

Carlyle, Thomas, and Jane Welsh Carlyle. *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*. Edited by Ian Campbell, Aileen Christianson, Sheila McIntosh, and David Sorensen. Vol. 32. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004. 313 pp. \$30.

WHEN I WAS OFFERED the task of reviewing Volume 32 of the *Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*, several doubts ran through my mind. I pondered what new could possibly be said about this distinguished series after 31 volumes. But I was even more troubled by the possibility that at this point, the collection of letters might now be more worthy of Dryasdust the historian, with his owlish fondness for meaningless minutiae, than of a general reader interested in the Carlyles. Happily, however, I was wrong on both counts. Far from being a ponderous and dutiful compilation, volume 32 captures a time of critical change for both Thomas and Jane Carlyle. In letters which alternate between amusing, practical, and poignantly heart-breaking, the volume allows us to see Carlyle emerging as the “Sage of Chelsea,” as the letters detail the publication of the first *Collected Works* and reveal a marriage strained by illness and worry, yet still full of its own prickly vitality. The volume is full of a certain melancholy, tempered by a determination to work and be productive, and as such paints a moving portrait of two people facing their later years.

Several themes stand out in this volume. First is that of mortality, as death after death is chronicled, from that of Carlyle’s infant niece, to the terrible loss of Lady Ashburton. The pensive tone is established early in the volume as Carlyle recounts to his brother a visit to the family plot in Ecclefechan:

[T]here, yes there they all lay; Father, Mother, and Margaret’s grave between them: silent, now that were wont to be so speechful when one came among them after an absence. I stood silent, with bared head, as in the sacreddest place of all the world, for a few moments; and I daresay tears again wetted these hard eyes which are now unused to weeping. All silent, sheltered forever

from all the storms and hardships; —your little Bairns lie near on the right: —and the big sky is overhead, and the Maker of all reigns there and here. One need not much mourn the lot of the Dead: it will, in all events, be our own so very soon. (4)

The reduction of the “speechful” to silence takes on an especially poignant air of foreshadowing when compared to the chatty letter that follows from Jane Welsh Carlyle to Mary Russell. And indeed, throughout the volume, Jane’s letters are determinedly bright as if in resistance to the forces of illness and death which threaten to overtake her. Carlyle’s own awareness of the passing days is brought out sharply in a sad passage from a letter to the ailing Lady Ashburton in which he describes himself as “grown strangely old—rapidly becoming *senex* [aged] and in fact become so, amid these chaotic waters of bitterness” (98). With the death of Lady Ashburton, Carlyle’s melancholy grows deeper and more touching as it becomes clear that, in letters at least, he could only unburden his heart so far about the depth of that loss. As he says in a letter to his brother, John:

I got a great blow by that death you alluded to, *whh* was totally unexpected to me; and the thought of it widening ever more as I *think* farther of it, is likely to be a heaviness of heart to me for a long time coming. I have indeed lost such a friend as I never had, nor am again in the least likelihood to have, in this *stranger* world; a magnanimous and beautiful soul, *whh* had furnished the English Earth and made it homelike to me in many ways, is not now here. (151)

Jane’s reaction to the death is colder, and also more revealing of her discomfort and suspicions concerning Carlyle’s feelings for Lady Ashburton. The expressions of condolence that come to her and Carlyle are only cold reminders of her dislike of the situation:

The letters and calls of inquiry and condolence that have been eating up my days for the last two weeks! distressingly and irritatingly. . . . *Some Ladies* (of her circle) who never were here before, have come, out of *good* motives, taking to us as *her* friends, out of regard for her memory— But the greater number of these

*condolers* have come to ask particulars of her death (which we were likely to know) and to see how we, and especially *Mr Carlyle*, were taking her loss! (147)

Jane's response to Lady Ashburton's death, along with so much else in these letters, further complicates the portrait of this intense and difficult marriage. Early in the volume, Jane gives a witty and wry description of breakfast at the Carlyles':

Figure *this!*—(*Scene*—a room where every thing is enveloped in dark yellow London *fog!*—for air to breathe a sort of *liquid soot!*—breakfast on the table—'adulterated coffee' 'adulterated bread' 'adulterated cream' and adulterated—*water!*—*Mr C* at one end of the table, looking remarkably bilious—*Mrs C* at the other looking half-dead! (10)

The tableau-like quality of the "Scene," with the bilious Carlyle and the "half-dead" Jane, corresponds eerily to the painting done of the Carlyles' home by Robert Tait, *A Chelsea Interior*, the production of which is chronicled in the later letters of this volume. Other insights about the marriage include Jane's recollection of her earlier days as a young wife learning to bake bread, which captures dramatically the difference between the pampered daughter of dotting parents and the frustrated wife of a poor scholar: "That I who had been so petted at home, whose comfort had been studied by everybody in the house, who had never been required to do anything but *cultivate my mind*, should have to pass all those hours of the night in watching *a loaf of bread!* Which mightn't turn out bread after all!" (72). The story is told with her usual self-mocking humor, and it reveals worlds about the discrepancies between the life she thought she would live, and the life she received. In general, and particularly in this volume, her letters display an eagerness to charm and to entertain, with the desperate gaiety of a woman who knows if she stays silent she will go mad. So talk she does, brilliantly, gaily, but with a hectic flush, as of fever. These accounts, coupled with Carlyle's frequent description of Jane as a "prisoner" in the house, and the litany of Jane's illnesses that both Carlyle and Jane detail in their letters, show a marriage pulled taut and straining at the seams, but still managing to hold together.

But the collection is not lacking in unrestrained wit and humor. Carlyle's letters consistently show flashes of his wry Scottish way of looking at things, and Jane also manages to capture the likeable gruff quiriness of Carlyle's character. A passage from Jane's letter to Emily Tennyson concerning Carlyle and his horse demonstrates the wit of both Carlyles at work:

Such a horse! he (not the horse) never wearies, in the intervals of *Frederick*, of celebrating the creature's "good sense, courage and sensibility!" "Not once," he says, "has the creature shown the slightest disagreement from *him* in *any question of Intellect*" (more than can be said of most living Bipeds)! I wrote to a relation in Scotland, "If this horse of Mr C's dies, he will certainly write its biography," and that very day he said to me, "My dear, I wish I could find out about the genealogy of that horse of mine! and some particulars of its life! I am beginning to feel sure it is a Cockney." (78)

This volume is full of such gems, and of rich reward to the casual reader as well as the scholar.

As with all the previous volumes of the *Collected Letters*, volume 32 is meticulously edited, with a wealth of explanatory notes accompanying the letters in a non-obtrusive way, in addition to an excellent introduction by Sheila McIntosh and a thorough chronology. A useful supplement to the volume is an appendix detailing Carlyle's marginal comments on the text of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem *Aurora Leigh*. Carlyle dutifully read *Aurora Leigh* out of regard for Barrett Browning, but, as the marginal comments indicate, he never quite understood or appreciated what she was trying to accomplish with the poem, especially given his antipathy to poetry as an adequate medium for ideas. I have to admit that, as an admirer of the poem myself, I was disappointed to learn that Carlyle was not; however, it remains insightful to see Carlyle the critic at work in such a tangible way.

In the end, this volume reminds both scholars and general readers alike of the central role the Carlyles played in the literary world of their time, as well as just how eminently readable their letters remain. One can dip satisfactorily into any part of this volume and find the living essence of Thomas and Jane on the

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page. As Jane herself comments in a letter to Mary Russell, letters possess a life far different from carefully conceived and written books: “‘My Dear’ she [Geraldine Jewsbury] said to me, ‘how is it that women who don’t write *books* write always so much nicer *letters* than those who do?’ —I told her—it was, I supposed, because they did not write in the valley of the shadow of their possible future *biographer*—but wrote what they had to say frankly and naturally” (11). Although it is difficult to believe that neither Thomas nor Jane occasionally thought about future biographers, we along with those biographers are grateful that they wrote such letters as we find here, so beautifully preserved.

Marylu Hill  
*Villanova University*