

“The ugliest stroke that I ever got”:
An Unpublished Account of the Burning of
the *French Revolution* Manuscript

READERS OF CARLYLE ARE UNDERSTANDABLY TEMPTED TO assume that the story of the 1835 burning of volume 1 of Carlyle’s *French Revolution* (1837) has been exhaustively analyzed and discussed from a wide variety of critical and biographical perspectives, and that it requires no further scrutiny. But a recently discovered account of the episode may throw fresh light on its significance. At the time, Carlyle wished to keep the incident a “secret.” He wrote to John Stuart Mill, on 9 March 1835: “One thing I forgot to mention on Saturday: that we will not *speak* of the misfortune, to any new unconcerned person; at least not till it is made good again, or made better. I had to impart it in general terms to the Bookseller Fraser, but only in general; as ‘an accident’ chargeable on no one; and he has promised me to maintain perfect silence. My Brother John and my Mother must know of it; but no other has right to do so” (*CLO*). It is possible that one other person knew about the “accident”: his old friend William Graham (1770–ca. 1857) of Burnswark.

The Isaac W. Dyer Collection at Bowdoin College now holds the complete manuscript correspondence of the letters from Thomas Carlyle to William Graham, as well as corrected typescripts of the letters from Graham to Carlyle. None of this material was available to the editors of the *Collected Letters*, who published Carlyle’s letters from the text available in *Letters of Thomas Carlyle to William Graham*, edited by John Graham, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1950), and from corrected typescripts of the letters provided to them by David L. Graham.¹

¹ See *CLO*: TC to William Graham, 15 Sept. 1820, sourcenote.

Among the papers included in the Dyer Collection is a letter to him from a bookseller named Ernest Dressel North, dated 20 March 1931. North informed Dyer that he had in his possession a letter from Carlyle to Graham dated 22 April 1835 in which Carlyle recounted the story of the burning of the manuscript of the *French Revolution*. North claimed that the letter has been “in the family ever since” it was written and received, although it is not clear whether he was referring to his own family or some other. He wished to sell it to Dyer for the sum of \$750, a substantial amount in the 1931 at the height of the Great Depression.

Without explanation, Dyer declined North’s offer. He had sound reasons for refusing: the letter was a transcription rather than an original manuscript; its cost was prohibitive (he acknowledged elsewhere that he usually purchased items closer to the \$10 range);² its authenticity was questionable, and its subject-matter was possibly offensive to the Carlyle and Graham families. Yet in spite of his skepticism, Dyer must have been interested in the document. Its contents strongly imply that the author knew what Graham had written in his previous letter, dated 25 March 1835. In it Graham offers an encomiastic response to Carlyle’s recently published eulogy of the recently deceased Edward Irving and of his ongoing work on the *French Revolution*, for which Carlyle thanks him warmly in his response. Graham writes, “my prospects are enveloped in dark clouds; the horizon dark as Erebus” (129). In the typescript Carlyle echoes Graham, referring to the “dark clouds girdling your horizon” (131). Graham tells Carlyle that I called to see your good Mother last week, with our young Minister; unfortunately not at home” (129). In the typescript, Carlyle writes, “Will you go down and see my Mother, and speak a good word to her. If Miss Grahame or Mrs. Howatton [*sic*] would go, it would do her still more good” (134). Evidently Carlyle thought that Graham’s sisters (Elizabeth Graham and Jane Howatson) would be more welcome to his mother than Robert Menzies, the recently installed minister at Hoddam. Graham in his letter expresses the wish that he and Thomas

² See Brent E. Kinser and David R. Sorensen, “Carlyle Clearing His Throat: The Manuscript Fragments of the Isaac W. Dyer Collection, Bowdoin College.” *Carlyle Studies Annual* 28 (2012): 93–94.

might be united with Carlyle's brother John: "Oh! For a brigh [day] for us three on Burnswark, but you will make it sunny" (130). In the typescript, after reminding Graham that "Jack" is on the continent, Carlyle assures him that "we shall all three spend yet one sunny day on the sides of Burnswark" (131). Another detail linking the two letters occurs in the postscript, in which Graham complains that a writer in a periodical called the *Age* has written that "poor Edward had been a Play actor in Kirkcaldy." In the typescript, Carlyle writes, "That scandalous absurdity about 'having been an actor,' was contradicted and abolished forthwith" (132). If the letter is a forgery, then it is a well-conceived and rendered one. Given that the correspondence between Graham and Carlyle was not published until 1950, it seems possible, perhaps even likely, that this letter is legitimate. If true, then one burning question remains: the location of the manuscript.

Brent E. Kinsler



EDN to IWD, 20 March 1931; TLS, 1 p.

Ernest Dressel North
Choice Rare and Standard Books
587 Fifth Avenue
New York

March 20th, 1931.

My dear Sir:—

Recalling your great interest in literary letters by Thomas Carlyle, I am venturing to call to your attention an important letter which I have just acquired, consisting of almost two thousand words giving the tragic history of the burning of the original Manuscripts of THE FRENCH REVOLUTION.

His letter is written on four pages, quarto, to William Grahame Esq. of Burnswark, and is dated 22 April 1835 from 5 Cheyne Row, Chelsea, London, and is endorsed by the recipient as follows: "Thomas Carlyle, 22 April 1835."

As you know the original manuscript of Volume I of THE

FRENCH REVOLUTION was burned by James Mills' maid. The account of this event is briefly given in Froude's THOMAS CARLYLE, but this autograph letter offered gives the minute description of the happening and has never been published; it has been in the family since written.

In addition the letter contains characterizations of Wordsworth, Southey, Allan Cunningham, and the Rev. Edward Irving. Besides this, the letter unfolds the human side of Carlyle's character, and refers most tenderly to his mother.

If you are interested, the price of this remarkable letter is \$750.00. Shall I send it for your examination? I enclose a transcription.

Trusting the subject of this letter interests you, I am

Yours very truly,

Ernest Dressel North

Mr. Isaac Watson Dyer
Grasslands
Gorham
Maine



WG to TC, 25 March 1835; TL, 4 pp.

William Graham to Thomas Carlyle,
Chelsea

Burnswark, 25 March, 1835.

My dear Friend,

When I look at the date of your letter (24 Decr.), I perceive too plainly that for many weeks I have been laboring under a most severe attack of two diseases inherent in my nature, fatal to my well-being, that have "pursued me close through every hour of life," that have been my bane, my curse, and, alas! as such, still adhere to me with fearful tenacity,— I mean that vis inertia that renders me a clod, and that procrastination that proves me a fool! Indecision, also joins the enemy; and the trio united with the rest of the legion, overcome my good intentions: "pity 'tis, 'tis true and true 'tis pitiful" ['tis true

'tis pity, and pity 'tis 'tis true—Hamlet, Sc. 2, Act ii.].³ It is not ingratitude, however, that has kept me from you; that black demon the better feelings of my nature can keep at bay. For this I thank Heaven, in the midst of my troubles and conscious undeservings. Grateful, therefore, I am for your letter, and thank you a thousand times for it; and could I have a thousand sovereigns for every time I have read it with delight, I should be a thousand times richer than ever I expected to be.

How deeply did I enter into your feelings for our departed Edward;⁴ how happily have you expressed what you felt! I have said that I read it with delight; I should have said, with sorrowful delight, “with the joy of grief.” And I may truly say the same of the deeply toned “Funeral Word,” which has had more of my reading and study than anything that ever met my eye. How graphic! how true! How candid, how correctly traced, how deeply felt! You have said the whole, no part of his position overlooked. 'Twas a melancholy yet friendly task; one can hardly conceive of the aberrations of mind so mighty, of a heart so honest, so true, so learned, and of so clear conception too!! That the incantations of Mary Campbell should almost instantly,⁵ without resistance on his part have thrown over him a net, the meshes of which should so entangle, the poison of which (more deadly than the Upas) should so enter into his soul!! But you give us the cause, the process, the effect: “Fashion threw her foul incense on him”; “the poison of popular applause, &c. But why need I quote yourself? You have given such a biographical sketch as never was before written. I hear it spoken of, by those who can judge of its beauties and merits, with unqualified admiration.— Our friend Hope seems lost and bewildered in it,⁶ or by it: he calls it “such an extraordinary thing”;— and, would you believe it? he seems to think, though he does not say so, that he can do something

³ Square brackets are used by the editor of the typescript to indicate editorial insertion.

⁴ Carlyle's great friend Edward Irving (1792–1834) died on 7 December; see “Death of the Rev. Edward Irving (No. II).” *Fraser's Magazine* 11 (Jan. 1835): 101–03; *Works* 28: 319–23.

⁵ A follower of Irving's, Mary Campbell of Helensburgh began to speak tongues in March 1830; she would often interrupt Irving's sermons.

⁶ David Hope (d. 1857), Glasgow merchant.

far better. So he set to work—he with the aid of the Rev. J. Johnstone—have done the dud!⁷ I have just received a copy of their finished task; they will have sent you a copy surely; their vanity (so marked) would not suffer them to withhold it from you. Alas! Poor David (poor Yorick),⁸ it is what the sailors would call “Seven-water Grog!”⁹ Perhaps David may have also sent you the printed list of his voters at last election. I have to blow his trumpet, by dispersing a bundle of them hereabouts.—head of the poll, one half of them plumpers!—Braw, braw Davie!—

But turning me to your beautiful letter again: I read with renewed satisfaction what you say in regard to your own position; and how much do I find to laud, to admire! Your firmness of purpose, your indomitable courage! Your soul has nobly sustained the weak framework of its “born thral,” and I rejoice to see you are able to digest in the Egyptian fog,—cheery, energetic, determined, your hat and your foot firmly placed, and bidding stern defiance to principalities and powers. Nil desperandum¹⁰ you may well take your motto. You must conquer.

I have been gathering up all your letters and reading them again. They might all go to press, just as they are. Amongst others is one from Mainhill, dated 19th October 1820,¹¹ just after your return from Ennerdale, having refused tutorage of “rickety sootherkin.”¹² I was greatly amused; what a host of reminiscences it brought home to me! I shall place these letters in safe deposit somewhere, if God pleases to give me gracious warning!— I was at Scotsbrig some time ago and carried off Schiller and four periodicals containing various thoughts of yours, which I have been reading. But the winter upon the whole has passed over unprofitably with me; nothing going on out of doors; a miserable house, bad roads, bad weather, little society.

⁷ The Rev. John Johnstone (1784–1854); see TC to John A. Carlyle, 15 Aug. 1841.

⁸ Cf. *Hamlet* 5.1.184.

⁹ A drink of equal parts water and rum.

¹⁰ Latin, “no need to despair.”

¹¹ See *CLO*: TC to William Graham, 19 Oct. 1820.

¹² Matthew Allen had tried to arrange for Carlyle to tutor the mentally challenged son of John Hutton: see *CLO*: TC to Matthew Allen, 15 Sept. 1820.

I have as great an aversion to cold as any bird from the tropics; heat is as much my element as that of the glowing salamander. Horrible weather we had for six weeks: thank God it is gone; spring come with long days,—sowing just commenced. All sorts of farm stock nearly unsaleable. Pork, cattle, sheep, wool, going down like a cataract. I called to see your good Mother last week, with our young Minister; unfortunately not at home. I am much attached to Mr. Menzies,—not to his politics; he is rather too high a tory for me, but he is a true, warm-hearted man.¹³ I regret to say I have no letters from my Brothers for a long period.¹⁴ I am very miserable about them; all is not well with them I am assured. Altogether my prospects are enveloped in dark clouds; the horizon dark as Erebus,¹⁵—but no more of this.

You would see by the D[umfries] Journal the miserable position in which General Sharpe is placed.¹⁶ I am sorry for him, very sorry; he has been very badly used too, in bad health also; indeed there seems no bed of roses for him any more in this world.— Little, very little local news can I send you. Most of those you left are living and pursuing the interests of their individual kingdoms, for the all of every one is at stake. Last week I went with Mr. Menzies to Waterbeck, Dunnabie and Grange,—a dining expedition of three days. At Grange, it was somewhat more spiritual: they are well. They charged me with kindest regards to you and your good Lady Jane. They hope to see you when you visit your Fatherland. I shall rejoice to see you and the work of your hands, soon. I see you are cutting out more labour; I doubt not you will “acquit yourself as a true Scottish man.”— I give the Bostonian all credit and praise for

¹³ Rev. Robert Menzies, minister at Hoddam; see *CLO*: TC to John A. Carlyle, 22 July 1834.

¹⁴ Graham had two brothers, John and Peter, with whom he conducted business in Philadelphia until his return to Glasgow to run the family operation there in 1809. The house of Graham Brothers collapsed under financial strain, and William returned to Burnswark, in 1823; see *CLO*: TC to William Graham, 15 Sept. 1820, sourcenote.

¹⁵ Erebus, the personification of darkness in Greek mythology.

¹⁶ General Matthew Sharpe (1773–1845) was the landlord of Carlyle’s father. Carlyle wrote to his mother on 25 March 1835 and told her he had recently seen Sharpe in Hyde Park (*CLO*); Sharpe was M.P. for the Dumfries Burghs (1832–41); see *CLO*: TC to Alexander Carlyle, 28 Jan. 1835.

reprinting your *Life of Schiller*.¹⁷ Depend upon it he was well assured it would bring him profit in hard Dollars.

My opinions in regard to affairs both in Church and State, begin to assimilate [*sic*] pretty much to your own. If each had given a tithe of what will be now taken from them, they might have saved the rest and been lauded to the skies; but no, they were infatuated, just as in France before the Revolution. We shall see, we shall see the result if we live long.

Your Brother John I may now hope to see in May or June, and very happy I shall be indeed to take him by the hand. Oh! For a brigh [day] for us three on Burnswark, but you will make it sunny.

I pray you do not punish me for my sins of omission. My best regards to your Jane, who I beg may intercede for me. My Sister is well.¹⁸ The “Mill shillin” has not had so gay a winter these 20 years.— Farewell.

Yours, faithfully,

Wm. Graham.

I have seen a most villainous thing, in the Age, asserting that poor Edward had been a Play actor in Kirkcaldy. Do, I pray you, disabuse that part of a credulous public that know no better of him. They pretend to have taken it from the New Monthly. I beg you do not let it pass. Oh! Damned Iago, Oh, inhuman Dog!¹⁹



TC to WG, 22 April 1835; TS, 6 pp.

22nd April, 1835

My dear friend,

Thanks for your good kind letter, which was right welcome to me; welcome and wholesome: like some fresh rural breath, as of new-mown hay, amid the confused artificial city vapours,—some

¹⁷ Emerson arranged for the American edition of Carlyle’s *Life of Schiller* (1825) in 1833; see Rodger L. Tarr, *Thomas Carlyle: A Descriptive Bibliography* (Pittsburgh, 1989), 17–18.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Graham did not marry and took care of William’s household.

¹⁹ See *Othello* 5.1.63.

of which are not the sweetest. Post obit,²⁰ we observed, had put certain marks on the sheet, and was taken as it were “with red hand”: clean again law! However, I would not have quarreled with that, had it only subdued your unbelieving humour, and made you write sooner. Think that Annandale is my old rough nursing mother; whom, with all her crabbed ways, I must ever have a son’s love to: poor old Annandale, hard and heathery are her hills, stunted, ruder her life; but when I forget her, may my right hand forget its cunning!

You are not to take this as an Answer; but as an acknowledgment that an Answer were due. The seed sewn once well in the ground, and bright summer calling your thoughts all out of doors, you will write to me again. News are precious; news of yourself and of what is round you; there are some six square miles there, of which Burnswark may stand at the centre, that are more to me than any other six hundred in the Solar System. Thanks, many ways, for the friendliness you testify toward me; I feel that you wish me heartily well, heartily and fervently; that the effectual fervent wish of a just man availeth much. It is verily so; in this time, as it was in the old time as it will ever be.

For yourself with “dark clouds girdling your horizon,” of which you resolutely retain all but the briefest mention, I can only again say that in this brave genial temper of yours lies assurance of safety to you. It is (God be thanked for it) purely impossible for mere Fortune to beat down a man; he must always have proved untrue to himself first. Courage, my friend! “Stout heart and cheerful thought” (as the Germans say); hope also forever belongs to us. We will hope for instance, that much will prove better than it looks in the distance;—that good news from beyond the Ocean will come to cheer you, that my poor Jack too will get safe across the Alps; that we shall all three spend yet one sunny day on the sides of Burnswark. It is a dark gruly warfare this, but with bright blinks in it; and is not the Everlasting star-dome over all?²¹ Not without a Fatherly Eye that notes is, with pity: nay, mysteriously, with guidance! It shall one day all be well.

²⁰ A joke referring to the obligation of paying a debt after someone’s death; see *CLO*: TC to William Graham, 5 Aug. 1834.

²¹ Cf. *Sartor Resartus*, ed. Rodger L. Tarr (Berkeley, 2000), 194.

Since I turned this leaf, my little Lord Jeffrey has come fiddle-faddling in,²² and fritters away the whole time I had set apart for a better man than he; nay more than the whole time; so that I must now steal for you from other allotments and give double small measure. He is here, the worthy little man, spending his holidays; and comes tripping down from time to time; grown very wizened, in hoof and mind; what he still wants with me were rather hard to tell, for I thought we had settled our accounts some twelve months ago. The piping of the whirlwind, when Death and Destiny Dance round you, and you must fight again or fare worse, is no element for a light-jigging carpet-dance of that kind; I wish him kindly well; but have not leisure to tarry with him. He has gone his way, I must go mine.

Of poor Edward's followers and church I now hear not the faintest whisper. His widow is a woman who does not like me, whom I do not like! Edward once gone out of that confusion, it is to me nothing but the wretchedest muddle, which I rather turn my sight from. There was a report some time since that he had written letters from Glasgow, as good as abjuring the things himself: however, I learned that it is not so. Later he did write; and they were printed, and again speedily withdrawn from circulation; but it seems they did not contain any recantation of the Tongue doctrine; only indicated great or small doubtings about it, and generally much confusion in the poor writer's mind. That scandalous absurdity about "having been an actor," was contradicted and abolished forthwith. A certain "Mr. Jones" (I think) is now writing a Life of Irving;²³ which is not likely to be anything but a mere chimera; they can do anything they like with him; he is far out of their reach now,—the foolish, inconstant, faithless inconsiderate gomerils that they are. A worse man might have served for them to waste, but this man was, to our sorrow, appointed them.

Since you last heard from me there has befallen the ugliest accident I ever underwent; of which I have spoken or speak to no man except to my own kindred, and now also to you, who I know can hold your peace. The first volume of my poor

²² Lord Francis Jeffrey (1773–1850); see TC to Alexander Carlyle, 26 Jan. 1820.

²³ William Jones (1762–1846), author of *Biographical Sketch of the Rev. Edward Irving with Extracts from and Remarks on His Principal Publications* (London: John Bennett, 1835).

book you heard a good while ago was written: well, it is now unwritten, annihilated, and even worse, for instead of it there is mere dispiritment and vexation! I lent it to a worthy friend here, who had great interest in it: who nevertheless, left it lying in his rooms unlocked where it went as waste paper. The fruit of five months hard toil, evaporated as a false dream of the night! I was forced to be quiet too: for the poor culprit looked as if he would actually go mad. But I think it was the ugliest stroke I ever got, in that humour I was in: no case for your Fliche von Allen;²⁴ not so! A case where you had to button yourself together, lest you too went mad! So I had to begin again; and for these weary six weeks have I been sitting and toiling, at the unthankfullest task, which, nevertheless must and shall be done, for I will not give up that dirty whipper-snapper of a book (it often seems to me quite hateful now) till I can say: “finis! Then, go, thou dirty whipper-snapper, creature of pain and toil; I am rid of thee!” So you will get no printed French Revolution this season? But must wait till the next. On the whole I do struggle to believe (for there is some faith in me) that this too will turn out for the best, but it seemed sharp upon me at the time. Believe what we will, I must struggle to make it good again, and then we will talk.²⁵

On the whole I get rather hefted to this place; and could grow to do tolerably enough with it. I am already much more at home than I ever became in Dunscore. There is a certain fractional sprinkling of good among these millions; one finds it possible to attain this and that.—I have seen Southey and Wordsworth,²⁶ with little disappointment, (for I hoped little.) Southey is a ready, active, straitlaced, well-meaning individual; the irasciblest man, I should fancy, or one of the irasciblest now living. Wordsworth is greater, without being great; a long-winded, prosy, in fact quite wearisome, but very natural clear and genuine man. Such are the two main luminaries for the time being. The fact is, “Distinguished Men,” above all things, “distinguished women,” are a class of persons whom I (taught by frequent experience)

²⁴ Presumably a favored phrase of Graham’s meaning a side of bacon for all.

²⁵ No doubt in order to attract Dyer’s attention to this crucial paragraph, North transcribed it in all caps. For the sake of readability, the editors present it in as standard text.

²⁶ William Wordsworth (1770–1850) and Robert Southey (1774–1843), poets laureate, 1813–50.

rather shun than seek.²⁷ I know some Annandale goodwives whom for real sagacity pure bravery you might beat each into three or four “distinguished (cockney) females.”

We had Allan Cunningham last night; with his Brother, Dr. Cunningham,²⁸ known for a very amusing book on New South Wales. Allan is full of rough vigour as of old; brings a piece of old Scotland home to you.----- Will you go down and see my Mother, and speak a good word to her. If Miss Grahame or Mrs. Howatton would go,²⁹ it would do her still more good. I get no sufficiently minute tidings about her; tho’ she writes me bravely too, it is always with pious assurance that everything is well—which indeed it ought to be, and I hope is.— O what a hurry! hurry! Adieu my worthy Friend! Write to me when you have an hour, and “N’oubliez” as your snuff-box says. My wife sends her kind salutations. Be diligent and fervent, be well and happy!

Yours most truly—T. Carlyle

Thomas Carlyle

22 April 1835
Chelsea

Written to W. Grahame, Esq.,
Burnswark.



²⁷ Cf. TC to John A. Carlyle, 12 Jan. 1835.

²⁸ Allan Cunningham (1784–1842), miscellaneous writer (see TC to Alexander Carlyle, 25 June 1824), and Peter Cunningham (1789–1864), naval surgeon and Australian pioneer, returned to England in 1830.

²⁹ Elizabeth Graham and Jane Graham Howatson (d. 1841), Graham’s sisters; see TC to William Graham, 5 Aug. 1834.