

ALAIN JUMEAU

Past and Present, by Thomas Carlyle. Introduction and Notes by Chris R. Vanden Bossche. Text established by Chris R. Vanden Bossche, Joel J. Brattin, and D. J. Trela. The Strouse Edition. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005. cxxiv + 843 pp., \$75.

FOLLOWING THE PUBLICATION OF *HEROES AND HERO-WORSHIP* IN 1993, *Sartor Resartus* in 2000, and *Historical Essays* in 2002, *Past and Present* is the fourth of the eight-volume Strouse Edition of Carlyle's Works. Like its predecessors, it is a superb piece of scholarship. It includes a very informative historical introduction, a few relevant illustrations, the customary critical apparatus, and an abundance of notes. It is meant to be the standard reference to be used in Carlyle studies and is a valuable substitute for the previous editions of the work, which are now very difficult to find and often inadequate in terms of text reliability and annotation.

After a preface by the editor, Chris Vanden Bossche, and a chronology of Carlyle's life by his modern biographer, Fred Kaplan, we are introduced to the work. Vanden Bossche begins by stressing the importance of *Past and Present* among the other works of Carlyle, setting it apart from *Sartor Resartus* and *The French Revolution*, for it always occupied a prominent place "in the Victorian debates about an increasingly industrial and commercial economy" (xix). He appropriately reminds us that, according to Friedrich Engels, it was the only book "worth reading" on the Condition of England in 1843, the year of its publication (xix), a statement that cannot be disputed and deserves our consideration. What is more surprising is Vanden Bossche's own comment on Carlyle's book: "The result is his most moving and optimistic piece of social criticism" (xix). *Past and Present* is, indeed, very

moving, because it conveys Carlyle's emotion when he realized the dreadful consequences of the New Poor Law of 1834, which turned young and active workers affected by unemployment into the miserable inmates of the St. Ives Workhouse. Yet it does not necessarily follow that it is also Carlyle's most *optimistic* piece of social criticism. Indeed, the coupling of his name with the epithet *optimistic* may even be an oxymoron. It would certainly have surprised the novelist Anthony Trollope, who parodied Carlyle as "Dr. Pessimist Anticant" in *The Warden*, if not Carlyle himself.

Vanden Bossche next describes the political and social context of *Past and Present*, showing that Carlyle was dissatisfied with both the Whigs and the Tories in office. The former had passed the New Poor Law while the latter were reluctant to repeal the Corn Laws, which represented a heavy burden for the workers, who lived chiefly on bread. According to Carlyle, there was no hope for the laboring classes of England unless the new leaders of industry transformed themselves into a new aristocracy, the old one having failed in its mission to "guide and govern" the people.

After interesting pages on the writing of *Past and Present*, Vanden Bossche devotes a long section to its reception and influence. Because it attacked all sides, political reviewers were rather embarrassed, for they could use it "neither to criticize their opponents nor to support their own positions" (xliv). Carlyle's refusal to make specific proposals apart from his plea for education and emigration was another cause for frustration. Yet the impact of the work on the public at large and on contemporary writers was enormous. Vanden Bossche is effective in pointing out that without *Past and Present*, it would be difficult to imagine the great interest in the condition of the lower classes of England that is to be found in Dickens's *Dombey and Son* and *Hard Times*, in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, in Kingsley's *Alton Locke* or Disraeli's *Sybil*, for instance. The work also influenced other social thinkers like Ruskin, and even poets (Tennyson in *Maud*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning in *Aurora Leigh*) and painters (Ford Madox Brown's *Work*, with its famous portrayal of Carlyle watching workers, is appropriately reproduced in the volume).

In his Note on the Text, Vanden Bossche explains why the present edition is essentially based on the copy-text of the

Printer's Copy, the manuscript from which the first English edition (1843 London) was typeset, as well as the fact that some changes of wording have been adopted from the 1845 edition which appeared soon after the first edition and for which Carlyle carefully prepared copy. Then comes the text itself. It has been made highly readable and contains no obtrusive editorial notes or indications of variations. The remarkably rich textual apparatus and explanatory notes are given in the second part of the book, with the bibliography, the discussion of editorial decisions, and a useful index.

The notes clarify all the references made by Carlyle to the social and political situation of England, the history of the country, classical culture, English and Continental writers, scientists, inventors. . . . And now, readers are tempted to think that the editor is explaining too much—for instance, was it really necessary to have a note on Downing Street (28.13) or on distillation (28.19)? Now, in fact, they would appreciate a little help with some rare words: *greaves* (48.3), *meed* (58.1), *adscititious* (127.17), Roman *thews* (162.24), and also *amaurosis* (17.4) which is not even mentioned in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. There are very few misprints (e.g. 126.17, 466: 224.9–10, 483: 245.26), and when Ancient Greek is quoted, some stresses and breathings are missing (374: 60.6, 459: 211.12–13 and 30–31). Concerning the myth of the Tanneries of Meudon, where the victims of the Guillotine were supposed to be flayed to make leather-breeches, it is surprising not to find any note showing Carlyle's lack of reliable information, for the point has already been made (see John D. Rosenberg, *Carlyle and the Burden of History* [1985] 94n). Moreover, no serious French historical source would support Carlyle's view.

But these very rare and, indeed, minor flaws are inevitable and do not affect the remarkable quality of this edition. The purpose of such a volume is to provide a definitive text for future scholars, to record variants accurately and to put the text in its proper context by giving an account of its writing, publication and reception, and also by providing the appropriate explanatory notes. The editors have clearly achieved their ambitious purpose and, naturally, Carlyle scholars will feel very grateful to them.