

*“The best club of all”:*  
Thomas Carlyle at the Athenæum, 1853–1872

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THOMAS CARLYLE’S ELECTION TO THE ATHENÆUM CLUB in March 1853 occurred at a stage of his career that was marked by gnawing personal and professional insecurity, a psychological version of the earlier spiritual crisis that he had dramatized in the “Everlasting No” chapter of *Sartor Resartus* (120–26). His descent into this lugubrious state of acute self-doubt was provoked by the harsh critical reception accorded to *Latter-Day Pamphlets* (1850) and *The Life of John Sterling* (1851). Carlyle’s ferocious condemnation of the British political and religious establishments in these two works generated an equally hostile counter-assault, which left him stunned and uncharacteristically vulnerable. Normally impervious to criticism, he was chastened by the depth of the outrage. He was unsettled by a critique of him in an American Methodist magazine, which depicted him as “one of the most portentous, black, immeasurable monsters, threatening to eat up the solar system and submerge mankind!” (To Joseph Neuberg, 5 Nov. 1852; *CL* 27: 348–49). In a letter to his sister

Jean Carlyle Aitken on 8 November 1852, he fretted that he had become a “humbug and a fool” in the eyes of “the general well-disposed Blockheadism of England, after all my talking!” Two days later he admitted to his great friend and patron Harriet, Lady Ashburton that these “black days” had sapped his will. In his private journal he chastised himself for being guilty of “Cowardice”: “Certainly I have not been strong *enough* on my side; often, often, not *bold* enough but have fled and shrunk, when I should have stood and defiantly fought. The votes of men, the respectabilities . . . have been too sacred to me?” (*CL* 27: 351, 354–55).

In the midst of these gloomy speculations, Carlyle resorted to writing down a series of thoughts on his core principles, fragments of which were later published inaccurately by his biographer James Anthony Froude as “Spiritual Optics” (*Life* 2: 7–12). In these brooding and anguished reflections, which were corrected by Professor K. J. Fielding in 2005, Carlyle reiterated his commitment to an abrasive and provocative style of critical idiom. He questioned whether he should take a more inclusive stance as a social commentator, given the ferocity of the attacks against him, but he rightly reasoned that such a volte-face would only tarnish his image further. Those offended by his cruel and perverse racist caricatures of Negroes, Jews, and Irish Catholics, or by his harsh dismissal of the “beggarly twaddle” (qtd. in Wilson 372) of contemporary Christianity, would never forgive him for his jibes, even if he justified them by insisting that his satire was aimed at the powerful rather than the powerless, and atheists rather than believers. Convinced more than ever that he constituted a “minority of one” (*Heroes* 53), Carlyle pledged to pursue his singular course as a prophet without honor: “There are few men who have even at present a certain terrible duty, to be intolerant, and I hope there will be ever more, and that their intolerance will grow ever nobler, diviner, more victorious; but how few are there in all the Earth!” (Fielding 224).

Yet the British literary establishment that he assailed in *Latter-Day Pamphlets* for occupying the “Throne of Hypocrisy” (*Works* 20: 321) was not as “intolerant” of him as he perhaps hoped. At least temporarily, his nomination to the Athenæum startled him out of his gloom. In a letter of 24 February 1853,

Harriet, Lady Ashburton (1805–57; *ODNB*)—the enigmatic society hostess, daughter of George John Montagu, sixth Earl of Sandwich, and wife of William Bingham Baring (1799–1864; *ODNB*), second Baron Ashburton and heir to the Baring Brothers banking concern—informed him that her husband, a member of the Club’s General Committee and an admirer of Carlyle, had proposed and secured his name for immediate election. Under the stipulations of Rule 2, “a certain number of persons of distinguished eminence in Science, Literature, or the Arts, . . . shall be elected by the [General] Committee” (*Rules & Regulations* 7). In her characteristically droll manner, Lady Ashburton dismissed the matter as a gesture of social convenience, and gently urged Carlyle to accept the honor. With tact and delicacy, she also pleaded with him to observe the conventions and dignities of the Club:

Dear Mr C. *We in our wisdom* deeming it adviseable you should belong to the Athenium [*sic*] Club (the reasons w<sup>d</sup>. be long to write & quite beyond the patience of the female mind) have made all arrangements accordingly—you of course will do as (you) please—go, or not go—with that we do not interfere; but after next Tuesday (1 March) if you ever *feel Christian* and wish to see a *fellow* (from which Heaven preserve you) or if you ever want a wayfaring glass of water or a rest in your pilgrimages to & fro from Chelsea you are free of the Club to go in and out at your pleasure. Only to bear a Christian spirit to y<sup>r</sup>. brother men whilst you are there, that is all that is needful! (Sorensen [2010] 59–60)

Lady Ashburton had good reason to be anxious both about Carlyle’s response to the offer and his reception at the Athenæum. In his present angry and demoralized state, he was especially irritated by the company of fellow writers. Two of Carlyle’s least favorite contemporaries—John Wilson Croker (1780–1857; *ODNB*) and Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800–1859; *ODNB*)—were prominent members of the Club. Croker had played a pivotal role in founding the Athenæum in 1824, inspiring the original committee with his plan to establish a club that attributed the highest priority to distinction in the arts and sciences. His vision was enshrined in the Club’s charter to include “individuals known for their Scientific or Literary attainments, Artists of eminence in any of the Fine Arts, and

Noblemen and Gentlemen distinguished as liberal Patrons of Science, Literature or the Arts” (*Rules & Regulations* 7). Carlyle disliked Croker for what he symbolized. He had committed the unforgivable sin of being a well-connected lawyer and politician who had used his position in the *beau monde* to build a literary name for himself. Reviewing Croker’s edition of Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* in 1831, Carlyle observed “how much the Editor, so well furnished with all external appliances and means, is from within unfurnished with means for forming to himself any just notion of Johnson, or of Johnson’s Life; and therefore of speaking on that subject with much hope of edifying” (*Works* 28: 65–66).

Carlyle’s difficulties in obtaining access to Croker’s famous collection of pamphlets in the British Museum library while researching *The French Revolution* (1837) only increased his disdain for a man who struck him as a self-seeking toady and publicist. In both its volcanic form and style, Carlyle’s “FLAME-PICTURE” (*Works* 4: 243) of the Revolution amounted to a scorching repudiation of everything that Croker stood for as a researcher and historian. In the period leading up to his membership of the Athenæum, Carlyle’s attitude towards Croker had hardened. In a letter to his brother John on 7 October 1851, he dismissed Croker’s essay on “revolutionary literature”—an attack against two of his disciples, F. D. Maurice (1805–72; *ODNB*) and Charles Kingsley (1819–75; *ODNB*)—as “very beggarly *Crokerism*, all of copperas and gall and human baseness. . . . No viler mortal calls himself man than old Croker at this time” (*CL* 26: 195–97). Three weeks later Carlyle, curious about the life of Captain James Cook, enlisted Lady Ashburton to “ask Croker if there is any descendant of Cook now alive that he knows of? and if so what or where? Let us turn the unfortunate Croker to this account (as even from Badgers one can make excellt shaving brushes)” (*CL* 26: 217–18).

Whereas Carlyle considered Croker’s presence at the Athenæum as a regrettable irritant, Macaulay’s was more in the category of a personal affront. The two men had been rivals for over twenty years, and though as historians they shared many affinities, the one constant in their careers was their mutual contempt. Their feud was exacerbated by the number of common friends they shared, perhaps the most notable of

whom was Harriet, Lady Ashburton, who adroitly managed to court both of them at her regular literary salons at the Grange in Northampton. Carlyle and Macaulay also shared a number of close friends who were members of the Athenæum, including the author and politician Richard Monckton Milnes (1809–85; *ODNB*), the historian and politician Philip Henry, 5th Earl Stanhope (1805–75; *ODNB*), and the poet and banker Samuel Rogers (1763–1855; *ODNB*). Ironically, Carlyle and Macaulay could even claim a common enemy, John Wilson Croker, who may have been indirectly responsible for fueling Carlyle's early resentment towards Macaulay. In the spring of 1831 the struggling Carlyle had written from his remote hermitage in Craigenputtoch to Macvey Napier, editor of *Edinburgh Review*, asking him if he would commission a review of Croker's edition of Boswell's Johnson. Napier replied in August, informing him rather untactfully that "soon after the first announcement of the work, I had agreed to put [the book] in the hands of a distinguished friend, who is now, I hope at work upon it." Carlyle probably never forgot the slight, and soon after he aligned himself with Macaulay's most venomous Tory enemy, the brilliant drunken Irishman William Maginn, editor of *Fraser's Magazine* and the declared opponent of "Thomas Babbleton Macaulay, whose articles would swamp a seventy-four" ("Gallery" 706).

It would be no exaggeration to say that by 1853, when Lord Ashburton nominated Carlyle for membership of the Athenæum, the feud between the sage of Chelsea and Baron Macaulay of Rothley had attained an epic dimension. The specific epic in question was Carlyle's projected biography of Frederick the Great of Prussia (published 1858–65), for which he was beginning to research. The impetus behind this Sisyphean undertaking was Macaulay's review essay of Thomas Campbell's *Frederic the Great and his Times* in 1842. Deftly manipulating bardic hyperbole, Macaulay had attacked the Prussian King as an amoral Machiavellian whose legacy was bloodshed and despotism: "On the head of Frederic is all the blood which was shed in a war which raged during many years and in every quarter of the globe, the blood of the column of Fontenoy, the blood of the mountaineers, who were slaughtered at Culloden. The evils produced by his wickedness were felt in

lands where the name of Prussia was unknown; and, in order that he might rob a neighbour whom he had promised to defend, black men fought on the coast of Coromandel, and red men scalped each other by the Great Lakes of North America" (*Critical and Historical Essays* 3: 192). Conversely, Carlyle declaimed that "Fritz" was an apostle of order and a bulwark of sincerity who singlehandedly defied the diplomatic hypocrisies of his time. He offered a bedrock Teutonic alternative to slovenly Anglo-Saxon mammon-worship and parliamentary "do-nothingism" on the one hand, and French frippery and dilettantism on the other.

Carlyle knew that the British intelligentsia had formed its opinion about Frederick from reading Macaulay. The table was set for his own mammoth six-volume Prussian Iliad, which together with Macaulay's essay composed the longest "Expostulation and Reply" in the history of English literature. When his friend the diarist Francis Espinasse mentioned Macaulay's name to him in this period, "Carlyle turned on me rather fiercely, averring that Macaulay had never said anything that was 'not entirely commonplace,' but he had the grace to add, 'he is a very brilliant fellow. Flow on thou shining river!'" Espinasse wisely discerned the creative benefits of this hostility, "which had something personal in it." As he rightly conjectured, "It is very probable that Carlyle was first attracted to Frederick the Great, as the subject for a book, by Macaulay's brilliant essay in the *Edinburgh Review*, in which he 'left half told the story' of that singular hero" (216–17). It became Carlyle's mission to finish the story by correcting Macaulay's distorted impression of the Prussian king; his aim was nothing less than to rehabilitate Frederick's image in the eyes of the British reading public.

Never one to back down from a challenge herself, Lady Ashburton had been eager to bring her two star gladiators together under one roof. Personally, she far preferred Carlyle to Macaulay. After reading the introduction to Macaulay's best-selling *History of England* (1848, 1855, 1861) in 1848, she confessed to Carlyle that "It is very clever . . . but it wants something to enlist my sympathy. It has as narrative the charm of simplicity carrying you on with it—& every now and then it is surely inflated" (19 Dec.; Sorensen 2010, 81). In his response, Carlyle eagerly contributed to the bonfire, describing Macaulay work as "clear, definite, every corner of it; but without concentration,

modulation, a formless *flat*,—like a Russian *steppe*; . . . without stream, without mountain, without feature, grass, grass to the utmost horizon; in fine, no story to be told, and nothing but a Whig Evangelist to tell it us!” (CL 23: 209). When they eventually met at the Grange in 1851, both men were civil, at least outwardly. Carlyle found Macaulay to be “a man of really peaceable kindly temper, and superior sincerity in his Whig way . . . [a sort of] spiritual *Hippopotamus*” (CL 26: 274). Macaulay was more scathing and less prepared to be conciliatory. After hearing Carlyle’s doctor argue that the water cure would make him a new man, Macaulay remarked, “If [Carlyle] goes away writing common sense in good English, I shall declare myself a convert to hydropathy.” Shortly after leaving the Grange, Macaulay remarked to a friend, “Carlyle and I tried to be mutually civil, but with mutual repulsion. His cant makes me sick” (Pinney 5: 182, 209n). Circumstances were not promising for any eminent reconciliation between them, even as fellow members of the Athenæum.

For the author of *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, Croker and Macaulay were symbols of the political paralysis enveloping the governing classes of England, offering them the “Quack” panaceas of Tory reaction or Whig progress. These were the grand shibboleths of the time that were used to justify the preservation of a debilitated oligarchy. In theory at least, a club in which these two figures counted as influential figures was not a place that Carlyle would care to frequent. In the fourth of the *Latter-Day Pamphlets* entitled “New Downing Street,” he condemned the opinion makers of England for their slavish devotion to stale orthodoxies: “Alas, it will be found . . . that in England more than in any other country, our Public Life and our Private, our State and our Religion, and all that we do and speak (and most even of what we *think*), is a tissue of half-truths and whole-lies; of hypocrisies, conventionalisms, worn-out traditionary rags and cobwebs; such a life-garment of beggarly incredible and uncredited falsities as no honest souls of Adam’s Posterity were ever enveloped in before. And we walk about it with a stately gesture, as if it were some priestly stole or imperial mantle; not the foulest beggar’s-gabardine that ever was” (*Works* 20: 160).

Yet Carlyle could be open-minded and personally generous, as even his most inveterate enemies acknowledged when they

found themselves in his midst. He considered the *Latter-Day Pamphlets* as a purgative act that enabled him to “get delivered of my black eccentricities and consuming fires.” He had fulfilled an obligation “to my own *conscience* as a faithful citizen,” and he resolutely stood behind them as an exercise in “*speaking of the truth*” (*Reminiscences* 103, 149). But for all of the harsh invective in the book, there was also an element of humor that Jane Welsh Carlyle particularly appreciated, and probably inspired. Carlyle was hurt that so many of his contemporaries had ignored the Swiftian dimension of his polemics. Those who knew him well realized that despite his harsh exterior, he was unusually receptive to dissent, largely because he mocked himself with the same rigor that he applied to his targets. Carlyle’s letters are full of instances of his self-deprecation. Perhaps one of the most revealing descriptions of this peculiar trait came from the poet and novelist Mary Boyle, who in January 1867 was staying at Mentone during Carlyle’s visit there in the aftermath of his wife’s death the previous April. Boyle accompanied him “on walks and drives,” and remembered how he “would launch forth into the most unwarrantable philippics, but then he would break off suddenly, and all the venom and bitterness be drowned in a burst of ringing laughter, and his handsome, though naturally grim, face would ripple all over with good-humoured smiles” (Boyle 268).

In the private sphere, Carlyle was not the reactionary “moral desperado” (Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough, 23 Sept. 1849; *Letters* 1: 156) that he liked to project in his writings, nor was he as inflexible as he so loudly proclaimed. The crowded slate of his close friendships with those who opposed him politically or ideologically abundantly testified to his protean powers of engagement. He demanded the same level of intellectual and spiritual intensity in others that he drew from himself, yet he also required that at the personal level, they not take themselves too seriously. For Carlyle, laughter was always a cure for righteousness, especially his own. Lady Ashburton, who knew him better than almost anyone else—a fact that understandably drove Jane Welsh Carlyle to bouts of extreme jealousy and umbrage—rightly surmised that membership at the Athenæum might enhance his self-worth. To a significant degree, the Club was composed of a Carlylean “aristocracy of

talent,” where distinction was measured by quality of character and intellect, and where attainment was not necessarily dependent on wealth, privilege, or upbringing.

From the outset, the Club had been derided by members of older and more established institutions as a gathering place for the “unwashed,” that is, “those writers who had to write for a living” (Black 59). Among the original list of luminaries who were invited to become members without election were William Blake, Robert Peel, and Sir Walter Scott, all of whom had exercised a deep impact on Carlyle’s own development as a thinker and writer. In principle, the founding principles of the Athenæum should have been welcomed by the author of *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841), in which Carlyle redefined the cultural role of the man of letters in Victorian England as an inspired “flowing light-fountain” (4). Moreover, the timing of the membership seemed fortuitous. Despondent about his fading relevance as voice of conscience, Carlyle might benefit from being reminded of his centrality to the dominant controversies of his time. Lady Ashburton had judged shrewdly in advising her husband to bestow the honor on Carlyle, but as always, the complex and refractory personality of her “Prophet” proved to be something of an impediment to her ambitions for his assimilation into the Club’s society.

Carlyle received formal notification of his membership on 2 March 1853 in a letter sent to him by the Club secretary, Edward Magrath. He wrote immediately to Lord Ashburton to thank him for this generous gift:

A gentleman of the name of Magrath, who writes a scraggy hand, but in a civil style and with pleasant news, informs me last night that I am elected to the Athenæum on Tuesday last “under Article 2 of the rules”; and that at this date, apparently by the special interposition of Heaven (for he says nothing about *monies* or other vulgar terrestrial objects), I am actually a member of that honourable Club! Really I begin to be ashamed of myself; and, now that I have reflected on it, know not what to say:—better perhaps that I *say* almost nothing! Certainly there are munificent souls still extant in this world; certainly here is one of the handsomest acts done in the handsomest manner! You have really given me a very pretty Freehold for the rest

of my life; and in a way that cannot be refused,—that can only be accepted, with a feeling which is itself a real possession to one. I do return many thanks; and will not speak another word.— — It is certain, except for this or some such miracle, I should never have been a member of any *Club*: and we will take the *consequences*, which may really be considerable for me, with *hope*. For the rest, I will not enter the place till after your arrival on Monday; and you shall introduce me, some evening while you are here,—to the “*Club Epoch*” of my existence, if peradventure any “epoch” lie in that!” (3 March; *CL* 28: 59–60)

In letters to his brother John and to their mother Margaret, Carlyle registered a range of emotions: gratitude, astonishment, and deep skepticism. He at once realized the broader social significance of the recognition. The son of an Annandale stonemason and farmer, he had been raised in modest circumstances. Largely through his own efforts and through the tireless encouragement and support of his brilliant wife Jane Welsh, he had vaulted into the front rank of the leading literary figures of his day. He was now a recognized member of the Arnoldian clerisy defined by “the best that has been thought and said in the world” (*Arnold* 5: 233) It was a measure of the Carlyles’ celebrity and fame in Victorian society that their modest house in shabby Chelsea had become an intellectual mecca teeming with ideas, wit, personality, and distinction, all of which floated free of the adhesions of wealth or privilege. The Athenæum membership was a confirmation of Carlyle’s stature as an artist and a public intellectual. Writing to his brother on 10 March, he recalled his earlier resistance to the Ashburtons’ suggestion that he join the Athenæum:

*Ld A.* is on the Committee of the Athenæum Club; he said once, Shall I propose you, this spring, for *immediate* election? I answered grumblingly, vaguely; Lady A. quizzed; and so we come to the clear result, “No,” and I dismissed the matter altogether. But now, the other day, comes news that I *am* elected, the money all *paid*, entrance money and subscription in a lump; and that I have only to go in when I like and stay out when I like! Really very kind; and so handsomely done that there was no rejecting or refusing it. (*CL* 28: 68–69)

It did not take him long to question the benefits of this new arrangement. In the same letter to his brother, Carlyle sarcastically reported details of his inaugural dinner at the club: “Lord An took me the other night to my first dinner and entrance there: I do not much believe I shall go *often*; but that will be seen. Old [Henry] Crabbe Robinson, visible in the reading room, inquired after you that night: very old, and clattery. [Charles] Darwin, [Richard] Owen &c were also visible: Plenty of loungers there, if one wanted lounging” (CL 28: 68–69). In a letter to his mother of 12 March two days later, Carlyle was more conciliatory and appreciative:

I must tell you of another pleasant thing that has happened to me; or rather Jack will tell you, and explain anything you cannot understand of it: the thing is this. I was never member of any club, nor ever should have been, as almost all the men of my circle are here. But it costs £25 or so of entrance, and £5 or £6 a year besides, for the privilege of going in to see Books, Newspapers, your Acquaintances,—and also of treating the place like the cheapest and royallest of coffee houses (getting refreshment, dining, lounging on sofas &c) according to your pleasure:—and it always seemed to me too dear, and I had no desire for it. However, Lord Ashburton, it *wd* appear, had privately determined this spring to have it done, with *t* consulting me; and now it is done, and I am member of what is thought to be the best club of all, the Athenæum; & all the money, both entrance and annual, is secretly paid for me, and the election (which needed to be *unanimous*, by a new law, and so was a thing of anxiety) all has been transacted without my ever knowing it, and I am, as it were, brought in in my sleep! I do not expect I shall ever very much use my privilege; but certainly it was a kind and handsome gift to make, and ought to give me pleasure, and does, a little. Men wait for 7 years sometimes before they can be so much as balloted for (only “famous” people, can be elected in this way *at once*), and then they have to pay (if they do it in a lump, and not annually), I suppose, £100 or better. A ‘good gift’ indeed! (CL 28: 73–74)

Carlyle’s gratitude was genuine, but his aversion to the “loungers” remained strong. From his perspective, the majority of the Club’s members were part of the “dilettanti” or

“cognoscenti” whom he had denounced in “Jesuitism,” the final installment of the *Latter-Day Pamphlets*. Their job was to cater to the debased tastes of the “monster of opulence”—Carlyle’s trope for the new English and European elite—“who has converted all the Fine Arts into after-dinner amusements; slave adjuncts to his cookeries, upholsteries, tailories, and other palpably Coarse Arts” (*Works* 20: 328). Carlyle’s antipathy to the literary class did not diminish as a result of his Athenæum membership, but the evidence of his activity at the Club over the next twenty-five years indicates a degree of accommodation, punctuated by bouts of fierce antagonism. He understood the magnitude of Lord Ashburton’s “handsome gift,” and its emblematic value. Yet he was never entirely at ease in the company of the “cognoscenti.” He had always thrived in an atmosphere of adversity, fearing that a too great intimacy with the powers of “Respectability” might inhibit his relentless urges to “unpleasantly astonish everybody” (*Reminiscences* 103). Still, he could periodically visit the club, confident in the assurance that his two most prominent disciples—John Forster and John Ruskin—were already members of the Athenæum. Carlyle was never as isolated as he liked to pretend.

The friendship of Forster and Carlyle, which lasted for over forty years, began in March 1839. As editor of the *Examiner*, Forster published four of Carlyle’s essays in 1848 and tactfully protected him from the inevitable outcry that these provoked. It was a mark of the trust that existed between the two men that Carlyle had followed Forster’s advice in withdrawing a follow-up article to his essay on “Louis Philippe” in March because Forster feared it might contribute to public disorder in London.<sup>1</sup> In the troublesome years of Carlyle’s publication of the notorious “Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question” (1849) and *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, Forster aligned himself with Carlyle and defended his reputation. Forster knew that Thomas and Jane lived an extremely modest existence, and he used his role as an adviser to the publishers Chapman and Hall to improve their financial portfolio. By 1858 Forster had moved Carlyle from Fraser to Chapman and Hall, and became his unofficial agent

<sup>1</sup> See Chris R. Vanden Bossche, “Carlyle’s Unpublished ‘French Republic,’” *Carlyle Studies Annual* 30 (2014): 23–58.

at the press, responsible for negotiating contracts, devising marketing policies, and planning the publication of the 1869 Library Edition of Carlyle's collected works.

Soon after joining the Athenæum, Forster and Carlyle used the Club as a meeting-point for a very literary purpose—the establishment of an annual annuity for Anne Elizabeth Lowe (1778–1860) and Frances Meliora Lucia Lowe (ca. 1783–1866), daughters of Mauritius Lowe (1746–93; *ODNB*), a painter and friend of Dr. Johnson, who were living in poverty in a house off the Old Kent Road in Deptford. Lowe's son, who had been named by Johnson as his godson in his will, had died in ill health and left behind these two surviving sisters, now both elderly and living in indigent circumstances. It was no coincidence that Carlyle, a newly minted member of London's most prestigious literary club, was organizing a campaign with Forster's help to support these two women. In effect, he was serving notice to the Athenæum's "loungers" that they had higher obligations to fulfil as "men of letters" than dining in the splendor of Decimus Burton's neo-classical clubhouse at 107 Pall Mall.

In the draft memorial he addressed to the prime minister, Lord Palmerston, Carlyle placed great emphasis on the indissoluble "organic filaments" (*Sartor* 180) that united the Lowe sisters to the English literary tradition. Indirectly, this document registered a barely disguised protest at the cultural complacency of the Athenæum itself. That he was launching the fund-raising from the Club founded by Croker—the editor and biographer of Johnson who had characteristically failed to estimate his subject's deep meaning to the English nation—only lent further stimulus to Carlyle to goad the conscience of its members. In the document Carlyle evoked the plight of these two proud and dignified relatives of one of England's greatest literary figures:

They are very poor; but have taken their poverty in a quiet, unaffectedly handsome manner; and have still hope that, in some way or other, intolerable want will not be permitted to overtake them. They have an altogether respectable, or we might say (bringing the past and the present into contact) a touching and venerable air. There, in their little parlour at Deptford, is the fir Desk (capable of being rigorously

authenticated as such) upon which Samuel Johnson wrote the *English Dictionary*, the best Dictionary ever written, say some. (CL 29: 301)

In assisting Johnson's god-daughters, Carlyle argued, donors were acknowledging the signal merit of his literary legacy, which continued to inform the ways in which English people thought and expressed themselves. Like Shakespeare, Johnson was an abiding influence on the formation of English character and identity.

Archly alluding to the "mammon-worship" of the times, Carlyle cast Johnson in the role of a heroic antagonist: "Samuel Johnson is such a literary man as probably will not appear again in England for a very great length of time. His works and his Life, looked at well, have something in them of heroic, which is of value beyond most Literature, and much beyond all money's worth, to the Nation which produced him." There was nothing sentimental about Johnson's continuing importance. He had set a standard of internal honor that was rooted in the conviction that language was a mirror of personal integrity, or lack thereof:

That same English dictionary, written on the poor fir Desk . . . is itself, a proud possession to the English Nation; and not in the Philological point of view alone. Such a Dictionary has an *Architectonic* quality in it; and, for massive solidity of plan, manful correctness and fidelity of execution,—luminous intelligence, rugged honesty and greatness of mind, pervading every part of it, is like no other. This too is a *Cathedral of St. Paul's*, after its sort; and stands there, for long periods, silently reminding every English soul of much that is very necessary to remember! (CL 29: 301)

Carlyle pursued his goal with inexhaustible energy, determination, and occasional despair, referring to the Lowe charity at one stage as his own private "Balaklava" (CL 29: 302). Overwhelmed by the burden of his Frederick research—"No such job ever fell to my hand before as this," he lamented to his sister Jean Carlyle Aitken on 7 May, 1855—he nevertheless persevered with the charity, complaining frequently that "I had no need of the job just now" (29: 303–04). Having composed the memorial to Palmerston, he sent it to Forster on 1 May and

asked for advice: "I get varieties of counsel as to whether the matter *shd* be kept absolutely private *till* Palmerston have been applied to, or should be made public, and blown into some popularity, as the only sure method of acting on Palmerston. That scrawl shews some trace of wavering between those two opinions, I rather fear." Carlyle urged Forster to meet him at the Athenæum "half past 4, any day," but insisted that their rendezvous be "without either meat or drink, for I am far below all that in the days that now run!" (CL 29: 302). They continued to meet regularly at the Club over the next three months, plotting their strategy.

The memorial was presented to Palmerston at the end of June, but he refused a pension from the Civil list because the Lowe sisters were ineligible. He instead offered a donation of £100 to be paid to Anne Lowe from the Royal Bounty. To Carlyle's dismay, the issue now had to be "blown into some *popularity*" (CL 29: 302). Notwithstanding his profound aversion to publicity, he decided to publish a letter of appeal in the *Times*, which appeared together with the memorial on 1 November. The Athenæum figured prominently in Carlyle's tactics. Not only was the letter sent from the Club by himself, Dickens, and Forster, but of the sixteen other names appended to the Memorial, thirteen were members, including Alexander Dyce, Charles Eastlake, Albany Fonblanque, George Gleig, Henry Hallam, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Henry Milman, Roderick Murchison, Richard Owen, James Stephen, and Samuel Wilberforce. It was a mark of Carlyle's persuasiveness that Macaulay, his chief nemesis at the Club, also signed in support and later contributed £5 to the fund, the same amount as Carlyle himself. What began as a thinly veiled attack against the Athenæum had evolved into a campaign asserting the Club's role as the champion of the English literary tradition.

Of course, not all of its members appreciated being identified either with Carlyle or the Lowes appeal. Many hoped that the campaign would fail, and welcomed the criticism directed against it that appeared soon after the publication of the memorial. When Carlyle informed the *Times* on 5 November that the name of an anonymous "friendly correspondent" had not been included in the list because his donation to the subscription came too late, the *Athenæum* literary magazine

(no connection to the Club) carped in its gossip column on 10 November, "The public seems to be of our opinion as regards the literary claims of the Misses Lowe, so pompously paraded a week ago. Mr. Carlyle acknowledges the receipt of a solitary five-pound note from a subscriber who gives no name: from which the public, rightly or wrongly, infer that the appeal has failed" (1308). A correspondent in the *Times*, writing under the pseudonym of "Common Sense" on 6 November, suggested that each of the subscribers commit to paying the sisters £2 a year "and say no more about the matter. The occasion is not worthy of the machinery thus put in motion. There is a risk of making charity ridiculous by the step now taken." To make matters worse, the original Lowes letter in the *Times* had been published without a heading and had been upstaged by a competing appeal, signed by Walter Savage Landor, in support of an impoverished godson of Daniel Defoe living in Kennington. Rubbing salt in the wound, Landor had cited Forster's recent study of Defoe as a source.

Remarkably, Carlyle kept his composure and continued to hold meetings with Forster at their designated time, "4 ½ p.m., at the Athenæum (reading room)" (CL 30: 104) to discuss the progress of the appeal. Their perseverance eventually yielded fruitful results. On 23 April 1856, Carlyle, Dickens, and Forster wrote to the *Times* once again from the Athenæum, with a list of subscribers and the "entire sum received," which came to £305.19s.6d., which was "invested in a Government annuity for the joint lives of Miss Lowe and her sister" (CL 31: 74). On 18 April, Carlyle had written to Forster, inviting him to "attend punctually at the Athenæum on Thursday the 24<sup>th</sup>,—let us say, towards 5 p.m.,—and correct the Proof Advertisement of Names along with you. . . . We will also come and dine and be joyful;—but absolutely we must not till this sorrowful business is finished; which looks as if it would see both the Lowes and us buried before it came to finis" (CL 31: 68). The meal may not have materialized—the finalized list was evidently compiled the day before—but Carlyle was clearly relieved that his initiative had been concluded successfully. As Alexander Napier, editor of Boswell's *Life of Johnson* in 1884 pointed out in an appendix, "Enough was raised to purchase an annuity of £38 on the joint lives of these ladies. The annuity ceased at the death of

the younger of the two, Frances Meliora, February 6, 1866" (3: 545). Carlyle would have been especially pleased to learn that Johnson's "venerable fir table, . . . the treasured ornament of the little parlour of the modest house, 5, Minerva Place, New Cross, Deptford," eventually found its way to the library of Pembroke College, Oxford, the gift of Rev. Augustus Kerr Bozzi Granville, vicar of St. James's, Hatcham and an intimate friend of the Misses Lowe" (3: 546).

Carlyle's second notable skirmish with the Athenæum Club involved another of his proclaimed disciples, John Ruskin, but ended with a much less happy resolution than the Lowe appeal. Ruskin became a member of the Athenæum through the Rule 2 clause in 1849, four years before Carlyle. In the same period Ruskin began to court the attention of the elder Scot. In 1851 Ruskin sent him the first volume of *The Stones of Venice* and Carlyle responded with cordiality and enthusiasm. In his "strange, unexpected, and . . . most true and excellent *Sermon in Stones*," Ruskin delighted the author of *Latter-Day Pamphlets* by fusing art with religion. Ruskin was employing methods that were germane to Carlyle as a historian and a critic. Thanking Ruskin for his copy, Carlyle declared that these "Critical Studies" were "a singular sign of the times . . . and a very gratifying one" (CL 26: 33–34). This was the beginning of an awkward and often uneasy alliance between an artist aspiring to prophecy and a prophet denigrating artists. Carlyle hoped that he had discovered a new adjutant in his mission to reinvigorate art and literature with an Old Testament fervor for "veracity." In Carlyle's eyes, Ruskin was pursuing the path of Frederick the Great, renouncing aesthetic idleness and repose, and audaciously challenging the literary status quo of England, the symbol of which was the Athenæum itself.

Like Carlyle, Ruskin regarded membership as a questionable blessing. In *Fors Clavigera* (1871–84), a series of letters written to the workmen and laborers of Great Britain, he alluded scathingly to James Henning's copy of the Parthenon frieze constructed around the roof cornice of the Athenæum, which perfectly encapsulated the philistine mentality of its occupants: "Being . . . themselves, Attic in no wise, but essentially barbarous, pilfering what they cannot imitate: for a truly Attic mind would have induced them to pourtray *themselves*, as they appear in their

own Pan-Christian procession, whenever and wherever it may be:—presumably to Epsom Downs on the Darby Day” (*WJR* 27: 398). At least part of this anger originated in a dispute that had pitted him and Carlyle against other Club members in 1866. The source of the grudge was Carlyle’s nomination of their friend John Rutter Chorley (1806–67; *ODNB*) for election, and Chorley’s subsequent blackballing.

Carlyle had been a friend and admirer of Chorley for many years. He was the son of a Liverpool ironworker and lockmaker, and for a brief period he had served as the secretary of the Liverpool-Birmingham Grand Junction Railway. In his spare time Chorley devoted himself to the study of German, Italian, and Spanish literature. The death of a wealthy uncle in 1845 left him with a generous bequest, and free to pursue a literary career. A year later he moved from Liverpool to London and soon became the chief reviewer of foreign literature for *The Athenæum*. Chorley’s chief distinction lay in his achievements as a scholar of Spanish literature. He amassed an extensive library of plays, which he later left to the British Museum, and he was among the first to resurrect critical interest in the writings of Lope de Vega. For Carlyle, Chorley was the very antithesis of the “idle souls” who dominated the Athenæum Club and who produced “much empty talk, laborious hypocrisy, dilettantism, [and] futility” (*Works* 20: 320).

Chorley’s death on 29 June 1867 deeply affected Carlyle. Like Joseph Neuberg, who had died the previous March, Chorley had set an example of intellectual probity that filled Carlyle with a mixture of veneration and regret. In his journal he commented, “I did not know a more punctually correct man; nor, with his rigorous almost shrewish temper, a more carefully honest. Has left no ‘fame’ or general recognition, in any kind, behind him,—which so many thousands of far less worth are sounding on the ‘popular gale’ . . . Poor Chorley read constantly for reading’s sake, and had not the least regard for ‘sounding’ on anybody’s tongue or mind” (29 June 1867). Almost six months later on 18 December, Carlyle expressed his admiration of Chorley’s capacious intellect in a letter to his brother William. It was a sign of the esteem that Carlyle held for Chorley that he had advised him to pursue a literary career, a path that he did not recommend to many other people:

I often urged on him to write a Book on Spanish Literature; some good Book, worthy of himself, and of his wide and exact knowledge, on a Spanish subject: but he never *wd* consent even to try. He *cd* have written like few men, on many subjects; but he proudly pitched his ideal very high; and far preferred silence and peace to any prize in that other *directn*. I know no man, in these flimsy days, nor shall ever *agn* know, nearly so well-read, so widely and accurately informed, and so completely at home not only in all fields of worthy literature & scholarship, but in matters practical over and above. My own loss in him I may well feel to be great;—none of us will ever see his like *agn*. (MS: National Library of Scotland)

From early in his membership of the Athenæum, Carlyle sought the election of Chorley. He was an individual who embodied the Johnsonian merits of practicality, solidity, and commonsense, together with a deep love of learning for its own sake and a vast erudition. The Club Minutes (No. 3719) record that Chorley, “Private Gentn. & Man of Letters & Study” had been proposed by Carlyle and Erasmus Alvey Darwin (1804–81), the older brother of Charles, on 13 November 1854. Under the “Not Elected Column,” the date of 12 February 1866 is entered. According to the club rules, during the ordinary elections “No Ballot shall be valid unless Twenty Members actually ballot [and] one black ball in ten shall exclude” (*Rules and Regulations* 9). Carlyle worked patiently and assiduously to insure Chorley’s election. In a letter to Ruskin of 16 February 1866, Carlyle thanked him for his “valiant punctuality both in signing and *agn* in voting.” He then bitterly reported that “we were blackballed, . . . lost by one ball, it appears. A base envious *Plebe* delights here & there to squirt a drop of dirty water in the face of betters: never mind it; it is the nature of the beast, and of the time it lives in” (MS: Strouse Collection).

Carlyle was outraged by the verdict and he did not forget the episode. It was still on his mind in February 1869, when Louisa, Lady Ashburton wrote to him asking to visit the Athenæum and vote in favor of the candidacy of Charles Harcourt Chambers (1826–76), the son of an Indian judge and a relatively obscure editor, translator, and political author. In his letter of reply on 9 February, Carlyle complied with her request: “I will endeavour to do my duty in the matter of ‘C. Chambers on the 18<sup>th</sup>,’—if he is a *gentn* of fair exterior, distinguished for nothing (*whh*

we will not hope), he has nothing to fear there; if *not*, there is liability to something!" He then reminded her of two notorious instances in which truly "distinguished" candidates were blackballed: the politician Robert Lowe (1811–92; *ODNB*) on 8 March 1858, and of course, John Rutter Chorley, "an excellent candidate of my own proposing, my first there, who is to be my last too, for endless time!" (MS: National Library of Scotland).

Carlyle may have been slightly consoled by the fact that his close friend David Masson (1822–1907; *ODNB*), professor of rhetoric and English Literature at Edinburgh University, had been put up for Rule 2 election at the Athenæum by another Carlylean disciple, the mathematician Thomas Archer Hirst (1830–92; *ODNB*), and elected on 10 March 1868. But the Chorley rejection continued to rankle him.

Did Carlyle try to avenge this "drop of dirty water"? The evidence is intriguing, but inconclusive. In the same week that Chorley's election was defeated, Carlyle's friend the eminent Scottish geologist and geographer Sir Roderick Murchison (1792–1871; *ODNB*)—who was appointed, along with Carlyle, as vice-president of the Governor Eyre "Defence and Aid Fund"—wrote to Anthony Panizzi (1797–1879; *ODNB*), Principal Librarian at the British Museum from 1856–66. Murchison regretted the fact that he had been obliged to withdraw Panizzi's name for Rule 2 election to the Club: "My efforts have been frustrated, to my deep regret, and that of all those men of eminence in science, letters, and art, whose opinion you value. After I saw you, accident placed me in the position to ascertain that *no arguments* of mine would or could change the resolve of one of the Committee *to veto* your election, in case you obtained a majority of votes; and therefore, after giving the strongest reasons I could for thinking that you were singularly and highly qualified to be selected as one of our eminent nine, I withdrew your name. The reason assigned for this opposition was, that as you were unpopular with a certain number of men in the Club *at large*, the Committee ought not to go against their feelings. I protested against this doctrine on my own part; the more so as the gentleman, who acted in a frank and honourable manner in letting me know his resolve, has assured me that he had a high opinion of your capacity, acquirements, and character" (Fagan 2: 302–03).

Panizzi was certainly “unpopular” with Carlyle, with whom he had feuded for over thirty years. Their quarrel allegedly began when Panizzi read Carlyle’s withering allusion to him in an essay that he wrote on French Revolutionary sources in the *Westminster Review* in 1837. When he joined the staff at the British Museum in 1831, Panizzi was assigned the task of cataloguing the French Revolution tracts that had been bought from Croker. Carlyle referred to the Italian as a “respectable sub-librarian” through whom “you could gain access to his room, and the satisfaction of mounting up on ladders, and reading the outside of his books, which was a great help” (“Parliamentary History” [1837], *Historical Essays* 225).

Panizzi was said to have never forgotten the slight, and when Carlyle asked for the use of a private room in 1839 to pursue his Cromwell research, the request was denied. Carlyle’s testimony against Panizzi before a parliamentary commission in 1849 only sharpened the antagonism between them. Carlyle wrote once more to Panizzi in 1853, seeking to confirm rumors that certain readers had been given private rooms at the library. In an intemperate response Panizzi denied the charge. Carlyle then sought the assistance of the Ashburtons to press his case for a private room. Eventually, Panizzi sought and obtained the backing of the British Museum Trustees and Carlyle was forced to retreat, though with typical tenacity, he converted his defeat into the eventual triumph of co-founding the London Library in St. James Square. Had Carlyle tried to influence one of the members of the General Committee against electing Panizzi at the Athenæum? Was the “gentlemen” in question Arthur John Edward Russell (1825–92), M.P. for Tavistock 1857–85, and son of the Carlyles’ close friend Lady William Russell (1793–1874)? Given the confidentiality of the proceedings, the answer must be confined to a category of historical fact described by Carlyle in his essay “On History” (1830). This type of knowledge is “lost without recovery [in] the dark untenanted places of the past, where, in formless oblivion [it] lie[s] entombed” (*Historical Essays* 6).

One last anecdote demonstrates Carlyle’s continued involvement in the affairs of the Athenæum Club, even in the twilight of his career. In November 1870 Carlyle received a visit from his friend the Russian novelist, Ivan Turgenev.

That the liberal Turgenev sought out the company of the reactionary Carlyle provides further proof of the Chelsea prophet's magnetic attraction to those who abhorred his political opinions yet savored his company. Carlyle reported to his brother John that "Turguénief was here yesterday, and walked with me in Hyde Park—unaltered, or altered for the better, plumper, taller, more stalwart than ever; only his beard a little greyer. He was excellent company while we walked together; talking about English Literature (his disappointment with our *recentiores*, our Brownings, Tennysons, Thackerays, Dickens, —nay our Byrons and Shelleys), and giving experiences about the starting of the War in Baden. The sight of him is interesting to me; though it awakens the saddest memories. He talks of being here for 5 or 6 weeks;—intent chiefly on making some acquaintance with real English Literature" (Waddington 164). Carlyle felt that the Athenæum, with its remarkable library and its rich literary reputation, was the most suitable environment in which Turgenev could pursue this "acquaintance." Turgenev's name had been put forward by Richard Monckton Milnes for honorary membership of the Club in 1857, and he was awarded the distinction in June 1857. He returned to the Athenæum in 1858, but by 1870, he had apparently failed to renew his card. As a consequence, he "found himself excluded from the club" (Waddington 166). Carlyle's reaction to this particular affront is unknown, but it may be easy to predict. Like his friend the late John Chorley, he "pitched his ideal[s]" very high, including his standard of what a literary club should be, and how it should function. The Athenæum may not have satisfied that ideal completely, but the record of his participation in its affairs for over thirty years suggests that he never quite lost the sense that he belonged to "the best club of all."

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