

Kathy Chamberlain

The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle. Edited by Ian Campbell, Aileen Christianson, David R. Sorensen, et al. Volume 43: October 1865–June 1866. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015. xxxvii + 304 pp. \$70 [institutions] \$30 [individuals].

THIS YEAR, 2016, MARKS THE 150TH ANNIVERSARY OF the death of Jane Welsh Carlyle. As the curator of the Carlyles' house in Chelsea put it, this ought to be "The year of Jane." Volume 43 of *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle* contains the letters the Carlyles wrote during the last year of her life, as well as an extensive and useful appendix of material relating to Jane's death and its aftermath. Excellently edited, introduced, annotated, illustrated, and produced (more on this later), Volume 43 is a cause for celebration. It tells the tale of a high point of Thomas Carlyle's life, his acceptance of the Rectorship of Edinburgh University, a position the students elected him to, and his subsequent journey to Scotland to give a speech on that great occasion. But for Jane Welsh Carlyle, it is the culmination of her life. Because of that, aspects of her life's story will be the focus of this review.

Through their letters, Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle create their own stories, deftly employing the epistolary art of spontaneity. They wrest coherent accounts out of chaotic, contingent existence, offering a great deal for scholars of the Victorian era to build upon. In Volume 43 various tales and characters we have been following in previous volumes of the Carlyle letters become woven together. In an easy lively manner, loose threads are nicely tied; we hear "what happened" to many a friend or friendship; certain tensions become resolved. Throughout, the Carlyles remain wonderfully in character yet

also startle and surprise. Readers may be forgiven for turning this latest volume, in our minds, into one of the most satisfying conclusions to a realistic novel that we have read. Nonfiction life writing, of course; but it offers a novelistic reading pleasure.

The period covered is October 1865 to June 1866. In December Thomas turned seventy, Jane was sixty-four, and by now they had lost a number of important friends. The Carlyles, therefore, had a keen sense of where they were on the timeline. Jane told her old beau John Stodart that happiness was “entirely out of the question at our age—when Youth and Strength and Health and Hope have all ‘been left behind—for someone else to find!’” (99). And Thomas wrote his brother, Dr. John Carlyle, that “Time, *Time* is very inexorable upon us all!” (116).

And yet, her denial of happiness aside, Jane’s last year of life was, ironically, quite a happy one. She had recovered from a long stretch of what she called “my terrible trouble,” which had lasted from the autumn of 1863 till the autumn of 1864 (128; 179n2). While Thomas was completing *his* terrible trouble, the fourteen years of work on his biography of Frederick the Great, Jane had endured a severe illness with agonizing symptoms never satisfactorily diagnosed. In August of 1865, however, after a continuing incapacitating pain in her arm had suddenly vanished and she found herself making a bonnet and playing the piano again, she liked to refer to herself as a “Living Miracle.” The shadow of her time of illness falls over this volume: she continued to refer to it, and suffered an occasional sick headache; more ominously, during moments of great stress, she would experience an almost unbearable pain in her back. Still, overall, Jane was enjoying a profound sense of reprieve.

To her friends she appeared unusually fragile and frail, like “a weird shadow” said Margaret Oliphant (137n3); but she was also described as smiling, responsive, and very much her old self. The lively, sometimes irritating Jessie Hiddleston, her “hereditary maid” (her mother had worked for Jane’s mother, her grandfather for Jane’s maternal grandfather), reported that her mistress went out socially many nights each week, often staying out as late as midnight. Jane quoted her husband as saying of this intense social life: “[R]eally my Dear I think it

is time you drew bridle in this Career of Dissipation you have entered on!" Jane replied, "But it helps me to— —*sleep!*" (132). She was proving her analysis of 1843 correct, when, after a rousing literary party with Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, and John Forster, she had proclaimed "*excitement is my rest!*" (17: 221).

Thomas still talked longingly of "some rural shelter" he might retreat to when London's railway whistles became unbearable (124). Never enthusiastic about a cottage in the country, however, the metropolitan-minded Jane, who loved the bustle of the city and the abundance of friends and acquaintances it provided, reaffirmed their life in London. When her Scottish aunts inquired whether—now that Thomas was about to be made Rector of Edinburgh University—she wouldn't like to move back to Scotland, Jane reacted in horror.

Another source of something like happiness for her in her final months was her husband's acknowledgement of her talent. He had recognized her gifts from the time of their courtship, yet at the same time had often belittled her efforts. "Do not go to Mr. Carlyle for sympathy, do not let him dash you with cold water. You must respect your own work," as Geraldine Jewsbury once warned the friend whose writing she had been warmly encouraging.¹ During the tense summer of 1845, when Jane had been penning a particularly brilliant series of letters to her husband, Thomas had repeatedly referred to what she wrote as "bits" ("Thy clever bits of Letters" etc. [19:110]), a denigration that had occasioned an outburst from Jane and caused a lingering quarrel between them.

Her letters in Volume 43 are as witty and fascinating as ever. When Emilie Ashurst Venturi's husband Carlo passed way, Jane discovered that Emilie (a great friend of Giuseppe Mazzini) was not adhering strictly to the conventions of mourning, and tossed off a quip that took note of a changing custom. (It is the kind of observation of Victorian life that in the index of Judith Flanders's *Inside the Victorian Home* gives "Carlyle, Jane" a list of twenty-two page numbers.)² Jane said of Emilie Venturi: "The

¹ Geraldine Jewsbury, *Letters of Geraldine Endors Jewsbury to Jane Welsh Carlyle*, ed. Mrs. Alexander Ireland [Anne Elizabeth] (London: Longmans, Green, 1892), 426.

² Judith Flanders, *Inside the Victorian Home: A Portrait of Domestic Life in Victorian*

formalists of her acquaintance are dreadfully concerned that she *will not* wear a widow's cap, but has her head bare, tho' iron grey now, and all in a toozle like a nest for putting plover eggs in. She said to me, how *can* I wear that odious thing that Carlo laughed at—saying it was like a placard *to Let* on an empty House?" (168). In March 1866 an Edinburgh lawyer Henry Inglis, whom the Carlyles had known since the 1820s, was so impressed with a letter Jane had written him that he burst out with: "In my latest Will and testament, I shall leave your letter to the British Museum" (127 n 4). Her conversation continued to impress as well: Margaret Oliphant, after Jane visited her at Windsor in April, reported that she was "as amusing as ever, and naturally has been taking away everybody's character, or perhaps I ought to say throwing light upon the domestic relations of the distinguished people of the period" (173n1).

Jane told Thomas that each time Jessie Hiddleston and their cook Mrs. Sarah Warren heard a new compliment about his successful speech as Rector—from the time that William Tyndale had sent a telegram proclaiming his lecture "A perfect triumph," compliments had been pouring into 5 Cheyne Row—the servants ran down to the kitchen to fry something, which sent savory odors floating upstairs. Thomas wrote back, "How uncommonly proper in those two women, to begin 'frying' something for themselves, the instant they get any fresh good-news:—you satirical little wretch, smelling it out with your nose!" (184).

Thomas had just experienced a moving moment in Edinburgh. It was said that his Rector's speech had a youthful, inspiring cast to it (what one might call "early Thomas Carlyle"); and he wrote, touchingly, that after the speech the cheers of the students who enthusiastically followed him through the streets had "for a moment actually entered my heart" (157). In other words, he was, for him, in a cheered state of mind. He wrote Jane (just a few days before her death, as it happened) that her latest letter was "all on the sparkle with satirical gaiety and malicious insight,—you little *noticing* gypsy!" (199). He could not let go of the reflexive *little*, but he heard what she said, he saw that she *saw* and *noticed*, deftly exercising her sharp satiric

pen and writing letters “all on the sparkle.” At this late stage, his compliments seem more easily given and less qualified, as if that particular tension between them (as two writers in the house) had eased.

In 1983 Phyllis Rose reached the reasonable conclusion, based on accounts then available, that in the end Thomas Carlyle had “ignored” his wife’s outstanding gift, what Rose called Jane Welsh Carlyle’s “joyous, playful deployment of her great comic complaint.”³ After Jane died, in his first wave of grief, remorse, and gratitude, Thomas did sometimes write as if Jane had existed only to serve him. To the second Lady Ashburton he mourned, “[H]er life from the time we met was and continued all mine; and she had fought and toiled for *me*, valiantly at all moments up to that last” (220). But the comments he wrote to Jane during her last months indicate that he got it—that he did understand her rare comic gift and could directly and casually let her know it was appreciated.

Further, this comprehension of her literary worth motivated the task he undertook almost at once after her death, which is well documented in this volume. With the help of Jane’s cousin Maggie Welsh, who was assisting at Cheyne Row by doing an inventory of his wife’s clothing and other belongings, Thomas collected Jane’s letters, arranged them chronologically, and wrote detailed notes about the contents. As her first editor, he made possible the posthumous collections of Jane Welsh Carlyle’s writing and her reputation as a letter writer, which has lasted into the twenty-first century. No homage greater than that.

Fascinating are Jane’s last encounters with people important in her life, or final words about her from friends—stories we have been following through previous volumes. They read like a novelistic tying up of threads. When Thomas had to communicate with his long-estranged friend John Stuart Mill on behalf of a German who wished to translate a Mill essay, he included a warm message from Jane, “testify[ing] *her* lively remembrance of old days, & the pleasure it *wd* give her to see you agn” (133). John Stuart Mill, as we shall ever remember, was

³ Phyllis Rose, *Parallel Lives: Five Victorian Marriages* (New York: Knopf, 1983) 256.

the one who immediately, in the next issue of *Fraser's Magazine* (January 1850), eloquently and justly addressed Thomas Carlyle's "Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question." In 1850, after publication of "the Negro Question," and after her husband had complained about a horrible journey by boat that he likened to being a passenger on a slave ship, Jane told him she hoped that having perceived such a connection would engender in him a degree of sympathy for "your black Brother"; in *her* case experiencing such misery first hand would create "a new sympathy . . . for another class of human sufferers" (CL 25: 184–85). However, where the lamentable Governor Eyre case was concerned, in a letter to her husband 10 April 1866, Jane's tone was the opposite. Lest anyone be tempted to idealize her, Jane's own dark side on this subject is revealed. A Royal Commission report had just concluded (9 April) that the punishments that ensued after Governor Eyre put down the uprising in Jamaica were "excessive, reckless, and barbarous" (176n7). When that report came up at a dinner party and the anti-Eyre Abraham Hayward told Mrs. Carlyle that "*women* might patronize Eyre" for they "were naturally cruel, and rather *liked* to look on *while horrors* were perpetrated. But no MAN living could stand up for Eyre *now!*" Jane responded: "I hope Mr Carlyle does. . . . I should be surprised and grieved if I found HIM sentimentalizing over a pack of black brutes" (176).

John Mill's 11 April 1866 response to Jane Carlyle's warm social message came, it was at best icily polite; he did not pick up on Jane's suggestion of seeing him again (133n7). Whatever his reasons for coldness (political or personal), that reply was the final period to the story of Jane's early friendship with Mill and his partner in feminism, Harriet Taylor.

Jane Carlyle had corresponded with George Eliot about early works of hers that she loved, without knowing the name was a pseudonym for Marian Evans, the common law wife of George Henry Lewes. When Jane found out the author's identity, the idea of visiting a woman in such a situation would have been considered highly improper. Was Jane never to meet and talk with the great novelist, then? We have a final word on that in this volume: Jane wrote her husband (in Scotland) that she and Lady Lothian wished to go somewhere special, "To Miss Evans is where we should go, still, if *you* would let us!"

(182). (As when she had attempted to edit improper phrases out of Geraldine's *The Half Sisters*, it was not the first time Jane pretended to hand off a solution to the "decency" question to her husband.) No meeting with George Eliot could take place, but Jane's words indicate that at this point she had wished to make such a visit.

Memorable last encounters and comments in this volume are too numerous to detail. But Jane heard from friends of her youth such as Eliza Stodart Aitken, John Riddle Stodart, and Susan Hunter Stirling. More surprisingly, she also made a new friend. After Maria Price, a tailor's daughter, wrote Thomas a letter of admiration, Jane searched her out and adopted her socially. Maria became a protégée. When Thomas was in Edinburgh for his speech, he visited Betty Braid, the old nurse Jane had kept in close touch with. Betty gave him a tablecloth spun by her mother as a gift for Jane, who urged her husband to take good care of it—only it arrived too late (170n7).

After Jane's death, an overwhelming number of sympathy notes flowed into the house at Cheyne Row, testified to by a rather crotchety, unwilling John Carlyle, who had been given the job of acknowledging many of the less personal ones. Erasmus Darwin, whom Jane had once called "the likeliest thing to a brother I ever had in the world" (*CL* 13: 69), wrote to Thomas that his "intercourse with your dear wife had been one of the great pleasures of my life & I shall never cease thinking of her with gratitude & affection" (223n3). Giuseppe Mazzini called on Thomas in June to pay his condolences. Robert Browning reported that John Forster, "who had a deep affection for her, is in a paroxysm of grief" (257). (Jane had lunch at John Foster's home on the day of her death, and he, to save Thomas from further pain, had prevented an autopsy and inquest from occurring.) Geraldine Jewsbury suffered at times from Jane's irritation and quips; in this volume Jane lightly quoted what a maid had said of her friend: "MISS can write Books but I'm sure it's the only thing she's fit for" (180). Nonetheless, as a best friend for life, Geraldine stayed loyally true, writing to Lady Amberley after Jane's death, "[A]ll the occupation of my life seems over[,] for she has been for many years the main interest I have had—all my employments were made with a view to her" (261).

Details of Jane's death, her burial at St. Mary's Church in Haddington, and the aftermath are given fully in this volume. The story of her death itself—her last afternoon of life—is unusually poignant, with many a telling detail. For one thing, it was what people call a good death: a quick, sudden end, something her husband acknowledged. That morning she had written him a last letter "all on the sparkle." She appeared to have appreciated her lunch at the Forsters' home. Her coachman John Silvester was driving her about Hyde Park in her brougham, an activity she often spoke of with enjoyment. Now and then the carriage would stop so that her little terrier Tiny could be put down for some exercise. One time, however, a passing carriage slightly injured Tiny's paw. Quite upset, Jane jumped out of the carriage and took Tiny back into it with her. The coachman resumed his driving, then became concerned when she did not pull on the string to signal him and asked a woman in a passing carriage to check inside. By that time Jane Carlyle, hands peacefully on her lap, had passed away.

Since there was no autopsy, the cause of death cannot be certain. Dr. John Carlyle, because of the excruciating back pain she had complained of, thought it was due to a disease of the brain or spine. Many friends believed she had died of an apoplexy, or stroke.

The fullness of the account this volume provides owes a very great deal to the editors. Aileen Christianson's introduction gives an excellent summary of the contents and is a sure-footed guide to key passages in the letters. Jane Carlyle, famously, at a party in early April, had talked out an idea for a novel to Charles Dickens. Christianson notes that such comments have caused some to construct "JWC as a novelist. But this is to distract from her real talents as an exceptional letter writer with a talent for comedy" (xxi). It is true that regarding Jane Welsh Carlyle as a novelist *manqué* does nothing to elucidate her work; but looking into her intermittent, and intriguing, aspirations to be something more than a letter writer, such as her brief forays into other genres (memoir, poem, short story), need not detract from her extraordinary epistolary accomplishments.

Christianson zeroes in on a key aspect of Jane's gift, a talent that also served to maintain the Carlyles' marriage dynamic,

keeping it (with notable exceptions, but that is another story) in good-enough balance: “Her comic timing was often best aimed at TC.” She ends her introduction with the best possible quotation to illustrate that: Jane wrote to her husband that William Tyndall had called when she was out, leaving word that after his great success in Edinburgh, Thomas was “‘looking well and every body worshipping you’! and I thought to myself; a pity if he have taken the habit of being *worshipped*! For he may find some difficulty in keeping it up, *here*!” (xxi).

The footnotes contain treasures. Because relevant excerpts from letters of friends and acquaintances are given, we hear a community of voices. Critical issues of the day are admirably summarized. The notes provide a thicker context: as we read the Carlyles’ words, an accompanying ribbon of Victorian life unscrolls at the bottom of the page. The nineteen varied, thoughtfully-selected illustrations, in addition to the portraits and scenes, range from a page of a Craigenputtoch account book to “The Chinese Giant, Chang” (from the *Illustrated London News*), who is alluded to in one of Jane’s letters. The illustrations are well reproduced, which adds aesthetic pleasure.

The Appendix, “Material relating to JWC’s death and its aftermath,” is unprecedented in its completeness and opens with a helpful list of the contents. Included are Thomas’s private journal entry, newspaper accounts, pertinent letters from friends, and the results of an interview with Jane’s coachman John Silvester. All of these, along with items included in other volumes of *The Collected Letters* such as the Key to References, Letters to the Carlyles, Chronology, Biographical Notes, the list of volumes published to date, and the index, make this volume abundantly useful. And of course the contents will end up in the *Carlyle Letters Online*, as well. All in all, a priceless resource.

As a final word, I want to recommend acquiring and *reading* Volume 43, the book, for the fascinating story it tells.