

## Scott, the Carlyles, and Border Minstrelsy

IAN CAMPBELL

**I**N HIS CELEBRATED ESSAY “ROBERT BURNS” (1828) CARLYLE sets out a typically idiosyncratic picture of the state of literature in which the poet learned his craft:

Born in an age the most prosaic Britain had yet seen, and in a condition the most disadvantageous, where his mind, if it accomplished aught, must accomplish it under the pressure of continual bodily toil, nay, of penury and desponding apprehension of the worst evils, and with no furtherance but such knowledge as dwells in a poor man’s hut, and the rhymes of a Ferguson or Ramsay for his standard of beauty, he sinks not under all these impediments: through the fogs and darkness of that obscure region, his lynx eye discerns the true relations of the world and human life; he grows into intellectual strength, and trains himself into intellectual expertness. Impelled by the expansive movement of his own irrepressible soul, he struggles forward into the general view. (*Works* 26: 263)

Contrary to what Carlyle claimed, the rhymes of a Ferguson or a Ramsay, as generations of Burns scholars have attested, were crucial to the development of his poetry. But more peculiar still is Carlyle’s dismissal of the state of Scottish literature at the time of Burns’s youth:

In fact, our Scottish literature had, at that period, a very singular aspect: unexampled, so far as we know, except perhaps at Geneva, where the same state of matters appears still to continue. For a long period after Scotland became British, we had no literature: at the date when Addison and Steele were writing

their *Spectators*, our good Boston was writing, with the noblest intent, but alike in defiance of grammar and philosophy, his *Fourfold State of Man*.<sup>1</sup> Then came the schisms in our National Church, and the fiercer schisms in our Body Politic: Theologic ink, and Jacobite blood, with gall enough in both cases, seemed to have blotted out the intellect of the country: however, it was only obscured, not obliterated. (*Works* 26: 288)

This is a slightly bizarre assessment of the country round which a youthful Scott traveled to collect the materials for *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1803). In the phrase “we had no literature” Carlyle conflates two ideas. The “we” identifies the writer (publishing in the *Edinburgh Review*) as Scottish, and the “our” as Scottish literature. Yet this bald statement dismissing the literature of the second half of the eighteenth century is at odds with what readers of the Duke-Edinburgh edition of the Carlyle Letters know about the intellectual background of Thomas and Jane: they were intimately familiar with the Scottish oral tradition, which Scott, together with Burns and Hogg, had assiduously worked to preserve from extinction. In his student years, Thomas read the Scott poems and the Waverley novels as they were published. Jane was similarly immersed in native music and song. Their early correspondence demonstrates their easy familiarity with the *Minstrelsy*. Referring to the frugal habits of a Hoddam neighbor, Thomas echoes James V, on beholding the celebrated outlaw Johnnie Armstrong of Gilnockie: “What want these knaves that a kind should have?” (*CL* 4: 89). On an earlier occasion, he promises to show Jane “Kirkconnel churchyard, and Fair Helen’s grave” (*CL* 3: 340), alluding to the heroine of the traditional seventeenth-century ballad re-conceived by Scott in the *Minstrelsy*.

From the outset, Scotland served to consolidate the marriage of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle: he was a child of Ecclefechan, Annandale, and the South West; she grew up in Haddington and was more familiar with the Lothians and the Borders. Though they became a celebrated literary couple in London, they knew that part of their appeal and attraction was attributable to their Scottishness. Even after decades living in Chelsea, they were regarded as Scots by the many visitors who gravitated to

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Boston, *Human Nature in its Fourfold State* (1720).

their home in Cheyne Row. Moreover, their letters reveal their lifelong commitment to Scotland, and to their Scottish friends and relatives. Their past was woven into the pattern of their daily experience in London. In *Reminiscences* (1881) Thomas recalled their early life together, particularly Jane's fondness for entertaining visitors: "Our commonest evening sitter, for a good while, was Leigh Hunt, who lived close by, and delighted to sit talking with us (free, cheery, *idly* melodious as bird on bough), or listening, with real feeling, to her old Scotch tunes on the Piano, and winding up with a frugal morsel of Scotch Porridge (endlessly admirable to Hunt)" (121). Hunt was especially welcome because he valued their Scottish habits and customs: "We gave him Scotch Porridge to supper ('nothing in nature so interesting and delightful'); she played him Scotch tunes; a man he to understand and feel them well" (80).

Scottish culture and tradition affected every aspect of the Carlyles' lives, including the manner in which they spoke and expressed themselves. To an American ear, Thomas sounded not only Scottish, but like one who sang traditional Scottish songs. Margaret Fuller spoke admiringly of Carlyle's "Scotch, his way of singing his fretful sentences, so that each one was like the stanza of a narrative ballad" (*CL* 21: 73n5). Jane's language too reflected her emotional proximity to Scotland. In her *Life of Jane Welsh Carlyle* (1891), Annie Ireland reports a conversation between Jane and her friend the liberal politician W. E. Forster (1818–86):

Mrs. Carlyle, in a quiet walk which rendered her "unusually communicative," spoke of the fact that her maternal grandmother was "descended from a gang of gipsies"—was, in fact, grand-niece to Mathew Baillie, who "suffered at Lanark," that is, was hanged there, and this fact, told probably in a spirit of playfulness, was felt by Forster as "a genealogical fact," which made Mrs. Carlyle at length intelligible to him; "a cross between John Knox and a gipsy." "By the way," she adds, "my uncle has since told me that the wife of that Mathew Baillie, Margaret Euston by name, was the original of Sir Walter Scott's 'Meg Merrilies.'" (202)

Long after they had established themselves as fixtures in London society, the Carlyles continued to shape their identity around their Scottish ancestry.

Scottish music was especially important to them. When Jane chose to quote poetry to underline a point, she quoted “alas, my old friends are all wed away!” (CL 38: 196), a lament that she played for Thomas about the fallen at the battle of Flodden Field in 1513. Writing to his brother Alick in Canada on 18 April 1846, Thomas informed him of the death of one of Scotland’s oldest fiddlers, Robie Irving (1794–1846), whose death marked the end of an era. Carlyle wrote an obituary notice for the *Dumfries Courier* of 13 April, reporting that Irving was “well known in Dumfries-shire and the Border as the most celebrated violin player in the South of Scotland. With him have probably died many of the oldest Scottish airs, which he retained only in memory and played with exquisite taste” (CL 20: 172). That he took note of this event suggests both Thomas’s affection for the past and his realization that it had become an increasingly remote and distant place as a result of the massive and rapid change that had overtaken the Scotland of his youth. Looking back on the Burgher Seceders of his early Ecclefechan years, Carlyle was as sensitive to their peculiarity—and their vulnerability to progress—as Jane was to the Haddington of her girlhood. He acknowledged the elders of his youth: “Men so like what one might call antique ‘Evangelists in modern vesture, and Poor Scholars and Gentlemen of Christ,’ I have nowhere met with in Monasteries or Churches, among Protestant or Papal Clergy, in any country of the world.” In a pointed reflection he added, “All this is altered utterly at present, I grieve to say; and gone to as good as nothing or worse. It began to alter just about that period, on the death of those old hoary Heads; and has gone on with increasing velocity ever since” (*Reminiscences* 185).

There is an odd echo here of Robert Hartley Cromek (1770–1812), who described the ballad landscape he worked in while preparing *Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song* (1810): “So great and rapid, indeed, has been the change, that in a few years the Songs and Ballads here selected would have been irrecoverably forgotten. . . . The old cottars (the trysters of other years) are mostly dead in good old age; and their children are pursuing the bustle of commerce, frequently in foreign climates” (xxi). Cromek concedes the advantages of progress, but he regrets that the “dancings and revelry at

hallow-een; the tryster dances and singing; the New-year's day diversions; in short all the 'old use and wonts' of their fathers have almost entirely disappeared. They are certainly much better educated than ever; almost every pupil in the lowland schools being instructed in English grammar and in the rudiments of the Latin tongue. But they begin to lose their vigorous originality of character, by attempting to copy the more polished and artificial manners of their neighbours" (xx).<sup>2</sup> This is a more temperate verdict than Carlyle's stinging paean for the vanished world of his and Edward Irving's youth: "It began to alter just about that period, on the death of those old hoary Heads; and has gone on with increasing velocity ever since. Irving and I were probably among the last products it delivered, before gliding off, and then rushing off, into self-consciousness, arrogancy, insincerity, jangle and vulgarity, which I fear are now very much the definition of it" (*Reminiscences* 185). Yet it is worth underlining the fact that both Carlyles had contact with this vanishing world, and that the contact was a crucial part of their literary background.

It is notable, for example, that throughout his career, Carlyle persisted in denying that his style had been influenced by German literature. In a comment that he added to Friedrich Althaus's biography of him in 1867, he stressed the primary role that his Scottish upbringing exerted on his literary development: "Edward Irving and his admiration of the Old Puritans & Elizabethans . . . played a much more important part than Jean Paul on my poor 'style'; and the most important part by far was that of Nature, you would perhaps say, had you ever heard my Father speak, or very often heard my Mother and her inborn melodies of heart and of voice!" (59). "Melodies" can be taken literally here. Approaching London in 1834, he

<sup>2</sup> Ironically, as Dennis M. Read has persuasively demonstrated, Cromek was unaware that the most of the "traditional" songs that he published in his collection had been written by the Carlyles' friend Allan Cunningham (1784–1842), who successfully duped Cromek by disguising his own imitations of Burns—imitations that Cromek himself had originally rejected; see Read, ch. 7. Of Cunningham, Carlyle wrote, "he retains the honest tones of his native Nithsdale true as ever; he has a heart and a mind simple as a child's but with touches of a genius singularly wild and original" (*CL* 3: 139).

wrote home to his mother on 17 May: “Many times my dear Mother has your image come over me; but I let it not be with sadness. Nay what will you think if I often hummed ‘fairest Phillis’ on the Coach-roof, and actually when I first saw the great smokey immeasurable London sung to myself with a kind of real defiance, and the right tune, ‘th’ere seven foresters in yon forest, and them I want to *see*’” (*CL* 7: 157).<sup>3</sup> In this moment of profound transition, the Scottish past was converging in his imagination with the present, as it would continue to do throughout his life.

So much does Carlyle’s long life and enormous output overshadow his early Ecclefechan years that it is possible to underestimate the extent to which his youth gave him familiarity with both the discourse and the oral tradition of the South West and the balladry Scott had been collecting the previous decade. Carlyle’s experience confirms Cromek’s observation that to “estimate justly the high character of the Scottish peasantry, and to acquire a true relish for the exquisite beauties of the Doric dialect, it is necessary to live among them, and to enter into their ideas and feelings” (339). Like Scott, he had the privilege of living with, hearing, and remembering the songs and speech of the area. David Daiches and John Flower note that “Scott, though born in Edinburgh, was essentially a man of the Borders, where his ancestors had lived and where he spent much of his childhood. As a young man he made annual ‘raids’ into Liddesdale exploring the countryside, thrilling to ruined towers and collecting much of the material he was to use in his ballad collection” (197). More recently, Ian Duncan has pointed out,

<sup>3</sup> The *CL* identifies “fairest Phillis” as an “unidentified song, sung to a ballad-tune by his mother, which Carlyle continued to sing into his old age, so that Mary Aitken Carlyle could remember two stanzas for Norton: ‘Haste, haste, fairest Phillis, To the greenwood let’s away, To pull the pale primrose: ’Tis the first of the May . . . Then all you pretty, fair maids, To the greenwood do not go, Till the priest joins your hands, Let your answer be No.’ The “foresters” is categorized as a “genuine ballad, ‘Johnnie Cock’ (or ‘Johnny o’Cox’ as Carlyle calls it in his *Journal*), wide-spread in a variety of forms in SW Scotland. Child prints thirteen versions, including one contributed by Carlyle’s sister Jean in 1884; and the ballad was known to Scott, who included it (under another title, ‘Johnie of Breadislee’) in the *Minstrelsy*” (*CL* 7: 157n2–3).

“William Laidlaw, who brought the poets together, comments on the hereditary ‘fear and respect’ with which the Border folk regarded their sheriffs; so stable a social difference made it possible for them to meet as fellow connoisseurs” (160). Nor are Scott and Carlyle so different in their ability to join in the life they experienced in the Borders. Robert Shortreed, a local guide and sheriff-substitute of Jedburgh who accompanied Scott on his “raids,” recalled that his companion “*roved away among the foulk haill days at a time, for Sir Walter was very fond o’ mixing wi’ them, and by that means he became perfectly familiar wi’ their character and the manner o’ the Country. . . And he could suit himself sae brawlie to the way o’ living o’ everyone he was in the Company o’, just aye did as they did, and never made himself the great man or shewed himself off*” (qtd. in Ash 434).

In his essay “Sir Walter Scott” (1838), Carlyle alludes to these Border raids, citing a long passage from Lockhart’s *Life* to demonstrate that “in those days young advocates, and Scott like the rest of them, were *alive* and alert” (*Works* 29: 48), though they were frequently propelled in their research by an excess of whisky:

Liddesdale too is on this ancient Earth of ours, under this eternal Sky; and gives and takes, in the most incalculable manner, with the Universe at large! Scott’s experiences there are rather of the rustic Arcadian sort; the element of whisky not wanting. We should premise that here and there a feature has, perhaps, been aggravated for effect’s sake: “During seven successive years,” writes Mr. Lockhart . . . “Scott made a *raid*, as he called it, into Liddesdale with Mr. Shortreed, sheriff-substitute of Roxburgh, for his guide; exploring every rivulet to its source, and every ruined *peel* from foundation to battlement. At this time no wheeled carriage had ever been seen in the district; the first, indeed, was a gig, driven by Scott himself for a part of his way, when on the last of these seven excursions. There was no inn nor publichouse of any kind in the whole valley; the travellers passed from the shepherd’s hut to the minister’s manse, and again from the cheerful hospitality of the manse to the rough and jolly welcome of the homestead; gathering, wherever they went, songs and tunes, and occasionally more tangible relics of antiquity, even such a “rowth of auld knicknackets” as Burns ascribes to Captain Grose. To these rambles

Scott owed much of the materials of his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*; and not less of that intimate acquaintance with the living manners of these unsophisticated regions [where] . . . the two travellers slept in one and the same bed,—as, indeed, seems to have been the case with them throughout most of their excursions in this primitive district. Dr. Elliot (a clergyman) had already a large MS. collection of the ballads Scott was in quest of. (*Works* 29: 45–47)

Carlyle, too, made his raids in his own way. His long walks to and from Edinburgh (as a student) and through the Borders in later years brought him into contact with this “dim moory Debatable Land” (*Works* 29: 45). In *Reminiscences* Carlyle articulates clearly that he and Irving had the knack of joining in company of every kind. Carlyle’s recollections of these trips convey a vivid quality of immediacy:

The vast and yet not savage solitude was an impressive item,—long miles from farm to farm or even from one shepherd’s cottage to another; no company to you but the rustle of the grass underfoot, the tinkling of the brook, or the voices of innocent primeval things. I repeatedly walked through that country, up to Edinburgh and down, by myself, in subsequent years:—and nowhere remember such affectionately sad and thoughtful, and in fact interesting and salutary journeys. I have had days clear as Italy (as in this Irving case); days moist and dripping, overhung with the infinite of silent grey;—and perhaps the latter kind were the preferable, in certain moods. You had the world and its waste imbroglios of joy and woe, of light and darkness, to yourself alone. You could strip barefoot, if it suited better; carry shoes and socks over shoulder hung on your stick; clean shirt and comb were in your pocket; *omnia mea mecum porto* [All that is mine I carry with me]. You lodged with shepherds (who had clean solid cottages, wholesome eggs, milk, oatbread, porridge, clean blankets to their beds, and a great deal of human sense and unadulterated natural politeness; *canty* [clever], shrewd and witty fellows, when you set them talking; knew, from their hill-tops, every bit of country between Forth and Solway, and all the shepherd inhabitants within fifty miles—, being a kind of confraternity of shepherds from father to son. No sort of peasant labourers I have ever come across seemed

to me so happily situated, morally and physically, well developed, and deserving to be happy as these shepherds of the Cheviot. *O fortunati nimium!*—But perhaps it is all altered, not a little, now; as I, sure enough, am, who speak of it! (210–11)

The passage contrasts sharply with his account of the rigidities of his home environment, and it is noticeable that once he had left for Edinburgh, Carlyle gave priority to his memories of the Cheviot shepherds. The conversation and very probably the ballads of these “shrewd witty fellows” formed a deep impression on his outlook.

A few years later Carlyle sensed how far he had strayed from the early Ecclefechan years when, on returning from a walk, he overheard his father praying: “[I]t was ten p.m. of a most still and fine night when I arrived at my Father’s door; heard him making worship, and stood meditative, gratefully, lovingly, till he had ended; thinking to myself, how good and innocently beautiful and manful on the earth, is all this:—and it was the last time I was ever to hear it. I must have been there twice or oftener in my Father’s time; but the sound of his pious *Coleshill* (that was always his tune), pious Psalm and Prayer, I never heard again” (*Reminiscences* 71).

Once liberated from the severities of his home life and the prohibition on imaginative literature, Carlyle embraced fiction with genuine enthusiasm. In his early student letters he records his first impression of reading Scott:

I had a sight of “Waverley” soon after I received your letter, and I cannot help saying that, in my opinion, it is by far the best novel that has been written these thirty years—at least, that I know of. Eben. Cruickshanks, mine host of The Seven Golden Candlesticks, and Mr. Gifted Gilfillan, are described in the spirit of Smollett or Cervantes. Who does not shed a tear for the ardent Vich Ian Vohr, and the unshaken Evan Dhu, when perishing amid the shouts of an English mob, they refuse to swerve from their principles? And who will refuse to pity the marble Callum Beg, when, hushed in the strife of death, he finishes his earthly career on Clifton Moor, far from the blue mountains of the North, without one friend to close his eyes? ’Tis an admirable performance. Is Scott still the reputed author? (*CL* 1: 35)

At the same time, he knew of other writers—Shakespeare left him thunderstruck—as well as the traditional Scottish songs of his neighborhood. William Allingham reported in 1871 that “[h]e told me of an old man, a pauper (‘bandster’), who sang Border Ballads in the Annandale dialect; C. imitated him” (204). Carlyle later informed David Masson (who repeated it to David Alec Wilson) that “[h]e afterwards regretted that he had never been taught music; believing his defective sense of rhythm, which made the best of his verses mechanical, was due to this omission” (qtd. in Wilson, *Carlyle till Marriage* 70). He also admitted to Allingham that “in early days he read everything he could put hands on—*Roderick Random*, with immense delight, a bundle of old numbers of *The Lady’s Magazine*, another of *The Belfast and County Almanac*, sewn together” (205). Again, in 1876 he recollected “when I first heard of Shakespeare, when I went to school in Annan, where there was rather more acquaintance with things in general than in our house. I had never heard of Shakespeare there: my Father never, I believe, read a word of him in his life. But one day in the streets of Annan I found a wandering Italian resting a board with very bad imagery—‘images’ (C. imitating the cry), and among them a figure leading on a pedestal with ‘The Cloud-cap towers,’ etc. Various passers-by looked on, and a woman read aloud the verses, very badly” (Allingham 247).

Yet Scott’s writings remained central to Carlyle’s literary vocation because he was widely heralded as *the* Scottish literary luminary. In a letter of 2 July 1832, Carlyle exclaimed to his brother John, “You have likely seen this in the papers; also that Sir Walter Scott lies struck with apoplexy, deprived of consciousness, and expected inevitably to die,—at a Hotel in Jermyn Street! He has a son and daughter there too; and dies in an inn: I could almost cry for it. O all-devouring *Time!* O unfathomable *Eternity!*—” (CL 6: 181–87). Though he had failed to make face-to-face contact with Scott despite the best intentions of Goethe (who had tried to arrange an introduction), he could not ignore the prodigious output of the author of *Waverley* or the story of his financial catastrophe in 1826. Carlyle’s essay on Scott is rooted in conflicting impulses. It comes from someone who is familiar with the Borders and who is extensively well-read and self-educated during the period of Scott’s greatest success.

It is also the expression of someone who perhaps felt excluded from the wealth and privilege which attended Scott from the royal visit of 1822 onwards, and who, like Scott himself, had assimilated a great deal of the literature and the oral culture of Scotland. Carlyle synthesized this learning in his own unique way and created his own particular result—one that was far removed from Scott's *oeuvre* by 1838. As early as 20 November 1817 Carlyle observed to his friend James Johnston that "it is curious too [to] observe the importance which the writings of Walter Scott have conferred on every thing pertaining to the Border" (*CL* 1: 116). There is no trace in his early years of Carlyle owning a copy of the *Minstrelsy*, though one contemporary's account of the book in 1805 perhaps explains why: "The prodigality of information and lavishness of composition has had the necessary consequence of setting the price so high as must prevent this collection of popular ballads from contributing to popular gratification" (MS Gen 1103/17[b]).<sup>4</sup> Carlyle relied on libraries for his reading material—Edward Irving's in Kirkcaldy and the University Library in Edinburgh—and his modest means would not have enabled him to own Scott's "lavish" volumes.

Carlyle's essay on Scott is a carefully poised tribute, one that is devoid of adulation. Scott is the "Genius of rather a singular age,—an age at once destitute of faith and terrified at scepticism, with little knowledge of its whereabouts, with many sorrows to bear or front, and on the whole with a life to lead in these new circumstances,—had said to himself: What man shall be the temporary comforter, or were it but the spiritual comfit-maker, of this my poor singular age, to solace its dead tedium and manifold sorrows a little?" (*Works* 29: 49–50). Scott the "spiritual comfit-maker"—the man whom Carlyle had earlier dubbed in his journal the "great *Restaurateur* of Europe" was primarily an entertainer. The journal entry is revealingly scathing in its reductionism: "[H]e might have been numbered among [Europe's] Conscript Fathers; he has chosen the worser part, and is only a huge *Publicanus*." But Carlyle's critical judgment here pertains primarily to the *Waverley* novels, as he continues: "What is his

<sup>4</sup> This letter is published with the kind permission of Glasgow University Library.

novel, any of them? A bout of champagne, claret, port or even ale drinking. Are we wiser, better, holier, stronger? No: we *have been*—amused. O Sir Walter, thou knowest too well, that *Virtus laudatur et alget*” (*Two Note Books* 71). But in the essay, Carlyle carefully distinguishes between Scott the entertainer and Scott the collector of Scottish ballads. He rightly appreciates that the *Minstrelsy* proved to be a “well from which flowed one of the broadest rivers. Metrical Romances (which in due time pass into Prose Romances); the old life of men resuscitated for us: it is a mighty word! Not as dead tradition, but as a palpable presence, the past stood before us” (*Works* 29: 50).

Carlyle also gives Scott credit for shrewdly seeing that his early metrical success could not be indefinitely pursued: “Scott was among the first to perceive that the day of Metrical Chivalry Romances was declining. He had held the sovereignty for some half-score of years, a comparatively long lease of it” (*Works* 29: 59). Ruskin may have recalled these remarks when in *Praeterita* (1885–89) he criticized Carlyle for sacrificing his native inheritance for the sake of Teufelsdröckhian abstraction, finding “how great the influence of this double ocean coast and Cheviot mountain border was upon Scott’s imagination; and how salutary they were in withdrawing him from the morbid German fancies which proved so fatal to Carlyle” (351). But contrary to what Ruskin assumed, the influence of the Scottish oral tradition on Carlyle was not swallowed up by his German studies, “morbid” or otherwise. Certainly Carlyle’s strong hostility to the intellectual climate of his time colored his overall assessment of his great countryman. Ruth Beckett has pertinently remarked, “For Carlyle it was above all the spiritual sickness and apathy of his own age which disturbed him” (515). Rosemary Ashton makes a similarly valuable distinction in her comment that “Carlyle seesaws between disapproval of Scott’s worldliness and a lukewarm endorsement of his genuineness, between warmth towards Scott’s Scottishness and disdain for the flummery of his ‘Scotch’ novels.” (189). What Carlyle’s early years gave him was empathy for “Scott’s Scottishness” and the 1838 essay, while concentrating on the success of the novels, does point to the *Minstrelsy* as the source from which Scott’s poetical success was to flow.

Carlyle’s lifelong acquaintance with and feeling for the tradition of Scottish music and song equaled Scott’s in its

intensity. While his own abode may have been dominated by his father's stern exclusions, Carlyle frequented other houses where he heard the songs of his youth performed as a matter of course. Anecdotal evidence abounds of his musical interests. For example, in *Reminiscences* he fondly recalled the vocal talents of Margaret Gordon, whom he had greatly admired at one time before he met Jane Welsh:

She was of the Aberdeenshire Gordons, a far-off Huntly, doubt it not; "Margaret Gordon"; born I think in New Brunswick, where her Father, probably in some official post, had died young and poor—her *accent* was prettily *English*, and her voice very fine:—an Aunt (widow in Fife, childless, with limited resources, but of frugal cultivated turn; a lean, proud elderly dame, once a "Miss Gordon" herself, sang Scotch songs beautifully, and talked shrewd *Aberdeenish* in accent and otherwise) had adopted her, and brought her hither over seas: and here, as Irving's Ex-pupil, she now cheery though with dim outlooks, was. (212–13)

In *Reminiscences* Carlyle describes an encounter with the Burns collector George Thomson (1793–1841): "Musical Thomson (memorable, *more* so than venerable, as the *Publisher* of Burns's *Songs*): him I saw one evening, sitting in the [British Museum] Reading-Room; a clean-brushed commonplace old gentleman in Scratch-wig; whom we spoke a few words to, and took a good look of" (234). Other anecdotal evidence abounds of Carlyle's musical passions. On a pane of glass, believed to be done by Carlyle in his Edinburgh lodgings at 3 Moray Street (now Spey Street) in Edinburgh, was an inscription from "Mary Hamilton": "O little did my mother think, / The day she cradled me, / The lands I should travel in, / The death I was to die" (*Home and Haunts* 49; Sargent and Kittredge 422). Ballads and stray quotations, such as "*There was a Piper Had a Cow*," also crop up frequently in the Carlyles' correspondence. Rodger L. Tarr and Fleming McClelland note that "[l]ike 'Simon Brodie,' this poem is part of the large and varied ballad tradition. . . . An old Scottish nursery rhyme, this poem is purported to have been sung to Carlyle as an infant by his mother" (197).

Other sources tend to confirm Carlyle's youthful enthusiasm for Scottish ballads. In his biography, Wilson includes Alexander Gilchrist's notes of a late 1859 visit to Carlyle:

When a boy at school, the class was singing once, the master remarked on the beautiful voice of that boy (Carlyle), which boy was destined never to turn his voice to any account. Liked Scotch tunes much: "Robin Adair," "Gilderoy," very plaintive and melodious. Carlyle was also fond of Irish airs, and said—"Gilderoy showed a soul bathed in melancholy. Rude music, probably first performed as Burns said, on cow-horns, these old Scottish airs; but came from the heart. That old tune to which Bruce led his men at Bannockburn, for instance." Carlyle recited "Scots wha hae wi' Wallace bled"; the whole poem, with measured emphasis, the right stress on each word. . . . Remarked on the practical character of the song, "Burns hit the nail on the head at each blow; not a blow lost. Rude, but not a word too much or too little." . . . Carlyle recited:—"Had we never lov'd sae kindly, / Had we never lov'd sae blindly, / Never met and never parted, / We had ne'er been broken-hearted." (Then he said—"This Jessie, a very nice girl, (was) the daughter of a neighbouring exciseman; Burns (was) married at the time. No princess had ever had such a song written of her." Some of the Jacobite songs fine, about a dozen genuine. (*Carlyle to Three Score* 372)

G. B. Tennyson has observed that "To Carlyle song meant border ballads, the 'airs' of lowland Scotland that in later years Jane used to delight him with by her piano playing in their Chelsea home" (qtd. in Tarr and McClelland xv). He certainly used ballad texts and titles freely and expected the reference to be recognized. Commenting on a letter from his mother Margaret Carlyle to his mother-in-law Grace Welsh, he wrote of "some pious aspiratn to have her there [in Templand with Mrs. Welsh] for altogr, and to live in *Bessie-Bell & Mary-Gray* fashion" (*CL* 7: 330-32). Perhaps the strongest indication of what this music meant to Thomas occurs in his recollection of Jane, using song to communicate with him during her recovery from a long illness: "We two had come up from dinner and were sitting in this room. . . . 'Lie on the sofa there,' said she. . . . In old years I used to lie that way, and she would play the piano to me: a long series of Scotch tunes which set my mind finely wandering through the realms of memory and romance. . . . That evening I had lain but a few minutes when she turned round to her piano, got out the Thomson Burns book, and

to my surprise and joy, broke out again into her bright little stream of harmony and poesy, silent for at least ten years before, and gave me . . . all my old favourites" (Holme 182). Jane's piano, and some of her sheet music, survive in Chelsea, but we will never know for sure what she played that night, nor on the many other occasions that she entertained Carlyle (and Leigh Hunt) with Scottish songs.

A particularly salient musical memory goes beyond Jane's death, to encompass a little-known Carlyle family production—Mary Carlyle Aitken's anthology *Scottish Song* (1874). She had moved in to Chelsea after Jane's death in 1866 to keep her Uncle company, and soon began to compose letters for him as a consequence of his deteriorating right hand. Many of the letters of the last fifteen years of Carlyle's life are in her handwriting, with a shaky signature at best from the old man. She accompanied him on his travels—the famous photograph by John Patrick (1821–1923) on the steps of St. Brycedale House in Kirkcaldy includes Mary, who had tidied up her uncle for the occasion to his considerable irritation<sup>5</sup>—and inevitably endured many hours of solitude during her long sojourn of companionship. The influence of Carlyle on *Scottish Song* is apparent throughout the book. She particularly takes note of his affection for the songs of Burns:

The smallness of the space at my command, while allowing me to exclude such as I deemed inferior, has compelled me to leave out many excellent songs of Burns, whose name will be lovingly cherished as long as there are Scotch hearts in the world. Mr. Carlyle says of him, "It will seem a small praise if we rank him as the first of all our song-writers; for we know not where to find one worthy of being second to him." I should have preferred to make these songs the foundation of this collection, but they have been so often printed, and are so well known, that it has been thought advisable to introduce them rather as a spice than as the *pièce de resistance*. (vi)

Mary is well aware that she is dealing with an oral tradition of some antiquity—a tradition that was central to her Uncle's

<sup>5</sup> See Campbell, "Portrait of Carlyle," in which I underscore how indispensable Mary had become to the aged Carlyle. For the details of the St. Brycedale photograph, see Campbell, "The Patrick Photographs of Carlyle."

generation. Occasionally she betrays an awkward squeamishness in her editing of the material: "In the case of a few of the older songs, written in an age, as far as language is concerned at least, more rude than our own, where I have not been able to give the earliest versions entire, I have chosen to omit an indelicate stanza, when not destroying the sense, rather than substitute commonplace vulgarized readings of them" (vi). This sensitivity to the original is mirrored in her comments on Allan Ramsay's *Tea Table Miscellany* (1733), "the parent of nearly all subsequent collections." She continues, "Ritson [Joseph Ritson (1752–1803)] and others have blamed [Ramsay] for his want of fidelity in editing some of the old songs; but it is evident from the *polished* specimens, that it would have been impossible for him, even with his by no means narrow ideas on the subject, to print them without alterations or omissions. It is, of course, a pity that he did not more clearly mark the changes which he and the 'ingenious young gentlemen' who helped in the task, had made" (6–7). In such passages, Carlyle Aitken suggests knowledge far beyond what she prints; many modern editors would heartily second her wish for a better distinction between original text and subsequent alteration. In an annotation to "Kind Robin Lo'es Me," Mary notes, "There are much older words to the tune, but they would be unsuitable here" (198). Of "Colin Clout" she comments, "Fragment of an old song; the rest is supposed to be lost" (190). We cannot know whether she sang any of these songs to Carlyle, but her collection does convey her Uncle's rich consciousness of the musical tradition he inherited from his Annandale roots. It also helps to account for Carlyle's mixed review of Sir Walter Scott in 1838. Scott the novelist may have been the "great *restaurateur* of Europe," but in Carlyle's mind, he was also the author of *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, which had kept alive a vital Scottish literary tradition.

*University of Edinburgh*

#### Works Cited

- Aitken, Mary Carlyle, ed. *Scottish Song: A Selection of the Choicest Lyrics of Scotland*. London: Macmillan, 1874. Print.

- Allingham, William. *A Diary, 1824–1889*. Intro. Geoffrey Grigson. Ed. H. Allingham and D. Radford. 1907; rpt. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1967. Print.
- Althaus, Friedrich. “Thomas Carlyle: A Biographical and Literary Portrait by Friedrich Althaus with Thomas Carlyle’s Notes.” *Two Reminiscences of Thomas Carlyle*. Ed. John Clubbe. Durham: Duke UP, 1974. 1–122. Print.
- Ash, Marinell. “Scott, Daniel Wilson and Archaeology.” *Scott and His Influence*. Ed. J. H. Alexander and David Hewitt. Aberdeen: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1983. 432–42. Print.
- Ashton, Rosemary. *Thomas and Jane Carlyle: Portrait of a Marriage*. London: Chatto and Windus, 2002. Print.
- Beckett, Ruth. “‘Past and Present’: Carlyle and Ruskin on Scott and Victorian Medievalism.” *Scott in Carnival: Selected Papers from the Fourth International Scott Conference*. Ed. J. H. Alexander and David Hewitt. Aberdeen: Association of Scottish Literary Studies, 1993. 512–22.
- Campbell, Ian. “The Patrick Photographs of Carlyle.” *Carlyle Newsletter* 9 (1988): 22–25.
- . “Portrait of Carlyle.” *The Scotsman* (12 Aug. 1967): 3.
- Carlyle, Thomas. *Reminiscences*. Ed. Ian Campbell and K. J. Fielding. World’s Classics. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997; rpt. Glasgow: Kennedy and Boyd, 2009. Print.
- . *Two Notebooks*. Ed. Charles Eliot Norton. New York: Grolier Club, 1898. Print.
- Cromek, Robert Hartley. *Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song*. London: Cadell and Davies, 1810. Print.
- Daiches, David, and John Flower. *Literary Landscapes of the British Isles: A Narrative Atlas*. London, Paddington Press, 1979. Print.
- Duncan, Ian. *Scott’s Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh*. Princeton UP, 2007. Print.
- Holme, Thea. *The Carlyles at Home*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1965. Print.
- Ireland, [Annie. E.] *Life of Jane Welsh Carlyle*. London, Chatto and Windus, 1891. Print.
- Read, Dennis M. *R. H. Cromek, Engraver, Editor, and Entrepreneur*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011. Print.
- Ruskin, John. *Praeterita*. Ed. Francis O’Gorman. World’s Classics. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012. Print.

- Sargent, Helen Child, and George Lyman Kittredge, eds. *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1904. Print.
- The Homes and Haunts of Thomas Carlyle*. London: Westminster Gazette, 1893. Print.
- Tarr, Rodger L., and Fleming McClelland, eds. *The Collected Poems of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*. Greenwood: Penkevill, 1986. Print.
- Wilson, David Alec. *Carlyle till Marriage*. London: Kegan Paul, 1923. Print.
- . *Carlyle to Three Score and Ten*. London: Kegan Paul, 1929. Print.