
Ian Campbell
University of Edinburgh

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BOOK REVIEWS


Subtitled "A Biography of Thomas and Jane Carlyle", this book recounts Carlyle's early life, his meeting with Jane Welsh and their subsequent correspondence and courtship, their married life and the increasingly strained relationship between them which continued until Jane's death in 1866. Carlyle was in Scotland at the time, resting after his enormously successful installation as Lord Rector of Edinburgh University; Jane's death came on him like a thunderbolt, and his subsequent remorse knew no bounds. Jane had been an inseparable part of his life since their meeting in Haddington in 1821. Many of their best letters are to each other for, as Mr Collis rightly remarks, they made up in their letters for the tenderness which was so often missing when they were together. If affection characterises their letters, so does sparkle, for both of them were witty talkers and memorable phrase-makers. Nothing is concealed in these letters, and the opportunity to follow the growth and development of their relationship is a fascinating one.

These letters are a goldmine for the student of nineteenth-century British literature, and they are the backbone of Mr Collis' book. The Carlyles needed each other, in real life or in their correspondence, and the tensions between them which caused this remarkable series of letters also form part of the backbone of Mr Collis' story. The reader will find himself entertained, perhaps enthralled, by the story of the often stormy relationship between two characters of genius.

The reader who is familiar with Carlyle biographies will find little that is new in this one, and little critical insight. This is a chatty book, it does not (with rare exceptions) offer documented fact, or use identified quotations. Where it attempts the critical, the results are often disastrous. Carlyle, Mr Collis tells us, was "... a windbag in the nineteenth-century manner, and the wind has tended to obscure the solid basis upon which he stood — that of mysticism rather than theology." (p.24) On literary subjects, he is dismissed even more roundly. "He thought nothing of poetry. He had once tried to write in verse, and failed, but did not realize that condescension towards poets was unbecoming on his part... He was so defective in literary
judgement that he was unable to discern that Wordsworth could pack into eight classic lines of deathless verse ('A slumber did my spirit seal...') everything that can be felt about death, in comparison with which his own long set pieces on the subject are as delicate as the gait of a hippopotamus." (p.88) On theology again... One gets the impression — perhaps rightly? — that he could not bear to pain his dear old mother, whose piety was such that she thought God kept his eye on human conduct so closely that bad weather in Scotland was due to the exceptional sinfulness of the people." (p.134) How seriously these remarks are meant to be taken is difficult to tell; from the sketchy bibliography at the end it is difficult to tell if Mr Collis is familiar with the works of others who have written on these subjects, notably C. F. Harrold and G. B. Tennyson. Neither is mentioned on p.183 among the books consulted.

This is not a critical work, it is a personal view of a great relationship, and a personal view very definitely biased in favor of Jane and her sufferings in "that long endurance test, her life" (p.15) Early fascinated by what Mr Collis describes as Carlyle's "runic prophecies of woe" (p.21), she sinks in this account deeper and deeper beneath his overpowering influence, sinking into silent suffering. As Mr Collis unhappily puts it, even her husband noted that she sat "mum". "No doubt he inducted munniness, if not numbness." (p.45) Unhappily married (Mr Collis skates round the question of how successfully married on pages 129 and 179-182), she puts a brave face on the world while Carlyle makes everyone suffer every time his stomach rebels. "In the following year, 1860, having again reduced her and himself to a tatter of nerves, Carlyle went off to another friend in Scotland..." (p.161) Finally she dies after terrible suffering, mourned for the next fifteen years by an insensible Carlyle. It is a familiar picture, familiar since Froude, but it leaves out so much; it leaves out Jane's biting tongue, her temper, her fearful sarcasms, her jealousy, her indubitable ability to fight back. She was a genius — as Mr Collis often reminds us — and no suffering angel.

This apart, there are far too many errors and minor irritations. The early chapters are heavily indebted to the Reminiscences, but checking with the letters could have corrected such statements as that on p.14 that no woman ever pursued him, nor he any woman. The enigmatic Miss Merchant of the early letters is forgotten here. It is a simple matter to calculate Carlyle's age on going to University as 13, not 14 (p.5), and to avoid elementary errors such as (p.46) referring to "the post of Professorship for St Andrews University". To say, as Mr Collis does on p.168, that "Whenever he had sought a post, especially in Scotland,
he had been turned down", is simply not true. To write, on p.7, of "Mrs Maclarty (whoever she may have been)", when *The Cottagers of Glenburnie* is mentioned earlier on the same page is another easily avoidable error.

Errors of emphasis and errors of fact mar this book; it is marred more deeply by the absence of original critical or biographical material. This is a personal re-interpretation of a familiar story, no more. To call it, as the publishers do, a book which succeeds "in doing full justice to this intellectual giant and his wife . . . a unique biography for it is the only one to put Carlyle’s complex character in the context of his all-important relationship with Jane Welsh" is only to raise false hopes in the reader’s mind.

**IAN CAMPBELL**
*University Of Edinburgh.*