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The Lives of Victorian Literary Figures III, Volume 2: The Carlyles.
Edited by Aileen Christianson and Sheila McIntosh. London:
Pickering & Chatto, 2005. xliv + 470 pp. \$495 [three-volume set].

A WEALTH OF MATERIAL COMPRISES THIS VOLUME, MATERIAL THAT is both informative and relevant and, simply put, vastly entertaining to read. It is due to the editorial choices made by volume editors Aileen Christianson and Sheila McIntosh that *The Carlyles* offers non-specialists and literary enthusiasts, no less than Carlyle scholars, a balanced, sensitively arranged collection of otherwise far-flung commentary on the Victorian social phenomenon centered at Cheyne Row, Chelsea.

The volume's introduction provides a succinct overview of key points that enable readers to negotiate an array of opinionated, impassioned, and sometimes contradictory commentary. While the editors note that their selections aim "to complicate and contest the received biographical image" (xvii), they hasten to add that the concept of a unified received image itself requires serious scrutiny. As a writer, theorist, and biographer, Thomas Carlyle was himself the subject of biographies during his lifetime. As the wife of "the great man," Jane Welsh Carlyle was also a biographical subject; though not herself a professional writer, she was a gifted storyteller, and her ability to spin witty tales out of the domestic minutiae of ordinary people and events was legendary. But when JWC died in 1866, she left behind approximately 2,000 letters, a journal, memoirs, and other life-writings, which were collected and edited by TC, and it is this circumstance that particularly challenges the idea of "received biographical image." This writing—most assuredly never intended for publication—revealed a more complex version of a marital relationship and of the individuals involved than was implied by the public persona

of the author. Shortly after TC's death, J. A. Froude published *Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, followed by a four-volume biography of Carlyle; as a biographer, Froude's aim was to establish definitive biographical *truth*, as opposed to editing the materials so as to uphold "the great man's" reputation. This sparked a controversy over biographical authenticity that continues unresolved more than a century later: hence the appropriateness of the editors' description of the controversy surrounding the Carlyles' legacy as "an unholy row" (xxi).

In 1903, Alexander Carlyle published *New Letters of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, a collection aimed at countering the impression of an unhappy marriage conveyed by Froude's publications. The volume featured an introduction by James Crichton-Browne designed to defend "Carlyle's reputation by undercutting Welsh Carlyle's" (xiii); utilizing his authority as a physician, he claimed that JWC's "over-education" had led to nervous disorder, neurasthenia, and mental illness. Thus was born the feud between establishing and authenticating vexing truths (Froude) and enshrining the reputation of the genius whose brilliance was compromised by a hysterical woman (Crichton-Browne).

The Froude controversy and its aftermath inform the editorial choices made by Christianson and McIntosh in this volume: "by giving many accounts which contain elements of reaction against Froude's account of the Carlyles' lives and marriage, . . . we are showing the way that Froude's deconstruction of Carlyle was followed by others' attempts at reconstruction, ensuring that there was a cacophony surrounding his posthumous representation" (xvi-xvii). The writers represented in this collection were inspired by Froude's volumes to "lay out their views of the Carlyles in counterpoint, reaction, and extension of his narrative. . . . Everyone, once Froude's editions were published, had an axe to grind. . . . [T]he Froude controversy was a struggle over 'authenticity' and ownership of the Carlyles" (xvii). These factors are significant not only in terms of literary history: the critical framework established by this early pattern of deconstruction and reconstruction, note the editors, continues to shape Carlyle studies to this day.

Along with commentary on Carlyle's works, on Thomas and Jane as individuals, and on the Carlyle marriage, a unifying idea in these extracts concerns the couple's "ineradicable Scottishness"

(xxi), a quality that further enhanced their idiosyncratic, bohemian image. Associated with this factor is what the editors define as the “ancient Scottish art of insult, . . . flyting.” According to Christianson and McIntosh, TC was a “great proponent of vigorous flyting,” while JWC’s more muted style demonstrated a “forceful capacity for skewering the truth, undermining Carlyle from within her narratives, cutting him down to size by irony and laughter, and by oblique insult” (xxi). The concept characterizes the Carlyles individually, their marriage, and their social persona during their lives, as well as the warring critical heritage that has raged, undiminished, for well over a century after their deaths. “An unholy row,” indeed.

It is in the extracts themselves that the most insightful perspectives are revealed; although in their variability the readings might seem to contribute more to indeterminacy than to definitive biographical authenticity, this volume offers the refreshingly postmodern view that such authenticity can never be established with any genuine viability. What, then, *can* be said, and how does that shape our understanding of the Carlyles’ social and intellectual legacy? Admittedly, the uncertainty resulting from a comparatively fluid notion of authenticity can be disquieting; yet, as this volume demonstrates, it is that very indeterminacy that, ironically, constructs a coherent picture comprised of genius and wit, brilliance and mediocrity, intimacy and celebrity, pierced through with barbed insults and—astonishingly—rich, spontaneous laughter.

Observations on JWC, for example, while they evade definitive characterization, are less frustrating than amusing in their variation. To Ellen Twisleton she is “a very ugly woman, with a broad Scotch accent” (55), and to Anne Thackeray Ritchie she is “a living picture; Gainsborough should have been alive to paint her; slim, bright, dark-eyed, upright,” and “handsomely dressed in velvet and point lace” (76). She was, according to Henry Larkin, a long-suffering wife admired for her “stoical resolution to shut in her own misery from the eyes of the world” (116) at the same time she was also a self-sufficient individual who “possessed plenty of resources of her own, and friends and acquaintances . . . and she well knew how to hold her own in all wordy warfare. . . . She had also a mischievous delight in treading on the delicate toes of the

conventional proprieties; and I have heard her say the most audacious things with a look of demure unconsciousness” (117). Margaret Oliphant’s remark that “the usual jargon about gentle wives and feminine influences is ludicrously inapplicable in cases where the strongest of qualities and the utmost force of character are called into play” (143) suggests that the binary separate-spheres framework is itself an inappropriate measure of assessment, particularly in this instance. “Monotony, the sole thing [JWC] could not endure” (171), Oliphant claims, was evidenced by throwing her teacup into the fire, or insistently holding forth on the topic of coal-skuttles, or climbing over a wall rather than waiting for the key. Considering that, as John Tyndall remembers, “Like her husband, she could hit off a character or peculiarity with a simple stroke of the tongue” (361n), JWC is remarkably idiosyncratic in her refusal to “suffer and be still,” for all her demure, velvet-clad elegance.

Descriptions of TC offer a similar mix of the sublime and the absurd. In his despair over the human condition, Fox reports, “Carlyle wandered down to tea, looking dusky and aggrieved at having to live in such a generation; but he was very cordial to us notwithstanding” (32). And Ritchie recalls that “When he first grew a beard, . . . all the time he had saved by ceasing to shave he spent wandering about the house, and bemoaning that which was amiss in the universe” (77). Carlyle’s famous dyspepsia connects forcefully with his equally famous meal-time harangues, one of which is detailed by T. Wemyss Reid: “Carlyle began to converse . . . then to argue . . . then to declaim. How they did stare. All other speech was hushed; some looked aghast, others admiring” (49). Another occasion is conveyed by Elisabeth Dwight: “He came out, at dinner, with one of his tremendous Jeremiads, against the age, sent us all to perdition without the slightest deference to our feelings, & talked so loud that the whole company inevitably stopped to listen . . . [to his] protracted howls & lamentations” (62). And yet as one who was himself subject to the human condition, TC was also capable of great compassion, as Jane Brookfield confirms: “[H]is language falls into commonplace conventionality when he has his heart engaged by a common and almost universal feeling. ‘Well—you’re a glorious fellow.’ No originality—no invention in this. . . . It was simply what a schoolboy would have said who was really pleased

. . . —like a thump on the back” (73). That Carlyle, according to David Masson, discoursed on “the conduct of one’s own spirit, in a world framed so majestically and so divinely” (313), and that he, according to Francis Espinasse, “spoke of his feeling towards his fellow-men as ‘abhorrence mingled with pity’” (283) complicates his “received” image as either a morbid depressive or vitriolic haranguer.

Contemporary statements on the effects of Carlyle’s writings also reveal a range of reactions. For Oliphant, TC’s *Reminiscences*, which burst “upon the world like . . . an angry meteor,” exposed “a far less impressive and dignified personality than . . . his generation had attributed to him” (136). While George Gilfillan claims, “Every thing seems new in the glare of Carlyle’s savage genius” (187), Frederic Harrison critiques the “drivel of his Pro-Slavery advocacy, and ill-conditioned snarling at honest men labouring to reform ancient abuses” (200). For his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson, Carlyle is “a hammer that crushes mediocrity and pretension. He detects weakness on the instant, and touches it” (223). And, although he was known to berate both acquaintances and strangers “with a perfect Berserkir rage” (340), his laugh, according to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, was “the key to his whole nature. . . . [A]fter the most vehement tirade, he would suddenly pause, throw his head back, and give as genuine and kindly a laugh as I ever heard from a human being. . . . It cleared the air like thunder and left the atmosphere sweet” (254, 257).

Interestingly, portrayals of the Carlyles as a couple yield a more uniform impression than as individuals. Their friend Caroline Fox testifies that “She plays all manner of tricks on her husband, telling wonderful stories of him in his presence, founded almost solely on her bright imagination; he, poor man, panting for an opportunity to stuff in a negation, but all to no purpose; having cut him up sufficiently, she would clear the course. They are a very happy pair” (19). Typically, TC wrote in the upper storey of the house, while JWC’s primary space was her sitting room. After finishing his work for the day, he would visit Jane, sit on the floor, and smoke a pipe with his back to the fireplace, leaning back so the smoke would go up the chimney rather than polluting the air of her room. Such an anecdote calls into question Fox’s assertion that “She and her husband, though admiring each other very much, do not in all things thoroughly sympathise; he does not

pay that attention to little things on which so much of a woman's comfort depends" (29). Henry Larkin insists, "I cannot for a moment suppose that their two lives were really blended into one. How, on such terms, could they be?" (116); but to Margaret Oliphant, the Carlyles are "a wonderful northern-Gothic couple, blazing off into thunder and lightning of fierce sudden wrangle, with volleys of rolling words, far too mighty for the occasion, fire and flame and the smoke of battle, and laughter ringing through. No wonder that people misunderstood them" (129). Although it is not my purpose to assess the accuracy of the contemporary assessments offered in this volume, Oliphant's version of the Carlyles seems consistently to capture the essence of the debate while casting it into an alternative perspective that challenges readers' binary expectations.

As these extracts illustrate, the contemporary narratives of prominent figures, based upon their personal experiences, anecdotes, and memories, are as "essentially . . . disreputable" as the private correspondence, memoirs, and other life-writing typically employed in the biographical endeavor. To illustrate, the editors quote Richard Holmes: "Biographers base their work on sources which are inherently unreliable. Memory itself is fallible; memoirs are inherently unreliable; letters are always slanted towards their recipients; even private diaries and intimate journals have to be recognized as literary forms of self-invention rather than an 'ultimate' truth of private fact or feeling" (xvii-xviii). But this volume demonstrates that such sources are not simply "disreputable"; they are also extremely enlightening. *The Carlyles* recasts the idea of "ultimate truth" by challenging readers to construct their own truth about the Carlyle legacy, thus exposing authenticity and "ownership" as moot points. In this, the volume succeeds admirably and serves as an intellectually significant, greatly entertaining contribution to Carlyle studies. With its extensive bibliography, insightful introduction, useful timeline of the Carlyles' lives, and thorough annotation, *The Carlyles* illustrates that the tragedy of the human condition is best confronted with some vigorous *flyting* punctuated by a deep, hearty laugh, and that, as the lay-philosopher says, is as good as it gets.