

IAN CABBELL

*The Letters of Francis Jeffrey to Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle.* Ed. William Christie. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008. 240 pp. \$195.

THIS IS A REMARKABLE VOLUME IN A NUMBER OF RESPECTS. Those with even a nodding acquaintance with Jeffrey's appalling handwriting will laud William Christie's considerable achievement in deciphering these manuscripts, some of them long in the National Library of Scotland in the papers of David Alec Wilson (Carlyle's biographer), and others more recently added to the collection. Jeffrey's extraordinary career was marked by an almost manic energy exemplified by his numerous publications, his extensive correspondence, and his inscrutable handwriting that drove Professor Christie himself to the brink of of a Carlylean "Everlasting No." It is a mark of Christie's skill and patience that there are so few lacunae or inspired guesses in transcription. These are, of course, Jeffrey's letters to the Carlyles—the correspondence in the other direction was destroyed by later generations of Jeffrey's family who were outraged by the publication of Froude's edition of Carlyle's *Reminiscences* in 1881 and by his four-volume biography (1882–84).

This tangled pre-history perhaps explains why the reading of this collection of edited correspondence is such a pleasure. Ever since the *Reminiscences* we have had Carlyle's side of the story, told with his characteristic sharpness of memory and too often, with his uncharitable gruffness of manner. From Froude, we have a similarly uneven and biased record. Christie's collection adjusts the balance in favor of Jeffrey himself. In his introduction and footnotes, he judiciously employs evidence from the Duke-Edinburgh edition of the *Collected Letters of Thomas and*

*Jane Welsh Carlyle* to offer a thorough and fair-minded account of this intriguing friendship. Christie observes that Jeffrey's sentimentalism—a quality that Carlyle frequently scorned—was a corollary of his ecumenical outlook. As Christie notes incisively in his introduction, “The consolation and resolution offered by ordinary, familiar affections—distinguished here from the passions and imagination of the gifted—more and more became central to his life and thought, as scepticism about religious and cultural enthusiasms was central to his philosophy, and toleration of religious and cultural differences central to his politics” (xxx).

The portrait of Jeffrey that emerges from the first letter (probably written in June 1827) to the last (in August 1849) is one of a warm and affectionate man who was the antithesis of Thomas Carlyle, both temperamentally and intellectually, but who nonetheless revered and respected his friend. Jeffrey is equally devoted to Jane Welsh, who obviously captivated him from his first visit to Comely Bank. It was typical of Jeffrey, busy as he was, that he took the trouble to return Thomas's call to his office by visiting him at Comely Bank. Jeffrey's deep interest in Thomas and Jane is evident from the outset, and he is unfazed by Carlyle's enthusiasm for Germany and by his idiosyncratic style. In a letter to Thomas from Edinburgh in early July 1827, Jeffrey writes:

I am very gratified by your note, and will not let you wait till Saturday to learn that I am not a all frightened at your Teutonic fire—and shall receive your larger exposition of the faith that is in you, with all respect and thankfulness—I feel at once that you are a man of Genius—and of original character and right heart—and shall be proud and happy to know more of you—I fairly tell you that I think your taste vicious in some points—and your opinions of the real value and talents of your German idols erroneous—But I know I am very ignorant of them—and I think I can say with truth that I am neither bigotted nor intolerant—It will be a real pleasure to me to discuss these matters with a person of your intelligence candour and good temper—and I make no doubt that the result will be far more to my advantage than yours. (2)

It should not be forgotten that it was Jeffrey's patronage that helped Carlyle break into the wider readership of the *Edinburgh*

*Review*, and it was his influence that enabled the young author (though even Jeffrey's power was limited) to find a publisher for *Sartor Resartus* in the troubled winter of 1831–32 in London. It was also Jeffrey who provided a vital loan to Carlyle when the latter's resources were at their most stretched, and who quietly endured his friend's somewhat graceless lack of gratitude for the favor.

Repeatedly in his letters, Jeffrey strives to look beyond the immediate context of a quarrel with Carlyle. As an editor, he tolerates the latter's determination to pursue in his own path in the review essay on Burns for the *Edinburgh Review*, but insists on "retrenchments": "I cannot venture to print 60 pages of such matter (and it would go to that) and it is the more provoking, because the article would be far better—more striking—more indicative of genius, and more effectual for your purpose, if it were condensed to half the size—I cannot reduce it so far—for it would require to be written nearly over again—but I *must* make some retrenchments—and I will send you proofs when that is done—The latter part is far the best—the best written and best conceived—I wish there had been less mysticism about it—at least less mystical jargon—less talk and repetition about entireness, and simplicity, and equipments—and such matters[—]There is also much palpable exaggeration—and always the most dogmatism where you are either decidedly wrong or very doubtfully right—But there is a noble strain of sentiment—and kind and lofty feeling—and much beauty and felicity of diction" (23 September 1828; 21). In such moments the reader tends to forget that Jeffrey was near the end of his career, while Carlyle had decades of productivity and fame ahead. Indirectly, Christie's book is a record of the pivotal role that Jeffrey played in making those decades possible. The book demonstrates that the sage of Chelsea's ascent from obscurity to worldwide fame was in no small way indebted to Jeffrey, who believed in him to the extent that he was prepared to travel repeatedly to the Carlyles' rural outpost in Craigenputtoch to encourage, inspire, and, if permitted, to subsidize.

Carlyle gave his friendship to few in an unreserved way, but he instinctively recognized Jeffrey's loyalty. The bond between the two men led to long conversations and to memorable verbal fencing matches that they both relished. Christie's collection

yields some sense of what they said to one another as they rode out from Edinburgh to Jeffrey's country house in Craigcrook for the weekend, the two anticipating the prospect of a weekend's friendly relaxation punctuated by critical banter. Writing to Carlyle on 12 October 1828, Jeffrey is contrite about harsh words that he used in criticizing Carlyle's literary ambitions: "Sincerity required that I should speak plainly and firmly—but I was anxious to show you also not only some of the reasons for which sensible people would reject your conclusions—but the tone and temper in which even the candid and thoughtful part of them must necessarily regard them—It would have been more polite and agreeable to have veiled this temper a little—and, as I myself really care less than most people about theories and speculative whimsies, I do not think I should have displayed it at all seriously—if you had been confiding yours to me alone—but it seemed to be a necessary part of my warning ag[ains]t your public apostleship—and I have only to add that I feel confident you cannot now <mis> understand my motives—nor doubt for an instant that our verbal and metaphysical differences are perfectly consistent with the greatest respect and affection" (25).

The intellectual stimulus Carlyle and Jeffrey lent one another was at the price of strained nerves and raised voices. "[Y]ou mystics will not be contented with kindness of heart and reasonable notions in anybody" (21 October [1828]; 28), Jeffrey jokes, yet Carlyle's inability to step back from controversy and to assess opposing viewpoints dispassionately clearly irritated Jeffrey. Tensions between them reached a breaking point in 1834 when Carlyle sought Jeffrey's assistance to obtain the position of the superintendence of the Royal Observatory on Calton Hill in Edinburgh. Writing to Carlyle on 14 January, Jeffrey reminds him that "an indispensable qualification in any candidate [for the position]" is "that he is a skilful and practiced observer." In an uncharacteristically fierce outburst, Jeffrey explains, "You know I do not myself set much value on the paradoxes and exaggerations in which you delight—and at all events I am quite clear that no man ever did more to obstruct the success of his doctrines by the tone in which he promulgated them—It is arrogant, vituperative—obscure—anti-national and inconclusive—likely enough to strike weak

and ill conditioned fancies—but almost sure to revolt calm, candid and thinking persons—It sounds harsh to say this—but I say it as a witness—and as you begin to experience the effects, you may perhaps give more credit to my testimony than you used to—You will never find (or make) the world friendly to your doctrines, while you insist upon dragooning it into them in so hyperbolic a manner” (144).

Carlyle was aware that on many occasions in Jeffrey’s company, he had violated the boundaries of propriety. In a keen moment of self-analysis in the *Reminiscences*, he admits that “there was throughout a singular freedom in my way of talk with him; and, though far from wishing or intending to be disrespectful, I doubt there was at times an unembarrassment and frankness of hitting and repelling, which did not quite beseem our respective ages and positions” (*Reminiscences*, ed. Fielding and Campbell 362–63). In the event, Carlyle proved to a better critic than a listener. Jeffrey’s detailed explanations of his editorial revisions bothered Carlyle far more than he liked to acknowledge. In a letter of 22 October [1828], Jeffrey provided a painstaking summary of his methods in the essay on Burns: “You really must not take the pet, because I do my duty—He who comes into a crowd must submit to be squeezed—and at all events must not think himself ill treated if his skirts are crumpled or the folds of his drapery a little compressed—You may be assured that I have given you more room than I have given any other person—and I cannot think you have any reason to feel sore because I have scored out 3 or 4 pages of very ordinary quotations—and about as much of the least important of your remarks—You have still a good portly article of 46 pages, on a subject by no means new. . . . In reference to your particular case you should remember that I have 2 duties to perform—one certainly to give you a fair field to display your talents and enforce your opinions—but another, to promote the popularity, circulation and effect of the review—I am afraid the last is a paramount duty—and to you I can only say that I have trenched more upon it already for your sake than I ever did for that of any one besides” (27–28).

Jeffrey’s relations with Jane Welsh Carlyle were subject to a different kind of emotional pressure. Thomas remarked in *Reminiscences* that Jeffrey “was much taken with my little

Jeannie. . . . He became, in a sort, her would-be openly declared friend and quasi-lover.” In Thomas’s view, this amounted to artful play-acting on Jane’s side: “My little Woman perfectly understood all that sort of thing . . . and could lead her clever little gentleman a very pretty minuet, as far as she saw good” (*Reminiscences*, ed. Fielding and Campbell 360–61). Christie largely agrees with Carlyle’s interpretation. Jeffrey was attracted to Jane because of her youth, beauty, charm, and freshness. Yet as Christie also points out, Jane derived considerable emotional and even erotic pleasure from the connection as well: “[T]he peculiar mixture of amorousness, paternalism and sibling familiarity in Jeffrey satisfied obvious needs and Jane found Jeffrey’s attentions no less flattering than cloying” (xxviii). Eventually Jane tired of Jeffrey’s patronizing addresses to his “dear Child,” with her “pretty bits of lessons and exercises” (4 and 5 December 1833; 138), but Christie is surely right to stress the intensely personal aspect of Jeffrey’s correspondence: “[T]here is occasionally about Jeffrey’s letters to Jane a confidence and an emotional abandon that is unique . . . even in one committed to his friendships as Jeffrey was and more and more given to emotional abandonment” (xxviii).

Jeffrey’s desire for proximity to Jane seems to increase as his links to Thomas become more strained. In 9 October 1830 he rhapsodizes about the photograph of her that he has received from her mother: “My Dear Child—a thousand thanks, and *blessings*, to you, for your letter—tho’ it drew tears from me—and I prefer the happiness of smiles—I have carried it about with me since I received it—and the very smell of the musk with which you have perfumed it seems to spread an atmosphere of purity and tenderness around me, which nothing base or unholy can enter. . . . You know, I take it for granted, that [your Mother] has sent me *the* picture—and with a letter so kind and touching—sent it to me, not in loan, but in gift—tho’ under certain conditions at which I should be a brute if I could murmur. . . . But in the mean time, that precious picture is my own—in my quite lawful possession at least—and with the full free and unconstrained consent of all who have anything to do with it” (71). When Jeffrey is forced to return the photograph on 8 September 1834, after Jane recoils at his allusion to her “bits of convictions,” he reacts with panic:

For Mercy's sake let us be friends still—and seem so.—  
Tho' you have instigated your mother to ask back your  
picture . . . do not let us be estranged any longer—I  
daresay I have been too harsh and peremptory—and  
humbly ask your pardon if you still think so. . . . [Y]ou may  
believe me when I say, that if I had not thought that the  
opinions and habits which you cherished were, in part at  
least, the cause of this derangement, I should never have  
testified ag[ain]sty them as I have done. (147–48)

His letters to her continued, but her position had hardened. On 10 August 1845 she reported to Thomas, “*He* payed the penalty of his assurance in losing from that time forward my valuable correspondence” (CL 19: 137).

One of the incidental benefits of this volume is the light that it sheds on the early years of Carlyle's literary apprenticeship, and on the Edinburgh milieu in which he was educated and began to write. For Christie's collection yields fresh insight into the Scottish background that figures so prominently in Carlyle's essays on Burns and Scott. Undoubtedly, there is further material to be unearthed. For example, it would be useful to have evidence of the very earliest Carlyle and Jeffrey contact regarding the Pictet review, which the old man's memory misattributes in the *Reminiscences*, and which sank without trace on Jeffrey's busy desk when a much younger Carlyle had hoped to break into the *Edinburgh Review*. A prickly Carlyle did not let this apparent snub cool his obvious affection for Jeffrey, nor did the latter allow the matter to impede their later friendship. These letters flesh out the partial view of Jeffrey that Carlyle offers in *Reminiscences*. They remind the reader of how much the aspiring author, recently married and with slender means, owed to a remarkable and powerful literary giant of his time. This is a book to be read from cover to cover, its scrupulous annotation illuminating the letters without hindering enjoyment, its introduction a model of compactness, and its editor's modesty making light of a transcription effort nothing short of heroic.