

## Comment on Carlyle

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*BENEDICT KIELY, IRISH WRITER AND BROADCASTER, DIED IN DUBLIN on 9 February 2007. With the kind permission of his widow Frances Daly Kiely, we reprint the following essay he wrote on Carlyle for the Irish Ecclesiastical Record in 1946 (5th series. 67 [April]: 223–31). Carlyle remarked in On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History that if “Hero be taken to mean genuine, then . . . the Hero as Man of Letters will be found discharging a function for us which is ever honourable, ever the highest . . . uttering forth, in such a way as he has, the inspired soul of him.” Though he would have resisted the title with characteristic self-deprecation, Kiely deserves to be remembered as one of those who lived “in the inward sphere of things, in the True, Divine and Eternal” (Heroes [Strouse Edition] 134). In his novels, short stories, autobiographies, essays, monographs, and broadcasts, Kiely demonstrated a quiet courage and conviction that marked him as a steely opponent of the withering ideologies that had glorified violence and corrupted Ireland’s social and civic sphere. He spent much of his life in Dublin, but he remained an Ulsterman in both spirit and outlook. Like his hero the novelist William Carleton (1794–1869), Kiely recognized the peculiar intensity of Ireland’s “Natural Supernatural” identity, which he bodied forth in his writing with prodigious imaginative intelligence. The country he loved eventually rewarded him for his contribution, and in 1996, he was elected a Saoi of Aosdána, the highest honor available to an Irish writer.*

*Although the editors have regularized Kiely’s punctuation, the text is presented as published, without documentation or annotation.*

## I

Although Carlyle set up shop as guide, philosopher and friend to the English people, he was less like an Englishman than Bernard Shaw. He dodged the column, more or less, by addressing himself to the British people, but a walking-tour from Land's End to John o' Groats would have showed him the difference between theological Scotland or oatmeal porridge and turf-smoke and untheological England of cakes and ale and yellow cheese. Once, among other things, he told the English that they were a devout, not a humorous people; and that remark, besides showing that in his mind laughter and devotion were divorced, showed also how much nearer in spirit he was to John Knox than to Charles Dickens.

He was born in the year 1795 when the doings of the French people had excellent news value. He was never to understand the French and in his search for heroes he could only regard Napoleon as a showy tight-rope walker and no really great man. Carlyle, the father, was one of five brothers, by trade workers in stone, by nickname and local repute "five fighting masons." Thomas once wished that he could write books as his father had built houses; and indeed in his writing and his thought there was always the sense of rasp that the hand feels on the edge of a brick.

From 1809 to 1814 his parents, who were poor, kept him at Edinburgh University, leaving eventually without a degree to begin life as a mathematical usher in Annan. During vacation he began to plough his way through a German grammar. That was one of the really important actions in his life, for it was to have a notable effect on his style of writing and his way of thought; it was to make him the interpreter of German literature to English-speaking men. Goethe was to say that Carlyle understood German literature better than the Germans themselves. By his efforts of translation and interpretation Carlyle was to give strength to an idea then young in Europe, namely, that between Germany and England there was a mystic kinship, something in the blood, in the language, manliness as opposed to Latin and Romance effeminacy, the strength of the Nordic or Teutonic man. The battle of Sedan was to give what was reckoned proof of that idea and, by the time of the fall of Louis Napoleon, Carlyle had come to be one of the few prophets

whose words are accepted in their own land for the simple reason that they say things people want to hear.

That acceptance and recognition of the prophet did not come quickly. There were years of despondency, of prosy Byronism, Wertherism, disgust with things as they were, bitter consciousness of neglect, grudges and grouses against men and women, friends and enemies and established systems. It was the period of the *Everlasting No!*, of shouting his questions down the cave of the Sibyl and hearing in reply only the mockery of echo. It was a period of doubts in the religion of his fathers, in all religions, in the very existence of God. He struggled against these doubts and came at last with Herr Teufelsdröckh to the *Everlasting Yea*, to belief in God, in a divine purpose working in all things, in the power of Nature to make towards Truth, abhorring lies, cants, and shams as vacuums. A man said of him that he loved earnestness rather than truth; and indeed although his mind could grasp facts, his pen give colour and life to past things, he was never sufficiently well-balanced to appreciate and consider calmly reasons for and reasons against. He was nervous, jumpy, born as Ruskin said, in the clouds and struck by the lightning.

He met Jane Welsh in the spring, but no love affair ever had less of the element usually associated with bluebells in the wood and laburnum in the park. A biographer wrote that the gradual mastery of a strong will by a stronger will was like the closing of an iron ring. The phrase was happy, for the circle that Carlyle put on Jane's finger had no eighteen-carat stamp and no jeweled keeper. It was made of grey Calvinistic steel. Even on honeymoon, when on some days they seldom met from breakfast until four o'clock, when they dined together and read *Don Quixote* in Spanish, that brilliant, bitter-tongued woman was to know what it was to be married to a prophet. His life of perpetual matrimonial strain of bad health coming from his stomach and bad temper, of struggle against poverty and neglect should be remembered as a background to his work. But it is possible to give too much importance to these things. Chesterton said that indigestion alone and unaided could never have produced a *Sartor Resartus*.

## II

He was consciously The Prophet from the North and a prophet should have his own prophetic way of expressing himself. So from the action of German literature and Scotch biblical Christianity on his own nature he evolved a style midway between Richter and the prophet Ezechiel. It is reminiscent, particularly in the better portions of *The French Revolution*, of red lightning piercing the clouds gathered around the mountain-top on which the prophet hears his message. The extraordinary effect of some parts of that book owed something to a kinship between the style and the fiery subject, for in the days of the Revolution men did consider they had heard wisdom speaking above the crash of falling prisons, the roar of guns, the tramp of advancing armies.

Sovereigns die [he wrote] and Sovereignties: how all dies, and is for a Time only; is a 'Time-phantasm,' and yet reckons itself real. The Merovingian Kings slowly wending on their bullock-carts through the streets of Paris, with their long hair flowing, have all wended slowly on—into Eternity. Charlemagne sleeps at Salzburg, with truncheon grounded; only Fable expecting that he will awaken. Charles the Hammer, Pepin Bow-legged, where now is their eye of menace, their voice of command? Rollo and his shaggy Northmen cover not the Seine with ships; but have sailed off on a longer voyage. The hair of Towhead (*Tête d'étoupes*) now needs no combing; Iron-Cutter (*Taillefer*) cannot cut a cobweb; shrill Fredegonda, shrill Brunhilda, have had out their hot life-scold, and lie silent, their hot life-frenzy cooled. Neither from that black Tower de Nesle descends now darkling the doomed gallant, in his sack, to the Seine waters; plunging into Night: for Dame de Nesle now cares not for this world's gallantry, heeds not this world's scandal; Dame de Nesle is herself gone into night. They are all gone; sunk—down, down with the tumult they made; and the rolling and the trampling of ever new generations passes over them; and they hear it not any more for ever.

In *Sartor Resartus* he wrote a whimsical description of the literary style of his valiant professor Herr Teufelsdröckh, and he may have had in mind some of the things said about his own

style, and said quite truly of that style at its worst moments. "On the whole Professor Teufelsdröckh is not a cultivated writer. Of his sentences not more than nine-tenths of them stand straight on their legs; the remainder are in quite angular attitudes, buttressed-up by props (or parentheses and dashes) and ever with this or the other tagrag hanging from them; a few even sprawl out helplessly on all sides, quite broken-backed and dismembered."

His style also had virtues. He had an easy control over a remarkable vocabulary that aided his power of making visible to the reader some landscape he had seen, some historical incident he had read about. He could rant, rave, growl, foam at the mouth; but he could also give a turn to a phrase that would strike the imagination or lift the heart.

Apart from the biographies of Sterling and Richter he left behind him seven or eight volumes of *Miscellanies*, essays devoted mostly to the interpretation of German literature, but ranging from a long analysis of Chartism to essays on the Diamond Necklace, on History, on Characteristics, on Voltaire, on Diderot, on Johnson, Walter Scott, Burns. The essay on Burns is, perhaps, the best of these; the essay on Scott the worst, for there was something in Carlyle that just kept him from understanding the great geniality of the novelist. The real merits of Carlyle's criticism can be gauged by comparing his essay on Boswell's Johnson with Macaulay's essay written at the same time as a review of the same book: Croker's amazing edition of Boswell's book. Macaulay's paradoxes have since been rejected by most men who knew anything about Johnson, but the bulk of Carlyle's comment still makes satisfying reading. And since the merits of a man are closely bound up with his deficiencies, there can be found also in this essay a fault that disfigures his writings on everything from social reform to literary values. He had no sympathy with the eighteenth century, and he saw Boswell, not as a sneak or a flatterer, but as an honest man, in an age of cynicism and shallow sayings, finding and worshipping his hero. That may have been justifiable reading of the riddle behind Boswell's miracle, but Carlyle was developing a bad habit of reading every riddle in the same way. If such and such a good was not to be found among men, Carlyle said it was because they did not know how to choose leaders, how to

worship the chosen. One explanation was to explain all things. To read steadily through the *Miscellanies* is to have a ringside seat at a performance in which a man chooses a philosophical strait-jacket, has the straps tightened and tightened until the free play of thought is ended forever.

### III

Those seven volumes of criticism give him his place among the best of English critics. His method, because of his unsteady emotional nature, was over-impressionistic; the best of his decisions are clouded by the effects of that unfortunate habit of straddling the one old philosophical hobby-horse and riding it to death. But in another field of his emotionalism was to find fulfilment by its power of vision and coloured imaginativeness. His judgments on the great deeds and great men of the past were eventually limited to picking out heroes here and heroes there. He said that history should be “the essence of innumerable biographies”; that the lives of the common people made a great current on the surface of which the antics of court or camp floated like cork. That preaching was very much to his credit, but it had very little to do with his practice. If history is to be the essence of innumerable biographies, then the earth should not be piled nor the light of Heaven darkened by books about Oliver Cromwell and Frederick of Prussia. That was exactly what Carlyle did. They were *his* heroes; they should be heroes for all men. Even Cromwell in Ireland was the best and kindest ruler Ireland ever had. John Mitchel tried to convince him that such was not exactly the case, but Mitchel, whose mind was very similar to and greatly influenced by that of Carlyle, did not see that Carlyle’s absurdity was not an isolated accident. It is not an error to believe in great men; but it is rank insanity to lose sight of small men, weak men, cheery men, whimsical men, cowardly men, of the whole world of men made up like a radiant patchwork quilt.

That was the fault of his historical work as it was the fault of his criticism: he had seized upon a few ideas, he could not for two consecutive pages take his mind away from them. Soul was necessary to man even if it did nothing more than preserve his body or, in Ben Jonson’s awful phrase, “save him the expense

of salt." That, along with his insistence on the necessity of finding and worshipping great men, was the body and bulk of his teaching. Some critics were fond of saying that his discovery of soul was magnificent in an age that accepted Bentham and Macaulay. It would have been magnificent if Carlyle had been an uneducated operative in a Lancashire mill instead of a Scotch Calvinist, scarcely a Christian, writing under the impetus of the Romantic revival. The ideas that seemed in him so alien to the age—for the simple reason that he snarled and growled about everything—were really in the air of the time, and he expressed them as a radio expresses words and music and atmospherics.

The real merit in his historical work was, perhaps, the greatest literary merit of Carlyle. Froude said Carlyle was no poet, and Froude was a fool. Some other critic said that his attempts at verse showed that he had no conception of the nature of rhythm. The critic had never read aloud the more lyrical passages of *The French Revolution*. For that book is nothing if it is not poetry. It is not instructive history, for it supposes that the reader already knows more about the men and events of the period than any normal reader could possibly know. It has no great philosophical lesson to teach beyond the platitude that kings who are evil, slothful, adulterous, open the flood-gates of destruction on their descendants. But it re-creates the past, it brings men back to life, it fills the streets of Paris not with symbolic phantoms but with living men, rushing crowds, stupidly valiant soldiery, the rattle of muskets, the flashing of swords. It is great dramatic poetry, spoken like *Macbeth* against a background of blackness and rolling smoke shot through with the red flame of storm.

#### IV

Before all other things he was the man with a message, the man with something to say. The great merit in Johnson was to his mind that everything Johnson said or wrote meant something; and he spoke with venom of the malefactors to mankind who produced so many beautiful books with nothing in them. For his own credit it was unfortunate that he so often produced page after page of rant and rhetoric with no very inspired

meaning, but it would be wrong to say that he ever wrote merely to fill space. For he was conscious of his message and of the austerity of that message. "His supreme contribution," according to Chesterton, "both in philosophy and literature, was his sense of the sarcasm of eternity. Other writers had seen the hope or the terror of the heavens, he alone saw the humour of them." He was not lured away by the high talk of his time to claim that the cure for all diseases of the social body was in democracy, enfranchisement, emancipation. The world would never be saved by men breaking the bonds that bound them to each other in the interdependence of existence, but by a true recognition of that interdependence, by elevating the noblest and best to rule normal men. That was God's will; and running through all his writings was the idea that God had spoken to Thomas Carlyle and bade him speak to the people. But the difficulty of choosing the noblest and best, and then safeguarding them against the weakness of nature and the temptations of high position, has never been overcome by men. Nor did Carlyle overcome it. If all men were saints and heroes and if God had given a guarantee to all things made by men there would be no problem, no need of prophets. He was the prophet in the wilderness. He posed as one of the few in a material world who remembered God and the human soul. But, when he assured England and America that all would be well in the end he assumed that one little portion of the nineteenth-century wilderness would indubitably blossom like the rose. The one great fault of this bitter, morose writer was not his bitter moroseness but his fatuous self-satisfaction.

His lectures on *Heroes and Hero-Worship* were collected into one volume and published in 1841; in that volume he looked upon the history of the human race as a voyage of skiffs, punts, fishing-craft all clustered around a few tall three-masters. Behind that image was the undeniable truth that men needed leaders, but he stretched that truth until it came to mean that men needed masters, until he revered not so much the noble mind as the strong hand. To all this there are a dozen answers, sound in philosophy; none of them so devastating as the practical fact that no six men will agree all the time as to who is and is not to be worshipped. Put the question in a city bus and you will find there are almost as many heroes as

there are men and women. His own gallery of heroes was, to say the least of it, representative; and there is matter for fantasy in speculating on the history of a nation ruled successively by Odin, Mahomet, Luther, Johnson, Rousseau, Cromwell, Dante, Napoleon, Shakespeare, John Knox, Bobby Burns.

Yet he had no wish to bring all men down to the level of the fan-mail. "Hero-worship if you will," he said, "but first of all by being ourselves of heroic mind." "Reform, like Charity, must begin at home." That was the most sensible aspect of his gospel and, outwardly at least, it did not differ a great deal from St. Philip Neri's plan for world-reformation. From those lectures on heroes he excluded the only hero that men could really worship because he was more than man. Carlyle apparently made the omission with the most reverential motives; but St. Ignatius of Loyola said that we should never speak too loudly in praise of any mortal man while that man was still alive, for even great men and heroes were sons of Adam and there was always an even-money chance of our having to swallow our praises. That was a judgment too humorously sane for Carlyle's comprehension. Later on in an utterly ridiculous essay on *Jesuitism*, the Chelsea prophet was to show how little he understood or cared to understand the mind of the Spanish saint.

Democracy, according to Herr Teufelsdröckh was "despair of finding any heroes to govern"; and Carlyle, who began life as a Radical, ended as a worshipper of ultra-autocrats. But it would not be true to say that his ideas on politics moved from radical democracy to utter autocracy. That would imply quite falsely that he even was a political thinker. In his youth, poor, neglected, suffering from the awful consciousness of his own merit, he felt for the pain and weariness of the millions forgotten, like himself, in neglect and poverty, and he felt rather than thought that the liberation of the poor could come only by chaos, by tearing down and rending asunder. In later years he did not forget, in his own growing prosperity, the existence of the poor. But his feeling had changed. Their peace would come only through order. They could not shape their own lives, could not make their own salvation. The most they could do was choose the strong man to rule and guide, shape and direct. That is the mood, an emotion, a feeling, not the apex of a solidly-erected pyramid of political thought. It is in

complete contrast with the behaviour of Belloc, who began life as a Republican, writing volumes in praise of the French Revolution. Later he wrote a volume in praise of monarchy; but in his writings there is evidence of a steady movement of thought, from position to position, planned and executed like an infantry advance.

## V

No man who depended on reason, who was not carried away by his feelings, could have written the *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, growling with displeasure with any Christ other than his own Christ, with humanitarianism aiming "to cure a world's woes with rose water," with railway-kings, publicity, big business, with a parliament of stump-orators "speaking through reporters to Buncombe and the twenty-seven millions, mostly fools," with St. Ignatius on whose shoulders he laid the evil deeds of all men. There is the usual fatuous undertone of reliance on the British people, on their latent ability at some time in the future to do something or other that would save the world. There is the usual attack on shams and cant, on the voice of the majority that had once bowed to the virtue of phylacterics and preferred Barabbas for Christ. There is the usual insistence on the necessity for finding heroes, supplemented by suggestions for the rapid execution of scoundrels. "Honour Barabbas the Robber," he said, "thou shalt sell old clothes through the cities of the world; shalt accumulate sordid monies, with a curse on every coin of them, and be spit upon for eighteen hundred years." His emotionalism and his utter contempt for logic and sequence, even chronological sequence, for the law of cause and effect, was to react disastrously on his own arguments, was to be a bad example to a race of men doomed to acclaim, with more noise than reason, Nietzsche and the strength of the strong. In rejecting humanitarianism he went too far, rejected also the charity of Christ. He considered it an important business that the "Supreme Scoundrel" should be hanged, but if he had really been a Christian he would have thought that the "Supreme Scoundrel" was Thomas Carlyle, just as Father Brown detected murderers and thieves by looking into his own heart and seeing there the potential murderer or thief.

*Past and Present* if not his greatest is certainly his noblest

work, as much above his glorification of Frederick and Oliver as sympathy for the weak is always above admiration for the strong. He saw the sufferings of the poor in the hunger-chamber of industrialism and he cried out in anger: "How come these things? Wherefore are they, wherefore should they be?" Because he was a man who did not deny the franchise to his ancestors, because his mind dwelt on history as the story of man and among the most important of human things, he went backwards, over the road that England had travelled, to find a time when no images were built to Hudson the railway king; no men, women, children at the mercy of Plugson of Undershot. Jocelyn de Brakelond told him the story of Abbot Samson and his monastery; and in the best sections of Carlyle's book we have keyhole peeps into the vivid life of the Catholic middle ages. But Carlyle, who revered Luther, could not analyse the story of Europe. He never realized that the capitalists of his own time had been given their charter by the revolt of Luther, the dishonesty of Thomas Cromwell, the logical Manichean genius of John Calvin.

In the life of the Abbot Samson he understood everything except the vows of poverty, chastity, obedience. But although he was convinced that monasticism was no longer to be found on earth he did see that the monks in A.D. 1200 were conscious "not by hearsay but by conviction" of the existence of their own souls. The factory-workers and factory-owners of a later time had no such intense conviction. The religion of the monks was not Methodist "with its eye forever turned on its own navel;" it was not "a horrible restless doubt, still less a far horribler composed Cant; but a great heaven-high Unquestionability, encompassing, interpenetrating the whole of life." He thought that the woes of England had commenced in 1660, that the Restoration settlement was a deliberate attempt to govern without God. Macaulay was nearer the truth when he said that the licence of the Restoration stage was the reaction against a Puritanism too conscious of its own existence. Reticence and dislike of display were to Carlyle proofs of the reality of a man's creed. He should have seen that there was precious little of either in Cromwell's parliament of business-men calling themselves saints. For "Praise-God Barebones" life was one long homily.

## VI

But he did not see these things. He missed the whole point in the history of Europe when he poured all his venom on the Restoration and the eighteenth century. It was neither Charles the Second nor St. Ignatius who built the factories or dug the mines. The exploitation and enslaving of the poor had been made in the same breath, who had given to many European peoples new ideals, a new morality, a new God. Their blood was in his own veins; their ideas, learned in the Calvinistic home of his youth, were when all was said and done, the foundation of his whole conception of things. He was not great enough to be false to his own provincial traditions, not calm or reasonable enough to play the part of Scotsman rediscovering Europe.

Yet, if he was unable to analyse the ideas that had made possible the exploitation of the poor, he at least knew that exploitation for an unjust and sinful thing. It was the fashion of the time, not only among industrialists but also among writers of the Manchester school, to excuse injustice because work must be done, because a nation must become powerful. To his credit be it said that he knew that power built by a few on the misery of the poor ensured its own damnation, not only in the eyes of God but even on earth and among men.

When I have debated in my own mind the many things that can be said against Carlyle, against the limitations of his philosophy, against his bigotry and bitterness, his nervous inability to reason from cause to effect, I remember in his favour that he was angry at injustice, and when the poor cried out in the streets he was not deaf to the voice of their suffering.