

“A Rain of Balderdash”:
Thomas Carlyle and Victorian Attitudes toward
the Franco-Prussian War

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IN 1870, Carlyle’s friends and admirers entreated him to take up his pen and write about emigration and the colonies. In spite of his strong feelings about these issues, he expressed reservations in a letter to his brother John dated 25 March: “People urge me to ‘write’ . . . but I absolutely cannot; did write with all emphasis 20 or 30 years ago; and now have no heart, nor even any hand available!” (MS: NLS 527 f. 9).¹ Eight months later, however, with the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war, he “reluctantly buckled on his armour again” (Froude 2: 403). More than thirty years after *The French Revolution* had brought him fame and confirmed his literary reputation, Carlyle published a letter to the editor of the *Times* entitled “Mr. Carlyle on the War” (18 November 1870). In the light of yet another crisis in France, he was willing to go through the irritating and painstaking process of writing by dictation in order to “elucidate” again the French question for the benefit of the Victorian public.

Carlyle’s letter, later collected as “The Latter Stage of the French-German War, 1870–71” (*Works* 30: 49–59), has been dismissed by the historian Dora Neill Raymond, who claims that the “public tired of Carlylogisms on Prussia, Bismarck, and the brave and pious German soldier.” According to her, “Latter Stage” was only useful in “diverting to his own person some of the excess emotion that had been venting itself in indignation at Russia” (16, 251). But the passionate reaction of the public that she describes serves to demonstrate that Carlyle’s opinions and warnings were still carefully heeded by British observers, whether they agreed with him or not. The usefulness of Carlyle’s response—originally published in the leading daily newspaper of the period—can hardly be questioned, and certainly cannot be reduced to a mere

diversion or distraction from the serious issues at stake. Some of Carlyle's statements about the Franco-Prussian war and its aftermath bear a striking resemblance to his writings about the 1789, 1830, and 1848 French revolutions, and shed light on the earlier works that have traditionally attracted more critical attention. In certain respects 1870 is a fourth act, both in the cycle of French revolutions and in the lessons Carlyle derives from them. The British public may have had some reason to be irritated by Carlyle's stereotypes of the pious thrifty Germans and the mad frivolous French, but these clichés are valuable as symbolic aspects of his thoughts on contemporary views of continental Europe. Reading "Latter Stage" in the context of his own writings on France and of other contemporary accounts of 1870 highlights another "conflux of two eternities" in Carlyle's career.²

In addition to provoking Carlyle's sudden change of heart about writing again, the war in France also prompted him to read newspapers he had been ignoring for years (Wilson 214). He was eager to hear from Ivan Turgenev, his then visitor and walking companion, who gave him first-hand accounts of the war from Baden.³ He also relied heavily on his brother John for details about newspaper accounts and public attitudes.⁴ In his *Journal* Carlyle expresses his approval of "the amazing German-French war, grandest and most beneficent of Heavenly providences in the history of my time," as well as his surprise at living long enough to be a witness: "I never expected to live to see such a swing round. . . . I am very glad I have lived to see it—the greatest event in history since I was born." He even refers to the Franco-Prussian war as something that might kindle his life for a short while yet (11 October 1870; Froude 2: 406–07). It was not the first time that France provided an uplifting diversion from his melancholia and renewed his desire to live and to create. In a sense, producing *The French Revolution* had saved him from the existential crisis of *Sartor Resartus*, just as the revolution of 1848 had shaken him out of his post-Cromwell despondency to write the essays "Louis-Philippe" and "Prospects of the French Republic," both of which express high expectations for the new government in France.

Carlyle's long-lived admiration for Germany, and his attendant desire for its unity, may also have been a factor in his sudden enthusiasm. He announced to Richard Althaus, who had asked him to write for a collection of essays, the proceeds of which

would go to German war orphans and widows, that “the unity of Germany is assured. . . . If anyone had been able to guarantee it for fifty years hence, I would have been happy and content” (Wilson 217). Carlyle remained a staunch promoter of German culture and literature. However, he had already stated his opinions clearly (“did write with all emphasis 20 or 30 years ago”), so he had no special need in 1870 to reiterate his satisfaction with German unity. Carlyle’s decision to write “Latter Stage” is firmly rooted in the sudden change in contemporary perceptions of France and its situation. It is France, not Germany, that motivates him to write.

In spite of the initial refusal of his brother’s and friends’ requests that he write, it is Carlyle’s awareness of a swing in public opinion in late October and early November that moves him to address this “botheration” (to John Carlyle, 16 November 1870, MS: NLS 527 f. 30). The British public—especially the elites—had hitherto supported Germany, whose Protestantism was more popular than French Catholicism. More important, many confirmed Francophiles, such as John Stuart Mill, disliked Napoleon III and feared the rising power of France. For most British observers, the crown-prince of Prussia, who had married Queen Victoria’s daughter in 1858, seemed more trustworthy than the unpredictable French emperor.

However, once Germany’s victory seemed secure, and the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine became a serious consideration, Britain’s fear of rising German might, together with humanitarian pity for France, seemed to tip the balance in favor of the French “victims.” This reinforced the pro-French party that had existed from the start and was composed of people who either admired the French radical tradition or longed for a reaffirmation of England’s influence over continental Europe. Beyond the intelligentsia and the upper classes, the cultural connections to France had always been stronger than those to Germany, regardless of royal weddings. As sympathy for France grew steadily with the prospects of German victory, the existing consensus about neutrality, both moral and political, had never seemed at greater risk of being broken. Though he represented himself as a recluse, Carlyle read newspapers and discussed the war with his brother John. The latter informed him in October: “I notice the delusions in regard to Prussia which are getting more and more vehement

in the newspapers, so that even the *Times* and *Daily News* which have been steadily against the French hitherto, seem to be turning quite round.” John urged Thomas to condemn the “shallow ignorance” of the pro-French: “A few clear and faithful words from you, who know the subject so thoroughly, might do much good I think at the great crisis now approaching” (MS: NLS1775D f. 246). John’s advice, in conjunction with the events themselves and the opinions expressed in the leading newspapers, had clearly begun to weaken Carlyle’s reluctance to write.

On the very next day, the decisive blow came in the shape of a letter. One of the Carlyles’ old friends, Baron Gustave d’Eichthal (nicknamed “Dushty”), wrote to him for the first time in nearly forty years (24 October 1870, MS: NLS 1775D ff. 250–51). D’Eichthal thanked him for his support of German literature, as well as the German cause and welfare, which Carlyle had expressed recently in a short letter in *Weimarische Zeitung*. He entreated the sage to elaborate his views on the conflict, and explained that his only son was part of a cavalry regiment currently stationed just outside Paris.⁵ Carlyle was sympathetic and wrote to his brother John asking whether or not he thought a blotch over the mention of the son was the stain of a tear.⁶ Although Carlyle does not acknowledge the link directly, the correlation between D’Eichthal’s letter and Carlyle’s decision to write are compelling, and both his pro-German friend and his new project are present in his letter to John dated 12 November:

Poor good Dushty, laden with many recollections, many sorrows and anxieties, was really interesting to me. . . .
Poor Mary and I have had a terrible ten days,—properly a *Much Ado about Nothing*. It concerned only that projected Letter to the Newspapers about Germany.
(MS: NLS 527 f. 30)

The combination of the growing opposition in England to Germany’s annexation of Alsace-Lorraine and D’Eichthal’s plea seem to have prompted Carlyle’s efforts to write. He was determined to set matters right in his contemporaries’ minds. With the help of his niece, he completed his letter to the *Times* two weeks after receiving the letters from his brother and “Dushty.” To his brother John, on 12 November, Carlyle declared that his sense of duty, if not his critical faculties, were satisfied:

I do not reckon it a good Letter; but it expresses, in a probably too emphatic way, what my convictions are; and is a clearance to my own conscience in that matter, whether it do good or not, whether it be good or not. I expect it may be considerably an astonishment to many half and half people, lamenters for the French; but am myself on any terms, right thankful to have done with it, and there an end. (MS: NLS 527 f. 30)

Carlyle's self-deprecation should not be taken at face value. His disquietude about France, Germany, and the possible breach of British neutrality was genuine and logical, and it eclipsed his own doubts about his dwindling abilities. Carlyle may have had mixed feelings about his pronouncement on the war, which he sarcastically referred to in the same letter to John as "that immortal letter" and "that thrice-beggarly concern." But whether he was being ironic or overly modest, the reception of his letter was of considerable importance to him, even to the point of denying him sleep.⁷

It is difficult to determine whether Carlyle's letter, published at a moment of compassion for France in Britain, met with indignation, as Raymond argues, or with gratitude, as Carlyle's biographers such as Froude and Wilson maintain. It is certain that considerable passion was triggered that brought a steady flow of letters to Cheyne Row, from both Britain and Germany, where it had been printed in many newspapers.⁸ Having received full support from his family,⁹ Carlyle seemed uninterested in the public response, which he described in letters to John as a "daily jumble," a "noisy inanity," and a "rain of Balderdash, foreign and domestic." Still, he sent his brother, "a considerable lot of these noisy-inane Epistles" to be read and summarized (26 November and 3 December, MS: NLS 527 ff. 32–33). In spite of possible editing on John's part, numerous readers apparently did derive "great comfort" and were "much elated" after having been "daily startled and vexed by the kind of arguments by which people try to extenuate the follies and crimes which have brought France to the pass it is now in" (MS: NLS 1775D f. 266). The most enthusiastic responses were from German readers of the article, but even some of those who usually questioned Carlyle's view on Germany found they could now agree with him. For instance, D. A. Wilson reports that the

historian W. E. H. Lecky confessed to his future wife that his usual disbelief in Carlyle's "might is right" theory had given way to the conviction that the present war justified it (215). Wilson himself saw Carlyle's letter-become-article in more overtly political terms. For him, "On the Latter Stage of the French-German War" was instrumental in preserving British neutrality and lack of interposition. His eulogistic assertions about Carlyle's vision must be qualified, but they are not entirely unfounded. The letter may well have attenuated the swing towards France of public opinion, which is always prone, according to Froude (2: 403), to take the weaker side.

If Carlyle's words in his letter thwarted the attempts made by Frederick Harrison and other MPs to convince Parliament to vote in favor of British intervention before the French surrender was complete, they did so by placing the conflict in a broader historical context. Unlike those who had come to think that the war began when Bismarck tricked Napoleon III into declaring it,¹⁰ Carlyle professed that the *casus belli* was rooted in four centuries of French aggression. He argued that there was "on the part of England, a most profound ignorance as to the mutual history of France and Germany, and the conduct of France towards that country, for Centuries back." By giving an outline of French-German history starting with Louis XI and Kaiser Max, Carlyle attempted to supplant his contemporaries' narrow viewpoint with a broader historical interpretation. He was delighted when the author of an article in the *Scotsman* later provided a detailed explanation of the intricacies of the history of Alsace-Lorraine.¹¹ It may well be that Carlyle had more influence on the British perception of the Franco-Prussian War than historians have realized.

In the context of Carlyle's own conception of history, which itself was the product of uninterrupted study of French and German history, his response to the Franco-Prussian War constitutes an important milestone in his career. The earlier view that Carlyle's interest in France dwindled after he finished writing *The French Revolution* in 1837 can no longer be sustained.¹² Even though his opinions from 1850 have often been considered more reactionary than those in his early work, there is no evidence of a dramatic change of attitude towards France in his later career. If anything, for instance, the character of Voltaire in *Frederick* appears in a more

favorable light than it did in the early essays or in *On Heroes*, where he called Voltaire's life "that of a kind of Antichrist" (14).¹³ The pattern of Carlyle's reaction to 1870 can only be understood in relation to his attitudes toward the previous three French Revolutions. In fundamental ways, his 1870 response replicates the cycles of surprise, hope, compassion, and disappointment that he had articulated about 1789, 1830, and 1848.

The Franco-Prussian war appeared to Carlyle "an exhibition of Divine judgement . . . in an hour when no man looked for it" (Froude 2: 399). In addition to his allusion to 1 Thessalonians (5: 1–6), Froude also echoes Carlyle's statement about the 1848 revolution, which appears in the opening paragraph of his article "Louis-Philippe": "To France least of all had we been looking, of late, for tidings that could elevate or cheer us" (145). Carlyle goes on to describe the revolutionaries of 1848 as the sons of those of 1830 and the grandsons of those of 1789. Their predicament remains the same in 1870. In a letter to John (29 May), Carlyle imagines the riotous lower classes in France complaining of an unimproved condition after eighty-two years of struggle (MS: NLS 527 f. 51; Froude 2: 406). The great-grandsons of the Revolution were at work in the Paris riots of 1870, trying to solve issues left unresolved since 1789. Carlyle was similarly disappointed in the outcome. Just as he bemoaned the aftermath of 1848, so too did he criticize the French Commune and the German handling of Alsace-Lorraine. This fourth chapter of the French Revolution provided Carlyle with the same unsatisfactory ending.

Carlyle was equally adamant, as he wrote in his *Journal*, that a "lesson" be drawn from the conflict (Froude 2: 401), one that France herself was bound not to learn. He wrote to his sister Jean, 28 January 1871:

Poor France one could observe all the while had, in spite of its boastings and the rumours of the Editors, no success in any enterprise whatever; and every "Victory", each in its turn, turned out within two days to have been a defeat cloaked by lies and fallacious hope. Poor France, what a bitter cup she is getting to drink! But it is of her own brewing;—let us hope only that all these frightful sufferings may prove instructive to her, and spare her more of the like! (MS: NLS 531 f. 6)

The mixture of compassion (“Poor France”) and accusation (“of her own brewing”) is reminiscent of Carlyle’s words on other agitated periods of French history. His closing words—“spare her more of the like!”—echo previous post-revolutionary sentiments.¹⁴ Similarly, Carlyle hopes that other countries, particularly Britain, will also find the experience of France “instructive.” In the 1840s, when the Chartist movement was at its zenith, Carlyle had pointed out the danger of an English Revolution erupting on the French model. By 1871, in a letter to John, he dismisses his contemporaries’ claim that Britain had become immune to revolutionary forces. Like the “mad country” France, “England seems to be all pretty mad,” and although he is concerned for France, “the state of England is still more hideous” (29 May, MS: NLS 527 f. 51; Froude 2: 406). In addition, the prophetic message of the French lower classes was relevant to all the upper classes of Europe:

One thing I can see in these murderous ragings from the poorest classes in Paris, that they are a tremendous proclamation to the upper classes in all countries: “our condition, after eighty-two years of struggling, Oh ye quack Upper Classes, is still unimproved, more intolerable, from year to year and from revolution to revolution; and by the Eternal Powers, if you cannot mend it we will blow the world up, along with ourselves and you!” (MS: NLS 527 f. 51; Froude 2: 406)

Carlyle could have written this statement about the state of affairs in either 1789 or 1848. For him the 1870 events in France are a direct continuation of the earlier revolutions. History has repeated itself, and in more ways than one, both in terms of the revolutionary events themselves and their consequences for the rest of Europe. France remains a model, or rather a counter-model for Britain, and Carlyle continues to envisage a time “when the hour of danger comes for Britain” (Wilson 218). France, which in July 1833 Carlyle had described to John Stuart Mill as “the great scene of Practice” (18 July 1833; *CL* 4: 414), had once more showed itself to be incapable of learning from past lessons. As Carlyle remarked to William Knighton, the necessary future of France included yet another “baptism of fire” (913), which made failure against a stronger and more praiseworthy Germany inevitable.

This vision of France as the unruly and bad pupil of Europe, and of Germany as its child prodigy, may appear too systematic. Raymond thought Carlyle's conception was over-simplified, and rejected the dichotomy he struck between a pious, thrifty, virile, virtuous, deserving Germany and a vain, frivolous, feminine, ill-governed France. Carlyle's conclusion to the letter on the Franco-Prussian War to some extent verges on caricature:

That noble, patient, deep, pious and solid Germany should be at length welded into a nation, and become queen of the continent, instead of vapouring, vainglorious, gesticulating, quarrelsome, restless and over-sensitive France, seems to me the hopefulest public fact that has occurred in my lifetime.

German superiority was defended by Carlyle as a divine fulfillment, but this valorization was grounded less in particulars than it was in his general vision of Germany as the embodiment—real or symbolic—of an ideal nation. Similarly, his perception of France and Paris can be seen as that of a chimera encompassing his worst fears and antagonisms. It is possible that the ageing Carlyle was imposing his philosophical system, his grid of moral judgment, on two countries that might have had little to do with the attributes he lent them. This vision of “vainglorious” Paris in 1870—a city that he had only visited twice, the last time in 1851—seem suspiciously close to his description of Paris as “the modern Babylon” (*CL* 3: 184), which he described after his first visit in 1824. As in *Frederick the Great*, Carlyle gives the impression of considering France and Germany as historical models that crystallize and embody his own values. Rather than serving as a solution for short-term current affairs, or a prescription for the future of Europe, his conception of France and Germany operates rhetorically. These images are essential to Carlyle's thought and values, both early and late.

It may be that Carlyle's choice to integrate the Franco-Prussian war into his symbolic and purposefully antithetical vision of France and Germany caused many British observers to exhibit the same sharp indignation that Raymond demonstrates in her investigation. Certainly, it is not inconceivable that his experience as a historian caused Carlyle to see the latest French disaster as simply another chapter of Frederick the Great. Perhaps the

memory of that nightmarish endeavor discouraged him from saying anything further on the subject, in spite of renewed requests from his brother.¹⁵ He could no longer watch over and guide Victorian views of France as effectively as in the past. His lone letter was the contribution he owed to himself, perhaps more than to his contemporaries, to try and preserve the then precarious neutrality Britain had adopted in both the actual and the rhetorical turmoil emanating from the Continent.

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NOTES

1. By this time, Carlyle's right hand was too shaky to write and most letters had to be dictated to his niece, Mary Aitken Carlyle. He often complained on this score; see for instance, MS: NLS 527 f. 29 (28 October 1870), f. 30 (12 November 1870).
2. Many histories of the Franco-Prussian War, by French, German, British, American, and Russian authors were consulted in the course of this study, but more often than not, are not cited as they proved of limited relevance. Indeed, nothing specific or substantial seems to exist about British attitudes to the conflict, other than Dora Neill Raymond.
3. See MS: NLS 527 f. 32, a letter from Carlyle to his brother John, 26 November 1870.
4. John Carlyle told his older brother about the start of the war on 19 July 1870 (MS: NLS 1775D f. 232). He also kept him informed, albeit with a possible bias, of public attitudes, declaring for instance, "Only a few very ignorant military officers are in favour of the French" (MS: NLS 1775D f. 235, 6 August 1870). Later on, he shared striking details, obtained from a French officer in Edinburgh, which included an account of men cooking horse flesh, cats, rats, and mice (MS: NLS 1775E f. 24–25, 5 March 1871).
5. In this letter of 24 October D'Eichthal wrote: "It would be the greatest benefit for the coming Germany if your opinion would be generally known every where with us!—I should like to do something in that way, knowing the great benefit for my Country. My only son, an officer in that Bavarian 1st Cavaliers Regiment . . . is now standing near of Paris. May God protect him!"
6. "Poor good soul, do you think that blotch over the mention of his only Son 'near of Paris' is the stain of a tear or not. It has repeated itself twice in the folds of

- the Letter, and you have it as we had it" (28 October 1870, MS: NLS 527 f. 29).
7. He admits his concern and loss of sleep in his next letter to John, 16 November 1870, MS: NLS 527 f. 31.
 8. John Carlyle related to his brother what Baron D'Eichthal had reported to him, that the letter had been published in *Allgemeinen Zeitung* (in abbreviated form, see Rodger L. Tarr, *Bibliography* 434) and in most of the Berlin and Rhine papers, creating "the greatest sensation" (27 November 1870, MS: NLS 1775D f. 267).
 9. John Carlyle wrote in glowing terms, 18 November 1870: "Your letter, I think, will do us a great deal of good, both in this country and in Germany. I agree with you in ever item of it." (MS: NLS 1775D f. 262–63.) Jean Carlyle also expressed the family's approval: "We were all delighted with your letter in the Times. So clear & calm & strong!" (20 November 1870, MS: NLS 1775D f. 264).
 10. At first, the British public was under the (mostly wrong) impression that Louis-Napoleon's aggressive behavior rather than Bismarck's schemes was solely responsible for the war (see Feuchtwanger 52–54).
 11. Carlyle wrote to his brother John on 3 December 1870 (MS: NLS 527 f. 33). The fact that he discusses the *Scotsman* article in the opening paragraph also suggests the importance of the article to him. After the publication of his own article, he relegated his mostly short comments on the War to the end of his letters.
 12. See, for example, Carlyle's unfinished history of the French Renaissance, "*The Guises*" (see Tarr). In *Frederick the Great*, France is a constant presence, including the strong French elements in the young prince's education and youthful rebellion against his father, in addition to his subsequent friendship with Voltaire. The young prince is described as being subjected to two major influences: a masculine Germanic one, and a feminine French one, the French being the sons of Art and the Germans those of Nature (*Works* 12: 326–27, 337). The German quality is that of honesty, thrift, and manly pursuits, whereas the French element is characterized by sham, femininity, fashion, periwigs and "sumptuousness." Prince Friedrich, for example, who "affects French modes," falls out of favor with his father, who has his son's French-style locks of hair "ruthlessly shorn away" (*Works* 12: 422). When Friedrich attempts to flee his country, he dresses "in magnificent French Style" (*Works* 13: 211) and considers joining the French army in its Italian campaign (*Works* 13: 261, 318). Eventually, "French Literatures, poisonous elements of thought and practice," are blamed for his treason to his country, and we are told that "He is to quit his French literatures and pernicious practices, one and all" (*Works* 13: 330, 352). Thrift and virility, to be acquired through administration of lands and finance as well as hunting and soldiering, seem the only cure to his unfortunate French inclinations.
 13. To extend the possible improvement of Carlyle's estimation of Voltaire beyond *Frederick*, in May 1870, he attempted to procure a good engraving of Voltaire, made after the original of one that recently had been lent to him (from a note held at EUL, GEN. AAF 1730, doc. 44, dated 4 May 1870). Clearly, Carlyle's response to Voltaire, like so much else in his life and work, is more complex than it appears on the surface.
 14. Particularly in *The French Revolution*, Carlyle can be seen expressing empathy with the poor and their fight against injustice at the same time he condemns their brutality and barbarism. Defeat disguised as victory brings to mind the episode of the *Vengeur*, a ship whose heroism had been overemphasized by French politicians and subsequent historians, to the extent that Carlyle himself misrepresented it in *The French Revolution* (*Works* 29: 208–25). He later corrected his account in "On the Sinking of the *Vengeur*."

15. John, worried about Léon Gambetta's projects to oppose the Germans, wrote to Thomas on 5 February 1871: "And another letter to the Times might do great good, as the first did, both in Germany and in England, and indirectly in France, if you could see your way in writing it" (MS: NLS 1775E f. 15).

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