

2007

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K. J. Fielding
University of Edinburgh

Mary Sebag-Montefiore
University of Surrey

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Recommended Citation

Fielding, K. J. and Sebag-Montefiore, Mary (2007) "Jane Carlyle and Sir David Davidson: Belief and Unbelief – The Story of a Friendship," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 35: Iss. 1, 26–43.
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol35/iss1/4>

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K. J. Fielding and Mary Sebag-Montefiore

Jane Carlyle and Sir David Davidson: Belief and Unbelief—The Story of a Friendship

Unearthed from a bank vault, hidden in a box of family papers, is a handful of letters from Jane Welsh Carlyle to David Davidson (1811-1900), a soldier home from India.¹ Written in rapid dash-linked sentences, peppered with double underlinings, Jane's letters chart a friendship of middle age that was in fact a re-acquaintance. The story of the friendship was, for Jane, a journey from excitement to disillusion—a microcosm of the story of her life, but the letters, which both lovingly dwell on a shared childhood background and satirize the present, were suddenly broken off. They throw a fresh light on her nature, her craving for a sympathetic ear, her restlessness, her prejudices, and a gallant front presented against a barely concealed depression. For, by the time that David and Jane met again, the petted, irresistible child-queen of Haddington and the sparkling girl who knew that no one less than a man of genius would satisfy her, had declined into a sickly middle-aged woman, who expressed herself with a sharp, self-deprecating wit that obliquely screamed of cynicism and disenchantment. It was hard for a clever and original woman of the time to find fulfillment when the male horizon seemed limitless; while

¹Quotations from the Davidson family papers, including some letters from Jane Carlyle, are noted parenthetically as *D*; those from David Davidson's *Memories of a Long Life* (Edinburgh, 1890) are given in the same way as *M*; we have used the second edition (1893). Unscribed letters by Jane are from the *Collected Letters of Jane Welsh and Thomas Carlyle*, ed. C. R. Sanders, *et al.* (Durham, NC, 1970-), cited as *CL*.

David, who was also clever and original, had found fewer frustrations and greater happiness.

Jane bestowed her affections only upon the few who managed not to irritate her. Tall, good-looking, idiosyncratic Major Davidson re-entered her life at a time of acute unhappiness, when her husband was constantly visiting Lady Harriet Ashburton at Bath House. Carlyle was obsessed by his fascinating and formidable "Principessa Nobilissima carissima,"² and Jane was confiding her sufferings to her Journal, "Oh dear oh dear This living merely to *live* is weary work?"³ But her new friendship with Davidson lasted only for four years before it disintegrated under Jane's impatience. After her death in 1866, it was Carlyle, racked with anguish and perhaps guilt, who cherished a link that had once made Jane happy. "Your letter awakens many *thots* in me *whh* are very mournful if also very beautiful, tender and solemn," he wrote to Davidson in 1870. "Indeed *yr* mere *signature*, at any time *wd* do that!" (*M*, p. 322).

David Davidson was the third of nine children of Henry Davidson (1775-1829). Henry's father had been a coachman who, following the upward Victorian class surge rapidly shook off his origins. As Froude, Carlyle's controversial biographer, observed, "to climb vigorously on the slippery slopes of the social ladder, to raise ourselves out of the rank in which we were born, is now converted into a duty."⁴ Henry became factor to the Fletchers of Salton (or Saltoun), a rich land-owning family, and senior Sheriff-Clerk of Scotland. He acquired a large house and farm in Haddington. On his death, his eldest son, also Henry, reported with pride that his father's funeral had been attended by "almost all the county gentlemen, Lord John Hay, General Stewart... and about 200 of the most respectable persons of the town and country." (*D*). Like the Welshes, the Davidsons were middle-class and well-to-do, though their sons were dispatched to earn a living as soon as possible.

David had a dual nature. He was a combination of passion and self-discipline. He showed disparate talents: at the Burgh School of Haddington he shone in mathematics and engineering, while at home he was tough, a bold horseman, crack shot, a gifted artist and a would-be poet. At fourteen he fell in love with a Haddington girl named Ailsie Boyce, but confided only to his diary the emotions that swept over him:

²Cited by Virginia Surtees, *The Ludovisi Goddess: The Life of Louisa Lady Ashburton* (Salisbury, 1984), p. 47.

³Jane Carlyle's *Journal*, 23 April 1856, *CL*, 30, 246, newly edited from MS.

⁴J. A. Froude, "England and Her Colonies," *Short Studies on Great Subjects*, 4 vols. (London, 1867), II, 206.

As I clasped her tiny hand in mine a sudden change came o'er
 my nature, a new and overpower passion sprang into
 existence, and filled my whole frame with thrilling ecstasy;
 the spirit of Love touched the electric train and fired
 the citadel of my soul. (D).

Yet his love was ill fated. At sixteen he was sent to Bombay to join the 18th Native Infantry. Young Ensign Davidson was homesick and wrote poems in his notebook to his mother, such as "The Midnight Hour." If not great poetry, its pathos is clear:

At such an hour to gaze on the bright stars
 On belted Jupiter and blood-red Mars
 Is pleasing to this exiled boy, for he
 Remembered when they glittered o'er his home and thee! (D).

Letters came from home, sometimes racy with Haddington gossip. His brother Henry, for example, had enjoyed a scandalous Ball at the Assembly Rooms at Haddington, at which "the Miss Dunlops were throwing about their legs as if they were on pivots." There was a quarrel over a "Bowl of Toddy which crowned Mr Hay in the manner of a Roman Professor," and "the party broke up about 7 o'clock, all *dead drunk*." But Henry was writing to an increasingly serious young man who was held up as an example to his family. A letter to him from a small brother reads, "It will be my first wish to be as good as you but I am young." (D).

David fantasized about Ailsie as bride-to-be, till he learned of her death from tuberculosis when he was 24. His diary records his dismay: "Doth not the worm, my loathsome rival, feed upon those lips I longed to kiss? Oh God! Oh God! How humiliating the picture." (D). Desolate but somewhat self-regardingly, he saw her death as a punishment for his loving her too well, and his sole comfort came from an essay by the great Scottish preacher, Dr. Thomas Chalmers. Chalmers was a friend of both David's father and the Carlyles; though, while Jane was proud of him as a fellow Scot, Thomas was to look back on him in his *Reminiscences* as "wonderfully true and tender," but:

all in a kind of rustic type...essentially of little culture, so ignorant of all that lay beyond the horizon in place or time...yet capable of impetuous activity and blazing audacity.... I suppose that there will never again be such a Preacher in any Christian Church.⁵

⁵Carlyle, *Reminiscences: A New and Complete Edition*, ed. K. J. Fielding and Ian Campbell (Oxford, 1997), p. 251. Chalmers' essay was his introduction to Abraham Booth, *The Reign of Grace from its Rise to its Consummation* (Glasgow, 1827).

David, less analytical than either, was instantly converted to Christianity, and fired off intensely Evangelical, later-to-be-regretted missives to his mother: "Did you ever direct me to the cross of Christ? Alas, I must say, never. Pray to our maker that he may give you a knowledge of the selfish nature of your heart." And, "Forgive me for thus speaking plainly, but deep contrition and an ardent love for the Redeemer...are not to be found in any of your letters.... I fear you have not looked to the Redeemer as the Physician of your soul." (*D*). Almost all his pent up passion was re-centered on religion.

Meanwhile, he concentrated on his Indian service and the army. He had become organizer of the Revenue Surgery, which restored to cultivation large tracts of wasteland, and he invented a diagrammatic way of presenting statistics which came into general use. He was popular, commended for "securing the good will of his brother officers and the affectionate regard of natives of every grade." (*D*). Unlike many of his contemporaries he realized that while it was relatively easy to subdue the Indian population, lasting peace was possible only through mutual respect, and his often original ideas sometimes contradicted the East India Company's guidelines. Indians were discouraged from Christianity, since this might undermine British rule, but David maintained that the Bible is "an Oriental book," many parts of which they could "understand better than we do" (*M*, p. 218). He earned respect as a superb sportsman, hunting man-eating tigers on foot. He rode on elephants charging down steep jungle slopes; bears snapped at his heels. Sporting prowess was a symbol of masculinity. In particular, big game shooting in India was deliberately encouraged as a good training for war. David found it an outlet for his physical energies and his passion for guns. He crowned his career by inventing telescopic sights, which were adopted both the British army and units of the Confederate army in the American Civil War.

After twenty years David returned to Scotland to marry in 1839. His wife (née Margaret Buchanan) was illegitimate. This shocking stigma for a Victorian never discouraged David's suit, though he always kept her entire family background a secret. The marriage was happy and produced ten children but David was secretly a disappointed man. He had missed out on promotion and a full pension by retiring early worried about his liver, a common cause of concern after long service in India. Although his rifles and pistols were displayed at the Great Exhibition in 1851, the War Office gave him no proper recognition for years, and when telescopic sights were finally used a later inventor got the credit. The Secretary of State for War, Lord Pamure, was to order his apparatus for accurate night firing to be fitted to twenty-four guns at the start of the Crimean War, but they were delayed so long that Sebastapol had fallen before they were sent from Woolwich.

In 1855 he was in London again to discuss patents with the War Office, and was staying with his old friend Sir George Wingate (1812-79), when he decided to call on another old friend, Jane Carlyle, at 5 Cheyne Row. They had known each other years before in Haddington, and had recently re-met in a

railway carriage traveling to Scotland, when to their horror and amusement the transformations of middle-age had prevented their mutual recognition. Though the fervently religious, firearm-fanatic soldier and the caustic Jane Carlyle were very different characters, they were delighted to meet again.

Their links went back to their early days. We see that their mothers were friends. Jane's father had been the Davidsons' family doctor, and David's strongest childhood memory (which endeared him to Jane) was of Dr. Welsh's treating him for a burst blood vessel by bleeding him. Jane's first love, Edward Irving, had taught mathematics at the Burgh School, which David had attended. He remembered his long walks with Jane in the plantations. They had old friends in common, such as some of Robert Burns's family who lived at nearby Grants Braes, and George Rennie, Jane's reputed fiancé. They knew each other's old family servants and David proudly owned the only known picture of Jane's adored dog, Shandy. Shandy had been lent to David's mother, to give balance to a portrait of David's little brothers, though David had cut out the boys and framed the dog. (*M*, p. 316). The network of Jane's and David's connections overlapped on every side and level. Both had traveled far beyond the limits of their childhood provincialism, and both were tantalized by a lost paradise of their youth, with its ecstatic irrecoverable memories of what might have been. Both understood pain, loss, and frustration, and had to front the stern face of a middle class code of behavior.

Jane could not sparkle in the wrong setting. Charles Darwin had found her neither "quite natural or lady-like," and with "a hysterical kind of giggle," and an incomprehensible Scottish accent.⁶ But she was at ease with David, though out when he called again. She wrote a day or two later:

My dear—David is what nature prompts me to write! But then comes the recollection of that tall grave *stranger* I met in the railway carriage to Haddington, and I could scream at the idea of such a liberty! "*Thirty years make a great odds* on a Boy as well as *on a Girl!*"—and it takes more than one good talk to get accustomed to the *odds*. Still the boy and the girl that knew one another thirty years ago must always, I think, have a certain interest for one another, independent of personal sympathies. So I do not hesitate to beg you to come again, tho' you have already tried the distance.... And now I make haste to tell you that I have missed no call for six months—or a whole year if you like!—that I so regretted—and that I shall rely on your coming again. The best time for finding me, and when we may make one another's grown acquaintance without interruption, is any time before *one o'clock*. Does that suit your Indian habits? I generally, at this time of the year, go out at one—not of necessity, but for the same reason the Scotch Professor gave for drinking whisky, "because I like it, and because it is cheap"—if you come so as to find me before I go out, there would be no need for me to go after—Don't you think it

⁶*Emma Darwin: A Century of Family Letters*, ed. Henrietta Litchfield, 2 vols. (London, 1915), II, 13.

would be pleasing to our mothers—dear friends as they were—that we should be meeting again in this great foreign London?— If you cannot come before one *any day*, write to me appointing any other time you like and I shall wait for you. (April or May 1855; *M*, pp. 297-298).

Jane's vision of "the boy and girl that knew each other thirty years ago," glides over the fact that she was nine or ten years older than David. This came less from self-flattery than a wish to draw them together into the loving security of her Haddington childhood. She was always delighted to meet any friendly figure from the past, such as George Rennie, her teenage "lover," John Stodart, or her affectionate companion Isabella McTurk, and others who shared "glad memories" of their "youth." "Dear Isabella," Jane was to write, 21 April 1860, "I never forget those I have lived in friendship with, however widely I may be parted from them."⁷ All the same, she showed a special delight in meeting David Davidson.

Her self-deprecating wit and irony seem to arise from the pain of growing up and of losing her parents quite as much as other incidents in her later life. The opening words in her *Journal* for April 15, 1856, show both the isolating effect of her depression and its connection with her child-self:

I am really very feeble and ailing at present. And my ailment is of a sort that I understand neither the ways nor outlooks of; so that the positive suffering is complicated with dark apprehensions. Alas, alas and there is nobody I care to tell about it! *not one!* Poor *ex-spoilt Child* that I am! (*CL*, 30, 243).

It is her repeated complaint, and one which partly explains the intensity of her response to her new friendship, if not maybe its sudden collapse. A few days later she writes (20 April), "This weakness is incomprehensible—if I had any *person*, or any *thing* to take hold of, and lean my weight on!" (*CL*, 30, 245). When, as David says, he called "not long after" at Cheyne Row (Jane never mentions him in her *Journal*), she began to feel that she had found a prop. They talked about Haddington, for both "a sort of relief to recall" noted David. Jane showed him some prized possessions—her mother's miniature, and a sketch of Fast Castle he had drawn as a boy for Mrs. Welsh. Jane once wrote to another friend, George Cooke, "It is sixteen years since *my* Mother died,—and not a day, not an hour has passed since that I have not *missed* her—have not felt the world colder and blanker for want of *her*." (21? Dec. 1858; *NLS*, MS 606.517). As they chatted she plunged gratefully into her past, and was both a grieving daughter and the tantalizing Jane Welsh, reminiscing about her lovers and their proposals. They enjoyed a small poke at Edward Irving

⁷Previously unknown letters to Isabella are now in the National Library of Scotland (hereafter *NLS*), MS, Acc. 12039; see *Jane Carlyle, Newly Selected Letters*, ed. K. J. Fielding and David Sorensen (Aldershot, 2004). Henceforth *Selected Letters*.

who had taken a “wee laddie” for a walk in the hills, and pointing to the golden sunset, had asked, “My boy, how would you like to live there?” The child replied “I like to live at hame best.” (*M*, p. 299).

David had gone down well. Jane wanted him to become part of her life. She asked him to tea to meet Carlyle and, shortly afterwards (9 June) to dinner:

As you are a Poet yourself, perhaps you would like to meet Alfred Tennyson. He is in town for a few days, and has engaged to eat a (*strictly*) family dinner here on Thursday next at six o'clock. Will you come and give me the pleasure of seeing you again? I assure you it would be considerable. (*M*, p. 299; *CL*, 29, 330).

Jane later remarked in her *Journal*, 20 April 1856:

If one don't like a man for what he *is*; neither will one ever like him for what he *does for one*, or *gives* one. Neither should any man—or woman—*get up a quasi-*liking for another on the ground of his subserviency—“obligingness”—and that sort of thing; for when the other has gained the end of his subserviency...he tires of being obliging, and sets up for himself. (*CL*, 30, 245).

David did not know how to be subservient. At Jane's diner he was forceful and forthright. Conversation ranged from a discussion about accepting titles (Tennyson firmly against it), through a short grumble from Carlyle about his current work *Frederick the Great*, to the state of Europe and the Crimean War. After dinner, the men began smoking long clay pipes. Tennyson remarked, “The world is looking for the coming man.” “The coming Man has already come, and they crucified Him,” declared the devout David. Carlyle replied, “I quite agree with you”: he could not have been more tactful. (*M*, p. 300).

All was set fair for friendship. Jane liked Davidson. He was a talisman of happier days, and a possible repository for confidences. David returned to Scotland, promising to call on Betty Braid, the Welshes' old servant, and Jane wrote, 2 February 1856:

My dear friend,—I made sure of seeing you before your departure from London, but you slipt away like that most provoking of all things, “a knotless thread”.... You have not forgotten us—or even forgotten ‘your promise,’ and I call that very nice of you—being *a man!* Dear darling old Betty will be delighted to see you! it will be next best to seeing myself, and I should say *you*, with your memories of old things, will enjoy seeing *her*.... The address is *Mrs. Braid*, 5 West Adam Street, in the George's Square region it is. It would be a pleasure to visit you, and make acquaintance with your wife; and decidedly I for one, will not be in Scotland without inquiring how you are situated, and going to spend a day or two with you, “*if convenient*”.... For the rest, you will be interested to hear that within the last two weeks, I have made two involuntary attempts on my life; neither of which proved fatal! First during my stay at the Grange, the house Dr. ...ordered me an embrocation for my throat, and I DRANK it every drop! Supposing that England expected me! A revolution of three days in my “interior” (as Mr. Carlyle calls it) was the un-

expectedly unimportant result of this mistake. Since my return, in taking a flying leap in the dark (!) I struck myself a violent blow on the right side which was supposed to have fractured it; but as it was only *sprained* and bruised, I am now recovering.... God bless you—my affection to Betty; and look me up again before long, will you? (*M*, pp. 301-302).

Jane often emphasized her stoicism to her friends and in her *Journal*, but found it almost impossible to talk sensibly to her husband about her health. She found it hard to express herself to him and speak of her wretchedness.

You want to be told how I sleep [she once wrote] and can't you understand that having said twice, thrice, call it four times, "I am sleeping hardly any, I am very nervous and suffering" the fifth time that I have the same account to repeat, "horrible is the thought to be" and I take refuge in silence wouldn't you do the same? (16 July 1858).

It recurs throughout her *Journal* and in Carlyle's *Reminiscences*, in writing which Thomas was at last to realize, too late, that it was the time of "the *nadir* of [his] poor Wife's sufferings." (*Reminiscences*, p. 157). The *Journal* ends (5 July 1856) with her note, "in the evening alone, as usual. A very sick and sad day with me; like many that have gone before and many that will come after" (*CL*, 30, 262) to which Thomas later added, "A very sad record! We went to Scotland soon after; she to Auchtertool (Cousin Walter's), I to The Gill (Sister Mary's)." It was the bleakest period of their marriage.

From Auchtertool, Jane wrote to David, 1 September 1856, edging him more closely into friendship:

I had not forgotten my promise to tell you when I came to Scotland—tho' it was binding myself to believe for more than a year, in your caring—or any one caring—whether I was in Scotland or *The Back of Beyond!* A grave engagement for one with so very limited an outfit of self-confidence as myself. But on my first coming I did not know your actual address—nor could dear Betty tell me, tho' she spoke about you till your ear might have tingled! (the *right* one)—So I waited till I should see your sister at Haddington, whither I was bound.... but when I leave this place in the middle of next week, I could go to you for two or three days, if your wife were really well enough and good enough to receive me. Write with perfect frankness, would that suit. (*D; M*, pp. 302-3).

Carlyle was traveling on his own but she added, "I am not unaccompanied, I have with me, bound for Chelsea two—*canaries*, bred at Haddington, and adopted for its old dear sake!" (*M*, p. 303).

Part of Jane's despair came from feeling that she was not first with any one, and that Thomas had chosen to introduce Lady Harriet Ashburton as a factor into the marriage equation. No one lived just for her; and, in fact, it seems that the visit to see David had to be postponed till 1857.

Still, she could perhaps bring David closer. She liked successful men and thought it time for David to emerge from his Scottish retirement. William Ewart, M. P. for Dumfries, had been talking to her dearest friend George Rennie, about “getting up a committee” on the question of colonizing India: “George Rennie of Phantasy (once you may remember him at a Dance at your mother’s, if indeed you were not sent to bed before the company arrived, or learning your lessons in the nursery!)” She went on: “Besides, Monsieur, you owe me a long letter, don’t you? You never acknowledged the photographs I sent you at New Year.” (*M*, pp. 304-5). She had recommended her old friend, the Rev. Thomas Erskine of Linlathen to call on him, and as usual signed herself “affectionately.” Davidson, sensibly enough, did not believe in colonization, and suggested someone else; and their meeting seems to have been put off till the summer.⁸

For David would not be drawn. He was designing and building Woodcroft, his house in Clifton Road in southwest Edinburgh, rife with turrets in a five-acre plot, to accommodate his rapidly increasing family. Jane suggested the motto over the front door, *Meliora semper Cogitat* [Always reflect on better things]. David’s reserved response was, for Jane, part of his appealing integrity. She wanted Carlyle to appreciate her friend and wrote from Haddington, 26 August 1857:

I sat out with Major Davidson yesterday: two hours or more, under the trees in the park; where the great new house is being built and got such capital good talk out of him. I do think he is a real kindhearted serious-minded man—living for the things he sees to be worthiest—Not without a tinge of insanity in him perhaps! But a *quixotical* insanity that one likes him no worse for. He was laughing *like a boy* about your “smashing of the operation.”—There wasn’t a word that he didn’t most cordially agree in, and “what you said about the opera might be said about every public amusement of the present time.” His wife is very *intelligent* and *engaging* and a thorough *Lady* in manner. There is room in the new house to be “kept in expectation of *you—till you come*”! Don’t you wish it may get you? Yet I am sure you would like the man when once he was at ease with you.⁹

David lost several of the letters, but the remainder show how she warmed to his ability to recapture the past for her, even if it underlined present sadness. Later in 1857 she wrote:

⁸In this letter of 1857 Jane speaks of his “admirable Babies,” and sends “a kiss to the little darling that laughed at me,” (*M*, p. 305) but the exact date is uncertain. News of the Indian Mutiny had come in May.

⁹NLS, MS 606.461. Carlyle’s “The Opera,” had appeared in *The Keepsake* (London, 1852. pp. 86-92), saying that though “laughter is said to be ‘A heavenly thing,’” men should abhor “phantasms.”

My dear Major Davidson,—In the first place, thanks for your letter from the bottom of my heart! Reading it was like hearing music from one's far-off home in a strange Land! I paid it the compliment of crying over it; what more could I do? It is curious that beside *you*, I always feel *like to cry*, even when I am laughing!... Do you know I was getting sadly afraid that you had abandoned the "*hope*" of writing to me? ... Miss Jess Donaldson [her godmother], too, wrote to me.... I have got a sketch of Sunnybank framed and hung opposite my bed, on the same principle that Ruskin has every night one or other of his splendid Collection of Turner's pictures placed on a chair at his bed-foot; that he "may have something spirit-stirring to open his eyes on the first thing in the morning!" (*M*, pp. 306-7)

She had also gone home with a picture of the local Nungate bridge to join others in her own picture gallery, all associated with "dear Old Long ago."

Will you make me a drawing of *your* house when it is finished? or will you send me your photograph?... When are you coming to London again?... Will you give my love to your wife.... And will you "hope to write" to me now and then?... And so good-bye, and all blessings on you and your belongings (5 November 1857; *M*, pp. 307-9).

David sent her his photograph like a "Valentine," for which she thanked him as:

more than a pleasure to me, coming just when it did; it was a *consolation* under several things.... I... tore it up with small reverence and less hope, and *saw you!*—and gave a scream of joy! like a little girl who had still to learn that all is weariness under the sun!... Still it has a want for me which your real face has not, I cannot by any effort of imagination gather out of that photograph the faintest image of the tall pale Boy that my Mother was so fond of.... For a portrait of Major Davidson at Greenhill, however, I am pretty well satisfied with it. (*D*, 29 Dec. 1857; *M*, pp. 309-10).

By 17 August 1858 she was able to congratulate him on his final move into the "new house," and ask "What will you do or try to do.... Don't forget me, but you won't be able to get that done; *I* shall remember you so often and so kindly! My belief in magnetism goes thus far." (*D*; *M*, 313). Yet David's growing family held no interest for Jane. His sixth baby had horrified her, though she had extracted herself skillfully from the frankness that flew off her nib:

I do think with the merry little boy, that you have a great many children now! But there will be plenty of room for them in the hearts of their father and mother. Certainly if you were to have so many children you could not possibly have had nicer ones or better brought up. (*D*, 28 Dec. 1857, *M*, p. 310).

But even then in an uncharacteristically shaky hand, she had added in post-script, "I say nothing of a 'happy new year,' that sounds such an irony nowadays." (*M*, p. 311). In February 1859 she was able to report on the present of *Adam Bede* from "an unknown Entity, who is pleased to pass by the name of *George Eliot*," a work she guaranteed he would think his time well spent on, "under penalty of reading the dreariest book of sermons you like to impose on me." (*D*; *M*, p. 314).

She still rejoiced in her "dream-like...recollections" of the past, and kept in touch with several of her old Haddington ladies, whose association with her childhood thrilled her, noting her welcome from the aged Misses Donaldson in August 1858, "Oh my own bairn!" "My angel(!)" in their old house with "the same papers, the same carpets, the same everything that I made acquaintance with when I was a child" "It made me feel," she told Thomas, "pretty well up toward heaven." At times she found that other old acquaintances "were conceited and sententious," though not old Mrs. David Davidson (David's aunt), who by contrast, at seventy-eight, had not "a drop of gall in her," and to whom Jane sent a present of an "Indian" hot water "rubber bottle," via Mary Dods. (31 December 1859; NLS, MS 1797,168).

Meanwhile David has already embarked on a new undertaking, in founding the Edinburgh Volunteer Force, for which he was eventually knighted in 1897. Expert riflemen, firing with his telescopic sights, would, he felt, be invincible against an invading army from France. In 1860 Queen Victoria reviewed the Volunteers in Edinburgh. David was colonel; hundreds of thousands cheered; and, as Lord Mckenzie wrote, the entire spectacle comprised "a nation's pith, a nation's boast, / And in their midst their Queen." (*M*, p. 339).

Jane was unmoved. She was beginning to find David a bore. She made him the butt of her sharp pen in letters to mutual friends. When the novelist, Mrs. Oliphant, a complete stranger to Jane, approached her for material for a biography of Irving, Jane commented to her old school-friend William Dods, "Were I as fond as Major Davidson of lecturing on—'The Rifles,' here would be a fine opportunity! as in all my reminiscences of Edward Irving, *myself* plays a distinguished part! But I have either less egotism than the Major, or more wit to hide it." His self-publicity "made me quite poorly." (5 and 29 April 1861, NLS, MS 1797.165,184).

Did the equally egotistical Jane resent David's new enthusiasm? Did he now seem dull and less interested in her? Had he committed the unforgivable male crime already singled out in her *Journal*, of "*setting up*" for himself? Or had their shared nostalgia waned with Lady Harriet Ashburton's death, in 1857, though her marriage was to remain till the end a detached one?—Whatever the reason, the friendship was over. For it is at this point that her surviving letters come to a stop. Davidson mentions a final (undated) letter to her, soon after this, which she sent with a photograph of Kenneth Macleay's miniature of her painted in 1826, saying rather ungraciously "much good may

it do you" (*M*, p. 316).¹⁰ For his part, David simply says that in his last letter "I pressed on her as earnestly and affectionately as I could the importance of making sure work for eternity." He told her that in his dressing-room, he had portraits of many of "my dear friends who had entered into their rest," and that the only living ones represented there were she and Thomas. When looking at hers he was anxious about ever meeting her again "in the happy land": that is to say, while he seems to have been confidently booked for heaven she was for somewhere else. "That letter closed our earthly correspondence," he wrote, though "God grant that...our intercourse may be renewed...where all is joy and peace." (*M*, p. 317).

His *Memories* show a military confidence in approaching people about their religious conversion, determined to bring them to their knees. Yet he realized that Jane was "singularly reticent" on the subject of her beliefs. Even so, he rather oddly thought that his offense was not in trespassing on her private faith but was possibly too "non-aggressive." He consoled himself by thinking that many of her friends (such as Chalmers, Erskine, and Betty Braid) were "faithful and godly." But Jane was not simply "reticent"; she was as earnest an unbeliever as he was a Christian. She admired the sincerity of men such as Erskine and Chalmers, but shared their views no more than her husband did. Biographers mostly fail to make this clear, though some close contemporary readers of Carlyle, such as the Rev. George Gilfillan, could see Thomas's "system" of belief seemed no more than a "flower-dressed corpse" which was "fast becoming putrid" (*CL*, 12, 306, n. 2). In the privacy of her Journal Jane calmly writes (16 May 1856) that "I have no religion." (*CL*, 30, p. 251). It is the same in letters to some of her closer friends, who she knew would not be offended. Just as Carlyle writes in his *Reminiscences* of standing apart from the circle of his family's prayers (p. 82), so we never find either of them willingly enjoying attendance at a church service. And the familiar moving tribute from Thomas on her grave at Haddington has neither Christian word nor symbol. It has been one of the difficulties in understanding Jane that her strong sense of death's finality has not been recognized clearly enough, and that she felt it only fleetingly alleviated by the memory of youthful happiness. It came to be linked with a resentment at having to face a changed adult life which failed to bring her a new family affection. As she wrote in one of the notebooks:

My youth was left behind
For someone else to find;

¹⁰To David it was painted at "the zenith of her beauty," and gave "imperfectly the impression she made on me as a boy.... It is the Jeanie Welsh of the first half of my long life," and in spite of his rebuff, "I cling to it still." (*M*, p. 316).

to which Thomas added after her death, “More than once she repeated this, with a mock sadness that went to my heart” (*Selected Letters*, p. xx).

Yet, even after these last lost letters, she continued to fascinate David; and he tells us how, at some time soon after her death, he wrote to Thomas Carlyle. He had, he said, been “looking over some of your dear lost one’s letters, which are more precious than ever. I have lost in her a true friend. She was one on whom my heart could rely perfectly.” He recalled how they first met, and how the past meant so much to them both. He then switched to a directly Christian appeal to Thomas, though he had begun his letter by quoting *Proverbs* 14:10, “The heart knoweth its own bitterness, and a stranger doth not intermeddle with its joy”; and he reinforced his urgency by enclosing the same essay by Dr. Chalmers that had once converted him. From this he turned to recollections of the almost apostolic Rev. Thomas Erskine, recalling a former occasion when he had tried—on a long walk with Thomas—to probe further into Carlyle’s religious beliefs. They had disagreed about the saintly Erskine, to whose teaching Davidson objected for its unorthodoxy, perhaps because it argued for a belief in God’s universal Fatherly forgiveness. Even so he could see how peculiar it was of him to continue to try converting an obdurate Carlyle, and hoping for a last-minute change of heart at the same time as supposing that God may have meant his biographers to reveal the details of the Carlyles’ unhappy marriage to show that “the gospel according to Carlyle and his followers is utterly unfit to make one happy either here or in eternity.” (*M*, p. 331).

David did not give up easily. In 1872 he called again on the pious Betty Braid, and talked to her about Jane and her father. He promptly sent a letter (19 February) to Carlyle, quoting her dramatic account of the Doctor’s death (*M*, pp. 323-4). But this was simply taken from an imperfectly remembered version that David noted down soon after. What now appears, from other newly-found family papers with a different origin, is an exact copy of Davidson’s letter with Betty’s narrative. Carlyle had asked his niece, Mary Aitken Carlyle, to transcribe it, thus preserving a precise and much fuller account (now given for the first time) which confirms the desperate shock to Jane of losing her father.¹¹

In writing to Thomas (19 February), David explained how he came to call on Betty, and found her sitting by the fire:

On the wall were photographs of her two kind friends [the Carlyles], a coloured print of the old church at Haddington and a photograph of the Tomb.... Vivid were my own recollections of that solemn Sabbath morning when it was whispered that [Dr. Welsh] was dead. Next Sabbath morning, I remembered Dr. Lorimer preached

¹¹These are in private hands; the warmest thanks are due for permission to quote, as well as to Professor Ian Campbell for his help. Carlyle scribbled on Davidson’s letter to him, “ah me! What a unique History of Histories it has been to me! To be repositied in my safest place—*Here*. T. C.” (Noted in sale catalog 70, n.d., item 45, Wilder Books, Elmhurst, Ill.).

the funeral sermon from the text, "Two shall be in the field together, the one shall be taken and the other left."¹²

Dr. Welsh had been to see a patient of his partner Dr. Howden. He returned, "took neither bath nor dinner, but went straight to bed." Next day he was dangerously ill and, as Betty said:

at night Dr Hamilton - "him that wore the cocked hat" came to see him. She minded it weel, for the Mistress wanted to give him a glass of wine, but they could not find the screw, so she just nicked off the neck of the bottle with a knife. As the Doctor was going away, he came through the kitchen, for the sake of quiet, with his cocked hat in his hand, and said to her as he passed, "He's gotten the turn; he's a good patient, but be sure to keep everything quiet." But he was worse in the night; and at six in the Sabbath morning his breath slippet away. And it was just as if we had all been deed thegither; for there was silence for nearly half an hour. And the first thing that broke it was Miss Jeannie, jumping up from the steps of the stair where she had been sitting, and running to the bedroom door, crying she must see her Father. Mr Howden would not let her go in, but took the handle out o' her hand; wi' that she fell down as if she had been dead, and Mr. Howden just took her in his arms, and carried her into the bedroom off the drawing room, and laid her on the bed. [Mary Aitken Carlyle, adds in the margin: "'My Father, I will see my father,' alteration of words directly by Mr Carlyle May 13 1872.."] Her Mother was lying on the sofa in a faint too; and they lifted her up, and laid her beside Jeannie. After a while Betty went into the room, and when Mrs. Welsh saw her, she burst into such a fit of crying that frightened Betty, who ran to Mr Howden; but he said that it was the best thing that could happened to her to get a good greet. "Miss Jeannie did not cry like her Mother; but her lightsomeness went a' and out o' her, and she never was the same lassie again."

And then Betty went on to speak of her old Master, in the fullness of cherished love. She would meet them all in glory. There were bits of things about Mr Welsh that she liked to dwell upon. About a year before he died, she was taking ain a fine Bible in parts,—“there it is on the table,”—and the Dr, when he was going to see the patients in the machine that he had got, for the riding was more than he was able for, used to say, “Betty, please lend me a bit of your bible, one of the four Gospels. I would prefer, *if quite convenient*, for the Doctor was aye a polite man, and mony a read he had o' them.—

Betty has not been to the kirk since you met her “hirpling hame.” But she said the Lord was wonderfully good to them. Two decent women lived next door; they looked as if they had seen better days, and every Sabbath they slipped in at convenient times, and gied her the texts and the heads and a good bit of the sermon.

She said she was a pilgrim and near hand hame, and she spoke of the glory of the Upper Sanctuary, like one whose heart was there. I was deeply impressed as I listened to her words, and watched the play of her features as she spoke of God and Heaven. She traced all her mercies to His gracious hand. Before leaving I took up

¹²Luke 17:36, slightly misquoted.

the Bible she had taken in parts more than half a century ago.... I turned to...that wonderful chapter, the 17th of John, which has been called "the Lord's Prayer," in which the Humanity and Divinity of our lord are so marvelously developed. When I came to that verse, "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe in me through their word," she said, "Oh Maister Davidson, what a wonderful God is our God, He had all his ain before Him, then, till the end o' time, and He was going to suffer for them a'; and he is present now here, and hears a' we are saying,—He's a wonderful God."

Then, after she had spread a clean bit napkin for my knees, we knelt together and thanked God for his kindness to poor sinners like us; and prayed for you and for my wife and children, and all our friends, that we might meet in the better land, and be for ever with the Lord.

Resisting dear Betty's pressing requests that I would "let he gie me something in my mouth," I bade her goodbye, resolved before long to look in upon her again. When I told her that I was going to write to you, she bade me say she was wonderfully well, but frail, her legs bowing just as they liked, like two willow wands....

At the head of his niece's transcript, Carlyle added his own comments in his familiar blue pencil:

(Copy) of a letter from Col/ Davidson to me, detailing the scene at Haddington on the Death of my Ever-dear one's Father, mainly in the words of the good and now venerable "Betty Braid", then and for many years their excellt, wise, faithful, and ever-loving House-Servant, to me in these years a *Unique* in the world.

Col' Davidson, a retired Indian Officer, son of a Haddington neighbour & intimate, is a friendly man, very high in his religious style; otherwise recognizable to me "as much the 'Son of his Father,'" who had quite another dialect ("Factor to the Fletchers of Saltoun" a busy lawyer & etc, and much liked for his kindness of heart).

The "Mr. Howden" of this Letter was first (if I mistake not) Dr. Welsh's Assistant, then (for certn) Junior Partner, and ultimately successor, *whh* he, or his son after him, still is. A practical, faithful, but not otherwise distinguished kind of man.—"Dr. Hamilton, he that aye wore the Cocked hat," was rather from my first student days, and to all the Edinburgh populatn, familiar by the above mark: "Cockie Hamilton" his distinctive appellatn among the lesser medical gentlemen. A most grave, benevolently thoughtful & dignified-looking man; had written on medicine, was in reputable practice, and universally in the best esteem. I never saw a handsomer or more attractive-looking old man, something nobly sad as well as wise and strong, in the look of him; his way of life very still and lonesome. A determined lover of cleanness, above all things, of clear air. Summer & winter he had a current of air flowing through this bedroom, windows more or less open on both sides of his house. In the coldest weather he waked *gloveless*, as in the hottest and all weathers. For the rest, scrupulously faithful to the old-school costume; never seen but in black-loose coat, *do do* knee-breeches, tight black silk stockings, broad silver shoe-buckles, the whole firmly but modestly surmounted by the always bright & soft-looking three cornered hat. In plebeian quarters of the town, might occasionally be seen what seemed a strange dim ghost, or mysteriously half-effaced facsimile of him, cocked hat and all, some poor deserving creature to whom he gave

his cast clothes. Good old man; tenderly attached to Haddington remembrances, he called once at our House in Comely Bank, for the sake of one so very dear to him; he was then *nr* 70, rather hard of hearing; I seemed to have known him many years; but I never spoke with him before or since. How strange, and sad, as if steeped in sorrow and pathetic beauty, is that pool little interview to me now! Gone, gone; so much in these 46 years has gone. —

Besides Dr. Hamilton, and after him as the night *worsened*, there came other distinguished Doctors, especially one other, the great Dr. Gregory,¹³ summoned by express, and driving out in the dark hours, to that mournful Deathbed, where none of them *cd* help, and all were so full of wish to do it. My poor Darling, I believe, forbidden to enter the sickroom, passed most of the night on the staircase. She, once or twice, mentioned Gregory's visit to me, and, once only, the notable fact (*wh* she must have heard from her Mother, who doubtless had sent Betty to bed), that the sick man, from amid the cloudy whirlwind of pain & delirium and fast-thickening shades of death, instantly recognised Gregory, and attempted to salute him by bringing hand to cap. Gregory's look on passing out, I suppose, had taught her to fear the worst. But she was still forbidden to enter,—whence her outburst of attempt when the End t. o. [turn over] itself had come. Ah me, ah me!—She much loved Gregory, as did I always, from the first clear sight I had of his ways & him. A grand son of Nature, beyond and along with all his skill in Art. Thunderous rage lay in him, and pity like a mother's; fearless frank veracity and spontaneity at all times. More like a Norse King than a modern chief of Doctors.

Betty, in her old Cottage at Green-end, once attempted to give myself the Narrative *whh* now follows;—but somebody interrupted; deeply to my regret, for it was grand & solemn to me, beyond what this Davidson record is, as no other earthly narrative can now be.—This was *ABOVE six years ago*. My Darling, never to the end of her days *wd* or *cd* give me any continuous Narrative, but merely this or the other detached trait. To her, and through her to me, it had always something of a *Doomsday* in it.

Enough.

T. C. (3 May, 1872)

Carlyle earnestly prized Betty's "tragic Narrative," thinking it as he told her, "one of the most precious Documents connected with my life." He told David that, though she had once given him an account, "it was nothing like so minute as yours." (*M*, p. 325). The whole scene was precious to David, too, in bringing him closer to Jane; and a further letter in the Davidson papers shows how he suffered in thinking of the contrast between the attractiveness of the Carlyles and their prospects in the next world.

¹³Evidently Dr. George Gregory (1790-1853), grandson of Professor John Gregory (1724-73).

It is the copy of a letter written by Davidson to Henry Larkin,¹⁴ the Carlyles' former next-door neighbor. How he and Davidson came to know each other is not known; but we find David writing after publication of Larkin's highly informative article about the Carlyles.¹⁵ Both men were sincere Christians; both admired the Carlyles; and both were distressed at the revelations of Carlyle's *Reminiscences* and Froude's biography. Larkin himself declared that he had first been drawn to Carlyle as someone "next to my sovereign Lord and Master, Jesus Christ." (p. 31); but he was to realize, without directly saying so, that Carlyle thought his religion too vacuous. (p. 71).

In anticipation of the *Memories*, Davidson confided that:

in my intercourse with them my earnest aim was to get at close quarters with them in the new life that was in them. My anxiety not to offend, and defeat my object by undue precipitancy, perhaps carried me too far on the non-aggressive side. I found Carlyle more accessible than his wife, although in our early association she & I had common ground for deepfelt and tender sympathy. Hence the letters I have from her—almost all in the strain of the published narrative of her visit to Haddington—are in her best and most touching style.

He went on to say that Jane Carlyle's three aunts were his hear neighbors, and that he never visited them without their all praying for Carlyle and Jane; for though Carlyle may have admired the "fruits of true religion...he had dim impressions of their source" in the "love of God in Christ."

Clearly there were at least two sides to Davidson, which we can observe as easily as his contemporaries. Even they, perhaps, did not fully recognize the intensity of his religious conviction, though when his *Memories* were published they found in him (like the *Scots Observer*) someone "with the fire of zeal in one eye and the twinkle of humour in the other." The *Spectator* saw how he showed that "the finest soldiers and keenest sportsmen" were "not seldom made out of the best of men." To the *Scottish Leader* he was "manly, modest and soldier-like." There is even a gentleness about him, in the way in which, as he says himself, his "memory dwelt, like hers, tenderly and lovingly" on the past. (*M*, p. 316). Yet they were irreconcilable.

It is now evident how the end of his heartfelt friendship with Jane came about so suddenly and what it means. When he pressed her about her beliefs she would certainly have taken refuge in silence. There exists several other

¹⁴Henry Larkin (1820-99) was at 6 Cheyne Row from 1862, and greatly helped Carlyle from 1856 with the maps and indexes of *Frederick the Great*. He wrote *Carlyle and the Open Secret of His Life* (London, 1886). Davidson wrote to him (30 December 1886, now *D*), keeping a copy, and replying to Larkin's letter of 22 November.

¹⁵Henry Larkin, "Carlyle and Mrs. Carlyle: A Ten Years' Reminiscence" in the *British Quarterly Review*, 74 (July 1881), 15-45.

letters of a similar kind: one about Thomas Erskine's death and pious words on God's loving forgiveness, others about Jane's aunts in Morningside whose concern with her spiritual welfare so deeply annoyed her. Davidson also managed to persuade Thomas to join him in planting a memorial oak to John Knox in Haddington.¹⁶ In the story of his friendship with Jane these hardly matter, except in slightly enhancing our understanding of Davidson and their association. What we can certainly see is that the lost paradise of their childhood in Haddington was one he wanted to redeem or rediscover in the next world, while, in spite of all their memories and reminiscences she knew, and made clear, that it had irreversibly been left behind.

University of Edinburgh
and
Surrey

¹⁶Several of these are given in *Memories*, others unpublished are in the NLS. One is about his last call on Thomas, in 1880, going over the old subjects, and leading up to David's declaration that he felt like "someone standing in the vestibule waiting to be called into the presence of the King." He added, "many dear ones had gone before." (*D*). There was no answer from Thomas.