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Notes and Documents: the Carlyle Centenary; Burns's "To a Louse"; Scott's Old Mortality

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NOTES AND DOCUMENTS



Thomas Carlyle in 1981

The Carlyle centenary of 1981 has been celebrated so variously, and in so many parts of the world, that there seems little remaining doubt about Carlyle's importance. That he has resurfaced after decades of neglect or unpopularity, that his reputation has survived allegations of fascism, above all that critical interest has matured beyond squabbings about his private life to look at the man and his works, all contribute to a sense that one hundred years after his death, Thomas Carlyle can perhaps be seen more clearly as a Victorian figure of first rank.

The repositories of Carlyle papers around the world did well to mount substantial exhibitions, at Duke, at Santa Cruz, in Edinburgh University and Public libraries as well as at the National Library of Scotland. Chelsea had a small but interesting exhibition, and as these words are written the display in the National Portrait Gallery of London is attracting widespread attention. Unusually, material has been exchanged and loaned for these purposes, above all for the full exhibition in the National Library, which attracted material from private owners, institutions in Scotland and England, and a good deal of previous loans from USA. This last exhibition is remembered by the publication of a handsome catalogue.¹

The Carlyle Society in Edinburgh has been inconspicuously

meeting for years to foster the study of both Carlyles (and, to a lesser extent, of Burns). Its Thomas Green Memorial Lecture, delivered by David Daiches, is now published as *Carlyle: The Paradox Reconsidered*,² and its Green Essay Competition attracted entries from England, Scotland and the USA. A rich and recently-rediscovered stock of glass negatives belonging to the Society enhanced the exhibition in Edinburgh Public Library and some of the prints are now in the National Library exhibition. The Society's activities are, of course, continuing although the official centenary celebrations are over.

Continuing, too, is the attempt to make available to the public the locations most associated with the Carlyles. During the centenary year, the National Trust of Scotland's local members in Dumfries and Ecclefechan have transformed the statue of Carlyle which grimly overlooks his native village; the graveyard is now much better maintained and the birthplace (like the Carlyle House in Chelsea) has had very considerable attention from its owners. Publicity has been given to these changes and improvements in the most practical way, through the press and television. Dramatisations of the letters were broadcast nationally, as was a half-hour discussion of Carlyle's relationship to his past.

His relationship to his environment continues to emerge from the pageant of the letters which are appearing in the Duke-Edinburgh edition, of which volumes 8 and 9 are reviewed in this number of *SSL*. With these letters Carlyle has published *The French Revolution* and become a major figure; a hundred years later there is a serious possibility that *The French Revolution* will be properly edited to modern standards, and perhaps be the precursor of a series of definitive modern editions of Carlyle, the absence of which remains (even after all centenary celebrations) a matter for grave concern to academics everywhere.

Academics more than paid their respects to the Sage. In North America there were conferences on the East and West coasts, there is a regular endowed lecture at Santa Cruz; the MLA has occasional Carlyle discussions. In Europe, a very high proportion of Carlyle workers gathered together in Germersheim (one of the campuses of the University of Mainz) for a successful and concentrated attempt to focus critical attention on the many facets of Carlyle's work. The conference (made possible by the generosity of the Stiftung Volkswagenwerk) was run with German efficiency and splendid hospitality and its papers should appear in the Spring of 1982; the Centre for Scottish Studies which has emerged in Germersheim should become a focus for future conferences on a vari-

ety of topics and in Carlyle studies it proved its worth by bringing the fertilising power of German, US, Canadian, English and Scottish scholars together to compare not only their approach to specialised topics within Carlyle studies, but their critical approach in general. Disagreement was fruitful and the perspective of Carlyle scholarship widened. The papers will be a permanent record of this valuable occasion.

In Edinburgh itself, the Centenary was marked by a weekend conference in February, punctuated by four major lectures from Lord Dacre of Glanton (Hugh Trevor-Roper), J. Hillis Miller, Owen Dudley Edwards and David Daiches--whose paper formed the Carlyle Society's Green Lecture already mentioned. Tours, library visits, and discussions filled the remainder of the weekend, and subsequent lectures prolonged the discussions throughout the Spring and Summer. Lecturers included Richard Ormond of the National Portrait Gallery in London, Sylvère Monod of the Sorbonne, and John Clive of Harvard. There are no plans to publish all the papers in one volume, though some have already appeared, and most will doubtless be published in due course.

In 1982, with retrospect, one could most wish for a start to a critical re-editing of Carlyle's multifarious works. The project is naturally enormous--the range of reading and knowledge exposed in the letters is more than matched by the editorial difficulties of Carlyle's major published work--but the standard text for scholarly use cannot indefinitely be that of the Centenary edition of the last decade of the nineteenth century. In 1982, we continue to work on volumes 10 and 11 of the Duke-Edinburgh *Letters*. The years of the public lectures are fascinating ones, as Carlyle widens his interests, and begins his Cromwellian reading. Student courses in Carlyle are now sufficiently common to be established; student texts are scarce, and becoming scarcer. Carlyle is surely, after his centenary, established as a major figure central to Victorian studies. The activities of the past year have surely given weight to the case for a critical edition, and a critical re-appraisal extensive enough to do justice to the stature of the author, and the scale of problems with which he faces the twentieth-century critic.

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¹*Thomas Carlyle, 1795-1881* [by Alan Bell] (Edinburgh, 1981) is published by the National Library of Scotland. Handlists were also issued by Edinburgh University Library and Edinburgh Central Library. Richard Ormond and John Cooper, *Thomas Carlyle 1795-1881* (London, 1981) is published by the National Portrait Gallery to coincide with their exhibition. *Carlyle: Books & Margins* is a handsome handlist of the Carlyle holdings of the Norman and Charlotte Strouse Collection at the University Library (Santa Cruz, 1980), with Murray Baumgarten's transcription of Carlyle's marginalia to Mill's *Principles of Political Economy*, and a critical essay. There are also revised guides to the Arched House, Ecclefechan (National Trust for Scotland, 1981) and the Carlyle House, Chelsea (National Trust, 1981).

²Professor Daiches' paper is available free of charge to members of the Carlyle Society; it was published by the Society (Edinburgh, 1981). Details of the Carlyle Society can be obtained from Ian Campbell, Department of English Literature, University of Edinburgh. Details can also be obtained there of the *Carlyle Newsletter* and occasional *Carlyle Pamphlets* published by Edinburgh's English Department.

The Moral Sentiment of *To a Louse*

O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
 To see oursel's as others see us!
 It wad frae monie a blunder free us
 An' foolish notion:
 What airs in dress an' gait would lea'e us,
 And ev'n Devotion!¹

"To a Louse" has been called a "perfect" poem and its last stanza, probably the "most famous" Burns ever wrote.² The choice of subject has been regarded mainly as a mark of Burns's

catholic powers of observation. Readers seem not to have noticed, however, that the last stanza fetches its strength and tone from a characteristic blending of informal folk wisdom, on the one hand, and the formal philosophical values of the Scottish enlightenment--in particular, of Adam Smith--on the other.

David Daiches says that the conclusion has "all the simple gnomic quality of a country proverb."³ He is right: Burns may even have had a specific, and common, proverb in the back of his mind. Tilley's great dictionary records an analogous saying under several forms. The original version, alluding to one of Aesop's fables, is "We see not what is in the wallet behind." Other versions are: "We see not what sits on our shoulder"; or, recalling Pope's "See the blind beggar dance, the cripple sing," "Happy Tom Crump ne'er sees his own hump." In its several forms, the proverb had wide currency, appearing in Erasmus and Lyly and Herrick as well as in proverb collections of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁴

It is very likely, however, that the flavor of Burns's proverb-like moral was enriched by his reading of Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, a book that was much in his thoughts while he was writing his first poems. The early verses on remorse, in the first commonplace book, take Smith for their text. In a headnote Burns comments: "I intirely agree with that judicious Philosopher M^r Smith in his excellent Theory of Moral Sentiments, that Remorse is the most painful sentiment that can embitter the human bosom."⁵ In the "Letter to J[ame]s T[ennan]t" (1786), Burns invokes Smith, "wi' his sympathetic feeling," as one of "Twa sage Philosophers" (Reid was the other).⁶ And James Kinsley detects the possibility of Smith's presence in two other early poems, "A Penitential thought, in the hour of Remorse" (1777?) and the "Address to the Unco Guid" (1784?).⁷ Under the circumstances, it seems inevitable to put Burns's pointed, italicized moral up against the following passage from *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

This self-deceit, this fatal weakness of mankind, is the source of half the disorders of human life. If we saw ourselves in the light in which others see us, or in which they would see us if they knew all, a reformation would be generally unavoidable. We could not otherwise endure the sight.⁸

Burns's proposition that seeing ourselves as others see us would free us from many a blunder and folly matches Smith's proposition about unavoidable reformation. Verbally and sub-

stantively, it is a close match.

And if, in fact, Smith's words did lodge in Burns's mind, then we should be cautious about asserting the empirical priority of the louse observed on Jenny's bonnet. Was it the louse that led Burns back to Smith or Smith who led Burns to the louse? In another age, when conventions of moral discourse were different, or in another sensibility, we could imagine the maxim preceding the example. Burns's handling of the situation comes naturally to him, and indeed it corresponds to the structure of Smith's argument, which moves from "the Nature of Self-Deceit" to "the Origin and Use of General Rules."⁹ But it would be hard, perhaps impossible, to specify whether example preceded maxim, or vice-versa, in the logic of Burns's artistic imagination. It seems best to regard the poem as having been spun off in a fruitful collision of the two.

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¹"To a Louse," *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford, 1968), I, 194.

²Robert T. Fitzhugh, *Robert Burns: The Man and the Poet* (Boston, 1970), p. 115.

³*Robert Burns* (New York, 1950), p. 193.

⁴Morris Palmer Tilley, *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor, 1950), p. 702.

⁵*Poems and Songs*, I, 37.

⁶*Ibid.*, I, 225.

⁷*Ibid.*, III, 1008-9; 1030.

⁸*The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, eds. D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (Oxford, 1976), pp. 158-159. The editors use the sixth edition (1790) as copy-text, but this passage remained intact through Smith's revisions of his book, though its location in the text varied. Burns eventually owned the sixth edition (*Poems and Songs*, III, 1021); his first reading would have been in one of four editions published between 1759 and 1774.

On Smith's concept of the impartial spectator, see the editors' introduction to *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, esp. pp. 15-17.

⁹In early editions the passage appeared in a chapter headed "In what manner our own judgments refer to what ought to be the judgments of others: And of the origin of general rules." In the sixth edition, the heading was: "Of the Nature of Self-Deceit and of the Origin and Use of General Rules."

Balfour of Burley: The Evil Energy in Scott's *Old Mortality*

In a discussion of Sir Walter Scott's "Dark Heroes," Alexander Welsh says that the villain may serve in the Waverley Novels as the "impetus to the plot."¹ Balfour of Burley is such a villain. "Without Burley there can be no insurgent army and no revolution," says Welsh in his "Introduction" to the Riverside Edition of *Old Mortality*.² Burley's significance was discerned as early as 1816 when an unknown reviewer identified Burley as the "principal feature" of the novel.³ More recent critics agree, calling him the "most striking figure," the "dominating figure," or judging the novel as being "dominated by Burley and Claverhouse."⁴ Although not the only fanatic, he is the one most fully developed and the one whose presence affects all the characters and the outcome of the novel. In addition to being important to the novel, he is also a significant Scott creation. His characterization illustrates Scott's skillful control and his insight into the evil and chaotic forces which master some men's existence. Burley's personality, carefully supported by the aura of the revolution, revealed by his violent and his controlled actions, and reinforced by the landscape imagery, provides the energy which unifies and enlivens *Old Mortality*.

The atmosphere in *Old Mortality* is one of darkness, decay, and desolation. It is appropriate for the title of the novel

to be the name of an old man whose purpose in life was to clean the gravestones of the Covenanters in an attempt to halt the "ruin or decay" that "all earthy memorials" must suffer.⁵ The era of the Covenanter's revolution was one of "darkness, blood, and tears" (p. 70) or in Burley's words, "days of blood and darkness" (p. 95). Mause says that her people live in a "valley of tears and darkness" (p. 120), with the enemy of the Covenanter's cause as the "besoms of destruction" (p. 206). Even Lady Bellenden feels that "there is an evil spirit in the land" (p. 176). One of the most vivid descriptions of the depth of the chaos and evil is delivered by Mucklewrath: "is this the time to speak of peace, when the earth quakes, and the mountains are rent, and the rivers are changed into blood, and the two edged sword is drawn from the sheath to drink gore as if it were water, and devour flesh as the fire devours dry stubble?" (p. 272). Mucklewrath's description, although metaphorical and extreme, reveals the pervasive influence of revolution. Two opposing forces collide, and violence ensues as each side fights with the dedicated conviction that its cause is the only just one. The Covenanters identify the evil as the government, and the government sees it as the Covenanters. Morton evaluates the situation when he complains of being "weary of seeing nothing but violence and fury around" him, "now assuming the mask of authority, now taking that of religious zeal" (p. 110). Scott shows that "revolutions are not originated by strictly civilized men," and "the release of energy implicit in revolution is analogous...to the release of passion from the restraint of reason."⁶ With the appropriate battleground provided, Burley can release his passion or evil energy under the cover of a "religious" cause.

The method of release for Burley's evil energy is that of violence. In his first scene, he is fighting (p. 91) and is revealed as the one who has murdered the archbishop with "great and cold-blooded cruelty" (p. 93). He finds a "thrill" in striking a "gash upon the body of another" (p. 105) and laughs with "savage joy" when he "flourished his sword aloft, and then passed it through his adversary's body" (p. 223). He performs his acts of violence not as a soldier might in the line of duty but because he enjoys them. Burley experiences "disappointed rage" at his failure to apprehend and kill Morton when they meet in the cave (p. 468). Even as he is dying, "his purpose was revenge," and he grasped the Dutchman "as a dying tiger seized his prey" (p. 476). He develops as more than a fanatic; he is, as he admits, a "desperate homicide" (p. 274).

His countenance cannot conceal his inner turmoil. The

depth of his violence is felt by Morton when he views Burley sleeping. He says that Burley "seemed agitated by some strong internal cause of disturbance" as he lay with his "right hand strongly clenched, and occasionally making that abortive attempt to strike which usually attends dreams of violence" (p. 107). With his sword across his knee and his Bible open in his hand, "his stern and harsh features" are colored with "ferocity" (p. 104). One of Claverhouse's men describes Burley as the "devil incarnate" (p. 224), but Burley sees himself as a man at war with the "Evil One" (p. 456). Struggling to overcome the evil within himself, "vices of revenge and ambition" (p. 261), Burley approaches insanity. As Morton concludes, "the disappointed ambition, wrecked hopes, and the downfall of the party which he served with such desperate fidelity, were likely to aggravate enthusiasm into temporary insanity" (p. 457). "Insanity" describes what Morton sees when he finds Burley standing in his cave holding his characteristic sword and Bible: "his figure ruddied by the light of the red charcoal, seemed that of a fiend in the lurid atmosphere of Pandemonium, and his gestures and words, as far as they could be heard, seemed equally violent and irregular" (p. 462). By coming upon Burley unexpectedly, Morton witnesses the emotional upheaval and demonic qualities of Burley that no one else sees because of Burley's justification for his violence in his devotion to his cause and his skill in maintaining an appearance of reason and control.

Burley purposefully controls himself to facilitate his manipulation of others. He restrains himself, as Morton says, because to do otherwise "might have discredited his judgment" (p. 457). Even when awakened from his violent dreams, he "at once assumed all the stern and gloomy composure of his ordinary manner" (p. 108). As quickly and calmly, he changes from his Biblical language, when Morton criticizes him for quoting out of context to support his cause, to a more "worldly language of that carnal reason" that he felt Morton would grasp (p. 259). The "artful Balfour" wants to persuade Morton to join him because he knows that Morton's name will bring "forth hundreds" to his "cause," and he knows that uncontrolled emotion is not the way to elicit his support (p. 261). His emotions almost betray him as "the blood rushed to his face, giving a ruddy and dark glow to his swarthy brow," but "in a voice which he designed should not betray any emotion," he presents his argument (p. 264). Before the discussion concludes, he again has to struggle to maintain his composure; he "bit his lip, and with difficulty suppressed a violent answer" as he "perceived, with disappointment" that he would not be able to "exert that degree of influence over him

[Morton] which he had expected to possess" (p. 266). Burley regains his "coolness" and succeeds in satisfying Morton as to the "justice of the cause" (p. 267). Morton is not the only one that he manipulates; he skillfully moulds Macbriar's opinion by compliments (p. 342). The number of men who are willing to follow him into battle illustrates his ability to control and influence others, an ominous power for a man who borders on emotional eruption.

Scott illuminates Burley's inner turmoil and wildness by associating him with untamed topography. When Burley and Morton first meet and are about to part, Burley tells Morton that "'his road lies there'" and points to a "pass leading up into a wild extent of dreary and desolate hills" (pp. 95-96). This pass in the wilderness is the same one that Morton traverses in order to get to Burley's cave. Burley is at home in the wild, for "his head has rested oftener on the turf, or on the stone, than upon either wool or down" (p. 98). He chooses a "wild" terrain for his first battle with Claverhouse (pp. 213-25), which proves to be too much for Claverhouse's men and contributes to their defeat (p. 220), just as the tame terrain contributes to the insurgents' loss in the battle at Bothwell (p. 354). After returning from his ten-year absence, Morton seeks Burley and is led to his cave in "a remote and wild district," the "horrors" of which almost overwhelm Morton (p. 461), but a place that Burley claims he would not trade for "the fair chambers of the castle of the Earls of Torwood" (p. 463). That Burley regards his cave and the wild mountains a desirable abode further establishes his kinship with that which is disturbed and untamed.

The water surrounding Burley's domicile and other water images reinforce his link with the wild and serve as effective symbols for Burley's internal conflict. Burley's brow is described as being "like the swell of a high spring tide, when the usual cliffs and breakers vanish from the eye" (p. 104), and the perspiration on his brow is "like 'bubbles in a disturbed stream'" (p. 107). The tide and stream are as mysterious and disturbed as the tumultuous mountain stream at Burley's hermitage and as Burley himself. According to Carl Jung, "water is the commonest symbol for the unconscious," and it "is also the fluid of the instinct-driven body, blood and the flowing of blood, the odour of the beast, carnality heavy with passion."⁷ Burley appears as such a body, teeming with violence and emotion, and it is his unconscious, the source of evil in man,⁸ with which he is struggling. Like the primitive man that Jung describes, Burley is "afraid of uncontrolled emotions, because consciousness breaks down under them and gives way to possession."⁹ A struggle to prevent possession

is what Morton witnesses when he sees Burley in the cave; he sees a "man who strives for life and death with a mortal enemy" whose "countenance assumed an expression in which ghastly terror seemed mingled with the rage of a demoniac" (p. 462). Thus on one level, the water symbolizes that which is untamed and if uncontrolled, evil.

On another level, the water becomes a symbol for eternity, serving to unify Burley with the rest of the novel and with all men. Man is to eternity as the brook is to the ocean:

There is a sea to receive thee in its bosom; and there is an eternity for man when his fretful and hasty course through the vale of time shall be ceased and over. What thy petty fuming is to the deep and vast billows of a shoreless ocean, are our cares, hopes, fears, joys, and sorrows, to the objects which must occupy us through the awful and boundless succession of ages!

(p. 449)

Burley's death brings him to his union with eternity as he merges with nature. As Angus Calder says, Burley's "final, fatalistic heroically strong and typically vindictive struggle with the Dutchman in the Clyde, are used to integrate Burley with nature itself. He becomes the 'tortured demon of the stream,' [p. 460], the spirit of that wild moorland landscape. ..."10 He becomes a part of the "foul and festering remnants of mortality which ferment beneath" (p. 61). Only a "rude stone" and a "ruder epitaph" (p. 476) mark his existence, and only men such as Old Mortality preserve his memory.

As a fictional creation, Burley cannot be ignored. As an integral part of *Old Mortality*, he illustrates Scott's skill in using setting, action, dialogue, and imagery to support the personality of a character. He does, as G.S. Fraser says, "linger in the imagination," and perhaps merits V.S. Pritchett's statement that no other Scott character "grows and changes so convincingly."¹¹ His characterization is memorable and convincing and leaves little doubt as to Scott's understanding of the evil energy that impels a man such as Balfour of Burley.

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NOTES

¹*The Hero of the Waverley Novels* (New York, 1968), p. 58.

²(Boston, 1966), p. ix.

³Review of *Tales of My Landlord, Collected and Arranged by Jedediah Cleishbotham, Schoolmaster and Parish Clerk of Gandercleugh*, in the *Critical Review*, 4 (Dec. 1816), 617. This review, as well as Scott's own review of *Old Mortality*, in the *Quarterly Review*, 16 (Jan. 1817), 430-80, is reprinted in John O. Hayden's *Scott: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1970), pp. 106-143, and the latter, along with other reviews of the same period, is discussed by James T. Hillhouse in his *Waverley Novels and their Critics* (Minneapolis, 1936).

⁴Bruce McCullough, *Representative English Novelists: Defoe to Conrad* (New York, 1946), p. 123; David Daiches, "Scott's Achievement as Novelist," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 6 (1951), 161; John Lauber, *Sir Walter Scott* (New York, 1966), p. 95.

⁵Sir Walter Scott, *Old Mortality*, ed. and intro. Angus Calder (Harmondsworth, 1974), p. 68. All subsequent references to *Old Mortality* will be to this edition and will be documented within the text of the paper.

⁶Welsh, "Introduction," p. x.

⁷*The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, 1969), p. 19.

⁸Jung, p. 22.

⁹Jung, p. 20.

¹⁰"Introduction," p. 41.

¹¹"Scott: Ballad Novelist?" *Ariel*, 2 (1971), 86; *The Living Novel and Later Appreciations* (New York, 1964), p. 65.