

Jane Welsh Carlyle's Last Protégée

TO KEEP AN ACCOUNT OF THE £50 PER ANNUM EARMARKED FOR LITERARY charity, a bequest left to him in 1857 through the last will of Harriet Lady Ashburton, TC entered the individual disbursements in a pair of pocket memoranda. These little notebooks are now held by the Bodleian Library of Oxford University (MS: Don. d53). In a future issue, *Carlyle Studies Annual* will publish a complete transcription of this record, which contains entries such as this one:

1866, July 14, Library *Life-Ticket* / to Meira Price (the deserving [illegible]) / £26·10·6

The year, underlined twice, was that of JWC's death (21 April), and 14 July would have been her sixty-fifth birthday. TC apparently observed the sad anniversary with this generous gift to a young woman who first appeared in JWC's life late in 1865. The following pen-portrait is from JWC to Lady Amberley, 7 November 1865:

I have seen such a curious example lately of the superfluousness of Teachers, where there is capacity to be taught! Some months ago Mr C got a letter from a girl, giving her opinion of himself and his Books—with considerable enthusiasm of—what shall I say?—admiration?— I did not feel *sure* whether it was *admiration* or *love*; but anyhow she expressed herself with an elegance, and eloquence, and real understanding of the subject, that excited my interest in her, and deserved, I thought some answer. So, as Mr C can never be moved to answer unknown adorers, especially unknown female adorers; one day that I had nothing to do, good or bad, I drove to Camberwell to find the “Maria Price” of the Letter. Heavens and Earth! The address she had given was a Tailor's shop! Not a rich Tailor's like Nichols, whose wife goes to court in Diamonds, and tears Lady Downshire's lace flounces; but a Tailor represented by one waistcoat and one pair of trowsers, in one small window! For one moment my heart failed me, and I was near driving away *re infecta*. Then I said to myself; is not she the *more*, not the *less* worth seeing, for having had no “advantages” in making herself what she is? So I asked if Miss Maria Price was within, and was shown up the smallest stair ever seen,

not belonging to a hen roost[.] How there came to me a little creature, looking eleven years old, but in reality six and twenty; how she blushed and flashed into sudden beauty, (like one of Balzac's colourless Heroines) at Mr Carlyle's name; How sweetly she looked and spoke, with what modesty and good breeding; how I invited her to Cheyne Row, and how she came, and how Ruskin took her home in his carriage! and how she is turning out the most comfortable protégée that I ever *fell into*—! About all that and much more, I will tell you if you like, when you come— In writing it would be too tedious! / When I told Lord Houghton the other day at "Lady William's" that I had "discovered a Genius," he threw his arms up wildly and exclaimed "Oh God forbid"! But I assured him my Genius wanted nothing of anybody not even a subscription to a Book of Poems! When I asked her had she ever thought of writing a book herself she answered, like the wise little woman she is. "Oh Dear! no! I have *read* far too many good Books to think of *writing* a bad one"! (MS: NLS 1808.106)

On 3 December 1865, JWC wrote to Miss Price to explain why she hadn't called upon her and to invite her to come again to 5 Cheyne Row. "Would you mind the long road back—with no Mr Ruskin to take you?" JWC asked (MS: Humanities Research Center, University of Texas). Miss Price's reply has not been traced, nor have additional letters to her from JWC or TC been discovered. In a letter to Lady Airlie on 6 April 1866, a mere fortnight before her death, JWC wrote: "If you could and would come to tea with me on Monday I would be at home and so glad to see you, and would try to bring *Sartorina* (little Price) for your inspection" (MS: NLS Acc. 2427).

Meira is the Welsh form of Maria, but it is unclear whether this was Miss Price's own preference or if TC applied the ethnic spelling. Perhaps further information may be found among TC's checkstubs for July 1866 (NLS 20753).

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