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Edgar F. Harden

Thackeray and the Carlyles: Seven Further Letters



The association of Thackeray with Thomas and Jane Carlyle has been sketched by Gordon N. Ray¹ and, in a more recent publication, broadly surveyed by Charles R. Sanders, who has attempted to document the entire relationship.² Drawing on an unsurpassed knowledge of Carlyle materials, Sanders has provided an extensive overview of the subject. A number of interesting and significant details have escaped inclusion, however, chiefly in the form of unpublished and largely unpublished Thackeray letters, for Sanders does not print any new Thackeray documents. Hence it seems useful to provide them here, both for their own sake and in the interest of greater completeness.

Ray was able to include in his edition of Thackeray's *Letters* only four pieces to the Carlyles: a note to Jane on 25 July [1846?] concerning his disinclination to hire a German governess (*Letters*, II, 242-43);³ another to her [October 1849] announcing the beginning of recovery from an illness (*Letters*, II, 597); a third to both of them [25? May 1851] thanking them for their kindness, apparently in coming to hear one of his lectures on the English humourists (*Letters*, II, 775); and one to Carlyle of 3 August [1856] accompanying the gift of a pen (*Letters*, IV, 147).⁴ To these letters Ray added three from Carlyle to Thackeray: one of 20 October 1859 indicating Carlyle's current inability to contribute to the *Cornhill* (*Letters*,

IV, 157-58); a second of 24 May 1860 regretfully declining a whitebait dinner (*Letters*, IV, 187); and another of two days later explaining how a projected piece for the *Cornhill* has come to nothing (*Letters*, IV, 188). Sanders cites all seven pieces and, besides making available a good deal of significant Carlyle material concerning Thackeray, prints an unpublished letter of 9 April 1859 in which Carlyle thanks the novelist for his merry note and gift. Finally, Sanders refers in passing to three early uncollected letters from Thackeray to Jane (pp. 168n., 172n., and 174n.) and a later one in the National Library of Scotland that he has not seen (p. 195n.).

Since these first three are from the period of closest attachment between Thackeray and the Carlyles, they are of special interest. The initial one was written on Reform Club stationery between April 1840, when Thackeray joined the club, and May 1843, when he moved out of Great Coram Street. Thackeray, perhaps in the first flush of membership, had invited Jane to the club. Her letter to him there was evidently addressed only to "Mr. Thackeray" and was delivered to the better known Thackeray--the writer's cousin, Martin, who was a member of the club's Committee. Hence the gentle comic reminder to Jane of his first name and the apparent renewal of his invitation to her:

[1840?]

My dear M.^{rs} Carlyle

My Christian name is William, and the consequence of your hesitation has been, that M.^r Martin Thackeray a member of the Committee here, & an ex-Don of Cambridge, has been put in possession of our little secrets--the only comfort is that he won't know what to make of them.⁵

BUT: if you will come on Monday at 2 o'clock, or on[e] day subsequent, at any other hour; how happy shall I be to show you the cutlets; and those not only but the kidneys, the pretty kitchen maids & Monsieur Soyé.⁶

I am just risen from the couch of sickness, whither a fortnights intemperance had driven me and am (with sincerest regret)

Yours most faithfully

WMT.⁷

13 G.^t Coram S.^t

Brunswick Sq.^{re}

The next two letters were written by Thackeray to Jane during the early months of 1841, a half year after his wife's

insanity had violently appeared, and when he was anxiously laboring over magazine articles and stories for money to pay the cost of Isabella's care at the Ivry sanatorium.⁸ Responding feelingly to the "kind-heartedness & sympathy" of Carlyle and Jane, he writes his warmest and most intimate letter to her and yet maintains characteristic notes of good humor and a hopefulness that triumphs over a sense of pathetic need. He has time to express concern for others, but his own anxieties soon reappear and are movingly expressed not only directly but also in the rapidly shifting sequence of his thoughts.

4 Avenue S.^{te} Marie. 25 Feb [1841]

My dear M.^{rs} Carlyle. What shall I say to you for your kind letter? I have not had any thing so pleasant for many dismal months back, and by way of return politely enclose you three little billets for the 1^d post, begging & imploring you to stick a 1^d stamp on that for the Times. That is all my gratitude--in actions that is. I assure you in my heart I have much more. Even though you & Carlyle praise me in that outrageous way I can't help liking it, and your kind-heartedness & sympathy I love still better. A poor fellow in my case clings to such: and is glad of all the pity and good will that his friends can give him.

I left Carlyle's monstrous puff at Cavaignac's.⁹ He has not had time to take notice of it, or has been most likely carnivalizing as all Frenchmen will at this season; how your Diogenes would laugh at the rogues if he saw their mad ways of going on!

I am very much concerned to see the death of a Captain Sterling in the paper:--is it Antony?¹⁰ I heartily trust not, for the sake of his good parents. Pray give my love to M.^{rs} Sterling when you see her. I have been hoping and praying to have good news of my own to send her, but my wife still continues in much the same state, and I am fain to look forward to the Spring, w^h will it is hoped bring about some change in her lamentable malady. She is not with me: but I go often to see her.

This is what I want to tell you about. The expense of her pension is exceedingly heavy, and I am casting about in all ways to raise the necessary sums. Now you have that within you Madam w^h surpasses money: viz. You can incite Sterling to get me a great puff of the reprint of the YPlush in the Times. 2 vols are fast coming out with illustrations.¹¹ You can do the same with Uglo Forstero¹² as somebody calls him. Think of nothing but puffing the

book: Incite everybody: and then my dear little woman will have her pension secure.

Do not if you please now imagine that I want anything out of any body's pocket: but puffs puffs are what I desire. There has been a slight coolness between me & Fraser. I write to him with a bundle of MS.--and if Carlyle chooses to say that he hears I am in a very wretched plight wanting all the aid my friends can give me & soon, and if he adds something in the pufficatory line to poor James,¹³ I doubt not the latter will accept my bundle of papers. Another bundle goes to Bentley: and I have been occupied tooth & nail etching plates, and am inclined to do more in the same way. When Monsieur Titmarsh works in this way, be sure there is a reason for it. Confound the Times that treated him very shabbily.¹⁴ Amen. Dear M^rs Carlyle, Ponder over these things in your heart,¹⁵ and pardon me for sending you so much about Ego: but you can do great good to Ego just now, and will I know. Soon when my work is done I will write you a letter till when believe me always gratefully yr.

WMT.¹⁶

Less than a month later Thackeray wrote again to Jane. Once more the tone is intimate and affectionate but less anxious than in his previous letter. Indeed, he devotes the first two paragraphs to an amusing story about the persistence of French enthusiasm for an illusory account of the sinking of the *Vengeur* that both Carlyle and Thackeray had previously exposed as fraudulent. Only after this comic narrative does Thackeray announce with equanimity the failure of Carlyle's letter of recommendation to Cavaignac. Once again an affectionate greeting to Mrs. Sterling and a grateful response to her concern for his wife leads to the sad news of Isabella's unchanged condition, which is here accompanied by a moving acknowledgement of Thackeray's need for his wife. Hope for the success of his future work and thankfulness for friends, especially the Carlyles, is then succeeded by satire of John Forster and by an allusion to a joke shared between Thackeray and Jane that conveys his feeling of absence from her.

Paris March 20. 1841.

My dear M^rs Carlyle.

Yesterday I was at the French Exhibition where I met honest Reeve¹⁷ with a budget of news from London. and saw a huge picture say 60 feet by 80 representing a subject

with w^h M^r Carlyle is familiar, namely the Sinking of the Vengeur a French ship w^h went down with colours flying and guns roaring in the teeth of the English fleet under the command of the Duke of Clarence. Captain Renaudin is not represented eating mutton-pie as some disgusting envious English writers have hinted he did:¹⁸ but as the picture has not been purchased by the Gov^t, I thought it best to lay out a small sum and have it for Carlyle. Be good enough to build a house in your garden for its reception.

I told some Frenchmen (it is pleasant to vex the scoundrels) that the Vengeur business was what a mediocre English historian has vulgarly denominated a blague: and that Renaudins letters & what not had been published. And what do you think was the reply of the Frenchmen? They laughed at me with good-humoured incredulity, & said that I must pardon them for declining upon my simple word to believe a fact consecrated in history and that as for Renaudin's letter that was easily disposed of--it was a forgery. Present my compliments to your husband upon this, w^h may appear in a third edition of the F.R.

Your republican friend has never taken a bit of notice of Carlyle's commendatory letter. I think he was right the praise was so powerful, that he must have wondered at a man having the face to present himself with such a document in his hand. Well, somehow, in spite of this neglect the world wags & your humble Serv^t is neither more happy nor more miserable than before.

Please to give my love to M^r^s Sterling and tell her that my dear little wife is only very very little better. It will be a long long while I fear ere she be restored to me. Pray God for the time for I am a great deal more unhappy without her, than I ever thought it was in my nature to be. The illness greatly disarranges my plans. or rather prevents me from forming any until it shall settle one way or another. She is not near bad enough for me to suppose that cure is impossible nor well enough that I may have her with the children. Poor Fraser wrote me a most kind affectionate letter in reply to the l I sent through you: and I have furnished him & Bentley with stuff enough to keep my dear little woman where she is for 3 months to come. Meanwhile I am working at something that I hope will turn out better than poor Napoleon a sad failure;¹⁹ and live in clover royally with a good old grand mother who keeps me & the children. What a blessing it is in these distresses to find how many friends one has!--Every body has a kind word & a helping hand for me; so God bless

every body say I.

O Donnel²⁰ wrote me word that you had been good to him, and that he met at your house a M^r Forster whom he thought 'a heavy man' Good heavens to think that light airy graceful fantastical creature a heavy man! My friend O'D is one of the sort: but a noble high-principled fellow of a sumptuous generosity of disposition that I value much more than brains. You will have found out the first part of his character, this is to warn you of the rest.

Yellowplush's republication has been delayed by the accursed dilatoriness & clumsiness of the copper-plate printers here, who spoiled half the work that I was obliged to do again. You will recognize that is I hope you will among the pictures in the book the dear image of Bullwig; w^h fond Memory has traced.²¹ I hope successfully. Good bye dear M^rs Carlyle. It is very pleasant to me to think of such good friends as you and your husband are to me. How I wish I could put you to the test of keeping or breaking your promise about that pipe in the garden.

WMT.²²

The next two letters in this group concern entertainments, the first a dinner to which Thackeray invites them to meet a young man named Mayne, who has given up security at Cambridge to marry for love a countrywoman of the Carlyles. Again Forster is the subject of mild irony and again Thackeray concludes with a little joke, this time concerning his delight in hearing *The Great Hoggarty Diamond*, which had recently appeared in a new edition, praised by Mayne.²³

Kensington. Friday 30 March [1849]²⁴

My dear M^rs Carlyle

An interesting young professor of Civil Law⁺ at Cambridge, who gave up his tutorship and income there in order to marry a pretty little wife of your nation, is coming to dine here on Tuesday 6 1/2, with the lady, and the great Forster. I wish you and Carlyle would be so kind as to be disengaged and w^d come: and I must tell you that he rose immensely in my opinion last night by liking the G. Hoggarty Diamond.

I have the honor to be, Madam
your most obedient humble Servant

WMThackeray

+This M.^r Mayne is really a most amiable kind & fine young fellow, full of learning and talents of all sorts hidden under a veil of modesty.²⁵

The second of these entertainments is not so clearly specified, for Thackeray refers only to "our little party of pleasure," which has to be postponed.

Kensington. Monday M^g
[11 June 1849?]

My dear M^{rs} Carlyle

I am summoned to Hampshire to a dear old relation of mine who mayn't be alive when I reach her house.²⁶ But I must go immediately, and our little party of pleasure is put off.

Always Yours

W M Thackeray²⁷

Thackeray's letter of 9 July 1851--addressed to Jane, like the five previous ones in this group--arose out of a dispute over "The Dignity of Literature" with Dickens and Bulwer-Lytton, who wished to found a "Guild of Literature and Art" to honor and financially support worthy individuals. Thackeray's disagreement, however, especially directed itself at his intermittent friend and antagonist, John Forster. The letter followed Thackeray's series of lectures on "The English Humourists" between 22 May and 3 July 1851, with which Forster had taken issue in *The Examiner*, and which Thackeray had ended by citing his audience as evidence of the honor done in England to the literary calling. The Carlyles had been part of that audience, and though Carlyle and to a degree Jane could be expected to have significant reservations about them (see *Wisdom*, pp. 144-45 and Sanders, pp. 185-86), as Thackeray himself defensively indicates in the letter, Thackeray felt he could count on their fundamental human sympathy with him and on their understanding, especially Jane's, of his feelings about "The Dignity of Literature" and about Forster.

[9 July 1851]

My dear M^{rs} Carlyle

And dont you understand that there are a set of men who will be martyrs, who are painting their faces and asking for your money, who want to make literature a chronic

beggary under the name of the Guild of &c? My words were not for Lady Ailesbury to say 'We is Gentlemen & as such we behave', but for the literary people in the room--ask Forster if he didnt know what I mean--In fact it was a side shot at that humbug the booth of Literature and Art into w^h I propose to plump a forty eight pounder presently. That is, if it isn't best left alone--I thought as much about the concluding paragraph of the lecture: but I was in a rage thats the fact, and with that poor old blundering Jack Forster, for 2 years of treason envy and foul play--the more difficult to bear because I *wouldn't* be offended with him until at last the wrath exploded in a letter w^h is like a slap on the face, and w^h I hope will be final as regards rupture or reconciliation between the poor old quack and myself.

And now with respect to Lady Lytton--M^{rs} Willoughby sertiingly said that she came without any sort of authority from Lady L: and, in reply I tried to point out to her, how I of all men couldnt be umpire in Lady L's case--that I oughtn't to know her, for to know her and to have to do with her wrongs was the same thing: & that the best counsel I could give her was *not* to write those playbills &c. w^h injured her, and strengthened Bulwer's case.²⁸ You see how wisely we can judge of the squabbles of other people.

And my conscience (this in a whisper) tells me that I had better have let that last paragraph alone and the Recording Angle when he flies up to Heavens Chancery with the damn, and states who uttered it, will I've no doubt hear the Registrar of Affidavits say "M^{rs} Carlyle demming! God bless my soul how odd! But she had provocation. So had Thackeray provocation,"--and holy Job if he happens to pass will say--Yes that he had--I couldn't have stood Forster for 2 years myself.

The children & I are off tomorrow to the Rhein and one of them said just now 'It's as happy as the Millennium'.

Dont you think it was very kind of you to come to the lectures? I do: and I was a coming to shake hands & thank you: but I heard that you weren't pleased; and I thought I wouldn't like to be scolded: but that it w^d be best to wait a bit and be yours and Carlyle's always gratefully

WMT.²⁹

Thackeray's final letter in this group provides the necessary link to Carlyle's response of 20 October 1859 (*Letters*, IV, 157-58), for it is Thackeray's request for a contribution

to *The Cornhill Magazine*, which was to begin publication with the issue for January 1860. The appeal is made overtly on the basis of old friendship, and seems to take up an earlier appeal.

36 Onslow Sq^r. S. W.

October 16. [1859]

My dear Carlyle.

Is there any hope? Can you help an old friend? Have you never an unedited chapterkin, or a subject on w^h you wish to speak to the public? And if you have will you think of my magazine and

[monogram]³⁰

Carlyle, however, was regretfully unable to send a contribution.

As one places these letters in the context of the hitherto published record of Thackeray's relationship with the Carlyles, one perceives much more clearly than before the emotional strength of Thackeray's early attachment to the Carlyles and also its persistence--especially his attachment to Jane, even when he senses her partial disapproval. At times of emotional intensity Thackeray addresses his letters to her rather than to both of them, as we see not only in the early 1840's but again in 1851, when, six weeks after he had written them expressing thanks for their coming to hear his first lecture, he writes out of the heat of his denunciation of Forster--this time to her alone.

One cannot miss the contrast between the Carlyles' tepid response to Thackeray's favorable review of *The French Revolution* in *The Times* during 1837 and his warm acknowledgement of Carlyle's letter of testimony to Cavaignac four years later, but it is clear that in the interval the friendship had significantly deepened on all sides and it stands to reason that the testimonial was more concerned with Thackeray's personal qualities than was the latter's public evaluation of Carlyle's book. Indeed, Carlyle's letter probably contained the most positive statement he ever made concerning Thackeray. One also observes that the reviews Thackeray apparently wrote of Carlyle's lectures during 1838 were vastly more positive than Carlyle's reaction to Thackeray's lectures during 1851, but a fundamental conflict of values, not just Carlyle's dour temperament, was apparent on the latter occasion and must be seen as justifying Carlyle's severe reservations. At the same time, however, it seems evident that Thackeray had considerably more of an ability to enter the thoughts and to praise the accomplishments of

another person with genial sympathy.³¹

One detects no notable fluctuations in Thackeray's relations with Jane, who showed kindness to Thackeray's daughters as well as to him, but intermittent coolness developed after 1846 between the two men. They continued to see each other, however, and appear gradually to have accepted their incompatibility along with their friendship. During the last half-dozen years of Thackeray's life their correspondence contains reiterated manifestations of good will--especially on Thackeray's part, who repeatedly took the initiative--and the implicit recognition of old ties. Though Jane is not mentioned in the brief correspondence of these years, she surely remained a major bond between them.

Simon Fraser University

NOTES

¹ *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray*, 4 vols. (London, 1945-46), I, cvi-cix, summarizes the friendship; additional material appears in *Thackeray. The Uses of Adversity* (New York, 1955) and *Thackeray. The Age of Wisdom* (New York, 1958). These works will be cited as *Letters*, *Adversity*, and *Wisdom*.

² "The Carlyles and Thackeray," *Nineteenth-Century Literary Perspectives. Essays in Honor of Lionel Stevenson* (Durham, N. C., 1974), pp. 161-200.

³ The text for *Letters*, which Sanders quotes (p. 177n), was taken from *New Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, ed. Sir James Crichton-Brown (London, 1903), II, 24. The original (MS. 665, no. 49) is in the National Library of Scotland and differs slightly from the text in *Letters*. I am indebted to The Trustees of the National Library of Scotland (henceforth NLS) for permission to make subsequent quotations from unpublished Thackeray letters in their possession and to Mrs. Edward Norman-Butler, who has permitted me to quote all the unpublished Thackeray material in this paper. I am also grateful to Alan Bell, Robert H. Dunham, and Evelyn J. Harden, who have helped me verify details of this paper.

⁴ Ray identifies the year as 1859 but Sanders, on the basis of an unpublished Carlyle letter (p. 194n.), persuasively re-

dates it 1856.

⁵ This paragraph suggests that the letter may well have been written during an early period of Thackeray's membership.

⁶ Alexis Soyer, who later helped inspire the portrait of Mirobolant in *Pendennis*.

⁷ For permission to publish this letter, I should like to acknowledge The University of Iowa Libraries.

⁸ Esquirol's *Maison de Santé* (*Letters*, II, 3), which Sanders incorrectly identifies as a *pension* (p. 172n.).

⁹ Evidently Carlyle's friend Godefroy Cavaignac, a French writer.

¹⁰ Antony Coningham Sterling, who actually died in 1871.

¹¹ *Comic Tales and Sketches*, containing "The Yellowplush Papers," appeared in two volumes during April 1841.

¹² John Forster, editor of *The Examiner*.

¹³ James Fraser, publisher of *Fraser's Magazine*.

¹⁴ A review of *The Second Funeral of Napoleon*, *The Times*, 19 January 1841, p. 3.

¹⁵ "But Mary kept all these things, and pondered *them* in her heart," *Luke* 2:19.

¹⁶ NLS MS. 665, no. 45. Ray has quoted slightly more than a sentence from this letter in *Adversity*, pp. 261, 478.

¹⁷ Henry Reeve, an English journalist who wrote for *The Times* during this period.

¹⁸ In the first edition of *The French Revolution*, 3 vols. (London, 1837), Carlyle, drawing on a French source, had symbolized the unconquerable in man by recounting the heroic conduct of the *Vengeur's* crew when that French vessel, under command of Captain Renaudin, was sunk during an English victory of 1 June 1794 (III, 335-36). Subsequent testimony of an English eye-witness, however, led Carlyle to the discovery that the French account was mainly an invention. Hence he published a correction in *Fraser's Magazine* in July 1839, quoting the Eng-

lish eye-witness, who reported that at the time of the sinking most of the *Vengeur's* crew had been taken aboard English boats, including Captain Renaudin, who had begun to consume "a cold mutton-pie" (p. 79). Carlyle concluded by calling the French account "blague" (pp. 82-83). In the second edition of *The French Revolution*, 3 vols. (London, 1839), Carlyle added a final paragraph exposing the French account as "blague" (III, 300). Thackeray then entered the dispute with a letter to *Fraser's* appearing in March 1840, in which he cited hostile French responses to Carlyle's correction and added further details concerning the *Vengeur*, notably evidence from Captain Renaudin himself that confirmed Carlyle's reinterpretation. When Carlyle republished his *Fraser's* letter in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, 5 vols. (London, 1840), he made use of this new evidence in an added paragraph (V, 378-79).

¹⁹ *The Second Funeral of Napoleon*, which "sold only 140 copies when it appeared in January" (*Adversity*, p. 267).

²⁰ A "ne'er-do-well Irish journalist" who had been Thackeray's "one real intimate" in Paris but with whom Thackeray broke off relations in 1843 after O'Donnel had used him as a dupe in getting *Fraser's* to publish material that O'Donnel had plagiarized (*Adversity*, pp. 267, 479).

²¹ Edward Bulwer, who appears in an etching opposite I, 245 of *Comic Tales and Sketches*, 2 vols. (London, 1841).

²² For permission to quote this letter I should like to acknowledge The Brotherton Collection, The Brotherton Library, The University of Leeds. Ray has quoted brief phrases in *Adversity* (pp. 264, 266-68, and 479) from the letter, which was then in the possession of Eric George Millar. Like all preceding ones, it is written in Thackeray's slanted hand.

²³ Sanders incorrectly identifies Carlyle as the source of this praise (p. 174n.).

²⁴ While Thackeray was living in Kensington, 30 March occurred on a Friday only in 1849.

²⁵ NLS MS. 665, no. 46. This letter, like all ensuing ones, is written in Thackeray's upright hand.

²⁶ Perhaps Thackeray's great-aunt, Anne Becher, who lived near Southampton and whom he reported on 14 June 1849 to be "better after being just at the very brink of the grave, nay

someway down into it" (*Letters*, II, 551).

²⁷ NLS MS. 665, no. 65.

²⁸ Lady Lytton was conducting a bitter dispute with her estranged husband.

²⁹ NLS MS. 666, no. 71. Ray quotes the opening of the letter in *Wisdom*, pp. 152-153.

³⁰ NLS MS. 666, no. 82. The letters of the signature are superimposed upon one another.

³¹ One thinks also of Thackeray's generous public tributes to Carlyle, like that in the seventh installment of *The Newcomes*, written in January 1854, where he has Clive exclaim of the Tuileries: "Think of Louis XVI. with a thousand gentlemen at his back, and a mob of yelling ruffians in front of him, giving up his crown without a fight for it; leaving his friends to be butchered, and himself sneaking into prison!...I couldn't help thinking of Barbaroux and his bloody pikemen swarming in the gardens, and fancied the Swiss in the windows yonder; where they were to be slaughtered when the King had turned his back. What a great man that Carlyle is! I have read the battle in his 'History' so often, that I knew it before I had seen it." So strong, in fact, is Clive's praise that Thackeray uses it to indicate the old-fashioned quality of Colonel Newcome's literary tastes, for the Colonel refers Mrs. Graham's "Letters from Paris" to Carlyle's powerful book (2 vols. [London, 1854-55], I, 206).