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Morrow, John. *Thomas Carlyle*. New York: Hambledon Continuum, 2006. xvi + 301 pp., \$39.95.

FOR THOSE OF US WHO SPEND MUCH OF OUR TIME WORKING ON, thinking about, and discussing the work of Thomas Carlyle it is perhaps difficult to imagine approaching his work from a position of relative ignorance. But, as many teachers of nineteenth-century literature and history recognize, this lack of knowledge about Carlyle is the usual starting point for undergraduate students (and for general readers) when encountering texts such as *Sartor Resartus* or “Signs of the Times.” My own experience of teaching and lecturing on these texts at the University of Edinburgh to English literature undergraduates has trained me not to anticipate any foreknowledge from my students of Carlyle’s life or his work: and if this is the case at TC’s alma mater, then one must assume that the picture is equally bleak elsewhere. For this reason, introductions to Carlyle’s life and ideas that are accessible, clearly written, and knowledgeable, such as this one written by John Morrow, are more welcome now than ever before. Any undergraduate or general reader who wishes to situate Carlyle in his historical and intellectual context will greatly benefit from Morrow’s careful sifting of the vast expanse of primary and secondary sources available in this field. Indeed, one might go as far as to say that decent introductions such as this are invaluable in making the teaching of works like *Sartor* manageable in the face of existing gaps in student knowledge and understanding.

Morrow’s text is particularly well placed to introduce the newcomer to Carlyle’s ideas because of its clear organization. After an opening section in which biographical details

are sketched out, the following chapters are arranged chronologically around key topics and intellectual ideas: "Literature as Mission" covers the *Sartor* period and focuses upon the background to the period's religious doubt; "Facing the Modern World" deals with modernity via "Signs of the Times" and "Characteristics"; "The Condition of England" examines social and political criticism via *Chartism* and *Past and Present*; "Work, Race, and Empire" looks at issues in Carlyle's work, largely in the 1850s and 60s; "Latter-Day Pamphleteer" continues the exploration of political ideas as they progressed in those eponymous publications; "The Voice of the Past" somewhat ambitiously sketches Carlyle's historical writing from *The French Revolution* to the *Early Kings of Norway*; and finally "The Sage of Chelsea" returns to the biographical approach of the opening chapter, examining Carlyle's life from the 1870s until his death. This material is sustained by the idea of "Carlyle's mission," which Morrow employs as an organizing principle for his text. In doing this, Morrow draws inspiration from John Morley's thoughts on the enduring nature of Carlyle's writings on history and literature: Morley suggested that the ideas contained in these texts were "what they will always be with wise and understanding minds of creative and even of the higher critical faculty—only embodiments, illustrations, experiments, for ideas about religion, conduct, society, history, government, and all the other great heads and departments of a complete social doctrine." Morrow's impressively wide reading of Carlyle's work allows him to trace the stages of this mission, and in the process, he provides the sort of holistic perspectives rarely achieved by specialist Carlyleans who so often remain focused upon a single text or period.

Perhaps inevitably, however, this bird's eye view (offered in just 221 pages of body text) of the ideas sustaining Carlyle's published and manuscript sources creates its own problems. Morrow is certainly more comfortable in the early chapters of the book in which he is able to offer a chronological thrust to his explication of the "mission." The chapters dealing with *Sartor*, "Signs of the Times," and *Past and Present* are lucidly contextualized, well balanced, and crisply written. The later chapters, in particular the one dealing with the historical

writing, are often less certain. At times, the writing here becomes repetitive, and one suspects that better editing would have strengthened the book as a whole. More rigorous editing would certainly have addressed Morrow's somewhat irritating tendency to repeat a key idea in a mantra-like fashion throughout a single chapter: for example, after discussing Carlyle's "doctrine of renunciation" in *Sartor* in the following terms on page 215, "When this doctrine was coupled with the gospel of labour, it provided those who were unsettled by challenges to conventional expressions of religious faiths and practice with a sense of purpose that was both galvanising and personally reassuring," he largely repeats the point on page 216: "The sustained popularity of *Sartor Resartus* reflected the persisting attraction of the doctrine of renunciation, and of the closely related gospel of labour, for successive generations of Victorians."

But this criticism will be of less importance to those who cherry pick their way through the book gleaning specific information than it will be to individuals who approach the text in a more linear fashion. A similar argument might be made in relation to Morrow's reluctance to offer judgements on the material he encounters. Once again, the reader looking for "fact" and explication from this text is less likely to be troubled by this decision than someone who comes to Morrow's text looking for a more polemical work. Even understanding the rationale behind Morrow's neutral position here, however, one cannot help but wonder what *he* actually thinks about much of the material he encounters. Indeed, Morrow's decision to remain in the shadows of his own work is placed in ironic relief when we read on page 210 of Carlyle's own thoughts on the issue of authorial positioning. These remarks, made when he was a member of the Royal Commission into the British Museum in 1849, clearly outline Carlyle's distrust of authorial neutrality: "everyman should have a sincere opinion, and should be prepared to act on it. . . . The Almighty has given him powers of judging, and . . . he is responsible for his exercise of the power."

One senses that Morrow's wide reading and erudite understanding of the material he discusses in this book might be more excellently put to use in a more specialised study

of Carlyle's work. Given that he is a Professor of Political Studies (at the University of Auckland), one might hope that a monograph more directly informed by Morrow's home discipline and research specialty will be forthcoming at some stage. In the meantime, I am sure that my Edinburgh students, among others, will be grateful for this volume, which offers excellent insights on an individual and an intellectual climate which (even Carlyle scholars must reluctantly recognize) remains largely obscure to the class of 2007.

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