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The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle. Edited by Ian Campbell, Aileen Christianson, David R. Sorensen, et al.

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VOLUMES 41 AND 42 OF *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle* cover the period from September 1864 to September 1865. The 215 letters in volume 41 document Jane Welsh Carlyle's return from Scotland and Thomas Carlyle's completion of *Frederick the Great*. With the couple reunited in Cheyne Row, the bulk of the correspondence reconfirms the Carlyles' intimate circle of Louisa Lady Ashburton, Mary Russell, and the extended Carlyle family. The 189 letters of volume 42, meanwhile, provide something of a mirror image. With Thomas in Scotland between late May and the end of August 1865, the bulk of the volume's letters are exchanges between the Carlyles. These latest publications represent an entry into the final chapters of two lengthy epistolary lives: only a handful of volumes remain. Both as a series and as individual volumes, the *Collected Letters* represent a major editorial achievement. Thomas and Jane are sparky, lively correspondents: though I have chosen to discuss illness, work, and a domestic scandal here, I could have picked many more themes.

Dominating the correspondence during this time is Jane's patchy recuperation from her serious illness. It is difficult to forget that she would die just six months after September 1865. As Jonathan Wild notes in the introduction to volume 42, the

Carlyles' "often melancholic tone . . . appears to foreshadow this coming event" (xi). Indeed, the first line of volume 41 sets the tone for what is to come, with Jane writing to Thomas: "Dearest—I am in the valley of the shadow of Blue pill!" (41: 1). Illness real and imagined is omnipresent and inevitably there are moments of black comedy, if one chooses to read with that in mind. Jane's reference to herself as "not like the same woman who trembled from head to foot and panted like a duck in a thunder-storm at St Leonards" is fantastically evocative (41: 65). Elsewhere, Thomas's fretting over a lack of "ripe potatoes" and his attempts to appease his digestion with brown bread raises a smile (41: 3). Both Carlyles exude a keen sense of dark humor. A decision about wallpaper elicits the comically gloomy "Also tell the paper hanger to *leave* all the odd pieces—they are needed for repairing in case of accidents. It may not be I that will ever need them—but some one will" (41: 19). Liz Sutherland notes in the introduction to volume 41 that "it is when the Carlyles were apart that we are allowed to witness their true affection for one another" (xvii), and this affection is conveyed in coterie speech, slang, and asides that are simply wonderful to read.

Any light-heartedness, however, must be seen in the context of constant references that underscore just how ill Jane had been. John M. Ulrich in his review of volume 40 notes a significant increase in letters between Jane and Thomas, and this trend continues here. Exactly 50 letters are sent in total between the beginning of volume 41 and Jane's return to Cheyne Row in early October 1864; of these, 42 are exchanged between the couple. Jane's letters have the peevish, fretful tone of the invalid. One begins with a plaintive "you will be wondering how the blank days have passed with me—much like the previous week—not better—but not worse; except Saturday evening, when *the pain* was worse than any time since I have been here. My nights continue painfully restless, tho' not *wholly* without sleep" (41: 18). The stalking presence of "*the pain*" robs Jane of sleep, magnifying twinges and aches into significant fears. She frets that she will lose the use of her limbs and as Sutherland points out, the return railway journey to Chelsea is a longed-for terror. Understandably, a constant, palpable anxiety is particularly discernible from Thomas's side:

“Darling—I am quite thankful for yr Letter; I was in terror for something worse” (41: 29). Elsewhere, he adopts tones alternately soothing and bracing. Jane is addressed variously as his “poor little Woman” (41: 8), “poor little Dear” (41: 1), “poor little Goody” (41: 3); she is not to “get into ‘despairing’ agn” (41: 1) and should “pluck up a heart, darling: all will go right yet!” (41: 10). Thomas’s urging notwithstanding, Jane’s time in Scotland is characterised by a certain flatness of tone: “I cannot write cheerfully. I am not cheerful” (41: 1). Throughout both volumes Jane describes the lasting impact that illness has had upon her character.

The temporary loss of the use of her right arm in June 1865 is a particularly troubling example of Jane’s precarious health—but also of her determination. A sample of writing with her left hand is depicted in one of the many illuminating reproductions in the volume. It is as if the hand that holds the pen and the paper itself have been set vibrating in opposition. The physical task is clearly arduous. Her tone, however, belies these graphic fluctuations: “I must learn to write with my left hand and then when I have learnt, perhaps I shall recover the use of my right” (42: 70). Jane’s letters are the complex emotional expressions of one who suffers chronic pain, which did not seem to alter her lifestyle much. Like Thomas, Jane visits friends in both London and Scotland throughout volume 42.

Even with Jane’s lasting melancholy and intermittent setbacks, 1864–65 is a period of rest, restoration, and a return to comparative normality after what had obviously been an utterly terrifying time. In the first letter written after her return to Cheyne Row, Jane writes to Mary Carlyle Austin of “the dreaded moment of reentering a house, which I had left in a sort of hearse, with a firm conviction of returning no more” only to be “tumbled head over heels by Mr C rushing out to meet me, in his Dressing gown” (41: 64). Jane’s words convey a sense of rebirth. Alongside Thomas’s agitation, her powerful imagery reveals how little any kind of return had been imagined. Nevertheless, the same letter to Russell has a vigor that reveals how pleased Jane is to be at the start of recovery: “Oh my Darling, my Darling! God for ever bless you! You, and dear Dr Russell, for your goodness to me, your patience with me, and all the good you have done me! I am better aware *now*

how much I have *gained* than I was *before* this journey—how much stronger I am, both in body and mind, than I was on my journey *to Scotland*” (41: 58).

“Gaining” is a theme throughout both volumes, as Jane gains weight, company, and energy. Her friends are as delighted as she that she is home. Her housemaids weep over her (41: 59), and she relates that both Lord Houghton and George Cooke do likewise (41: 66). It is tempting to cast Jane’s delight in their welcome as part of the cult of invalidity, a mode of being that invests anxiety with power. Jane inhabits a micro-world, delineated by the boundaries of her bed, her brougham (41: 84), and her body. She worries that her weight of “eight stones eleven pounds and a half” (41: 63) is decreasing, but dares not travel to the end of her street to be weighed (41: 85). Her sleeping habits are minutely recorded throughout both volumes (as indeed are TC’s).

Thomas’s last mention of his wife is “Jane’s health is a great deal better than it was; that is one considerably favourable point” (42: 226). It is a brief, exhausted moment in what otherwise appears to be a comparatively lengthy letter for Carlyle, giving some indication just how dogged the couple had been by the specter of ill-health. Nevertheless, Thomas is describing an improvement. The Carlyles did believe that Jane’s health continued to improve throughout 1865 and the couple started to plan more ambitious visits.

Thomas, meanwhile, experienced a rebirth of his own. Twelve years of labor came to a close with the publication of the sixth and final volume of *Frederick* in the first half of 1865. Thomas’s book and Jane’s illness are metaphorically similar. Thomas’s language echoes that of Jane’s on pain, writing of the “Printers Devil” that pursue him at “a quite *panting* rate” (41: 11). This devil is a “huge lumbering enterprize” (41: 71), a “burdensome thrice-tedious *History*” (41: 17) that is like wading through “Disgusting rubbish” (41: 12). Elsewhere in order to convey his struggles, Carlyle uses images of physical harm—“choking in Paper-clippings” (41: 112), a “millstone” (41: 43)—and of mental instability—“my *Proofs* are like to drive me mad” (41: 42). Particularly similar to Jane’s tone are his images of Death-in-Life, writing that *Frederick* has “almost literally killed me—at least it has kept me buried alive for 12

years past" (41: 123) and that he is "busy to finish my wretched book, and live agn!" (41: 58).

Any writer who has longed to complete a project will find a sympathetic model in Carlyle. The abstractions of the scholar are beautifully captured here. A previously unpublished letter shows him writing to Joseph Neuberger "in haste and despair," a citation having eluded him (41: 91). TC's replies to John Edward Jones of the London Library make delightful reading, as Carlyle denies all knowledge of several books (41: 172-74)—a year and a half later, a footnote records that JWC has returned at least two of these books to the London Library (42: 181-82). Less humorous are TC's letters to Henry Larkin. A last-minute decision is taken to print one combined index, rather than in each volume; TC's apparently sincere belief that this can happen in rather less than a week makes for tense reading (41: 161). In the midst of a large household scandal (more later), Jane's letters are long and gossipy, but such is Thomas's absorption in the progress of *Frederick* that his letters contain no mention at all.

Post-*Frederick* Thomas becomes a reinvigorated correspondent, and accounts of his activities dominate volume 42. The opening pages reveal his lengthy preparations for Scotland, to which he sends papers, bank drafts, books, and finally Noggs, his horse. Thomas writes that Noggs will find himself "astonished" to arrive in Ecclefechan (42: 14). Carlyle confesses that Scotland "almost made me greet when I saw it again" (42: 32) as he visits family, reads a great deal, and rides even more than usual. His letters to Jane often request news of her, going so far on one occasion to exclaim "Oh for God's sake write to me!" (42: 38). Thomas's letters grow longer as 1865 progresses and the struggle to complete *Frederick* recedes into memory. One of the final images he offers is of the "burning baking windless weather we have" in Chelsea, and of the quiet rhythms into which the couple have fallen: "My feet have not been so easy in my shoes for 10 years back" (42: 221). His account poignantly notes his "musing" over "many sad things, sad but quiet and very fit for the circs I have got into" (42: 221). It would be easy to simply characterize this nostalgia as a couple nearing the end of their days. Both Thomas and Jane, however, resist this characterization until the end.

I am not the first reviewer to note the considerable contribution to Carlyle studies offered by *The Collected Letters*, nor am I the only one to commend the sheer scale of the editorial achievement. However, both of these attributes are perhaps most clearly seen in JWC's breathless recounting of a household scandal to Mary Russell (41: 91–94), Mary Craik (41: 103–05) and Ann Welsh (41: 107–09). At the time, the Carlyles' domestic staff was comprised of Eliza Warren serving as Cook and Housekeeper, and of Mary and Helen (surnames unknown) as Housemaids. After a series of breakages and what appears to be food wastage, JWC declares an end to it. Resolving to sack Helen as the culprit, a neighbor pleads for clemency. Her reason, however, is extraordinary:

Mary is the worst of Girls! She had an illegitimate child in your house on the 29th of last July—It was her *second* Child—and all the things you have been missing have been spent on her man and her friends. . . . I shall only say that while she was in labour in the small room at the end of the dining room, Mr Carlyle was taking tea in the dining room with Miss Jewsbury talking to him!!!—Just a small thin door between! The child was not born till two in the morning when Mr C was still reading in the *Drawingroom*— By that time Helen has fetched two women—one of whom took the child home to be nursed—need one ask where all my fine napkins went, when it is known that the Creature had not prepared a rag of clothing for the Child! Imagine coming to the knowledge of all this when I was *retching* at any rate! (41: 93–94)

It is important to note that Froude's edition of *Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle Prepared for Publication by Thomas Carlyle* (1883) excises both of these passages. Regardless of Froude's intent, here is a woman's account of a wholly feminine concern excised by male editors. It is hard not to hear the voices of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar alongside those scholars who have also devoted themselves to Victorian textual silences.

I cannot end without writing of the charm of these two volumes. What is remarkable to me, returning to the Carlyles after an absence—and in many ways, coming to them for the first time—is the degree to which the correspondence speaks to a variety of contemporary engagements with all things Victorian.

Readers with any interest in the nineteenth century will find something for themselves here. The details of the Carlyles' illnesses, their travel (much of volume 42 is spent traveling, both individually and as a couple), and their domestic arrangements are the stuff of neo-Victorian novels. The Carlyles' London is irresistible; the streets are more dangerous and thrilling than any novelist would dare to write, with galloping horses and carriages routinely running over feet and knocking people down. There are fights in the Cremorne Gardens (41: 29). Letters cross and post goes missing, causing high drama. I had no idea that newspapers could be sent free of charge, nor that couples might send them to one another as a shorthand way to indicate wellness without paying for postage (42: 164). Similarly thrilling is my discovery that horses could travel to Scotland by rail (42: 17). Were I simply to list witty comments, this review would be much longer. From Jane: "I wish that when my education was going on there had been wise women appointed to give a course of lectures to young ladies on THE BOWELS!" (41: 41). From Thomas: "Such is crinoline;—indeed, there might the cooking of a *dinner* be going on, unseen, under some of those travelling cupolas!" (41: 29). Sutherland writes that the Carlyles "exist as exemplars of nineteenth-century life in all its variety" (41: xviii). Variety is right.

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