

Carlyle and Catholicism, Part I: Hilaire Belloc and *The French Revolution*

OWEN DUDLEY EDWARDS

CARLYLE AND CATHOLICISM! THE JUXTAPOSITION ALONE SEEMS to demand a roar of indignation from the grave at Ecclefechan, followed by an ironic silvery laugh from that in Haddington. It might come as a surprise to both Thomas and Jane that Catholics, particularly those who outlived them and had a notion of totality in assessing Carlyle's writings, were also capable of admiring *and* understanding his writings, notwithstanding his fierce prejudice against their religion. Hilaire Belloc (1870–1953) and G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936) dominated English Catholic letters for half a century and were precocious enough when Carlyle died in their childhood to have witnessed their elders' belief that a landmark had been uprooted. It is instructive to begin with Belloc's introduction to the Everyman's edition of Carlyle's *The French Revolution*, published in 1906, since it provided the auspices under which the bulk of the next half-century's readers of Carlyle's book would first encounter it. Between 1906 and 1931, there were ten reprints of the edition.¹ Belloc brought out his own homonymous version of the volume in 1911, which was revised three months later and reprinted twenty times in 55 years.² As an historian, Belloc would be popularly and not unfairly labeled as elbow-jerk pro-Catholic, and this assessment also characterizes his many books on English history. But on the subject of France he was far less predictable, and on the French Revolution he achieved the somewhat astonishing feat of eloquently viewing it in sympathy with the Catholic Church, Louis XVI, Marie

Antoinette, Mirabeau, Dumouriez, the Girondins, Danton, Carnot, and even Robespierre. Belloc was more catholic than Catholic, it might be thought, but he possessed a deep Catholic sympathy with the Revolution, mixed with an equally deep Catholic horror of its self-destructiveness. Unlike Carlyle, he could not bring himself to believe that Robespierre had tried to take his own life, though scholarly posterity now seems to support Carlyle. Belloc was generous in his appraisal of the leading figures. He thought Marat insane, but that his insanity “was often generous.” Fouché he called “the vilest and most intelligent revolutionary.” He termed the “stoical inflexibility” of Carnot’s temper “the noblest among the many noble characters of his soul” (Belloc, *French Revolution* 75, 74). He thought Carlyle’s “pale caricature” of Lafayette was “among the worst failures of his great study” (Belloc, *Last Days* 154–55), but left himself open to the charge in the same case, and probably for the same reason. Lafayette was too American for both of them.

Belloc’s Danton resembled Carlyle’s for the very quality that he deplored in Carlyle’s version—it was too autobiographical. In his own *French Revolution* Belloc informed his readers, “Carlyle . . . has great intuition in the matter, yet makes him out farmer-like—which he certainly was not” (68). The comment is shrewd, since to envisage Danton “born of ‘good farmer-people’” (*Works* 4: 260) was the highest compliment that the son of James Carlyle could pay him. Belloc’s own Danton bears a strong physical resemblance to himself, and he like Danton had failed at farming. Carlyle’s grand obituary of Danton—“like a gigantic mass, of valour, ostentation, fury, affection and wild revolutionary force and manhood” (*Works* 4: 259–60)—is no bad autobiography either, and could serve for Belloc as well as for Carlyle. It is almost certainly due to Carlyle that Belloc’s first historical work was his *Danton* (1899). Their narratives coalesce over his death, in metaphysics as well as in method. Naturally it was Belloc, and not Carlyle, who wrote of Danton on the scaffold: “They say that a face [supposedly that of the Breton priest who married him] met his, and that a sacramental hand was raised in absolution.” But Belloc’s observation that “the ghost of Mirabeau stood by his side and inspired him with the pride that had brightened the death-chamber of three

years before” shared direct ties with Carlyle, who, having killed Mirabeau in his place did not need to resurrect him on Danton’s scaffold. Nonetheless, his description of Mirabeau’s death had “brightened” Belloc’s own: “Lit up, for the last time, in the glare of coming dissolution, the mind of the man is all glowing and burning; utters itself in sayings, such as men long remember” (*Danton* 280, 281). Compare this with Carlyle’s fond farewell to Danton: “He may live for some generations in the memory of men” (*Works* 4: 260). Mirabeau and Danton are the heroes of Carlyle’s book, and Belloc’s gift of Mirabeau’s ghost to Danton’s last moments was his homage to England’s previous foreign tutor in the French Revolution. Danton “walked straight his own wild road, whither it led him” (*Works* 4: 260) proclaimed Carlyle, and Belloc drew that melody across his own strings for the death itself: “Then they did what they had to do, and without any kind of fear, his great soul went down the turning in the road” (*Danton* 281). Both of them naturally thrilled to the self-rebuke—“Danton, no weakness” (*Works* 4: 259; *Danton* 280)—moments before death, perhaps confusing sublime with sentimental weakness. Worshippers of strong men are often most appealing when they lapse into weakness.

Belloc followed *Danton* with *Robespierre* (1901). Whatever Carlyle’s excesses in charity to Danton, he admired Robespierre no more than Lafayette, and Belloc, who had himself enjoyed translating the lampoon on Robespierre circulated on Danton’s death, might be expected to be no less partisan.³ Frederic Harrison regarded his study of Robespierre as a corrective to Carlyle: “It needs a young man, a Frenchman, a Parisian, a soldier, a trained historian, a keen Republican to *feel* the Revolution of 1789. . . . We Englishmen feel the spell of its fascination . . . but as we get close to its whirling scenes . . . we feel disillusion chilling us to the bone, and we have to struggle not to yield to the strident mockery of Carlyle” (*Speaker* 341; 21 December 1901). Yet Belloc’s distinction was that he recognized that among the greatest claims of Carlyle’s book was that it did make its readers “*feel*” the Revolution, sometimes at its sharpest cutting edge. But Carlyle’s Robespierre may have disappointed Belloc because he seemed more displayed than felt. In particular, there was Carlyle’s childlike reiteration of Robespierre as the sea-green incorruptible, well-wrought in

early use, inducing a necessary shiver of the Lectorial spine: “O resolute-tremulous incorruptible seagreen man, towards *what* a destiny!” as Robespierre briefly “retires for a little to native Arras: seven weeks short of quiet; the last appointed him in this world” (*Works* 3: 202). But first usage had been earlier, in Carlyle’s description of the procession of delegates making its triumphant way on 4 May 1789. Mirabeau, the “greatest” among them is contrasted with Robespierre, the “meanest.” The latter is mockingly linked with what is to be his signature-tune, his “complexion of a multiplex atrabiliar colour, the final shade of which may be the pale sea-green” (*Works* 2: 141). Thenceforth incessantly sea-green grows the Robes-pierrot, scaled down to puppet-size, seagreenery flourishing a dozen times varying in its illumination from his feline eyes to his marble busts, alternating or attended by a jeering “incorruptible.”

In spite of his Carlylean leanings, Belloc rejected the portrait in his introduction to the Everyman edition of the *French Revolution*: “What Madame de Staël said was that the prominent veins in Robespierre’s forehead showed greenish-blue against his fair and somewhat pale skin. But his complexion was healthy, and his expression, if anything, winning” (1: xiii, n.1). Belloc drew character as Macaulay had done, in bold, vivid strokes over a thousand continuous words or less, rather than by Carlyle’s more modern method, of letting the reader make the summation from a variety of vivid scenes and well-pointed symbolic moments. Belloc tried his hand on the Carlylean fast-moving, cumulative portrait, but the needful brevity of most of his hundred books imprisoned him in glittering, stimulating paradoxes whence to build his men and women. He felt Carlyle’s Mirabeau “something too much of an actor, and something too little of an artist” but believed that “if you had known Mirabeau yourself and had read this passage long after his death, you would have said, ‘Good lord! how vivid!’ long before you had begun to criticise this or that slip in the appreciation” (1: xii). But he had other fish to fry with Robespierre as years went on. Belloc’s hopes of the House of Commons when elected to it in 1906 (the same year as the Everyman introduction) gave way to a bitter despair of parliament, signaled by his refusal to stand again in 1910. By 1929, he was in the mood to write a more favorable introduction to a second edition of *Robespierre*. But

his Everyman introduction casts on the newly-elected Belloc a shadow from the future disillusioned Belloc. The complex Robespierre he seeks to substitute for Carlyle's "wax" (1: xiii) version possesses many qualities that have been unconsciously spun from Carlyle's thread.

Belloc's Everyman introduction was significantly catholic—small "c." It was generous with an occasional hard hit. It is fair to Belloc to say that while he may have excluded a still harder word or two—thirty-five years later he was to describe Carlyle to his friend Sir Evan Charteris (1864–1940) as the first of "Twelve Great Eunuchs of the Victorian Period" (2 Dec. 1939; *Letters* 285–86)—his praise was warm, impulsive, and unlabored. Belloc, who wished readers to remember or deduce that he himself had been a French soldier, disapproved of Carlyle having "misunderstood the battles." He seems only just in complaining that in Carlyle's text, "the armies . . . come in as it were by accident and give no clue." And he reasonably declared that Carlyle military history in other works showed him "at his best" in contrast to "his worst" in this one. His explanation, Carlyle's "inacquaintance with the French character" suggests his limitations, as well as Carlyle's own. If we are cautious, perhaps cowardly, in producing "character" for the dramatic personae whose history we write nowadays, we take to our heels at attempts to assert "character for a nation." Equally, in applauding Carlyle's "portraiture of French violence, and of French ferocity," Belloc hazards a cause in "some ancient strength in the Scotch inherited from mediæval freedom" (1: xvi, xvii).

In his anxiety to awaken his public, justly, to the folly of the dismissal of medieval history, he ranges too far. Carlyle had known enough poverty, envy, hunger, and shame to have a fair estimate of the potential impulses for violence. Though occasionally asserting his readiness to hit someone or other (such as Cardinal Manning), Carlyle seems to have limited himself to identification with persons who resorted to it. His pauper youth was not something simply set up on a classics rags-to-riches, famine-to-fame career: it was a horrible training in the kind of resentment at social injustice, inflicted initially on himself, which fired so many of the pages of *The French Revolution*, *Chartism*, and *Past and Present*. His iron

soul-fodder told him how much a Calvinist society judged an acquaintance's prospects in this world and in the next on the respectability of their clothes. The down-at-heel boy who read, perhaps, far more mockery into passing glances than was intended, would go on to write *Sartor Resartus* and make the Sans-culottes his pre-eminent symbol of France in revolt. The high, almost Olympian ironies in which his arguments would express themselves might conceal the pain of their birth, from the world, if not from himself. Belloc's own background was less opulent than he may have imagined, but as university man his knowledge was less painfully and hence less instructively won.

Like all good critics, Belloc asked questions in his introduction that were more valuable than the answers he provided. Why did Carlyle do badly on French revolutionary warfare, and then well on the battles fought by Cromwell and Frederick (and all credit to the Catholic Belloc for saluting the value of Carlyle's panegyrics for Cromwell and Frederick the Great, two powerful enemies of Catholic peoples, leaders, and armies)? The answer may be a simple one. Carlyle read extensively on the French Revolution, and much more so than is generally realized. But Cromwell put him among the primary documents. His main source for the French Revolution had been memoirs. His contemporary documents were generally letters, rather than state papers. However excessive Carlyle's plaudits for Cromwell, we may give Oliver credit for one virtue his editor would hardly have wished to stress: that he taught Carlyle military history. He had one great quality for doing so in that he shared with Carlyle the ability to write words that would put his reader amidst the events he described. Having made his own point, Belloc did not labor it. He did not, for instance, complain of Carlyle's virtually ignoring what Belloc regarded as the military genius of Lazare Carnot. In the *French Revolution*, Carlyle supplied one lightning paragraph—blemished by saddling Carnot with his son Hippolyte's name. Other than that, Carnot got three appearances of a sentence each.

Belloc showed himself a clever tactician. He ignored the weakness on Carnot while impugning its context. Similarly, he indicted Carlyle for his failure to capture the character

of Louis XVI, but did not mention what in his own study of the Revolution he saw as Louis's most exceptional quality, his Catholicism, which in Belloc's view was unshared by anyone else in *ancien régime* polite society. His criticism of Carlyle's Louis XVI is positive, and this in itself constitutes a wondrous Carlylean "Fact." For Belloc to have ignored a Carlylean lapse on Catholicism where so glaring an example was at his hand, is an event of importance. Yet Belloc went further in paying Carlyle the glorious compliment of showing that his ignorance of Catholicism became a virtue as he triumphed over it. According to Belloc, the distinctive "product of a Catholic nation" was France's "contempt for fatalism, an adherence to abstract dogmas, and a military hatred of mere force and of the religions of fear." So, Carlyle's success in spite of his impoverished Calvinist sense of Catholicism becomes a yardstick of his genius, irrespective of revolutionary France's being, or no longer being, "the product of a Catholic nation" (1: x). Nobody was more ready than Belloc to denounce British historiography as being one long Protestant rant, and nobody was quicker to jeer at it, for instance, in making heroes of William III and Frederick the Great, whom Belloc anathematized as homosexual, perhaps encouraged by Macaulay's and Carlyle's equivocal denials.

In his introduction Belloc shrewdly gauged the pull of Carlyle's *French Revolution* on Catholic intellectuals, both before and after him. The most notable of the early converts was John Henry Newman. Writing to his sister Jemima on 23 April 1839, while still an Anglican, he commented on Carlyle's "queer, tiresome, obscure, profound, and original work. The writer has not very *clear* principles and views, I fear, but they are very deep." He expanded on this remark in a letter of 25 February 1840: "[Carlyle was] a man of first rate ability . . . and quite fascinating as a writer—His book on the French Revolution is most taking (to me). . . . I had hoped he might have come round right, for it was easy to see he was not a believer, but they say he has settled the wrong way. *His* view is that Christianity has good *in* it, or is good *as far as it goes*—which when applied to Scripture is of course a picking and choosing of its contents." But for all that the book gave him transient hopes of an ally, Newman recognized the dangerous appeal of Carlyle, who was one of those thinkers who prompted him to "have serious

apprehensions lest any religious body is strong enough to withstand the league of evil, but the Roman Church" (*Letters and Diaries* 7: 66, 244–45). Still, *The French Revolution* intrigued Newman,⁴ and he felt that it might feed Anglo-Catholicism by challenging its believers to embrace the "good" that lay in it.

Another distinguished Roman Catholic who keenly felt Carlyle's peculiar magnetism was John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton (1834–1902). He wrote to Richard Simpson (1820–76) that Carlyle was "that most original and striking figure in our literary world." He later informed Simpson that Carlyle's "most important things in good and evil are I think in Past and Present, French Revolution, and latter-day pamphlets" (6 June 1858; 4 Feb. 1859; *Correspondence* 31, 149). He was more restrained in writing Mary Gladstone on 10 February 1881, with Carlyle just dead: "One is generally tempted to give a preference to writers whose influence one has felt. But that is often accidental. It is . . . by the accident that I read Coleridge first, that Carlyle never did me any good. . . . Excepting Froude, I think him the most detestable of historians. The doctrine of heroes, the doctrine that will is above law, comes next in atrocity to the doctrine that the flag covers the goods, which is what Froude lives for. Carlyle's robust mental independence is not the same thing as originality." Acton conceded that he "had historic grasp—which is a rare quality—some sympathy with things that are not evident, and a vague, fluctuating notion of the work of impersonal forces. There is a flash of genius in Past and Present, and in the French Revolution, though it is a wretched history. And he invented Oliver Cromwell. That is the positive result of him, that, and his personal influence over many considerable minds" (Paul, *Letters* 54–55). Acton may have realized here that he was on slippery ground, having already told Mary Gladstone in December 1880 that her father had "all the resource and policy of the heroes of Carlyle's worship, and yet he moves scrupulously along the lines of the science of statesmanship" (qtd. in Drew 29). But the compliment evidently pleased her.

Acton's own lectures on the French Revolution were delivered at Cambridge some twenty years later with very strong awareness of Carlyle's being the most likely volume for his students to have read on the topic. Discussing authorities,

he proclaimed, “The event of the English competition is the appearance of Carlyle. After fifty years, we are still dependent on him for Cromwell, and in *Past and Present* he gave what was the most remarkable piece of historical thinking in the language.” *The French Revolution*, he argued, was a disappointment because of its inferior sources: “[T]he mystery of imagination had not been revealed to him when he began his most famous book. He was scared from the Museum by an officer who sneezed in the Reading Room. As the French pamphlets were not yet catalogued, he asked permission to examine them and to make his selection at the shelves on which they stood. He complained that, having applied to a respectable official, he had been refused. Panizzi, furious at having been described as a respectable official, declared that he could not allow the library to be pulled about by an unknown man of letters. In the end, the usual modest resources of a private collection satisfied his requirements. But the vivid gleam, the mixture of the sublime with the grotesque, make other opponents forget the impatient verdicts and the poverty of settled fact in the volumes that delivered our fathers from thralldom to Burke” (*Lectures* 358–59).

Acton’s analysis is a testimony to Carlyle’s appeal, albeit with his enduring achievement being limited to *Past and Present*. But for *The French Revolution*, Acton was showing far too clearly why his splendidly lucid lectures on the subject were never brought to book form by him. He was inviting his students to wallow in gossip—and remarkably silly gossip—as a means to dismiss a popular work. As though Acton laid a curse on his subject, his example in this respect dominated Oxbridge and its British academic colonies throughout the twentieth century. It was perhaps the Catholic gentleman’s answer to the Catholic clerics’ *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, and like it, the proscription implicitly acknowledged that the book under censure had a natural and appreciative public, not to speak of a fascination with the unwary. Acton’s verdict against *The French Revolution* would be echoed by his fellow-academics, albeit in slightly more generous terms. His pupil George Peabody Gooch (1873–1968), Belloc’s fellow-liberal MP, wrote in 1920 that Carlyle’s “immortal work . . . revealed the greatest event in modern history to the English-speaking world, and still shapes the judgment of all but

historical students. . . . It is the most dramatic work in historical literature.” To Gooch, Carlyle’s “supreme effort of creative imagination . . . [rendered] . . . the vision as real to his readers as to himself” (*French Revolution* 15). But, however generous of Gooch, his judgment was a pale echo of Belloc’s conclusion to the *Everyman* introduction: “[Carlyle] was inspired. The enormity of the action moved him as the Marseillaise can still move the young conscripts upon the march when they hear it from a distant place and go forward to the call of it. The Revolution filled him as he proceeded, and was, in a sense, co-author with him of the shock, the flames and the roar, the innumerable feet, and the songs which together build up what we read achieved in these volumes” (1: xvii–xviii).

The young ex-conscript differed from his fellow-Catholics Acton and Newman in purpose. In subtly different ways they are famous for seeking to reconcile the spirit of liberty and the Roman Catholic church. Belloc pursued a thesis more explicit than did either they or their target, Carlyle. In the introduction to his study of the French Revolution, Belloc declared with pride and courage: “[T]he fact that the writer of these pages is himself a Catholic and in political sympathy strongly attached to the political theory of the Revolution, should not be hidden from the reader” (viii).⁵ His sixth and final section of the book, “The Revolution and the Catholic Church,” began by asking “the most general question of all: ‘*Was there a necessary and fundamental quarrel between the doctrines of the Revolution and those of the Catholic Church?*’” The answer was that “[t]hose who are best fitted to approach the problem by their knowledge both of what the Revolution attempted and of what Catholic philosophy is . . . cannot call the Revolution a necessary enemy of the Church, nor the Church of Democracy” (217–18). Theoreticians would have to agree. No theologian could “put his finger upon a political doctrine essential to the Revolution, and . . . say, ‘This doctrine is opposed to Catholic dogma or to Catholic morals.’ Conversely, it is impossible for the Republican to put his finger upon a matter of ecclesiastical discipline or religious dogma and to say, ‘This Catholic point is at issue with my political theory of state.’ . . . [T]he Republican cannot by his theory persecute the Church; the Church cannot by her theory excommunicate a Republican.” The business

of sorting out whether there was “a fundamental spiritual contradiction between the Revolution and the Catholic Church” (219, 221) would take time, and it had not yet happened. Belloc was being slightly disingenuous, perhaps, since his book clearly sought to harness the future, and to reconcile the heirs of the Church with those of the Revolution. To some extent, he may have succeeded. But however the historian might hope to dominate future thought, his investigation could only limit itself to the past. What was basic to mutual hostilities was the quarrel which developed around the Revolution’s enactment of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, previously described by Belloc as “the principal work (and the principal error) of that year and a half” (104) from October 1789 to April 1791. The ensuing century, concluded Belloc, “has not appeased, but accentuated” (222). It had “accentuated” it so well that Belloc’s purpose would have staggered French Catholics and French anti-clericals alike.

Still, Belloc was not writing for the fellow-nationals in whose army he had soldiered, but for the fellow-nationals with whom he had trained in Oxford. It was Carlyle, and not Michelet, Mathiez, Madelin, Sorel, or Taine who had prepared his readers to understand the great event in ways that no artist or novelist, including Dickens, could hope to emulate. Neither Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) nor other Anglophone fictionists, apart from Belloc himself in his superb short stories collected in *The Eye-Witness* (1908) and in his novel *The Girondin* (1911), mused to memorable effect on the Catholic element.⁶ It was Carlyle alone who offered an inspiration for Belloc’s decisive diagnosis of the civil Constitution being at the root of the needless and destructive Catholic-Republican quarrel. Naturally Belloc would have indignantly denied such a debt, if asked. He probably saw it as some kind of treason for a French soldier to admit any debts in French history to any Englishman, however Scottish. Carlyle had given the matter of the Civil Constitution pride of place in his analysis:

The Clergy have means and material: means, of number, organisation, social weight; a material, at lowest, of public ignorance, known to be the mother of devotion. Nay, withal, is it incredible that there might, in simple hearts, latent here and there like gold-grains in the mud-beach, still dwell some real Faith in God, of so singular and

tenacious a sort that even a Maury or a Talleyrand could still be a symbol for it?— Enough, the Clergy has strength, the Clergy has craft and indignation. It is a most fatal business this of the Clergy. A weltering hydra-coil, which the National Assembly has stirred up about its ears; hissing, stinging; which cannot be appeased, alive; which cannot be trampled dead! Fatal, from first to last! Scarcely after fifteen months' debating, can a *Civil Constitution of the Clergy* be so much as got to paper; and then for getting it into reality? Alas, such Civil Constitution is but an agreement to disagree. It divides France from end to end, with a new split, infinitely complicating all the other splits:—Catholicism, what of it there is left, with the Cant of Catholicism, raging on the one side, and sceptic Heathenism on the other; both, by contradiction, waxing fanatic. What endless jarring, of Refractory hated Priests, and Constitutional despised ones; of tender consciences, like the King's, and consciences hot-seared, like certain of his People's: the whole to end in Feasts of Reason and a War of La Vendée! So deep-seated is Religion in the heart of man, and holds of all infinite passions. If the dead echo of it still did so much, what could not the living voice of it once do? (*Works* 3: 10)

This profound perception directly arose from Carlyle's witness of populist religion, Calvinism in Scotland, then on the verge of a crisis over state rulings about the form of choosing its clergy. He was equally aware of a populist form of Catholicism, the Irish variety, winning Catholic Emancipation (of which he approved) by powerful agitation led by Daniel O'Connell (of whom he disapproved). One may see a clear line from Carlyle's "Fatal, from first to last!" to Belloc's "the principal work (and the principal error)." Belloc can as easily be seen in full antagonism to Carlyle on certain other matters. He might resent Carlyle's jeering power-worship: "With endless debating, we get the *Rights of Man* written down and promulgated: true paper basis of all paper Constitutions. Neglecting, cry the opponents, to declare the Duties of Man! Forgetting, answer we, to ascertain the *Mights* of Man;—one of the fatalest omissions!" (*Works* 2: 219). But a voice of more humanity, and hence more weight, could also be heard: "Did ye mark among your Rights of Man, that man was not to die of starvation, while there was

bread reaped by him? It is among the *Mights of Man*" (*Works* 2: 227). Belloc's *The French Revolution* answered this question, only six pages before his entry into a Carlylean heritage on the civil constitution of the clergy: "It is the period in which the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, a document which may fittingly stand side by side with the Declaration of Independence (for together they form the noblest monuments of our modern origins), was promulgated" (98). That was good liberalism, for which Carlyle would have had no more use in 1911, when Belloc wrote it, than he had in 1837.

But on Catholicism—apart from Carlyle's denial of it as inimical to truth, and, still more, to time and to his *Zeitgeist*, *versus* Belloc's belief in Catholicism and conviction that outside it is night—their minds met. If anything, devout Belloc showed more hostility to the Church in early revolutionary France than did derisive Carlyle. Contrast Carlyle's opening allusion in *The French Revolution* to "Priests' Litanies, read or chanted at fixed money-rate per hour" (*Works* 2: 2) with Belloc's graver observation that "in the eyes of the impoverished town populace . . . the human organisation of the Church, the hierarchy, the priesthood, and the few but very wealthy religious orders . . . were but a portion of the privileged world which the populace hated and was prepared to destroy" (231–32). At his earliest opportunity, indeed, Carlyle enlisted his lost Calvinism to understand what Catholicism might mean:

Observe, however, that of man's whole terrestrial possessions and attainments, unspeakably the noblest are his Symbols, divine or divine-seeming; under which he marches and fights, with victorious assurance, in this life-battle: what we can call his Realised Ideals. . . . The Church: what a word was there; richer than Golconda and the treasures of the world! In the heart of the remotest mountains rises the little Kirk; the Dead all slumbering round it, under their white memorial-stones "in hope of a happy resurrection":—dull wert thou, O Reader, if never in any hour (say of moaning midnight, when such Kirk hung spectral in the sky, and Being was as if swallowed up of Darkness) it spoke to thee—things unspeakable, that went into thy soul's soul. Strong was he that had a Church, what we call a Church: he stood thereby, though "in the centre of Immensities, in the

conflux of Eternities,” yet man-like towards God and man; the vague shoreless Universe had become for him a firm city, and dwelling which he knew. Such virtue was in Belief; in these words, well spoken: *I believe*. Well might men prize their *Credo*, and raise stateliest Temples for it, and reverend Hierarchies, and give it the tithe of their substance; it was worth living for and dying for. (*Works* 2: 9)

To the Catholic reader, whether in 1837 or 1911, this passage must have read like an oasis in a hostile Protestant literary desert. In the high-tide of post-Emancipation Romanticism it gave the 1830s a resonance of earlier Catholic centuries. In the triumph of French anti-clericalism between 1901 and 1905, it offered a comprehension of Catholic roots conspicuously absent from the rhetoric of Émile Combes (1835–1921), who zealously suppressed his own religious past. Carlyle had come close to an impossible achievement: to explain what religion really meant to its devotees. It harmonized perfectly with the beautiful images of Catholic worship discovered by the rural traveler, which made such sublime literature of Belloc’s masterpiece *The Path to Rome* (1902). For Belloc, Carlyle’s *The French Revolution* began a search for understanding, which might reasonably invite reconciliation between the Church and the Revolution (and Belloc loved them both). At times Carlyle’s great epic must have seemed an antidote to the post-Dreyfus poison saturating Church and State in early twentieth-century France.⁷

Belloc, clearly the widest-circulating Catholic commentator on Carlyle’s *The French Revolution*, thus had an agenda very different from previous Catholics in reaction to it, such as Newman and Acton, neither of whom shared his populism. Nor is it easy to envisage either of them—the wavering, Tory, near-Romanized Catholic priest, and the vacillating, Whig, near-unRomanized Catholic aristocrat—responding to Carlyle’s final comradely farewell to his reader as Belloc of the Third Estate would in the conclusion to *The Path to Rome*. His introduction does better than hailing Carlyle as his master, as several Catholics would do in Carlyle’s lifetime. More vigorously, it admits him as a fellow, but the fellowship could not last. Belloc would never make common cause with the hagiographer of Cromwell and Frederick, and his cold analytical eye dissecting Carlyle on either subject in years

to come make clear that his bargain with the author of *The French Revolution* was sober. In 1926 he remarked in the first of two biographies of Cromwell: "Carlyle, whose whole position was due to the using of bombastic and violent words, acting always with (never against) the popular (and false) philosophy of his time, clinched the affair. For Carlyle play-acted all his literary life at breaking down, with any amount of noise, self-advertisement and fuss, what were already open doors" (77–78). In the context of Cromwell, Belloc was perfectly right. Carlyle's edition of Cromwell's letters and speeches gave the Protector a platform in the Victorian age, but Cromwell as hero had won popular acclaim some twenty years earlier, notably in Macaulay's essay on Milton in the August 1825 edition of the *Edinburgh Review* and again in his long review of Hallam's *Constitutional History of England* in September 1828. What Carlyle achieved in his edition of Cromwell imitated *The French Revolution*. He fed the under-informed existing sentiments of a large mass of readers in memorably original ways.⁸

If Belloc's discovery of Carlylean soil arable for Catholicism was odd, his attempt to recruit James Anthony Froude to this agriculture was bizarre. However daft a thesis of Carlyle as a Catholic seminarian might seem, it had imaginative passages by Belloc in its favor. But Froude was surely the most vehemently anti-Catholic professional historian of Tudor England and Hanoverian Ireland produced by the Victorian age. Yet the year 1906 began with an earlier introduction by Belloc for an Everyman's Library choice, namely a selection of Froude's *Essays in Literature and History*. Belloc concluded it with an almost erotic theologizing: "Why then do I say that [Froude] was perpetually on the border of the Catholic Church? Because when he leaves for a moment the phraseology and the material of his youth and of his neighborhood, he is perpetually striking that note of interest, of wonder, and of intellectual freedom which is the note of Catholicism. . . . He despised the cowardice—for it is cowardice—that pretends to intellectual conviction and to temporal evidence of the things of the soul. He saw and said, and he was right in saying, that the City of God is built upon things incredible" (xxii–xxiii). Belloc conscripting Carlyle makes some sense, since he never pretended to a more than startled acknowledgement of Carlyle's unexpected

comprehension. Belloc conscripting Froude operates in much more sublime terms, which are as incredible as the foundations he took Froude to diagnose in the City of God. Belloc was certainly thinking of Froude as a Carlylean, even though the selected essays were from 1851–63, nearly twenty years before publication of any part of Froude's biography.⁹ His argument turns on one of Froude's most attractive qualities—his honesty in despairing of revealed religion, for which his *The Nemesis of Faith* was seized from him as an Oxford undergraduate and publicly burnt by the Rev. William Sewell, tutor of Merton College. Froude's honesty found a chord in Belloc's own early and transient time of religious doubt and in his disappointment at being rejected for a fellowship by Oxford.

Belloc's identification of Froude with potential Catholicism was not quite as absurd as it might appear to readers of his *History of England* (1856–70), or still more, to those familiar with *The English in Ireland* (1872–74). His comments on Froude as an historian suggest that he may not have read either work: "Often in Green [John Richard Green (1837–83)], very often in Freeman [Edward Augustus Freeman (1823–92)] and always in Carlyle you feel that your author is deliberately exciting his mind and your own. Violent colours are chosen and peculiar emphasis—from this Froude was free" (xviii). From this he was certainly *not* free. Belloc was correct in seeing a contrast in method. In *The French Revolution* Carlyle certainly wanted to excite his audience, but it was the excitement of an amazing spectacle presented in unprecedented language. It would have been very easy for him to work up that audience against brutal aristocrats or homicidal revolutionaries, as Dickens had done with the Marquis and Madame Defarge. But no one in Carlyle's work appears in such florid garb. Louis XV is probably the single most repulsive individual in Carlyle's pages, but he is on stage far too briefly to rouse more than contempt. We are given little chance to gloat over Marat or Hébert, however repulsive. Carlyle depended so much on speed for his effect that emotions engendered seem primarily reflective rather than agitative. Our thoughts are those of sorrow more than of anger. Froude, on the other hand, invites argument and gives so many hostages to his readers that he invites recrimination, perhaps from insecurity as much as arrogance. Belloc rightly understood that Froude

recognized that much remained to be discovered, even as he tried to sustain himself by superficial and silly superstitions of the sort that Belloc denounced in his introduction. Froude could see the other side of the story, as he did in looking at the behavior of Catherine of Aragon in the divorce case after lauding Henry VIII, or in reviewing the Spanish version of the Armada after celebrating the English one. Belloc also admired Froude as a fighter: “[He] had this merit—a merit he shared with Huxley alone of his contemporaries—that he imposed his convictions. He fought against resistance. He excited (and still excites) violent animosity. He exasperated the surface of his time and was yet too strong for that surface to reject him” (ix).

Froude had flirted with Catholicism, though in the 1840s, fluttering around Newman’s kindly light, which burnt him more than it led him. By the 1850s, Catholicism and gloom were synonymous in Froude’s mind. His Catholic dalliance led him in strange directions, none more so than when he introduced St. Neot in the third part of *Lives of the English Saints* (1844–45), *Hermit Saints*. Newman, who had organized the project and had invited Froude to contribute, struck a characteristic note of mingled piety and humor in his life of Saint Bettelin: “And this is all that is known, and more than all,—and yet nothing to what the angels know,—of the life of a servant of God, who sinned and repented, and did penance and washed out his sins, and became a Saint, and reigns with Christ in heaven” (“St. Bettelin” 72). Froude seems to have taken this example literally, and begun the next life, that of Saint Neot, by more or less celebrating the importance of legend where so little fact is known. He invites the modern writer to emulate the ancients and to invent: “The old Greeks saw Naiads sporting in every fountain, and when the breezes played among the branches of the forest, they heard the Zephyrs whispering to the Dryads; and the Legends of Saints which still cling to the scenes of their earthly glory, are but Christian expressions of the same human instinct” (“St. Neot” 77). Since the life of Saint Neot is shrouded in Stygian darkness, even his location being bitterly contested between Kent and Cornwall, Froude proceeded to identify the saint with “Athelstan, the Prince of Kent” (“St. Neot” 84) and manufactured his “A Legend of St Neot” with ardent spirits.¹⁰

Having lied in the Catholic interest, and left it, Froude took it as axiomatic that Catholics were therefore liars, but it did leave an aura through which Belloc might dimly perceive the ghost of his affinity with Catholicism.¹¹

Belloc had been obliged to read no more of Froude than the essays he was introducing, and we should not complain that two men normally so embattled are here discovered at peace—one might say an ecumenical peace, though neither man would have understood the term as it is used in this context. Readers may be glad that in 1906 Belloc was wooing Carlyle and Froude so positively, and so optimistically, in contrast to his later days when he would mention an English protestant historian only to denounce him as a bigot in language that knew much of bigotry. But Belloc's innocence of Froude's more extreme hostility to what he called "Romanism" raises a question as to whether he sometimes wrote in mid-briefing, to put it charitably. There is the curious episode of his allusion to Charles Robert Leslie Fletcher's 1902 edition of Carlyle's *The French Revolution* in his 1906 introduction:

Carlyle is without doubt one of the most accurate historians that ever put pen to paper. . . . It has latterly been my business to comment on one of the latest editions of his work which has been produced with voluminous footnotes at Oxford. Here there was no excuse at all for inaccuracy. The book was dull, pedantic, and badly put together. It was a purely mechanical piece of work, and all the Editor had to do was to verify every reference he made and to see that the spelling and the dates were correct. Yet I have found in this edition at least five errors to one of Carlyle's. (1: xv–xvi)

Fletcher (1837–1934) was the type of English establishment academic—a Fellow and Tutor of Magdalen College, Oxford—whose preferment painfully reminded Belloc of his failed effort to obtain a fellowship.¹² But the startling aspect of Belloc's criticism lies in his having reviewed Fletcher's edition favorably on its initial appearance in the *Speaker*, 8 November 1902. In it, Belloc rightly noted Fletcher's incessant intrusions and his right-wing prejudices, but he may have been mollified by the editor's reference to his "brilliant sketch [of Danton] . . . with excellent appendices discussing the controverted points" (Fletcher 1:294). Belloc's review insisted, as the editorial heading proclaimed,

that this must be “A FINAL EDITION OF CARLYLE.” In fact, it was promptly challenged in 1903 by the more austere critical edition by John Holland Rose (1855–1942), a Cambridge man, later its Vere Harmsworth Professor of Naval History. Whence the staggering reassessment?

The answer would seem to lie in the difference between a close scholarly reading and a review by a man of too many letters for exact scholarship. There was, one suspects, another work for Belloc to review the following week, or another book to continue, or another journey to be made—1902, after all, was the year of publication for *The Path to Rome*. The contradiction between the over-generous review with the ferocious reappraisal three to four years later at least brings home that Belloc’s *Everyman* introduction had followed close examination of the Carlyle text and Fletcher notes in 1906, if not in 1902. In a deliciously sublime piece of commercialism, Belloc’s general editor Ernest Rhys (1859–1946) reflected during the second World War:

[I]f only *Everyman* had been the guide of a New Europe in that year of grace, there need have been no war in 1939. Such volumes as Plato’s *Republic*, Carlyle’s *French Revolution*, Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, Mommsen’s *History of Rome*, Locke’s *Civil Government*, Abraham Lincoln’s *Speeches*, and Hamilton’s *The Federalist*, provides a testament of civil liberty, political wisdom, and a mental gymnastic, which had he been put through ‘a course of them’ would have prevented the author of *Mein Kampf* from writing that book. (272)¹³

Rhys’s testimony, however culturally egocentric, is a very wise reading of *The French Revolution*. His chosen editor of the work also recognized its humanity, in a more minute if more profound context. Where Carlyle suddenly reveals a Catholicism in his death of Robespierre, whom he did not like and perhaps belittled unjustly. The “Incorruptible’s” final fate is given in a chapter entitled “Go Down To,” and the last words spoken to him are delivered as he is driven to his execution:

All eyes are on Robespierre’s Tumbril, where he, his jaw bound in dirty linen, with his half-dead Brother and half-dead Henriot, lie shattered; their “seventeen hours” of agony about to end. The Gendarmes point their swords at him, to show the people which is he. A woman springs on the Tumbril; clutching the side of it with one

hand; waving the other Sibyl-like; and exclaims: "The death of thee gladdens my very heart, *m'enivre de joie*;" Robespierre opened his eyes; "*Scélerat*, go down to Hell, with the curses of all wives and mothers!" (*Works* 4: 285)

Yet Carlyle's last words on him are a very different prayer:

At the foot of the scaffold, they stretched him on the ground till his turn came. Lifted aloft, his eyes again opened; caught the bloody axe. Samson wrenched the coat off him; wrenched the dirty linen from his jaw: the jaw fell powerless, there burst from him a cry;—hideous to hear and see. Samson, thou canst not be too quick! Samson's work done, there burst forth shout on shout of applause. Shout, which prolongs itself not only over Paris, but over France, but over Europe, and down to this generation. Deservedly, and also undeservedly. O unhappy Advocate of Arras, were thou worse than other Advocates? Stricter man, according to his Formula, to his Credo and his Cant, of probities, benevolences, pleasures-of-virtue, and such like, lived not in that age. A man fitted, in some luckier settled age to have become one of those incorruptible barren Pattern-Figures, and have had marble-tables and funeral-sermons. His poor landlord, the Cabinet-maker in the Rue Saint-Honoré, loved him; his Brother died for him. May God be merciful to him and to us! (*Works* 4: 286)

Protestantism denied the efficacy of prayers for the dead once they were dead; Catholicism, seeing God as outside time, believes prayers at whatever remove in earthly time, may still be efficacious. And the Lord's Prayer, common to both, demands our prayers for our enemies. Robespierre was, clearly, Carlyle's enemy. He was not Belloc's, but the close of Belloc's *Robespierre* (1901, 1927) took its theology from Carlyle:

He saw God Personal, the soul immortal, men of a kind with men, and he was in the company of those who began to free the world. God have mercy on his soul and on each of ours, who hope for better things. (367)

Amen, Amen.

Notes

1. Terry Seymour gives overall sales figures of the Everyman *The French Revolution*: 106,409 for the first volume, and 95,096 for the second. The very odd discrepancy suggests that 11,313 readers bought the first volume alone, perhaps for Belloc's introduction, since the full text was readily available in other editions, or because they despaired of the work after buying the first half.

2. Belloc's *The French Revolution* (1911) was first published by Williams and Norgate, reprinted by Thornton Butterworth, then rebound by Oxford and finally reissued by Oxford. It was commissioned by Herbert A. L. Fisher in the same series, whose full title was "The Home University Library of Modern Knowledge."

3. "When Danton, Desmoulins, and D'Eglantine / Were ferried over to the world unseen, / Charon, that equitable citizen, / Handed their change to these distinguished men. / 'Pray keep the change,' they cried; / 'we pay the fare for Couthon, and St. Just, and Robespierre'" (*Danton* 278; trans. Belloc).

4. Newman had planned to write an essay on Carlyle's *The French Revolution* and sketched a plan for it in his diary entry of 21 April 1839: "On his acknowledgment of Symbolism, on his light quoting of Scripture. / What a formula is. / great men not seen at the time / want of clear *objective* view of religion / admiring good in bad however bad, or rather admiring *them* for the good in them / little said about the *overthrow of religion*—one should have little idea from the book what the case really was. / little said about their pagan roman-mania, theatricalness, etc. i.e. not *adequately* to the fact. / danger of pantheism. / admiring ἥθος in Madame Roland (vid account of her death) *though* allowing indirectly her to be an unbeliever / on realized ideals / impossibility of making a constitution. / draw out, if possible, his *system*. / individuality / trying to find out *what* words mean—*what* the Revolution is—*what* was the way in which Jacobins got over the Girondins. / primitive state chaos and evil—and good a creation from it—e.g. order—again and again vol. 3 p. 310" (*Letters and Diaries* 7: 486).

5. This prompted the fairly representative reaction from Ernest Edward Kellett (1864–1950) in his *The French Revolution* (1913) that Belloc's "little work . . . has been accused of being 'a bit of journalism,' but which is of no great value provided due allowance made for the writer's point of view" (119). On the same page Kellett calls Belloc's *Danton* "admirable . . . his *Robespierre* and his *Marie Antoinette* only less so because the subjects are less inspiring" but Carlyle's history is "more of a pageant or of an epic poem than of a history," and in criticism believes

that Carlyle's Mirabeau in policy "needs altering and correcting at every turn" (118). Kellett was a devout Protestant, Methodist-Anglican.

6. A possible exception is the popular Irish priest-novelist Patrick Augustine Canon Sheehan, *The Queen's Fillet* (1911).

7. I am grateful to my late colleague Maurice Larkin for admirably contextualizing this in *Church and State After the Dreyfus Affair* (1974).

8. James Anthony Froude's contention that "Carlyle was the first to break the crust which had overlaid the subject of Cromwell since the Restoration, and to make Cromwell and Cromwell's age again intelligible to mankind" is hardly consistent with his assurance a few pages later that "every one was ready to welcome a fair picture of the great Protector" (*Life* 1: 383, 396).

9. It is worth noting in this context that Froude's charming if mildly dotty essay "Reynard the Fox," reprinted from *Fraser's Magazine* of 1852 and included by Belloc in the *Everyman* selection (273–93), carries appropriately masochistic allusions to Carlyle, as though Froude is expecting at least metaphorical castigation and will be bitterly disappointed if it is denied. One wonders why it has not occurred to anyone that Froude's charges of physical abuse by Carlyle against Jane originated in yearnings for wish-fulfillment?

10. Froude's Athelstan thesis was not original and belonged to the nineteenth century rather than to the ninth. It was the creation of the Rev. John Whitaker (1737–1808), fellow of Corpus Christi, Oxford, and ultimately rector of Ruan Lanyborn, Cornwall. His *Life of Saint Neot, the Oldest of All the Brothers to King Alfred* (1809), completed by him immediately before his death, may have been a satire, with its insistence that a saint of Cornwall with good local cult was in fact Kentish, royal, and under an alias. Froude's leg was an easy one to pull, however posthumously.

11. Froude was Newman's protégé; he also became the brother-in-law of Charles Kingsley's wife, and was looked after by Kingsley when Froude lost his faith and was rejected by his clerical father. In his famous attack on Newman in "What, Then, Does Dr. Newman Mean?" (1864), Kingsley alluded a little coyly to the "charming life of St Neot" and complained that it, like many of the other biographies, "treat the stories openly as legends and myths, and tell them as they stand, without asking the reader, or themselves, to believe them altogether. The method is harmless enough, if the legends had stood alone; but dangerous enough, when they stand side by side with stories told in earnest" (22). In fact, before he resigned as editor of the *Lives of the Saints* series, and with "St. Neot" still in draft, Newman had told Froude after seeing his MS, 28 Nov. 1843, "If I were to criticise, I should say that your composition wants subduing—but perhaps you will do this better when you look over

it. Of course it is desirable to keep up the *religious* effect, and without pledging oneself to the truth of this or that fact, to imply that one does not know *how much* truth there may be in it, and that it reminds of truth and is edifying, even where it is fictitious. It reads somewhat too like Sir Walter Scott" (*Letters and Diaries* 10: 35–36). That Kingsley managed to make Newman the pernicious purveyor of mendacity while protecting Froude, invites some thought on what part Froude played in working up Kingsley against Newman. In reality, both Kingsley and Newman protected Froude on the very issue on which they were attacking one another—truth. Students of the historiography of Carlyle should take all of this, and the final text of "St. Neot," into consideration in assessing Froude's own veracity.

12. Fletcher is said to have been "[u]nconventional in his teaching methods . . . he was a fierce Protestant Anglican, a confirmed Conservative and imperialist, and an ardent opponent of liberalism and socialism" (*ODNB*). Judging by his footnotes, it would seem that he had a propensity for ramming his opinions down every undergraduate's neck. No doubt the arrival of the Liberal Campbell-Bannerman government of 1905, which was re-elected by a landslide in 1906, did not improve his mood. Fletcher was also a misogynist, as his note on Carlyle's handling of Madame Roland clearly indicates: "Madame Roland must be regarded as Carlyle's most complete failure. . . . [I]t seems to me time that this horrid female was unmasked. The revolting indecency of the worst part of her memoirs, and the execrable taste of a great deal more of them were unknown to Carlyle" (1: 406). The *ODNB* gingerly remarks that "Although kind to individual women students, [Fletcher] refused to admit women to his lectures."

13. In his recent Carlyle Society lecture, David R. Sorensen has noted that Rhys is a significant contemporary witness for Carlyle's *The French Revolution* as anti-Nazi in character and putative impact, and necessary to bear in mind in postwar intellectual reprisals against Carlyle as supposed fuel for Nazism.

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