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Rodger L. Tarr

**“Let us burn our ships”:
Carlyle, Sarah Austin, and House-Hunting in London**



Carlyle's decision in 1834 to move from Craigenputtoch to London to seek his literary fortunes was not easily reached, and was one fraught with paradox. Indeed, it was, as he was to describe it later, a time of "heavy fields of memory, laborious, beautiful, sad and sacred," a time of "diligences, strenuous and sometimes happy," and a time in the words of Jane Welsh Carlyle to "burn our ships...and get on march!"¹ However, as the appointed time for departure from Scotland neared, the situation of removal became traumatized by the fact that no suitable lodging in London had yet been found. It was not as if Carlyle had not tried to relieve the burden of uncertainty that haunted both him and Jane. For several months, but principally from March through April, he had been using London contacts with the hope of circumventing the trials of house-hunting. Sarah Austin was his principal resource, and in fact in the second week of March she had managed to locate in Kensington a potential residence for the Carlyles.² However, because of the remoteness of

¹See *Reminiscences*, ed. Charles Eliot Norton (London, 1887), II, 210-11.

²Even though the efforts to secure the Kensington home proved unsuccessful, Carlyle continued to accept the good graces of Sara Taylor Austin (1793-1867) when he arrived in London in May to begin his own search for a residence. However, he was later to

Craigenputtoch, Mrs. Austin's letter informing them of the letting procedures did not reach the Carlyles for more than a week after it was written. Exasperated but not defeated, Carlyle answered immediately with commitment and gratitude—and questions—on 20 March 1834. This letter, one of the last to be written from Craigenputtoch, is printed here in full from manuscript for the first time.³ The totality of the letter provides unique insight into the machinations the Carlyles went through during those fateful months in 1834. It also provides unique insight into Carlyle himself and his willingness to accept the domestic duties of husband while facing the uncertain literary challenges ahead.

Craigenputtoch, 20th March, 1838—

My Dear Mrs. Austin,

If the Kensington Householders are like the Medes and Persians whose law alterth not, our completely little speculation has all gone awry, and this sheet is already little other than waste paper. My date, you perceive is the 20th; and your Letter did not reach us till late in the evening of the appointed 19th. We have at the utmost only two Postdays weekly here; in general only one (the Wednesday, which answers to your London Monday); and tho', last week, as it chanced, both Postdays did their duty, your Express unhappily fell between them; and so here we are!⁴ I much fear, our Ladyday Competitor will have carried the palm; the rather as he

remember her for her "rather poorly done" translations from the German and came to characterize her as "*femme alors célèbre*." Still, he concludes, "Mrs. Austin affected much sisterhood with us." See *Reminiscences*, I, 172.

³A portion of this letter was first printed in Janet Ross's *Three Generations of English Women* (London, 1888), I, 84-86; and has been reprinted without change in *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle* (Durham, NC, 1981), IX, 398-400. The above printings omit significant portions of the letter and, of course, are not founded upon the manuscript. For convenience of reference, I have adopted here the policies of presentation from the *Collected Letters*. This letter is part of the Rodger L. Tarr Carlyle Collection, and is printed here with the kind permission of Anthony Garnett.

⁴On 27 March 1834, Carlyle writes to his brother John, "Mrs. Austin writes in the most cheerful way about undertaking to get us a house; nay last week there came a Letter that she had already got one (in Kensington, rent £32, and seemingly *quite* suitable to us); *only* that we 'must decide before the 19th,' and, alas, the 19th was within three hours or so of terminating when the Letter arrived! I walked over to Minnyhive, next day, with an Answer: 'Take it by all means'; but I fancy it would be too late, and so we are still at sea in that respect" (*Collected Letters*, VII, 123).

has now only some four free days before Ladyday itself arrive. What is to be attempted, however, we will still attempt. A Moorland Post-office lies some six miles from us, over the Mountains: thither will I, this blessed spring day, with the sheet in my pocket; that in me, whatever be Destiny, there be no delay.

You are very kind and helpful; and yet it is almost cruel so to task your kindness. With clamorous Printer's Devils one has enough to do; no need of the Devils to join in the hunt! For the rest, as to "responsibility", take no thought of it. I am well persuaded you can please us better than we could ourselves were we already on the spot. My whole soul grows sick in the business of house-seeking; I get to think, with a kind of comfort, of the grim house six feet by three, which will need no seeking. In return, I ought to profess myself humble in my requisitions as to that matter. I must have air to breathe; I must have sleep also, for which latter object, *procul, O procul erte* [away, away with you], ye accursed hives of Bugs, ye loud-bawling Watchmen, that awaken the world every half hour to say what o'clock it is!⁵ Other indispensable requisitions I have none.

The House which Lucykin⁶ and you describe so hopefully, seems as if it had been expressly built for us. Our answer is at once: secure it for Whitsunday,⁷ if it be still attainable. Till we hear otherwise, we will still have a kind of hope that it may. If you do so proper there will then be various other inquiries to trouble you with, various minor arrangements to tax your kind discretion with. For example, what *are* the fixtures beyond grates? We have window-curtains, venetian blinds &c &c which will be useless here, which might chance to fit them. The measured Dimensions of all rooms and windows (if you can procure them) will bring the whole matter before us. The general outline of the Housekin I already have, by assurance of Imagination: a sunk story, three raised ones; the little bed-quilt of garden before the house or behind it, as it shall please the Fates. — You must, on the whole, consent to consider us as a Brother & Sister in this matter, and freely lend us your head as well as your affection.

My Dame bids me say that as to Carpets (since those here, not indeed of great value, will go to waste if left), nothing can be decided, till we know the sizes, and according to your judgement the quality and

⁵Carlyle is perhaps thinking here of his watchman-metaphor from *Sartor Resartus* (1833-4); cf. Book I, Chapter I; and Book III, Chapter XII.

⁶Lucy Austin (1821-1869).

⁷Pentecost, or the seventh Sunday after Easter. Carlyle is mistaken here in his assumption that in London Whitsunday would be a recognized term-day, or quarter-day, from which to rent a house, as was the custom in Scotland. See *Collected Letters*, VII, 149.

cheapness. The only thing that will be certain, of that sort, is perhaps a fixture already: some sort of wax-cloth for a lobby

And now if the Ladyday Pretender only find himself thrown out, as we prey the Heavens he may—! —In the other case, we will still console ourselves with the Scotch adage: “As good fish is in the Sea as ever came out of it”; which, if it have served for broken-hearted Scotch Werters, and healed them more than once, may well do for us. *Und damit Gott befohlen* [And commend it to God].

I look to London with Bodings of a huge, dim, most varied character. You shall, with my whole heart, have as much of the “Hoping to do yourself”, as you can undertake in me is little hope, or only Hope of a kind that I shall call “desperate”; a Hope that recognizes all earthly things to be *Lug’ und Trug* [Falsehood and Deceit], and yet under them, and symbolically hid in them are *Ewiger und Wahres* [Eternity and Truth]: oft this same desperate Hope I have for many years (God be thanked for it!) never been bereft, nay on the whole grown full and fuller of it. For the present, I be quite becalmed; not *calm*; alas, that is a very different matter. I am doing and can set a ti[me]⁸ doing, nothing, or as good as that. No line have I written for months; only [word missing?] read whole heaps of Books, with little profit. In any case, befall what may, I see it to be the hest of the Unseen Guide that I should come to you; so I come *getrosten muthes* [sustained by Courage]. You, my dear Friend, and your kind hopeful and helpful words, fall like Sunlight thro’ the waste weltering chaos: may the Heavens bless you for it!

And so with all manner of good wishes, and as much of Hope, “desperate”, and other as may be,

Ever your Affectionate,
T. Carlyle.

My wife full of cares, tumults and headaches, and I doubt also of indolence, bribes me to write this Letter not unwillingly, which you are to take as hers and her love with it.

Illinois State University

⁸Here part of a word—and below a whole word—is missing because the manuscript is torn where the original seal was placed.