



J. R. Thompson and Thomas Carlyle

THE FOLLOWING EXTRACT IS FROM *RECOLLECTIONS, GRAVE AND GAY* (New York: Scribners, 1911), the memoirs of Constance Cary Harrison (1843–1920), a Confederate sympathizer, socialite, and author, who was married to Burton Norvell Harrison (1838–1904), a lawyer and the private secretary to President Jefferson Davis. After the Civil War, Harrison was imprisoned until 1866, when his wife was able to negotiate his release. He went on to become an envoy to Santo Domingo in 1872, and later, secretary of the New York City Rapid Transit Commission. In her memoir Cary Harrison recalls her literary efforts during the war, and she devotes special attention to the diary of the legendary editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, John Reuben Thompson, and in particular to his visits to the Carlyles.

DRS and BEK



I suppose, in view of the amount of ink-splashing afterward perpetrated, I may be excused for saying that before this time I had begun to write stories, verses, and sketches which the editors of various war papers flattered me by consenting to print. *The Southern Illustrated News*, the “Best Family Journal in the Confederacy,” edited by Messrs. Ayers and Wade, had for its “regular contributors” Messrs. John R. Thompson, John Esten Cooke, Harry Timrod, James Barron Hope, and Paul H. Hayne, certainly a list of important and charming writers. The *News*, “sent to all parts of the Confederacy at ten dollars a year,” paid me my first literary checks. The paper on which it was printed was yellow and coarse, and the illustrations, mainly of generals in the field, made those hopes of our nation look like brigands and cutthroats of the deepest dye. The *Magnolia Weekly*, “A Home Journal of Literature and General News,” was the other patron of my budding literary ambition. Both of these weeklies struggled under the drawback of having the military

authorities of Richmond descend at any moment and drag off editors, printers, engravers, and contributors to delve into the mud of trenches or to stand guard around the prisons and bridges of the Confederate capital. At that peremptory call of the alarm bell Richmond learned to know so well, the entire staff of the two periodicals often had to forsake office duty and be absent for an indefinite amount of time. During the summer of 1864 there were many suspensions of publications, but the work began again in October, 1864, and continued I know not how long, to the satisfaction of camps and citizens.

The greatest feather in my literary cap, however, I conceived to be an appearance in verse in the columns of the critical *Examiner*, of which people stood in awe for the caustic utterances of its editor, Mr. John M. Daniel, on subjects military and otherwise. I had met Mr. Daniel and considered him as unapproachable as the north pole was till recently; but, as has been proved, even the north pole has been misunderstood, and the Jove-like editor not only gave me a place on the editorial page, but came to call afterward, and continued to be a kind friend. The verses in question were the wail of a mother for a son shot in the battle before Richmond. Probably I imitated Mrs. Browning, but without knowing it, for I always tried to write what I knew or could feel myself. I had shyly shown them first to our delightful next-door neighbor in lodgings, Mr. John Mitchel, the famous Irish agitator, whom we knew only as a kind-eyed, brown-bearded man, full of literary taste and culture, residing with his family to whom he was entirely devoted. To Mr. Mitchel I owed a range of new ideas. He superintended my reading and urged me to go on writing and to work *hard*. Mr. Daniel, too, gave me sane and strong counsel. My third literary godfather was Mr. John R. Thompson, former editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, of which Poe was the most illustrious contributor. Mr. Thompson wrote charming *vers de société* after the style of Austin Dobson. He was also a sort of laureate of the Confederacy, since to him were due many tender and graceful verses written and published in the daily press upon subjects of immediate public interest, like the death of army heroes and the winning of great battles. In 1864 he went to London to take an editorial position on *The Index*, a journal supported by the Confederate Government with the hope of inducing France

and England to lend aid to its cause, and became also a leader writer on the *London Standard*. To reach a British port, he ran out of Wilmington in a Confederate blockade-runner, slept on a cotton bale, was chased by a United States steamer, but reached Bermuda safely. There he took the British mail-packet for Halifax, thence went by the *Asia* to Liverpool. From London, he made visits to aristocratic country houses in Scotland and Ireland, and on returning to town in the autumn, surrounded himself with a circle of friends comprising Tennyson, Mr. and Mrs. Carlyle, Bulwer, Lord Donoughmore, Lord Houghton, the Duke of Sutherland, Mr. and Mrs. Gladstone, Disraeli, Dickens, Mowbray Morris, editor-in-chief of the *London Times*, Woolner, Millais, Charles Kingsley, Dean and Lady Stanley, Lady Augusta Stanley (then lady in waiting to Queen Victoria), who entertained him at luncheon at Windsor Castle; Dowager Marchioness of Bath, a warm friend of the Confederacy; Miss Thackeray, Mrs. Sartoris, Sir Edwin Landseer, Lady Georgiana Fane, the Countess of Harrington, and many others. An account in his diary of this time described drinking tea and spending the evening with Thomas Carlyle at 5 Cheyne Row, on October 14, 1864.

“Mrs. Carlyle has been for some time an invalid, but made her appearance. Lady Ashburton and Miss Baring came in after tea. Mr. Carlyle said it was his habit to drink five cups of tea. He ran off into table-talk about tea and coffee, and told us that he had found in Lord Russell’s ‘Memoirs of Moore,’ which he called a rubbishy book, the origin of the word *biggin*; it comes from one Biggin, a tinner, who first made the vessel and was knighted afterwards. Then he talked of pipes and tobacco and recited the old verse, ‘Think this, and smoke tobacco.’ There was but one honest pipe made in Britain—by a Glasgow man, who used a clay found in Devonshire. Mr. Carlyle enquired about the Confederacy, its resources, army, its supplies of food and powder. He read a letter from Emerson in which the Yankee philosopher declared that the struggle now going on was the battle of humanity. When we rose to say good night, he called a servant for his coat and boots (he had received us in dressing-gown and slippers), and walked with us within a stone’s throw of Grosvenor Hotel, two miles, at half past eleven. On the way passing Chelsea Hotel, he burst

into a tribute to Wren the architect, of whom he said there was rare harmony, a sweet veracity, in all his work. We mentioned Tennyson, and he spoke with great affection of him, but thought him inferior to Burns; he had known 'Alfred' for years; said he used to come in hob-nailed boots and rough coat, to blow a cloud with him. Carlyle said he thought Mill's book on Liberty the greatest nonsense he had ever read, and spoke despairingly of the future of Great Britain: too much money would be the ruin of the land."

On October 31, 1864: "At the Carlyle's, who made many enquiries about Lee, whom he greatly admires."

Again on May 17, 1865: "Went to Chelsea. Mr. Carlyle amused us very much by his comments on the proclamation of (President) Johnson. He styled him a sanguinary tailor seated on Olympus."

On November 15, 1865: "Called on Carlyle. Found the Irish patriot, Gavan Duffy there. Carlyle gave us a graphic account of a visit to the thieves quarter at Whitechapel. He also spoke of the great ignorance of the educated classes in England and Germany, of German history and literature."

On January 25, 1866: "Called at Cheyne Row. Found Carlyle in the best of humours. He gave us an account of the rise of Chartism in England. He denounced the Emperor Napoleon and John Bright with equal severity, and said while there was not one noble soul to be found in all France, England had become a great, horrible discordant blacksmith's shop."

On June 1, 1866: "Met in Hyde Park Carlyle, the first time since the death of his wife. We walked as far as Brompton Road. He talked with all his peculiar brilliancy—speaking of Jefferson Davis he declared that looking at the war from first to last, Davis seemed to him one of the manliest actors in it, and whatever the jury might say on his trial, the grand jury of mankind had already declared him not guilty."

In Carlyle's "Reminiscences," edited by Froude, occurs this passage concerning Mrs. Carlyle's sympathy with the South: "Amongst other last things she told me that evening was, with deep sympathy: 'Mr. Thompson' (a Virginian who sometimes came) 'called one night; he says there is little doubt they will hang President Davis!' Upon which I almost resolved to write a pamphlet upon it, had not I myself been so ignorant about

the matter, so foreign to the whole fratricidal 'war' (as they call it); self-murder of a million brother Englishmen for the sake of sheer phantasms and totally false theories upon the Nigger, as I had reckoned it—and that probably I should do poor Davis nothing but harm.”

On the 15th of June, in the same year, Thompson makes another visit to Chelsea, when he saw Carlyle's brother and his niece, Mrs. Welsh. “Mr. Carlyle said it seemed to him men were bent on reversing the idea of a millennium, which was to lock up the devil a thousand years, and were going to give him a free passage to do his worst on the earth.”

A portion of Mr. Thompson's diary was edited and published by his friend Mrs. Elizabeth Stoddard, author of several vigorous novels, and wife of Richard Henry Stoddard, the poet. Thompson was a great deal at their house when he lived, after the war, in New York, as an associate editor of the *Evening Post*. Mrs. Stoddard mentioned to me an entry in the journal of a check, “the proceeds of a poem on the obsequies of General Stuart,” sent to me, but “never received.”

I explained to her that there was some mistake about this, since I have now in my album the letter accompanying the check sent as an offering to my work in the hospitals. Mr. Thompson was present at my marriage and wrote an account of it (strictly without names). He did not live long enough after that, poor fellow, in his adopted Northern home to become the frequenter of our house my husband and I would both have wished him to be, for a sweeter-tempered man and one more pleasingly in love with literature never lived, than he! (118–23)



Collecting the Letters of J. A. Froude

IN A FOOTNOTE ON PAGE 5 OF HIS SLIM VOLUME *FROUDE THE HISTORIAN* (1987), the late scholar A. H. Rowse informs us: “Froude's letters have never been collected, though many are quoted in W. H. Dunn, *James Anthony Froude: A Biography*. Oxford, 1961. I recommend their pursuit and publication to the indefatigable American editors of less rewarding letter-writers. Letters