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Carlyle, Thomas and Jane Welsh. *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*. Volume 36. Ian Campbell, Aileen Christianson, and David R. Sorensen, senior eds. Brent E. Kinser, Jane Roberts, Liz Sutherland, and Jonathan Wild, eds. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2008. xxxvii + 301 pp. \$60 [institutions]; \$30 [individuals].

VIRGINIA WOOLF REMARKS IN “GREAT MEN’S HOUSES” (1932) that visiting the house of a “great man” reveals more than any biography possibly can, particularly in the case of the Carlyles and their home at 5 Cheyne Row, Chelsea. The physical fact of the house and its lack of amenities—indoor plumbing above all—immediately provide insight into the world of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle, and into the battles they waged against life, against nature, and sometimes against each other. Woolf saw the house as a domestic war zone:

The high old house without water, without electric light, without gas fires, full of books and coal smoke and four-poster beds and mahogany cupboards, where two of the most nervous and exacting people of their time lived, year in and year out, was served by one unfortunate maid. All through the mid-Victorian age the house was necessarily a battlefield where daily, summer and winter, mistress and maid fought against dirt and cold for cleanliness and warmth. (*The London Scene: Six Essays on London Life*. New York: Harper, 2006. 32–33)

That which Woolf recognizes in the house can also readily be discerned in the Carlyles’ letters. For the literary equivalent to the Carlyle House is the *Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*. The plumbing, the bedbugs, the Herculean struggle with noise and dirt, are all here in the letters; in

addition, readers can see the wit, the acerbity, the humanity, and the genius that these daily struggles brought out in both TC and JWC. Indeed, without the letters, we would not be able to grasp the whole significance of the lives lived within the walls of 5 Cheyne Row.

Volume 36 of the *Collected Letters* (November 1859–September 1860), edited by Ian Campbell, Aileen Christianson, and David Sorensen, along with Brent Kinser, Jane Roberts, Liz Sutherland, and Jonathan Wild, continue the long process of bringing a complete picture of the Carlyles and their world to light. Following a suggestion made in the introduction by Aileen Christianson, I returned to the very first volume (1970) of the collection, with its introduction by Charles Richard Sanders, who explains the history of the compilation of the letters over the previous century, first by Thomas as a way of memorializing Jane, then by others as a way of memorializing Thomas. As Sanders shows, none of these early editors—not even Carlyle himself—quite anticipated the value of collecting the letters in one comprehensive place. Sanders remarks upon the indispensable commentary that the Carlyles provide for one another. I would go further: what emerges from this gradual compilation is neither memorial nor editorial; it is the life the Carlyles lived, as they lived it. Here they truly inhabit their house once again, cajoling, hectoring, and teasing one another.

Love letters of famous writers are always popular (witness the latest Jane Campion film *Bright Star*, based upon on the letters of John Keats and Fanny Brawne), but I would argue that one learns more from letters in their tensions and strife than in their sweetness and light, which is exactly what emerges from TC and JWC in this volume. The vacation fiasco during the late summer of 1860 is a prime example. Both Carlyles head off for separate vacations (TC to Scotland, JWC to Alderley Park and elsewhere), but through a comical-tragically misunderstood phrase about sailing home in one of TC's letters, JWC returns to Chelsea in a tizzy:

Home!—and the curtains of his bed at the Dyer's!—  
and all the spoons and silver things hidden away  
from possible thieves, where only myself could find  
them!—and all the Keys locked up in—the Piano!—  
unlabelled! No body to do for him but an old Cook  
of 71 whom every thing like an emergence reduces to

absolute idiocy!—and he the most “particular” and most impatient of Men! And I the most self-bothering and excitable of Women! (204)

Trouble of course ensues, and a flurry of vexed letters fly about for the better part of two weeks, not only between the aggravated Carlyles, but also to friends and family, each complaining loudly about the other. Christianson comments in the introduction that this exchange is noteworthy in “the extent to which they each comment (quite critically) on the other to relatives and friends and each feel aggrieved and justified in their position, providing an open and equal expression of feelings between them” (xix).

But the volume offers more than just crankiness and petulance. There are also poignant and touching parts, especially the letters relating the decline and the death of Nero, JWC’s little dog of eleven years. JWC describes Nero as her “substitute for a little bundle of flannel” (18) for whom she grieves “as if he had been my little human child” (78). His death draws out of JWC some uncharacteristic meditations on the nature of life and death:

For, what is become of that beautiful, engaging little life, with its “manifold undeniable virtues” (as Mr. C said)? Could these be extinguished, abolished, annihilated by some drops of Prussic Acid? Is that credible? Is Prussic Acid more powerful than qualities which, found in a Human Being, the self-same qualities—we call divine, immortal? (68)

While TC—unhappily mired in “the Valley of the Shadow of Frederick the Great” as JWC refers to it—selects portraits of Frederick for the frontispiece of his biography, JWC seeks out portraits of her beloved Nero, contacting Robert Tait, painter of *A Chelsea Interior* (1858), to retrieve the photographs of Nero he made at the time of the painting. She resists, however, the latest Victorian fashion of having deceased pets stuffed for display in the front parlor, as she recounts with her usual wit: “And two women, of the sort called ‘full of sensibility,’ inquired if I had ‘had him stuffed?’ ‘I wonder you didn’t,’ said one of them plaintively, ‘he would have looked so pretty in a glass case in your room, and still been quite a companion to you.’ Merciful Heavens!” (68).

There are other gems in this collection: TC's descriptions of various portraits of Frederick and Cromwell, JWC's devastatingly witty dismissal of Darwinism ("I was no oyster! Nor had no grandfather oyster within my knowledge"), JWC's developing friendship with the second Lady Ashburton (and her surprising tenderness towards Lady Ashburton's infant daughter), as well as the letters of both Carlyles that were written while they traveled. Readers may not find the sentimental romanticism of Keats and Brawne, but they will continue to recognize the Carlyles on the battlefield of their life journeys.

Further, scholars who have used previous volumes of the edited letters already know the high standards to which the editors adhere, and this volume is as meticulously and carefully edited, researched, and annotated as the rest. Volume 36, like its predecessors, illustrates yet again how rich the treasure trove of Carlyle letters remains, with the promise of further revelations in upcoming volumes.

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