

DAVID McALLISTER

The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle. Edited by Ian Campbell, Aileen Christianson, David Sorensen, et al. Volume 38: November 1861–November [xli + 316 pp.]; Volume 39: December 1862–December 1863 [xxxix + 305 pp.]. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010–11. \$70 [institutions]; \$30 [individuals].

THE YEARS 1862 AND 1863 WERE MARKED BY A COMBINATION of flux and fixity, progress and stasis, for Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle. The sense of stasis was largely professional; Thomas's work on *The Life of Frederick the Great* continued much as it had done for the previous decade, with each sign of progress towards completion of the monumental work quickly followed by the realization of how much more remained to be done. In a letter to his brother John, written in January 1862 and published near the beginning of volume 38, Carlyle observes that his work on the book "goes on perhaps a shade ligh[t]lier" and that the end of his task was almost in sight. "I sometimes do feel that I had got it fairly under my shoe, and shall finish it—surely some time in the course of this summer or autumn" (38: 40).

And yet the penultimate letter of volume 39, written almost two years later, finds him still stuck in his attic writing-room at Cheyne Row, working on his "troubled history," the final volume of which, he now estimates, "cannot be out within eight month or ten" (39: 262). It would, in fact, take longer still, until 1865, for the final volume of his last major work to appear in print, and these two volumes, therefore, like so many others published in recent volumes of *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*, are haunted by what seems to Carlyle to be the impossibility of concluding the task that he had set

himself. Little wonder, then, that his descriptions of his work constantly return to metaphors of impeded progress. Writing on Frederick is a “sad muddy pilgrimage” (38: 22) which has led him into “an unutterable quagmire” (38: 6), where he feels himself to be “weltering, or choking, eye-deep in *mud*” (38: 37). These are the letters of a bogged-down writer.

Yet while Carlyle’s work seems to have been tiresomely repetitious, wearying both Thomas and Jane with its seeming interminability, their correspondence in these years reveals personal lives that were marked by an increased sense of instability. A series of new and unsatisfactory servants comes and goes, upsetting the accustomed rhythm of daily life in Cheyne Row. Moreover Jane, who is normally a “most still-standing woman”, takes a series of trips which sees her “whirling here and whirling there just like—other people!” (38: 250).

Sudden illness and death are recurring themes. Volume 38 begins with Jane bed-bound with a protracted bout of flu while, through the walls of 24 Cheyne Row, the Carlyles’ young neighbour Alexander Gilchrist was dying of scarlet fever which had been transmitted to him by one of his children. The correspondence of any long-lived, well-connected Victorian becomes increasingly elegiac. “What a great Cemetery one walks through after forty,”¹ Dickens wrote upon hearing of the death of yet another old friend in 1862, and with both Carlyles now in their sixties the letters published here are punctuated with news of the deaths of members of their circle. More worrying still was the illness suffered by Lord Ashburton, which takes up much of volume 39. His collapse in France caused both Carlyles extreme anxiety as he seemed, at several points over the following eight months, to be on the verge of death. Jane reports that on the first night they had heard of his illness they were already marking his departure in the grammar of their conversation, “talking very sadly” of him “almost already in the past tense” (38: 264).

Yet although these two volumes contain more than their fair share of deaths, near deaths and deathly foreshadowings, they also contain one unexpected resurrection. The Carlyles

¹ Charles Dickens to Sir Alexander Duff Gordon, 4 April 1862, *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Graham Storey (Oxford, 1998), 10: 66.

had believed their old maid Bessie Barnet to be dead until she turned up at the door of Cheyne Row while Jane was on holiday in Scotland in the summer of 1862, and her sudden reappearance goes some way towards balancing these volumes' mortal ledger. Jane is appalled by the *sang-froid* with which Thomas recounted her startling reappearance. "Good Lord!" she replies, "I all but screamed at the idea of *her* walking in! whom Tom Holcroft reported DEAD a quarter of a century ago!" It is not just her husband's lack of surprise that astonishes and frustrates Jane, but his failure to furnish her with the sort of detailed, telling, personal information that she would, no doubt, have found out for herself had she been in Chelsea rather than Dumfriesshire. "I want to know if she be married as well as alive?—where she lives?—if *I* shall see her?" She casts his lack of curiosity about the details of Bessie's personal life as a significant professional failing. "I really don't think your time would be wasted, in cultivating your Human Nature a little more! One doesn't *write* the better for growing into a Historical Abstraction! There! put that into your moral pipe!" (38: 156).

This Scottish holiday offers Jane more evidence of the effects of time's passage. Although it was "very cheering to see the face of Mary [Austin]", Thomas's sister, Jane is shocked that "[i]t was such an *old wrinkled* face!" (38: 133). On arriving at Mary Russell's house at Holmhill Jane is at first delighted by her host's sensitivity in giving her a ground-floor bedroom, as "the up stairs windows *must*, some of them, look towards Templand" (38: 133–34), the house which Jane associated with her mother, who had died there twenty years earlier in 1842. Eventually, however, she realises that Templand could no longer be seen from Holmhill, as the trees that stand in between the two houses "have grown up so high!" in the years since she last took in the view. We are left with the sense that this occlusion of her old home, which offers a practical illustration of the time that has passed since her mother's death, proves as painful to Jane as the unimpeded sight of it would have been.

Jane finds her return to Scotland emotionally draining: there are "so many houses within sight, once occupied by people who belonged to me, or cared for me! So far; I merely sit bewildered in the presence of my own Past!" (38: 140). Indeed, there is something almost *unheimlich* in her responses

to this trip home. "These old roads where I have been both as a child, and young Lady give me a feeling half charming half terrible! The people all gone or so changed! and the scenery so strangely *the same!*" (38: 158).

The wonderful photographs of the Carlyles and their circle that illustrate both of these volumes show the growing availability and circulation of at least one form of capturing and preserving something of the present in the midst of all this disorienting change. The pictures are not simply decorative: the images that the editors have collected are frequently discussed in the letters themselves, and cast a fascinating light on Victorian photographic culture. "An immense explosion of photographs has come off in this house" Jane tells Mary Russell in September 1862 (38: 219). The explosion had been brought about by the bootlegging of Carlyle's image by a Dumfries photographer, who was "bound down to take *only six copies*" of a print he had been lent by Carlyle's sister Jean but had, as Jane reports, "sent these wretched photographs out in shoals for his own gain!" Her prim aunt Grace "had seen a great *heap* of them lying on a Booksellers counter in Princes Street!" (38: 219–20).

This unauthorized trade in Carlyle's image, in the form of a picture that he didn't particularly like, prompted him to call in "the best Photographer in London" to have some more suitable photographs taken. The photographer was also, as Jane tells Mary Russell, "very obliging in insisting on ... *doing me*". The letters show how the Carlyles' photographs circulated around a network of their friends both in Britain and abroad, and offer cultural historians a wealth of detailed information about how photographs functioned as mementos in the mid-Victorian period. One curious picture of Carlyle mounted on his beloved horse Fritz (another figure who vanishes in the years covered by these volumes—sold to a man in a nearby street after suffering a fall in the park) made it as far as Australia, where it was received by a bemused Charles Gavan Duffy. Jane, meanwhile, seems to have guarded entry to her own photograph album jealously, restricting entrance to those who had personally given her their image, and refusing to include anyone solely on the grounds of celebrity or standing.

And yet, hanging over all of this is our awareness that Jane's

death is coming ever closer with each volume of their correspondence that is published. The decline in health that will eventually lead to her death in 1866 is foreshadowed here first by an attack of a mysterious “neuralgia,” which leaves her left arm virtually useless, and then by an accident which she suffers in the West End that leaves her housebound until the second of these volumes ends in December 1863. It was, as Brent E Kinser observes in his excellent introduction, a “nightmarish” (xxiii) end to the year for the Carlyles, with Jane in constant agony and subsequent low spirits. Her husband’s anxiety at her failure to respond to treatment is apparent in a letter to Lady Ashburton: “We have had a terrible four weeks since you heard last! Rheumatic fever, or I know not what it is.... The doctors call it mere ‘influenza whh has kindled into a *general paroxysm* all the neuralgias, hurts &c’....[B]ut alas, it seems very evidt their art can do nothing for her; and indeed all their opiates, morphines, soporifics, produced the very reverse of *sleep* or help. . . . I never saw a being in such continuous agony!” (39: 258).

It is difficult not to read this letter—and, indeed, these wonderfully edited and beautifully illustrated volumes—“for the plot”: anticipating Jane’s sad final years, looking for signs of the end beginning, and seeing, in letters such as this, the seeds of Thomas’s own pained response to her death. It is a curious, but perhaps inevitable response to the unprecedented level of detail that the *Collected Letters* has given us about the day-to-day lives of the Carlyles that we begin to read these volumes like instalments of a sprawling realist novel. It is a tribute to the editors that such a monumental and diligent work of scholarship can pack such an emotional punch.

Birckbeck, University of London