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Edward Irving, Carlyle and the Stage

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Edward Irving, Carlyle and the Stage

On 2nd January, 1827, Thomas Carlyle sent a copy of his newly-published Specimens of German Romance to his mother in Ecclefechan, adding in his covering letter that "... I have inscribed [it] to my Father, though I know [that] he will not read a line of it." This serious remark touches on a theme of some importance in the study of Scottish literature, namely religious intolerance to the theatre; both Thomas Carlyle and Edward Irving were members of the Burgher Seceder community of Ecclefechan, and products of a system which was characterised by indifference, or even hostility to fiction and the stage.

One celebrated instance of this hostility, of course, was the production of John Home's Douglas in Edinburgh in 1756. Although the author (a minister of the Church of Scotland) received the warmest support from his friends in the moderate clergy while writing and rehearsing the tragedy, opposition from less liberal colleagues was severe, and finally led to his resigning his charge. Generally speaking, there was much hostility of this nature in Scotland in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

The Ecclefechan church which Carlyle and Irving attended in their youth was noted for its high moral ideals, and its strenuous standards of Christian behaviour. "Rude, rustic, bare, no Temple in the world more so," it made little concession to artistic merit inside. Carlyle spoke with the greatest respect of its members, among them his schoolteacher Adam Hope, and especially of his own father James Carlyle, a noted member of the congregation. James Carlyle would not have read a page of German Romance, and in his Reminiscences his son explains this attitude. "My Father's Education was altogether of the worst and most limited. I believe he was never more than three months at any school." This was not to say he was ignorant or uncultivated; on the contrary, Carlyle had the highest respect for his father's self-developed talents. This respect animates the whole of the reminiscences of James


Carlyle. Yet his artistic education was quite thwarted. "Poetry, Fiction in general, he had universally seen treated as not only idle, but false and criminal. This was the spiritual element he lived in, almost to old age." Nor was his father alone in this attitude; Carlyle in old age recalled hearing "novels" being "ridiculously held in horror by a certain hawk-faced 'ruling-elder'" who was quite probably of this congregation. Poetry and fiction were not alone in this ban, for we know that drama, too, shared this fate. Carlyle did not learn of the existence of the man who was to become his favourite author till he went to live in Annan for the years he spent at the Academy there. Here the climate of opinion was more genial than in Ecclefechan, "I never heard of Shakespeare there: my Father never, I believe, read a word of him in his life." This was quite in character with James Carlyle as we know him; once he had the chance to see Robert Burns, the most famous poet in Scotland, who was passing through Ecclefechan. A single curious glance sufficed, and James Carlyle went back to his work.

This childhood experience inevitably affected Carlyle's attitude to the theatre. He never viewed it with great favour, although in his older age he was a close friend of Macready's, and occasionally used a free pass to the theatre which the great actor thoughtfully provided. In Edinburgh he occasionally attended performances (he saw Kean once and during his visit to Paris in 1824 saw the great Talma play in Voltaire's Oedipe. These, however, are scattered references in a long life during which Carlyle devoured forms of artistic experience with restless curiosity, and insatiable appetite for what pleased him. The theatre did not, and it formed a minor part of his artistic experience.

Such, then, is the anti-theatre attitude which surrounded Thomas Carlyle's early years; the same conditions obtained in the case of Edward

7. Reminiscence of Thomas Carlyle to Robert Herdman, the Scottish artist. See my Portrait of Carlyle in the Scotsman, Saturday 12 August 1967, p. 3.
8. This was in 1838. See D. A. Wilson, Carlyle on Cromwell and Others (London, 1925), p. 24. For another decade Carlyle continued to attend the theatre in London occasionally, mainly (Wilson opines) to please his wife. The practice ceased when Macready left the stage in 1851. See Wilson, Carlyle at his Zenith (London, 1927), p. 55.
9. This was in 1824. See Allingham, A Diary, p. 247.
Irving, who (though living in Annan, in an easy-going family) attended worship in the Ecclefechan meeting-house, respected the same elders and ministers (and their attitudes), and must be presumed to have shared in the attitudes which Carlyle drew from the background he has described in such detail. Both went on to the same University education, and thereafter to an extraordinarily close friendship while both were teachers at Kirkcaldy (1816-1818) and afterwards in Edinburgh. Their friendship was one of continuous discussion and exchange of ideas, where each was deeply stimulated and affected by the proximity of a mind as powerful as his own, and sharing the same intellectual roots and education.

Irving early rose to a sensational success as preacher in the Scotch Church in London; his tall handsome person and considerable powers of rhetoric packed the church initially with a fashionable crowd, and later with a steady and admiring congregation. His success there is well known. His attitude to the metropolitan theatre, however, is not.

Some indication comes, indirectly, from Thomas Hood’s satirical engraving, published in 1825, of The Progress of Cant. Hood, a regular theatre-goer and critic of the stage, includes among many canting figures one of a tall statuesque person in clerical garb, holding a banner inscribed “no theatre.” The figure is dressed in antique robes, has long matted black hair, and a notable squint—unmistakably, he is Edward Irving. This seems to be the only possible identification of the figure, so perfectly does it match the known facts about Irving’s appearance and dress.

In The Progress of Cant engraving, we learn from John Clubbe’s Victorian Forerunner: The Later Career of Thomas Hood,\textsuperscript{11} Hood strove to chide “... those who hold reactionary attitudes on matters of national significance: Ireland, the theater, removal of Catholic disabilities, the new London university.”\textsuperscript{12} Why, then, should he have satirised the popular minister of the National Scotch Church in London? In a way it seems ridiculous; Irving, the “great brimstone merchant,”\textsuperscript{13} was the most theatrical of figures himself, dressing with the calculated care of an actor, always conscious of appearance and impact. Certainly he made an impact, usually one of awe (and even terror), though occasionally he caused ridicule among his more sardonic friends such as

\textsuperscript{11} (Durham, N. C., 1968.) “The Progress of Cant” is reproduced opposite p. 18.

\textsuperscript{12} Victorian Forerunner, p. 17.

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Carlyle. His delivery from the pulpit, too, was theatrical, with well-timed pauses, rhetorical climaxes of great power, delivered in a deep and powerful voice. Women frequently became hysterical under the influence of his long and impressive sermons.

Irving's attack on the stage as an institution can best be seen in The Last Days, where his denunciation of the theatre assumes prophetic force. "And again, if from there I turn to look at the character of our theatrical exhibitions, the same love of show, the same gratification of the sight—splendid scenery, wonderful machinery, which now will open to you the mouth of hell, now present you with airy congregations of the gods, and now with the mockery of battle; and, in short, with every thing which addresses the eye, which sparkles, and flames, and flares, and thunders—an endless round of sights, signifying nothing; or, if any thing, something very evil. Those things were wont to be the entertainment of children which now are magnified, and presented unto great children, the men and women who delight to behold them. Compared with this, a comedy, and still more a tragedy, was like a sermon compared with the tricks and harangues of a stage doctor: but into every quarter, and through every department of the community, the lust of the eye, or the love of pleasure, hath led men captive away from the love of God." The attack on the theatre rests on three main accusations. First, the exhibitions of the stage are unworthy of the attentions of grown men and women. Second, they are merely a hollow sham. Third, they draw peoples' attention from matters which should more importantly concern them. The first and the third are remarkably similar to Carlyle's attitude to literature (especially poetry) which did not seem to him to discuss challenging moral problems, but it is in the second of these charges that the similarity to Carlyle (the product of the same background and education) is marked. The feeling that playacting is a hollow sham, a mere mockery of life, emerges most clearly of all in Carlyle's reaction to Paris, the "Bartholomew Fair" of France. Paris, though impressive, was dirty, frivolous, unacceptable. "Every thing seems gilding and fillagree [sic], addressed to the eye [and] not to the touch." Paris, indeed, is "the Temple of Frivolity and


15. A good description is in Hazlitt's The Spirit of the Age: or Contemporary Portraits (London, 1825), pp. 90-91. Interestingly, one of Hazlitt's remarks reads "He has converted the meeting-house into a play-house."

Dissipation."17 Its sin is the same as Irving's charge against the theatre, namely an excessive appeal to the outward eye, unaccompanied by inner worth. The intellectual source of both would appear to be the same, the rigid standards of the Ecclefechan burghers, to whom "Life was 'no idle tale,' nor a Lie, but a Truth, which whoso liked was welcome to come and examine."18

Irving's attacks on the stage were not brushed off as hysterical or bigoted vapourings. They were taken seriously by the metropolitan community to whom the high moral standpoint of the Seceders was something quite alien. And the reaction produced two extraordinary replies in the shape of ephemeral pamphlets, which survive in the library of the British Museum. Closely related (one, indeed, borrows from the other), they seek to blacken the character of one who sought to blacken the reputation of the London stage.

The first, a very cheap and flimsy production, is

_Puritani:al Treason!!/The King/and/Honest John Bull/versus/Parson Irving./Doctor Collyer, and their Proselytes/or/ TRUTH/ Unmasking Hypocrisy, Deceit, and Bigotry! A Satirical Epistle._19

Very much the work of an English nationalist, this piece begins with an appeal by the author to his "Fellow Countrymen" to rise up against "... the ranting hypocritical trash, and nonsensical jargon of a Northern Presbyterian clerical, who has just emerged red hot from the mountains of Caledonia, and established himself in the very heart of our metropolis." Personal abuse is very much the mainstay of this author, who takes pains to mention in his description of Irving "... as ludicrous an obliquity of vision as you could possibly imagine a sput to be placed in," in addition to displaying a crude woodcut of Irving, squint and all, preaching from the pulpit in his wildest dress and attitude. Irving's approach to the theatre is briefly stated: in it are scenes of "diabolical representations," at which no good man will ever be found. Part of the defence is based on the existence of the royal patronage of the stage, which is unaffected by clerical abuse. The Command Performance of _The Hypocrite_ at Drury Lane is cited as a recent example of the royal disregard of puritanical nonsense, while George III is


18. _Reminiscences_, p. 8. This theme is developed in H. Shine, _Carlyle's Fusion of Poetry, History, and Religion by 1834_ (Chapel Hill, 1938).

19. (London: the British Museum catalogue conjectures the date as 1825, but the description of Irving as "recently arrived" makes this possibly a year or two too late. Irving went to London in 1822.) Printed and Published by W. Chubb, 21, Wych-Street, Strand.
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affectionately remembered as ". . . not only an encourager of religion, but an admirer and encourager of the Drama, and all its profession." By juxtaposing the King's religious fervour and his love of the theatre, the author is able to give the theatre an added respectability. This is one line of defence; the other is an enumeration of the list of literati who have supported the theatre by writing for it, or defending it. Johnson, Addison and Young are chief witnesses for the defence here.

The author of Puritanical Treason!!, however, does not rise much above the level of abuse. His purpose is to throw credit on the stage by throwing discredit on Irving. A more accomplished production is Shakespeare, and Honest King George, Versus Parson Irving, and the Puritans; or, Taste and Common Sense, Refuting Cant and Hypocrisy. By an Actor. 

This pamphlet has as illustration a coloured plate by Robert Cruickshank, featuring Irving in his pulpit in full flow of eloquence. The pulpit is labelled "Hatton Garden" Puritanical Gasometer exploded," and Irving is crying, "Ye followers of Shakespeare you'll all be damn'd." The artist adds a very interesting detail by making the precentor, in the subordinate position beneath the minister, add "Yes, you'll all be Damn'd because you are not of the elect." Whether this is merely a general attack on Irving's beliefs, or whether it is an oblique reference to Hogg's Confessions of a Justified Sinner, published in the same year as the pamphlet, we cannot tell. Shakespeare and his supporters, however, seem little troubled by this eruption of hostility. The plate shows a placid George IV sitting in a theatre box opposite the pulpit, a bust of Shakespeare in his hand emitting a dazzling light which blinds Irving. The pillars of the box are labelled "Religion," "Hope," "Faith," and "Charity." In tone the pamphlet is both milder and more subtle; at the point of enumeration of famous supporters of the stage, however, it is identical to Puritanical Treason!!, verbatim. "Surely Johnson, the rigid, the austere, the censorious Johnson, was anything but a latitudinarian. . ."—the words are the same in both works. This second pamphlet, however, lays stress in its argument on the theatre as an institution of civilised life, as one of the "elegant relaxations of polished life," which now " . . . have been placed under the ban of methodistical prescription," however unscriptural this ban may be. The stage is offered for consideration as a moral phenomenon; in Shakespeare's major


21. This was the site of the Caledonian Chapel which had invited Irving to be their minister in 1821; after the very great rise in numbers which followed the rise of Irving to fame, the congregation built a new and much larger church in Regent Square.
plays, for instance, "No where is virtue arrayed in more imposing and attractive attributes—no where are the ravages of unlicensed passion depicted in more appalling colours." Actors, too, are invited to consider themselves as "... a profession ... well calculated to promote the best interests of morality," while the drama is summed up as "the queen and mistress of the imitative arts," an innocent recreation, a scene for inculcating morality in the audience, even (and here the author is tiring a little in his inventiveness) as the training-ground for coming generations of skilled elocutionists.

Neither argues the case with Irving. Both are content to abuse his person, and present arguments, more or less relevant, intended to discredit his case, to the level of (in the words of the second pamphlet) "The Canting puritan and indignant methodist." Yet they give, irrespective of the flimsiness of their case, an indication of the anti-Scottish feeling in London theatrical circles in London in the 1820's, and an indication of Irving's incredible popularity in England as well as in Scotland. If Irving chose to attack the stage as a degenerate institution, people took notice.

And yet the attack was not fundamentally justified, for Irving's position is misjudged. Both Carlyle and Irving admired Shakespeare, Irving particularly being the original source for Carlyle's close acquaintance with, and admiration for the writers of Shakespeare's generation. Carlyle admits this when he makes his important tribute to the part Irving played in the formation of the style now immortalised as Carlylean. Carlyle is objecting to an early biographer who attributed it to Jean Paul Richter. "Edward Irving and his admiration of the Old Puritans & Elizabethans. ... played a much more important part than Jean Paul on my poor "style"; and the most important part by far was that of Nature, you would perhaps say, had you ever heard my Father speak, or very often heard my Mother and her inborn melodies of heart and of voice!" Both men had their own unforgettable style, securely grounded in an inherited tradition of family speech, and developed in the close and intellectually demanding community which has been de-

22. Large city churches in Edinburgh were packed to overflowing to hear him preach at 6 a.m., while in his native Annandale he could attract crowds of 7000 or more. ("Senex," Irving in Dumfries.) Other biographical details may be found in A. L. Drummond's general study, Edward Irving and his Circle (London, [1937]).

23. This is part of Carlyle's commentary to the biographical notice of himself by Althaus published in Unione Zeit (Leipzig, 1866). The text, and Carlyle's marginalia, are preserved in the National Library of Scotland.
scribed as existing at Ecclefechan in their formative years. Shakespeare and the Elizabethans played their own important part in the strenuous self-education by which both rose to fame. It is ironic that the same background of ideas should have left both indifferent to, or hostile to the medium Shakespeare chose for the presentation of his art, and that this attitude should have drawn on to Irving's head the vicious, but fortunately ephemeral, hostility of the London pamphleteers.

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