

BRIAN RIDGERS

The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle. Edited by Ian Campbell, Aileen Christianson, Sheila McIntosh, and David Sorensen. Volume 34. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006. xxxv + 308 pp. \$60 [institutions]; \$30 [individuals].

OVER THIRTY YEARS AGO, IN HIS INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME 1 of *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*, Charles Richard Sanders pointed out that the first editor of the Carlyle letters was in fact Thomas Carlyle himself (ix). Sanders's account of Thomas, in the midst of writing *Reminiscences* and editing Jane's letters during the summer after her death in April 1866, reveals the solace that the aging sage had found in reading his wife's words: "The whole of yesterday I spent in reading and arranging the *letters* of 1857; such a day's *reading* as I perhaps never had in my life before. What a piercing radiancy of meaning to me in those dear records, hastily thrown off, full of misery, yet of bright eternal love" (ix). More than 140 years later, the latest volume of *The Collected Letters*, the thirty-fourth, covering the second half of 1858, continues to show readers the complexity and the tenderness of the Carlyles' marriage. The key preoccupation of the Carlyles throughout this volume mirrors that of the recent chronological past: Jane's health, the domestic trials of Cheyne Row, and the difficulties associated with Thomas's writing dominate, especially the latter. As David Sorensen points out in his introduction to the current volume, "For both TC and JWC, the written word has been the rock on which 'their sore life pilgrimage' . . . has been founded" (xiii). It is in 1858 that, while directing the publication of a new edition of his *Collected Works* that the "Sage of Chelsea" comes to terms with his past achievement and the burden of his continued labors,

as he confesses to Julia Margaret Cameron: “If I can live about a year at this rate, I hope to be free,—and for the rest of my life, whatever that may amount to” (259). It is also in 1858 that TC reaches a milestone in his later career: in September, after six years of writing, Chapman and Hall published the first two volumes of *Frederick the Great*, the work that defines his later career.

The laborious pace of Thomas’s writing combined with Jane’s ill-health and her frustration over Lady Ashburton’s influence upon him had led to the Carlyles’ marriage becoming highly strained during 1857 and 1858. In the wake of Lady Ashburton’s death in May 1857, correspondence between them reflected a certain level of disquiet and mutual suspicion. However, the letters in this volume reveal a more optimistic attitude and allow us to witness the slightest fluctuation in the Carlyles’ marital relationship. As well as revealing the extent of Jane’s worries about her own health and the burden that *Frederick* has placed upon them, these letters provide, as they always do, keen insights into life in London and Scotland during the mid-nineteenth century.

As in previous volumes, the editing in volume thirty-four is rigorous. Sorensen’s introduction offers an insightful overview of the letters contained in the volume, and the chronology is well organized. In addition, the Biographical Notes and the Indices are useful, both as *aide-mémoires* to the many figures of Victorian literary culture with which the Carlyles interact as well as the various members of the Carlyle and Welsh families.

The Carlyles spent most of the six months covered by this volume apart. Thus the majority of these letters are personal correspondence between Jane and Thomas themselves. In the July and August of 1858, Thomas is in Scotland staying with his sister Mary while Jane remains in London enduring the “Great Stink” of 1858, when a sewage-filled Thames during the hot summer months became unbearable. Jane’s letters reveal the difficulty in maintaining her fragile health while waiting “on the banks of that horrid Thames, waiting for Mr C’s return” (107). When Jane’s letters are delayed, Thomas worries that her silence is ominous: “Again nothing: Oh my Dear! . . . What can I infer, in my gloomy thought, but that you are not better, more likely worse, and so in spite of my express request have kept *silence* lest the real news might drive me crazy altogether!” (19). In Jane’s reply, Thomas also becomes “my Dear” (21), and her writing is almost playful in comparison to the letters of the previous

month. This letter also suggests that one of the reasons why she writes about her health in such a consistent manner is because she is urged to do so by her husband. Indeed, at certain points when reading these letters, it seems intimacy between husband and wife is maintained solely through a discussion of Jane's ill-health.

Her letters from this period, however, also reveal that she makes some effort to avoid writing compulsively about her physical and mental state. On 16 July, conscious of Carlyle's literary legacy, she complains about the material condition of one of his letters: "Such a mixed *m s*, with *flaps* too, may be a valuable literary curiosity 'a hundred years hence'; but is a trial of patience to the Present Reader, who, in eagerly opening a letter from you, had not calculated on having to go thro' a process like seeking the source of the Niger" (49). Jane continues by resisting Thomas's habit of interrogating her in his letters: "For the rest; you dont [sic] at all estimate my difficulties in writing a letter every day, when I am expected to tell *how* I am—and when Is 'ashamed to say Is no better.' Dispense me from saying anything whatever about my health—let me write always '*Notes*'—and it would be easy for me to send you a daily letter" (49).

Jane had dealt with her frustration in the previous week's letters with an elegant mixture of sarcasm and wit. Her letter to Thomas of 11 July is boldly entitled "NOTES OF A SITTER STILL." The following day the title becomes "NOTES OF A STILL-SITTER," and her description of her health is relegated to a postscript while the body of the letter recounts in some detail the crisis of another married couple, the Bulwer-Lyttons. In this letter Jane, replays the drama of Rosina Bulwer-Lytton's confrontation with her husband on the election hustings at Taunton. As the titles of the letters suggest, Jane has been the "still-sitter" listening to a first hand account of events from Eliza and John Forster. All of Jane's skills as an eloquent, witty raconteur are on display in this letter. She not only describes the events with the pathos of a writer of sensation fiction—"Robert Lytton desperate then, seeing the white figure approaching nearer and nearer screamed into his ear; 'Your *Wife* is here'" (39)—but also offers a comical portrait of Forster, who later in the volume is seen diligently and seriously negotiating with publishers on Carlyle's behalf. Here, he becomes so carried away with his own storytelling that "he made his feet bang about. And Charlotte [the Carlyle's maid] rushed in, rather terrified looking, and said 'please

Mam, did you knock?” (39). Jane’s account of his reply is worthy of Thackeray: “‘No’—said Forster turning to her with majesty—‘that was only *my* energy’” (39). Although Jane’s anecdote ultimately adds little to the history of the Bulwer-Lytton’s marriage, it does stand out in one sense. As an extended piece of hearsay, like most gossip, it revels in a sense of exclusivity and encourages a brief intimacy that dwells upon neither Jane’s health nor Thomas’ work and thus marks a momentary escape from their marital conflicts.

These letters also show us that Jane is a writer of self-conscious clarity who is distinct from the long suffering “poor little Woman” of Carlyle’s *Reminiscences*. On 16 July, she remarks that “not a hundredth part of the thoughts in my head have ever been or ever will be spoken or written—as long as I keep my senses at least” (49). Later that November, writing to her cousin Janet Pringle, she recounts her “initiation into the dark side of Life” (244), which occurred when “mad with joy” she went on her “*first* journey” and spent an uncomfortable night in a post chaise with her mother and a stern East Lothian farmer who offered advice “that cut into my small heart with a sudden mysterious horror! ‘Little girl,’ he said, ‘don’t you know that there is no pleasure to be had in this world without pain!’” (244). Ironically, and perhaps not accidentally, the letter is signed as “Jane C Welsh” and corrected in the postscript. Elsewhere, her letters reveal small measures of self-discovery. For instance, after she describes a trip to Richmond in mid-July to visit her aunt Margaret Welsh (and receives an enthusiastic letter from her husband), Jane confesses in an excited tone that “I *ride* in an omnibus every day more or less” (49–50). Jane continues with a vividly poetic account of her reading in the early hours during the extreme heat of the summer: “All last night it thundered; and there was one such clap as I never heard in my life! preceded [sic] by a flash that covered my book for a moment with blue light, completely eclipsing the candle light—(I was reading in bed about three in the morning and you cant [sic] think what a wild effect that blue light on the book had!)” (50). In the same vein, her description of a visit by Carlyle’s Russian translator Vassily Botkin reveals her descriptive genius: “He burst into the room with wild expressions of his ‘admiration for Mr Carlyle’” and “nothing could I get out of him but rhapsodies about *you* in the frightfulest *English* that I ever heard out of a human head” (33).

Jane's description of Botkin parallels her surprised account of the newly named Carlyle Parish and township in Melbourne, Australia. The township had been named by Charles Gavan Duffy, a member of the legislative assembly of Victoria and an admirer of Carlyle's work. Jane's initial confusion over the maps—"I have spent an hour over the new packet, before I could understand what it all meant"—yields to understanding when, while noting that the map "is a more curious document than I at first supposed," she includes her own drawing of the new township (66–67). Jane's own drawing allows one to note that Jane Street crosses both Thomas Street and Irving Street, thereby linking her to both her husband and her former teacher and suitor. Thomas's minimal reaction to the honor sums up the episode: "I am considerably amused at the 'Town' Carlyle &c; still better gratified by the account of two nights not so bad as I had expected" (59).

When reading Thomas's letters in this volume, one finds a more relaxed prose style than in his published work. For example, in a macabre but fascinating letter to Edward Chapman, he discusses the history of the head of Oliver Cromwell. Carlyle refutes the authenticity of the head then being exhibited in Beckenham, tracing the history of the actual head and marveling that the current artifact "reappears with flesh and hair on it" (248). It is evident from his postscript that his attention lies elsewhere: "n.b. No *printing* of this; no talk abt it (to persons not really concerned: I cannot afford to spend one other instant on the abominable Platitude in question!" (248).

Ultimately, as his post-script suggests, Carlyle's attention in this volume belongs to *Frederick*. When the first two volumes of *Frederick the Great* are at long last put before the reading public in September, Thomas's response is rather anti-climactic. He notes in a letter to Jane: "I am in want of nothing. *Book* comes out on Monday witht fail. It seems the Newspapers have been reviewing, Mudie ordering 400 copies &c &c, and a 2d editn is expected" (202). Carlyle's response is rather cavalier considering the immense amount of work he had invested over the previous six years, and considering the amount of complaining that accompanied the work. A cautious optimism implied in the letter, however, is soon fulfilled when *Frederick* begins to sell successfully and preparations for the second edition are in process by the fifth of October (little more than a week later).

It is curious if not remarkable to note how quickly Carlyle returned to his work after the appearance of volumes one and two. And it is what Carlyle later describes to Neuberger as “the agonies of getting into work again” (253) that characterize his attitude toward work in the final letters of the volume. He describes himself as “distressed ghost” (259) in a letter to Julia Margaret Cameron (31 Dec.), and in a self-piteous letter written on Christmas Eve to his sister Jean he had described his “struggling in the most disastrous manner to get on with it” and his isolation: “I live altogether *alone* from my fellow creatures and their ways; I am often very miserable over my sad problem,—and may be said in general to resemble a man sunk to the eyebrows in quagmire, and left to help himself out, in a wet night, miles off any *house*, if he can!” (252). Carlyle’s analogy is instructive: no longer able to confide in Jane, who herself had suffered at the hands of *Frederick* for the last seven years, he suffers alone, away from the consolation of “any *house*,” neither the dead Lady Ashburton’s nor his own Jane’s.

If, as William Epstein has suggested, biography is a form of abduction, then each of the volumes of *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle* allows us to see the prisoner in a different light, away from the claims of a biographer other than the non-intrusive editors of the edition. The great benefit of being able to read *The Collected Letters* is that readers may judge the Carlyles free from what TC himself called “the concentrated and conserved essence” of biographical narrative. It would take Carlyle a further seven years to complete *Frederick the Great*. Yet his letters of November 1858 reveal that he underestimated the time it would take him to escape the Jobean task, promising to his sister “a formidable two years ahead” and “after that, . . . no more, however long I live” (239–40). In the forthcoming volume of letters, readers can look forward to Jane and Thomas’s debate about the gender of the author of *Adam Bede*, Thomas’s reaction to Mill’s *On Liberty*, as well it may be imagined his reaction to Darwin’s *Origin of Species* and other denizens of that miraculous year in the history of British literature. Inevitably, the letters will also continue to reveal the pressures upon both Thomas and Jane, “a minority of two” crushed beneath the pressures of *Frederick*, but facing the world together, vibrantly alive in the pages of this remarkable edition.