to be remedied at all." Reassuring the Benthamites among his audience, Stephen concluded, "Surely if this is not practical teaching it is hard to say what it is."

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