

*Jane Carlyle. Newly Selected Letters.* Edited by Kenneth J. Fielding and David R. Sorensen. Aldershot, Eng. and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004. 400pp., \$99.95.

**L**ONG BEFORE academic feminists brought women's studies to the critical forefront, Jane Welsh Carlyle had achieved, if not cult status, at least a significant niche in the growing pantheon of Victorian women writers. Her position there is in no small part due to the efforts of Carlyle himself and, though the editors of this volume would probably disagree, of his close friend and biographer, J. A. Froude. Jane Carlyle exerts enormous appeal for the psychological complexity that lies at the heart of her personal history, the breadth and liveliness of her intellectual interests, and, not least, her wide range of friendships. She was also for nearly forty years the wife of Thomas Carlyle. In all the above dimensions she is not yet sufficiently understood and appreciated. This well-chosen selection from her correspondence, prepared by the late Kenneth J. Fielding and David R. Sorensen, two of the editors of the ongoing Duke-Edinburgh edition of the Carlyles' letters, is less a major contribution to scholarship—the *Collected Letters* of both Carlyles on which it draws heavily is that—than an introduction to Jane, one designed to increase awareness of her being, her talents, her diverse roles in Victorian cultural life and her perceptive responses to that life.

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This volume contains a list of abbreviations indicating locations of the letters; an introduction of twenty-three pages; a two-and-a-half page chronology; twenty-eight illustrations; and 318 pages of letters, dated from September 26, 1819, when Jane was eighteen, to April 21, 1866, the day she died. Most of the letters have been published elsewhere but the editors include important new letters as well. They divide the letters into twelve "chapters." The editorial titles, suggesting a narrative, begin with "In Search of Genius, 1819–26" and end with "The Perfectly Extraordinary Woman, 1865–66." There follows a name index of nearly 70 correspondents, itself followed by a general index. The

editors provide a few helpful interpolations but no notes to the letters (I will return later to the lack of annotation) and limit bibliographical references to those works in the list of abbreviations or cited in the Introduction.

The letters cover a broad spectrum of subjects and personalities. Many letters evince Jane Carlyle's great capacity for friendship and for love. She desired both, intensely. A Romantic in her dreams, a realist in her life, immensely articulate of her feelings and thoughts, Jane poured forth to those she chose as intimates a written version of her wonderful talk, spiced with natural sarcasm and genuine wit. Hovering over the volume, never distant, looms the gigantic figure of Carlyle and the tense, and, yes, *loving*—though fraught with pain—relationship that Jane established with her husband. Many of the letters in this volume she addressed to him, and in them we follow, from her perspective, the triumphs and travails of Carlyle's career. We see the Carlyles, tied together by a Gordian knot, happy and unhappy together and apart. Other letters go out to her Scottish relatives, the chief being her mother; to her London acquaintances, male and female; to Lady Ashburton, her husband's great admirer in the 1840s and '50s, and after she died to the second Lady Ashburton. Letters to Ellen Twistleton and Charlotte Cushman count among the important new discoveries. Still other letters are significant for the illuminating glimpses they cast upon prominent Victorian cultural figures, among them, Tennyson, Browning, and Darwin, or on events like the Great Exhibition of 1851.

Jane Carlyle, as these letters show, was a wise and sensitive woman. Husband Thomas, she believed, was often oblivious to her and to anything beyond his intellectual foci. "How one is vexed with little things in this life! The great evils one triumphs over bravely, but the little eat away one's heart" (77). Thomas's merit was of an altogether other order. Though indifferent to the small change of life, "in *great* matters he is always kind and considerate, but these *little* attentions which we women attach so much importance to he was never in the habit of rendering to any one—his up-bringing and the severe turn of mind he has from nature had alike indisposed him towards them" (80). Jane's gift for limning deft character portraits (a gift her husband also possessed) shines in verbal sketches of many who swam within her ken. Physiognomical notions were omnipresent in Victorian England

(Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* lasted most of the century as a standard text), and Jane proudly touted her skills in divining character. "He is a bad man or I am no physiognomist," she writes at one point (52). When the actress Fanny Kemble, a fierce equestrian, paid a visit to Carlyle one day in 1837, Jane captured her in motion. She "bolts in upon his studies (out of the atmosphere as it were) in riding-habit cap and whip (but no shadow of a horse, only a carriage—the whip, I suppose, being to whip the cushions with, for the purpose of keeping her hand in practice)" (42).

There are memorable portraits of the fascinating Giuseppe Mazzini, the regal Mrs. Montagu, the mysterious "George Eliot," and the temperance preacher Father Mathew (not unidentified by the editors), for whom she felt deep and genuine admiration. Jane's astuteness in her evocation of others is inseparable from her keen ability to express her own anguish. These include her brilliant description, invoking Cellini casting his *Perseus*, of baking her first loaf of bread at Craigenputtoch, of the death of her beloved dog Nero, and of her first visit to Haddington since her mother's death, as well as numerous instances of Carlyle's mistreatment of her. Over several passages in her letters biographers have paused. The endlessly controversial "blue marks on my wrists"—were they inflicted by Thomas or not? We are no wiser than before.

Also in this volume are newly-discovered letters documenting Jane's endearing friendship with the much younger Ellen Twistleton and the extraordinary epistles (excerpted in the editorial commentary) addressed to her by the American actress Charlotte Cushman, along with Jane's warm yet evasive replies, suggestive to the editors of "a lesbian inclination." Both the Twistleton and Cushing friendships await subsequent documentation in later volumes of the Duke-Edinburgh *Collected Letters*. About many who enliven Jane's pages—General Baird, John Greig to pick two adjoining individuals, Americans both—we remain curious to know more.

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Instead of dealing with Jane Carlyle and her letters, an overwhelming portion of the Introduction, presumably the work of both editors but bearing the stamp of opinions long held by

Ken Fielding, rehearses Froude's alleged sins of commission, both interpretative and editorial, in his four-volume biography of Carlyle (1882, 1884) and in his editions of the Carlyles' letters and of Carlyle's *Reminiscences*. This introduction constitutes the final, or near-final, installment of Fielding's thirty-year obsession with what he regards as the flaws in Froude's work on the Carlyles. Besides negative or spiteful comments regarding that work, it also contains patent absurdities such as his chiding Froude for avoiding feminist issues "only now receiving serious attention" (xxiii). Should a Victorian biographer be faulted for ignoring a late twentieth-century critical field?—one the editors themselves make no effort to investigate. Their position is based in part on a historical error: they claim Froude knew Jane Welsh Carlyle "personally" only in 1861 (xix), but she first met Froude in 1849 and Froude speaks of other meetings throughout the 1850s.

The Introduction argues that Froude's biography "diminishes . . . the actual complexity" of the Carlyles' lives (xv). Of course it does. All biographies do. Even if every scrap of paper the Carlyles wrote had survived, biographers would still have to simplify and (inevitably) distort to tell their story. In 1979 I wrote that "Froude presents not only a convincing but also a fundamentally sound interpretation of the Carlyles, their courtship, their marriage, and their existence together" (cited from xiv). The editors fault me for these words, but I stand by them. "Convincing" is not a synonym for "true" although much of what Froude says may well be true—even the editors concede it is "one of several possible interpretations" (xiv)—and Froude's words have certainly convinced others. His interpretation of the Carlyles continues to hold its ground. The editors' crusade against what they believe to be the distortions in his account has had little success. Alas, they lament, "with a few notable exceptions, those who followed him have mainly accepted his interpretation and let it shape their own" (xvii). The editors do not make clear why recent biographers feel compelled to write as they do more than a hundred years after Froude published his biography, nor do they name the "notable exceptions." Recent biographies of Carlyle (Kaplan, Heffer, Ashton) have not taken Fielding's cue to renounce, or even much to modify, Froude's views.

Despite the editors' presumed intent, this volume, with its newly-discovered correspondences with Ellen Twistleton and

Charlotte Cushing, strengthens rather than weakens the validity of Froude's perspective on the lives of the Carlyles. Froude found Carlyle harsh and overbearing but a great man, and Jane a suffering heroine. The editors sometimes question his view, but their selection of Jane's letters contains proportionately far more damning instances of Carlyle's misbehavior than one finds in Froude.

Concerning Lady Ashburton's place in Jane Carlyle's life, the editors argue, with some justification, for a more nuanced understanding than Froude provides. Lady Ashburton admired Thomas and was kind to Jane, but Jane's relationship with her was always tormented. She expresses on successive pages of this edition (166, 167) diametrically opposite opinions of Lady Ashburton. Still, it seems a stretch to claim that the lordly Lady was not "aloof" (xv). Carlyle addressed Lady Ashburton in passionately exalted tones he adopted for no other human being, his wife included. Even the editors concede "a fantastical air in his letters to her" (xv). They chide Froude for his dramatic characterization taken primarily but not exclusively from classical drama—in his pages he hints of Carlyle as a modern Oedipus, Jane Carlyle as a sacrificed Iphigenia, Lady Ashburton as the Gloriana of *The Faerie Queene*—but seem to forget that the Carlyles dramatized themselves and their relationships (including that with each other) in virtually every letter they wrote.<sup>1</sup> Froude did have an undeniable dramatic flair, but so did most major Victorian novelists and historians, Macaulay, for example, not to forget Carlyle himself. The genres were then less rigidly defined: historians wrote novels, novelists wrote histories. Biographies today—e.g., Edmund Morris's life of Ronald Reagan—evinced a return to fictional techniques. Froude himself disclaimed a definitive take on Carlyle: he claimed to have produced only the "materials for a 'Life'" (82).

Annoyed with Froude, the editors have little to say about the dubious editorial practices of Mary and Alexander Carlyle, Carlyle's niece and nephew-in-law and his heirs. This pair would happily have left unpublished or destroyed much of the material Carlyle entrusted to Froude. Among biographers of other major Victorians such omission or destruction was often the norm. But the editors' animus against Froude prevents them from telling this story. Without Froude's editorial work, imperfect as it is, we

would have had a much smaller base from which to interpret the lives of the Carlyles.

Froude's is the only biography of the Carlyles that the editors engage with, itself testimony to the work's impressive skill and lasting influence. More recent lives pass unremarked or are mentioned only in passing. In contrast to most other Victorian biographers, Froude, unusual for his time, assessed his subjects with extraordinarily candor and boldness. Posterity has recognized the worth of such candor, less so than his own age or most (but by no means all) members of the Carlyle family, and his biography continues to rivet readers. The conventional Victorian view of biography was anathema to Froude. Unlike the authors of the equally massive but discreet lives of leading Victorians like Disraeli and Tennyson, Froude chose a harder path. He distorted the lives of the Carlyles far less than Boswell distorted Johnson's. Neither Boswell or Froude offers the last word about their respective heroes, to be sure, but surely if we can accept Boswell on his own terms, we can make an attempt to accept Froude on his.

Froude's own letters, which exist in some abundance, present his point of view on the issues raised here, but it is one the editors make no effort to consider. Fielding claims elsewhere that Froude "made sure that most of his [papers] were destroyed."<sup>2</sup> This is not true. Froude left his papers to his daughter Margaret, who upon her death bequeathed them to Waldo H. Dunn, who upon his death left them to Yale, where they remain—open for study to interested scholars. In addition, a cursory search I made some years ago in libraries in this country and Britain yielded an incomplete tally of several thousand Froude letters. May I plead that the next student of the Froude-Carlyle controversy attempt a more careful evaluation of Froude's involvement with the Carlyles, one that demonstrates a fuller awareness of his own being and his writings, unpublished as well as published, than does the Introduction to this volume.

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The editors' reasons in choosing "newly selected" letters are not altogether clear. Of the almost 2000 recovered letters by Jane, they give us some 250 (mostly in part). Several previous one-

volume selections are now out of print, and the idea here is presumably to highlight Jane as an figure independent of Thomas and important in her own right. “What emerges from the present selection is someone who is not dramatically changed, but who appears in a brighter and sharper focus, with a different emphasis” (xi). Textually this selection is the best since many letters before the late 1850s (the point to which the Duke-Edinburgh *Collected Letters* has reached) derive from its carefully edited texts. Some letters have turned up since their publication there, and a few derive from editions prepared by the detested Froude.

The value of this volume is also in part predicated on its including heretofore unpublished letters. The editors give references to the location of manuscript letters but astonishingly do not give their location in the *Collected Letters*. From this policy unwary readers might gain the (false) impression that most letters in this volume are hitherto unpublished. Giving the volume and page in the *Collected Letters* might also have benefited uninitiated readers (for whom this volume is presumably intended) who may not realize that most of the letters with NLS numbers or other located in other depositories have already seen publication in the *Collected Letters*. Even seasoned Carlyle scholars might have preferred to have the newly-published letters clearly designated.

It is regrettable that this volume does not include footnotes. Instead, passages of invariably excellent editorial commentary elucidate or link many of the letters. But many letters lack commentary. Scholarly as well as general readers might have appreciated more help of the kind so outstandingly provided in the *Collected Letters*, which unfortunately will not be available to most readers. The annotation there—ample, informed, and authoritative—would have helped all readers to comprehend better the complexity within Jane’s letters. Coterie speech, literary allusions, forgotten works and figures, the obscure trivia of the past—“Make a spoon or spoil a horn” (85), “*crim con*” (104), “the new Princess” (291), “*Guy Fox’s Lantern*” (47), Jane’s saying that “some ‘change has come over the spirit of his dream” (101)—are mostly left unexplained. Will prospective readers know that Jane refers to Guy Fawkes and to Byron’s “The Dream”? Not from the annotation provided here. A “cast of characters,” that is, a few words about the principal correspondents and figures

mentioned, might also have helped. (The editors do provide a brief chronology and a list of correspondents.) Even readers up on the Carlyles may find themselves puzzled trying to figure out who this or that individual was or even what Jane Carlyle is talking about. Readers new to the Carlyles may find themselves more baffled still. This is not the way to augment the Carlyle fold. An ideal model for a volume of selections such as this is Robert Spaethling's *Mozart's Letters, Mozart's Life. Selected Letters* (2000). Spaethling as editor provides introductory comments for each letter, inserts when necessary bracketed explanations, and does not shirk from footnotes. Such care nicely introduces its subject. One trusts Spaethling to explain important matters as they arise.

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Rosemary Ashton reviewing *Newly Selected Letters* in the *TLS* claims that the pleasure in reading Jane's correspondence is "like reading a good novel" (June 25, 2004). By dividing Jane's letters into twelve "chapters," the editors encourage reading the letters as an embryo novel. Titles such as "In Search of Genius, 1819–26," "Finding a Mission, 1845–47," "Like a Dim Nightmare, 1863–64," and "The Perfectly Extraordinary Woman, 1865–66" suggest a plot line in which the heroine triumphs over various vicissitudes to emerge recognized for her abundant merits. Ironically, by drawing upon the genre of novel, the editors foster the kind of "dramatic" approach for which they castigate Froude. But should we think of Jane as a kind of epistolary novelist? I think not. Letter writing is after all a major 19th-century genre in itself, and an important way to contextualize a literary artist. Is Jane not more a letter-writer than a novelist? Compare her letters overall, for example, with those of George Eliot, and Jane's achievement in this genre is clearly more impressive. Eliot put her genius primarily into her novels, Jane into her letters. Why this is so might have been worth investigating. Instead of putting her achievement into this context and the larger one of Victorian culture generally, nearly two-thirds of the Introduction indulges in a partisan diatribe against Froude. Jane's rising position in Victorian literary studies and feminist circles, areas in which the editors possess considerable expertise, is hardly touched upon.

Finally, it is hard to discern the target audience for this

volume. Ashgate has a solid reputation as an academic press, and this collection appears in its distinguished Nineteenth Century series. But Ashgate volumes are marketed mainly in academic venues, have small print runs, are rarely available in bookshops—never in those outside Britain. They are also extremely expensive. Even without the skewed, captious Introduction and the somewhat off-putting presentation, this volume might have trouble attracting the non-academic readers its subject richly deserves. That would be a pity. Who besides well-endowed libraries will buy *Jane Carlyle. Newly Selected Letters*?

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#### NOTES

1. The biography contains dozens of other analogies. They are suggestive, not prescriptive. As I wrote earlier: “Carlyle’s character and acts, in Froude’s view, might be suggested by any or all of these analogies to figures of the past. He puts Carlyle into a number of roles, none permanently, but none without relevance to the complexity of Carlyle’s character. No one role by itself “explained” him, none could encompass the uniqueness of his being, but all helped at one time or another illuminate different aspects of his character” (*Froude’s Life of Carlyle*, ed. Clubbe [Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1979], 12). The above applies, though to a lesser degree, to Jane.
2. *The Carlyles at Home and Abroad*, ed. Sorensen and Rodger L. Tarr (Aldershot, Eng. and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 2.