

4-1-1968

# Thomas Carlyle and Henry M'Cormac: Letters on the Condition of Ireland in 1848

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### Recommended Citation

Tarr, Rodger L. (1967) "Thomas Carlyle and Henry M'Cormac: Letters on the Condition of Ireland in 1848," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 5: Iss. 4, 253–256.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol5/iss4/7>

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**Thomas Carlyle and Henry M'Cormac:  
Letters on the Condition of Ireland in 1848**

To Carlyle, the English commonwealth was suffering under the throes of despotism and materialism, and nowhere was this fact more evident than in the widespread social injustices present in Ireland in the 1840's. The famine, the degradation of the farmer and laborer, and the political anarchy inherent in the Irish condition were foreboding signs to Carlyle. He could only conclude that Great Britain was disintegrating under the pressures of social and political upheaval, and "Ireland was the weak spot, where the failure was first becoming evident."<sup>1</sup> In an effort to understand better the plight of the Irish, Carlyle visited Ireland in August of 1846, and while there met Gavan Duffy and John Mitchel, the "Young Irelanders" who advocated agricultural reform and tenant-rights.<sup>2</sup> However, in spite of the fact that he admired these "specimens of the best of Irish youth," Carlyle vigorously opposed their insurrectionist tendencies, as is evidenced by the comments in his essays *The Repeal of the Union, Legislation for Ireland, Ireland and the British Chief Governor*, and *Irish Regiments of the New Aera*. As a proponent of centralized authority, Carlyle supported insurrection only when all other means of redress had been exhausted. As he pointed out in *Past and Present*, "all men's hearts ought not to be set against one another; but set with one another, and all against the Evil Thing [Injustice] only. An insurrection that can announce the disease, and then retire with no such balance-account opened anywhere, has attained the highest success possible for it."<sup>3</sup>

Carlyle's essays, especially *The Repeal of the Union* in which he dismisses as impractical any thought of a separation of Ireland from English rule, precipitated a reply from Henry M'Cormac, M.D., of Belfast, who wrote to Carlyle to explain the Irish position. As a physician, philologist, and humanitarian of considerable renown, M'Cormac

<sup>1</sup> James A. Froude, *Thomas Carlyle: A History of His Life in London, 1834-1881*. 2 vols. (London, 1884), I, 396.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of Duffy's and Mitchel's roles in the Irish Reform Movement, see: *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History, 1845-1852*, ed. R. D. Edwards and T. D. Williams (New York, 1957), passim.

<sup>3</sup> *Past and Present*, ed. H. D. Traill (London, 1899), p. 17. Carlyle's support of Governor Eyre of Jamaica, who slaughtered a great number of revolutionaries in 1865, is evidence that he never abandoned this concept.

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was apparently disconcerted with Carlyle's avowal that Ireland must maintain her ties with England. Despite their differences, however, the following letters exchanged between the two men demonstrate their belief that the condition of the common individual, who is the backbone of the country, must be radically improved if Ireland were to survive as a nation.

Belfast, Monday  
[1 May 1848]<sup>4</sup>

Dear Sir: I read with pain, at coming from *you*, the letter in the last Examiner.<sup>5</sup> The produce of this country is sent out of it, in order to/be sold or/ pay the *absentee* landlord, or capitalists who hold mortgages on his estates. Thus, capital in every form is abstracted, *leaving insufficient* for the comfortable subsistence of the people. *Hence, misery, discontent, & wholesale Starvation.* I am persuaded that if our English & Scottish friends would duly weigh these matters, they would perhaps pause ere they recorded so harsh verdict.

The accompanying communication<sup>6</sup> printed for my own convenience was sent to most of the London Journals: I am unaware that it received insertion or attention. The same also of a subsequent, & perhaps more impressive letter addressed to the Times.<sup>7</sup>

I can assure you Dear Sir, that discontent—a discontent that slashing philippics hardly appease—is likewise very rife in the South of Ireland.

I am, Dear Sir, with best kind wishes,

Very faithfully Yrs:  
HENRY M'CORMAC

Although M'Cormac's letter is critical of Carlyle's position concerning the disposition of the Irish situation, Carlyle's response to M'Cormac is conciliatory and sympathetic.

<sup>4</sup>The MS of this letter is in The Victoria and Albert Museum and carries two postmarks: 1 and 3 May 1848. See also: David A. Wilson, *Carlyle at His Zenith* (London, 1927), IV, 39, who makes reference to the letter.

<sup>5</sup>The letter referred to here is Carlyle's "The Repeal of the Union," published in the *Examiner* on April 29, 1848. See: Wilson, IV, 38.

<sup>6</sup>The communication referred to here must certainly be M'Cormac's *Observations on Tenant-Rights* which Carlyle alludes to in his letter to M'Cormac. See Footnote 9.

<sup>7</sup>According to Wilson (IV, 39), "Carlyle wrote to the editor of the *Examiner* and did all he could, with what success does not appear, to get a hearing for MacCormac, who complained that the London papers were taking no notice of a letter he had addressed to Lord John Russell!!!"

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Chelsea, London, 16 May  
1848—<sup>8</sup>

Dear Sir,<sup>9</sup>

I have read your *Observations on Tenant-Rights*, with much approval so far as I can understand the matter;<sup>10</sup> thanks to you for sending this Pamphlet, and for the other friendly things you express to me.

It is greatly to be desired that persons of rank and veracity of mind, acquainted with Irish Agriculture and the nature of things, should consult with all earnestness as to what is now to be done with that unhappy land and people! Evidently there is nothing wanted but a good and just discernment as to this; for if land and people *could* be brought into the true relation to one another, it seems admitted that there are ample resources then for them all; that there need not be, at this hour, one idle man in Ireland who could handle his spade or hoe, and was willing to work.<sup>11</sup> It is a tremendous reflexion that this should be the horrible fact, and that the actual one is what we see!

I think it is a pity the Lord Lieutenant himself, or some other eminent man or body of men in Ireland, did not soon call together by his own summons, a competent number of Practical Rational Persons, such as you, from all quarters of Ireland,—a *real* "Irish

<sup>8</sup> The MS of this letter is in the Duke University Library. It was first published in the *Pall Mall Budget* on December 10, 1891. For further references, see Wilson, IV, 39-40, and Isaac W. Dyer, *A Bibliography of Thomas Carlyle's Writings and Ana* (Portland, Maine, 1928), pp. 182-183.

<sup>9</sup> Wilson, IV, 40, states only that Carlyle "was writing to someone"; however, in the opinion of Professor Charles Richard Sanders of Duke University M'Cormac must indeed be the addressee. However, there appears to be no extant copy of M'Cormac's *Observations on Tenant-Rights* which Carlyle refers to as a "Pamphlet." Professor R. D. C. Black of Queen's University, Belfast, who is presently completing a catalogue of economic pamphlets published between 1750 and 1900 which are now housed in Irish libraries, writes, "I should think it extremely unlikely that any copy of M'Cormac's pamphlet now survives in this country." Sir Ian Fraser, F.R.C.S., Belfast, who has access to the M'Cormac family papers, concludes, "I am certain that the article was Henry MacCormac's, but I was not able to find a copy among all his papers." I wish to take this opportunity to thank the above mentioned gentlemen for their assistance.

<sup>10</sup> Carlyle made his first trip to Ireland in August of 1846 to more fully inform himself on the situation. For a discussion on this matter, see Froude, I, 400, who states, "He had looked on Ireland, and that was all; but he had seen enough to make intelligible to him all that followed. When he came again, three years later, the bubble had burst."

<sup>11</sup> Carlyle considered earnest labor as the salvation of mankind; for "is it not as purifying fire, wherein all poison is burnt up, and of sour smoke itself there is a bright blessed flame!" *Past and Present*, p. 196.

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Parliament", and conversation of the Notables;—and (carefully excluding any Newspaper Reporter, and binding every member to strict discretion or even silence as to what should be said there), ask them, in the name of God that made us all, and bade us all to be just and wise, not iniquitous, negligent and mad, What *can* be done to bring these vanishing workmen into contact with the unfruitful uncultivated or miscultivated Irish land? Does human ingenuity, which has invented steamships and found out the law of the stars, quite fail in this limited terrestrial problem? I will not believe it;—it must be human courage only, and human determination to justice, that fails!—We are getting into fearful conditions on this side of the water, too, if nothing be done. The streets of London itself are getting studded with Irish Beggars more thickly every day, presenting the "Irish Problem", which no legislator will take up, to the British community at large with intimation that they must either solve it, or sink along with it to worse than death!—

Believe me,  
Dear Sir,  
Yours sincerely  
T CARLYLE

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