

Jane Welsh Carlyle:
A Review of Recent Research, 2004–2013

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TWO PREVIOUS ARTICLES I HAVE PUBLISHED ON THE STATE of JWC research from 1988 to 2003 and from 1974 to 1987 delineate the growing scholarship and appreciation of Jane Welsh Carlyle. Since 2003 research on JWC has not been transformed, but has been appreciably enhanced by new ways of reading her published writings and by increased attention to her life, letters, and other works. No longer considered the victim of a selfish husband and a patriarchal system, JWC is now regarded primarily as a Victorian writer, without equal in the field of personal letters.

Carlyle Studies Annual has continued bringing an increased knowledge of JWC to a small but attentive audience while *The Carlyle Letters Online* provides digital access to the letters and other writings. Two books of essays on the Carlyles have drawn a range of scholarship on JWC. The essays in *The Carlyles at Home and Abroad* (ed. Sorensen and Tarr) offer explanations for her choices and find new ways to interpret JWC, her writings, and her life. Of the 21 essays in this collection, 7 of them concern Jane and 4 are solely about Jane. *Thomas Carlyle Resartus* (ed. Kerry and Hill), although seemingly dedicated to Thomas, contains 2 essays out of 13 that focus primarily on JWC. Much of the scholarship in recent years involves redefining the identity of JWC. Rather than presenting JWC as Thomas Carlyle's wife, scholars are more apt to examine how the role of wife of a literary lion informs her writing.

A few scholars have advanced appreciation of JWC through biographical entries and research guides, but many published reference works are not written by experts and retain older ideas and myths about JWC. Online, the Wikipedia entry remains incomplete, while *The Orlando Project*, an online guide to women's literary history, provides a comprehensive overview of her life and work. The BBC radio broadcast of the Woman's Hour looked at the Carlyles as a celebrity couple (30 April 2004) and made a journey to JWC's Chelsea home (18 August 2011), indicating a more general interest in JWC. Casual mention of JWC among a wider audience sustains the attention she deserves and may lead more readers to her letters. However illusive her presentation of herself, her words continue to captivate readers.

The Letters

The brilliance of JWC's letters is becoming widely known and accepted. John Gross published an article in the *Wall Street Journal* in 2006 on the "Five Best Letter-Writers" stating that her letters are surpassed only by those of John Keats in the nineteenth century. The online publication of the Duke-Edinburgh *Collected Letters (The Carlyle Letters Online)* provides an accessible doorway to all things Carlyle. The complete correspondence (over 3,500 of JWC's letters as well as other writings) will be available online. This site now includes the letters through October 1862; less than five years of JWC's letters remain. Reviewing the Duke-Edinburgh edition, volumes 10–12, Fred Kaplan wrote in 1986 of JWC: "Her own beautifully articulated record of her problems with herself and her society, and her difficult love-hate relationships with women . . . should be one of the basic resources for the study of women in Britain in the nineteenth century. So far, it has hardly been tapped" ("The Emerging Carlyle," *The Arnoldian* 13 [1986]: 54). Although a start has been made, serious scholarship still remains to be done.

The introductions to the volumes suggest different ways of approaching the letters and other writings. Aileen Christianson (*CLO*, vol. 36) takes the reader back to C. R. Sanders's apt description of JWC's literary skills at the start of volume 1: "Her resources of language were remarkable, involving

abundant use of metaphor and great variety and cleverness in making use of the principle of association.” Because of these associations, her private jokes, and use of Scottish words and phrases, her letters are difficult to comprehend without annotation. Janet Ray Edwards surveys Jane’s private coterie speech in the more public context of the Carlyles’ family and friends and demonstrates the skill with which JWC transforms an assemblage of voices into the witty and graphic art that has made her letters a literary treasure.

David R. Sorensen (*CLO*, vol. 37) considers how both Carlyles channel their frustrations toward constructive purposes with the written word. Even in failing health, JWC continued to write. Sheila McIntosh (*CLO*, vol. 33) discusses the complexity of JWC’s letters that depict her as “half-dead” but in a vigorous and amusing way.

Although her writing delights others, it did not always provide relief for her. Kenneth J. Fielding and Sorensen (*CLO*, vol. 30) discuss the unevenness of her writing. Her notebook from 1845–52 shows a decline in the quality of her writing over the seven years, perhaps because she lost interest, or her ability to express herself, or recognized that “her writing about other people and things brought no escape from herself.” In a similar vein Sorensen (*CLO*, vol. 34) notes that JWC has “no outlet for her feelings, even in the act of writing, which becomes a burden that sharpens her sense of estrangement from the world.”

Jane Carlyle: Newly Selected Letters (edited by Fielding and Sorensen) brings a selection of her letters to readers who might be overwhelmed by the Duke-Edinburgh edition. The introduction states that “what emerges from the present selection is someone who is not dramatically changed, but who appears in a brighter and sharper focus, with a different emphasis” (xi). Notes and comments are kept to a minimum, while introductions place the letters within the context of JWC’s life. The letters show the full range of her life and her talent, including her pieces “Budget of a Femme Incomprise” and “Much Ado about Nothing,” Ellen Twisleton’s account of JWC’s experiences at Craigenputtoch, and excerpts from her Journal.

Because there are so many of JWC’s letters, they are often organized around a particular topic or correspondent for

study. For example, Brent E. Kinser considers the relationship between the Carlyles and Rebecca Buffum Spring. Fielding and Mary Sebag-Montefiore's article "Jane Carlyle and Sir Davidson: Belief and Unbelief: The Story of a Friendship" observes the relationship between JWC and Sir David Davidson as shown in their letters and provides insight about JWC's religious beliefs. JWC had known Davidson in childhood and she reconnected with him as an adult. The article reports the common view of JWC's childhood as an ideal time while also making clear her non-traditional religious beliefs that led to her estrangement from Davidson. During the latter part of her life, JWC frequently attempted to connect with her earlier self through contact with her earlier suitors, or reviewing her life at Craigenputtoch (*CLO*, vol. 30), or her earlier self ("Much Ado about Nothing," published in *CLO*, vol. 24) yet she finds no lasting solace in these efforts.

Selections from JWC's letters have been used in a variety of collections of letters, showing the importance of JWC within a larger framework of her friends and the era as a whole. Harold Bloom uses an excerpt from a letter from JWC in *Alfred, Lord Tennyson* that reveals their personal relationship. Thomas F. Glick quotes from JWC in his book *What About Darwin?*, while Deborah Valenze has included a letter from JWC in *Milk: A Local and Global History*. In *Love Letters of Great Women*, Ursula Doyle writes of JWC that she "is routinely referred to as the best letter-writer in the English language" and that "in a different time, she might have achieved success as an artist in her own right" (94). This latter statement harkens back to the notion of Jane Carlyle as a failed artist, someone who might have been a great novelist but never lived up to her potential because of her husband or because of the era. Scholars have reconsidered earlier sources and ideas to dispel this myth and replaced it with recognition of JWC's achieved success as an artist in her own right, not as a novelist but as a letter writer.

Other Works

In addition to her letters, Jane Carlyle left behind a short story, poems, such life writings as journals and memoirs (many are published in volume 30 of the *CLO*), as well as photograph albums (see David Southern) and an illustrated screen in

her Chelsea home. JWC's presentations of herself are always fascinating and differ from "the carefully crafted portrait of herself to be found in her letters" (Christianson, *CLO*, vol. 38). Writing a letter for a known audience was her gift—her other writings are uncertain in their presentation of herself.

The short story, "*The simple Story of my own first Love*," discusses love, an important topic for her at the time she wrote it because of her jealousy over her husband's attentions to Lady Ashburton. Her story is not at all "simple," as it blends fact and fiction, but the author "seems unsure about which is which, or who she is" (*CLO*, vol. 30, Fielding and Sorensen). Kathy Chamberlain views JWC's "*Simple Story*" as an experiment both with fiction and her own identity.

JWC's literary skills are disclosed in her travel writing, according to Aileen Christianson: "Her travel narratives in particular reveal the full range of her talents, conveying a subtle grasp of the ironies implicit in tourist narratives . . . explorations of the return to the familiar, voyages into the new (which are then contained by literary metaphors), and awareness and a critique of the picturesque" (209). JWC's use of language complicates her message and her identity. "Much Ado about Nothing," describing a trip she made to her birthplace of Haddington, ends with the words, "it is only in connection with the Past that I can get a sentiment for myself—The Present Mrs Carlyle is what shall I say?—*detestable*—upon *my* honour!," a statement that uses a quote from the Carlyles' friend Mazzini. In "Finding Tales" Kathy Chamberlain proclaims that she is tired of hearing of "poor" Jane Carlyle and makes a case for the letters as art and also for the stories as showing her competency and cleverness: "Even if the woman existed, like Jane Welsh Carlyle, partly in a prison of society's making, and partly of her own, we can still attempt to go beyond old, patterned ways of seeing and search for glimpses of the live, original human being who once dwelled upon this earth, rendering her tale in ways meaningful to us" (259–60). JWC's forays into different genres indicate the complexity of both her talent and her personality.

The Life

Going back to the beginning of Jane and Thomas's relationship, Norma Clarke and Rosemary Ashton survey the top-

ics on which TC tutored JWC “during their courtship when together they explored the ‘Fairy land’ of Goethe and German literature.” Ashton concludes, “Whatever the well-publicised problems in the marriage, Jane always retained her pride in her husband’s ‘genius.’” In his recent biography of TC, John Morrow assesses the love that the Carlyles had for each other: “Thomas’s commitment to his literary career was endorsed by his wife and formed an important part of their relationship, rather than being something that intruded on it” (27). He blames Thomas for the failure of the relationship, alleging that he was responsible for the deficient finances and the tense atmosphere in the house. According to Morrow, Thomas did not understand the resentment Jane felt towards him, particularly in regard to his relationship with Harriet Lady Ashburton.

While geared more towards TC, the Craigenputtock Carlyle Circle (founded in 2005) is committed to the study of their lives in this home and to its preservation. Although she left Scotland for London, JWC is receiving attention as a Scottish woman. For example, the John Gray Centre lists her as an East-Lothian writer. The website for Welsh Carlyle’s birthplace in Haddington, part of the *Gazetteer for Scotland*, repeats the older view of JWC. Briefly mentioning her life, the site states that after she became TC’s wife, “She devoted the rest of her life to her husband and his work.” Her own accomplishments are never acknowledged.

Aileen Christianson discusses JWC’s work in *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Women’s Writing* (see below). In *Lives of Scottish Women* William W. J. Knox portrays JWC as representative of a woman married to a genius and struggling for equal rights: “The ways in which she defined herself and her marriage succeeded in convincing Thomas, and later biographers, of his guilt, of his wasting of her talent in the service of his career. Jane leaves us an overwhelming image of self-sacrifice and, as a result, we are compelled to share her sense of frustration at being recognized as only the helpmate of genius rather than a talent in her own right.” Pam Perkins, in her introduction to *Women Writers in Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century Edinburgh*, discusses JWC’S relationship with Francis Jeffrey, who joked with JWC about intellectual women while at the same time his association with her indicates his regard for intellectual women—although JWC complains of his flirtatiousness.

Beryl Gray observes the importance of Nero, one member of the Carlyle household who has not hitherto received very much attention. Looking at Robert Scott Tait's painting *A Chelsea Interior* (1858), Gray comments on Jane's engagement with her small, furry dog and her lack of engagement with her husband. She concludes from reading the letters that the dog functions frequently as a reminder of their feelings for each other, and finds that the more JWC was detached emotionally from her husband, the closer she drew to Nero.

Public and Private

One of the most interesting approaches to JWC concerns the distinction between the public and private aspects of her life and writings. Although JWC never published her own writings, TC published many of them after her death, making them public. She was then defined as a writer by others. Aileen Christianson discusses the myth of JWC as a failed novelist, "Frequently and lazily claimed as a 'missing' novelist, her choice was to write privately; her reputation should rest firmly and justifiably on the skill and power of the life-writing that survives" ("Private Writing" 81).

Ian Campbell (*CLO*, vol. 31) comments on the various faces of the Carlyles, "The fascinating counterpoint between the public face of the Carlyles—genial, enthusiastic, passionately friendly—and the more morbid and acid commentary that enlivens their letters is even more vividly present with the counterpoint that is possible only at this period between both their letters and the *Journal*." In another introduction (*CLO*, vol. 35), Campbell writes that visitors to their home in Chelsea left exhilarated by the conversation, energy, and wit of both Carlyles. Their visitors enjoyed themselves because the Carlyles shone in their home environment where they were comfortable. Guests were entertained by their individual conversations as well as the interplay between husband and wife. In addition to the private nature of her writing, scholars have examined JWC's personal property. Jane Carlyle's effects, principally her belongings and her home, have been examined to shed light on aspects of her personality. Jane Roberts and Sarah Olwen Jones use the published letters to show JWC's concerns with presenting herself to the outside world through her house, her servants,

and her dress, all of which are a reflection of the self. Jones finds JWC frequently concerned with wanting to blend in with the outside world, and consequently considering what to wear. She enhanced traditional clothing with her own flourishes.

Like Beryl Gray, Andrea Kaston Tange takes her start from the physical separation between Jane and her husband in the Tait painting, reading this as an indication of their interrelationship. Tange believes that they constantly rebuilt their identities in relation to each other. Jane needed more stimulation than she received from contact with her husband and she received this from conversation with others. In her letters she makes the boring routine of running the household exciting so that she stimulated herself: "While Jane seems clearly to have loved her husband, she also found herself under appreciated, overworked, and frustrated by her position as 'the Lion's Wife.' To remedy this frustration, she sought out excitement, making her domestic life into a series of battles even when there was no need to glorify them as such, simply to create interest in her own life" (133). Thus her battles with bedbugs, crowing cocks, and taxmen become a mock-epic with herself as the hero.

By making the Carlyles' home a museum, the private has again become public. In "Rooms of the Past: Victorian Women Writers, History, and the Reconstruction of Domestic Space" and *Literary Celebrity, Gender, and Victorian Authorship 1850-1914*, Alexis Easley reads the Carlyles' home at 5 Cheyne Row (currently 24) as a symbol of TC's genius and a signifier of JWC's emotional and physical suffering. For Easley, the house functions both as a symbol of the marriage and the controversy over the marriage.

Dispelling Myths

The tendency today is to view JWC in a positive light rather than as a victim. Paul Johnson surveys Jane Welsh Carlyle and Emily Dickinson in a single chapter in his book, *Heroes: From Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar to Churchill and de Gaulle*, but separately rather than together. The author moves from considering the wives and mistresses of the great to examining the real accomplishments of JWC. Whereas he begins by suggesting that JWC was influenced by her husband's style and his hypochondria and that they shared humor, he concludes by

saying “She was a brave soul, and out to be a heroine among those to whom the tragic comedy of life is the stuff of great drama” (153). In “A Not So Simple Story” Brent E. Kinser compares Jane with the title character of Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*, Shirley Keeldar. In his view, Shirley is more of her own woman than a victim, independent and strong, like JWC.

The traditional view of the Carlyle’s marriage may be illustrated by a pamphlet distributed by Duke University Press at the 2002 MLA meeting. Entitled, *The Collected Sex Lives of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*, the pamphlet featured 16 blank pages. Kinser goes beyond that view in “A Not So ‘Simple Story’” to reexamine the evidence for the Carlyle’s supposedly sexless marriage which rests primarily on the testimony of Frank Harris, an extremely unreliable witness. Although unable and unwilling to discover the truth of their sexual relationship, Kinser shows the inaccuracy of the myth concerning the married life of the Carlyles.

Seeking to disprove other myths, scholars are currently reevaluating earlier beliefs about JWC. Martha Vicinus examines the relationship between JWC and Geraldine Jewsbury closely, reading the changing dynamics (from romantic love to daughterly independence to maternal dependence) through the letters of the two women, although JWC’s letters to Jewsbury no longer exist. Vicinus concludes, “Their friendship is not a lesbian story, but rather a narrative that makes possible lesbian understandings” (115).

The idea of JWC as a lesbian goes back to Virginia Woolf’s articles. Woolf’s ideas of JWC and the interconnections of their families are discussed by Malcolm Ingram. Certainly as Aileen Christianson points out (*CLO*, vol. 38) as she aged, JWC found pleasure in the company of women and yet she always pulled back at any demonstration of an excess of emotion. Eleanor McNess looks at Virginia Woolf’s relationship with the Carlyles and her attempts to show Jane’s literary genius as superior to Thomas’s. David Sorensen (*CLO*, vol. 37) questions whether JWC repressed lesbian tendencies towards Charlotte Cushman, but concludes that JWC was frightened of straying too far from familiar patterns of domesticity, “which she so often derided, but which simultaneously provided her with a precarious illusion of security and routine in an otherwise increasingly fragmented, isolated, and lonely existence.” As with her dress, JWC stayed

within accepted protocol.

Ian Campbell questions how much Geraldine Jewsbury can be believed about JWC, especially in her reports to J. Anthony Froude after Jane's death. Rodger L. Tarr looks at some of the same issues. He believes JWC has been mistreated among scholars because of the exaggerations of Thomas's abuse of her that Jewsbury reported to Froude: "The maltreatment of her character has even wider implications, for she has become a symbol of what happens when so-called scholars and intellectuals choose to live outside the realm of accepted taste, common decency and historical perspective" (196).

Myths of JWC developed very soon after her death as Thomas read her writings and learned of her anguish. Sarah J. Heidt looks at Carlyle's relationship to Jane within his process of reminiscing and bringing her portrait and letters forward to a wider public. She reexamines the roles of Jewsbury and Froude as well. Similarly, Ian Campbell in "A Transatlantic Friendship" looks at Charles Eliot Norton's part in trying to recapture some of this material from Froude. In two articles ("Finding Fault" and "Finding Tales") Aileen Christianson surveys the works of JWC's early biographers, Mrs. Ireland and Elizabeth Drew. Mrs. Ireland saw JWC as a victim, while Elizabeth Drew used her letters for biographical material rather than analyzing their literary merit. Both Aileen Christianson and Sheila McIntosh have edited biographical materials about the Carlyles giving a historiography of writings on them and showing them in comments from contemporaries in order to "complicate and contest the received biographical image" (xvii).

In her recent biography of J. Anthony Froude, Julia Markus revisits the Froude controversy and credits him with "single-handedly preserving the memory of Jane Welsh Carlyle until a time when it would be possible to recognize her as one of the lights of her era" (199). Sheila McIntosh approaches the relationship between JWC and Lady Ashburton with humor and repeats a comment of Pope-Hennessy, "She [JWC] would certainly have appreciated the irony of her own jealousy being the chief source of present interest in Lady Ashburton, while her gifts as a writer are increasingly recognized" (167).

No major new writing by JWC has been discovered, although the *Collected Letters* has reedited her work. David Southern

brought out a new account of her death by Sarah Dilberglue and a description of her “Last Protégée,” Miss Maria Price. The increasing popularity of JWC may be seen in the republication in the *New England Review* of an account by Caroline Fox from a visit she paid to the Carlyles in 1847 that recounts their talk and interests and a dream of JWC’s after taking opium for an illness. We can only hope that readers will continue their interest in learning about Jane Welsh Carlyle while scholars continue to reexamine her as well as her works and find new ways of presenting her to an appreciative audience.

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