11-15-2014

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DAVID MASSON AND THOMAS CARLYLE

Ian Campbell

On April 2, 1866, Thomas Carlyle stood up in the Music Hall, George Street, to give his Inaugural Address as Lord Rector of his *alma mater*, the University of Edinburgh, a position to which Edinburgh’s students had elected him the previous year. It was fitting that among the dignitaries who accompanied him at his triumph was David Masson (1822-1907), who since 1865 had been Professor of Rhetoric and English Literature. Masson spent a good deal of time with Carlyle and arranged a dinner party for the newly installed Rector in the first flush of the success of his address, and it is to Masson (as well as to the newspaper accounts of the time) that we owe much of our knowledge of the day’s events and their aftermath.\(^2\)

Their acquaintance had gone back a long time: indeed, Masson appears in the *Carlyle Letters* as early as 1843, when we find Jane writing to Thomas (who was on holiday in Scotland at the time) of her first

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\(^1\) This essay is an edited (and shortened) version of a lecture given in Edinburgh on November 15, 2012, marking the 40th volume of the Duke-Edinburgh Edition of the Carlyle Letters, and Carlyle’s association with the University.

meeting in London with one David Masson, then a very raw young man from Aberdeen, whose crowded career already encompassed being briefly editor of the *Banner* (a Free Kirk weekly) and then a spell as freelance in Edinburgh, writing for *Frasers* and the *Dublin University Magazine*, before he made his decision to move to London in 1847 to try his luck as a freelance there. Masson had long looked forward to the day he met Carlyle for in his Edinburgh days, before his first visit (in 1843) to London, he had bought a copy of *Heroes and Hero-Worship* and

I read the book, I remember, with great avidity, chiefly in walks to the Corstorphines and Craigcrook, and was so interested, and roused by it, that I wrote to my friend Alexander Bain in Aberdeen . . . describing the extreme novelty of its character, and advising him by all means to procure a copy.  

Alexander Bain and others stimulated the young Masson’s interest and when he allowed himself two weeks’ holiday in London “my first visit to the great capital” he went with John Robertson, another literary friend, to Chelsea and had, he said, “a most kind reception by Mrs. Carlyle, and of a talk with her alone, for more than an hour, in the little upstairs drawing-room.”  

Little did the young Masson know that Jane’s incomparable skill in satiric portraiture would have captured him so deftly:

Robertson brought here last night to tea a youth from Aberdeen of the name of Mason— —A newspaper Editor poor thing, and only twenty!—he is one of your most ardent admirers and imitators [sic]—Robertson said “he had come up to town to see the lions and so he had brought him to me”. . . He is a better “speciment” of Aberdeen than I ever saw before—an innocent intelligent modest affectionate-looking creature— I quite took to him—when he went away, which he seemed to do very unwillingly, I said that he must come and see us when he returned to London and I hoped to make up then for his present disappointment by introducing him to you—to which he answered with a cordial grasp of my hand “Eh! What a real shame in ye to say that”.

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4 *Memories of London in the 'Forties* 15-35.
Masson was to become a frequent visitor at Cheyne Row over the decades, returning the following year for his first face-to-face meeting with the great man himself, and “from that evening, early in 1844, I was to know Carlyle well, and increasingly well.” The result is a series of the most personal and revealing accounts of Carlyle to survive: *Carlyle’s Edinburgh Life* (1881), *Carlyle: the address delivered by David Masson ... on unveiling a bust of Thomas Carlyle in the Wallace Monument* (1891), *Edinburgh Sketches & Memories* (1892), *Memories of London in the 'Forties* (1908), some parts of *Memories of Two Cities: Edinburgh and Aberdeen* (1911), and most fully of all *Carlyle, Personally and in his Writings* (1885). Masson plainly grew increasingly intimate with the old man, and witnessed both his 1866 triumph in Edinburgh and its sad aftermath. Jane, too unwell to accompany Thomas to Edinburgh, had died suddenly in London while Carlyle was still in Dumfries-shire, holidaying after all the excitement:

Most memorable of all was the visit to Edinburgh in April 1866, for his installation in the Rectorship of Edinburgh University. Of that visit, perhaps the crowning glory of his old age, and reconnecting him so conspicuously with Edinburgh at the last, but saddened for him so fatally by the death of his wife in his absence, I have not a few intimate recollections; as also of those later, almost furtive, visits now and again in his declining autumns, to his eightieth year and beyond, when the real purpose was pilgrimage to his wife’s grave in Haddington Church, and he would saunter, or almost shuffle, through the Edinburgh streets as a bowed-down alien, disconsolate at heart, and evading recognition.

In 1885, his memories of Carlyle fresh, he put on paper his conviction of his entire fitness to write about Carlyle with authority:

My own acquaintance with Carlyle dates from as far back as the early months of 1844, when he was still only in his forty-ninth year. He was then a man of tall erect figure, over five feet eleven inches in height, very lean and spare, with close-shaven lips and chin (for the fashion of beards had not then come in), and with a complexion of such bilious ruddy as you sometimes see in a Scottish farmer who is much in the open air . . . I saw him enter on his fifties, and pass out of these into his sixties, and again out of his sixties into his seventies, and so till he was a tottering octogenarian, his lean figure latterly much shrunk from its

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6 *Memories of London in the 'Forties*, 44.
7 *Edinburgh Sketches and Memories* (Edinburgh: A. & C. Black, 1892), 358.
original stature with the stoop of advancing age, his hands shaking with palsy, and his hair and beard . . . gradually turning to gray, though so very gradually that it seemed as if his head would never grow quite white. . . All in all, few persons now living can have seen more of Carlyle that I did, or can have known him better. In happier times, Masson had been able to call on Carlyle, then at the peak of his powers, for a recommendation for the chair of English at the University of London – which certainly did the job, for Masson was appointed to the London chair and held it till 1865 when he was appointed to the Regius Chair in Edinburgh. When the London post was advertised, Carlyle was on one of his testy research trips to Germany in search of material for his enormous history of Frederick the Great, but he took time off to write warmly for Masson.

I have had the honour of some considerable acquaintance with Mr. Masson for a good many years, and am well pleased to have this opportunity of testifying my high sense of his merits under all points of view. It is my clear opinion nobody can know him without feeling that he is a man of truly superior qualities, calculated at once to secure good success in his undertakings, and the love of his fellow-creatures by the way. A man of many attainments in scholarship and literature; and with a natural fund of intelligence, delicate, strong and deep, such as belongs to very few, even among scholars and men of letters. A man of beautiful and manly character withal; ardent, vivid, veracious, and yet altogether quiet, discreet, and harmonious; likely to be distinguished, I should expect, at once by love of peace, and by felicity and steadiness in doing work. For he is full of what one might call central fire, which is singularly well covered in, and tempered into genial warmth, of many useful and beautiful kinds.

Mr. Masson's Writings, chiefly criticisms and essays in reviews hitherto, are beginning to be well known in the world. Some of them I could point to,—especially to one on Milton, written several years ago,—as among the best, if not even as the very best, that British Literature exhibits at present. If there is not promise of excellence in Mr. Masson, I know not where, among our young men of letters, to look for it in these coming years. In

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8 Carlyle Personally and in His Writings: Two Edinburgh Lectures (London: Macmillan, 1885), 46-8. The book reprints two addresses to the Edinburgh Philosophical Institution in 1885, and notes in passing that from 1868 to his death Carlyle accepted the presidency of that Institution, though he visited it (in Masson’s company) only once.
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fine, if the Electors are not quite unusually fortunate in candidates, I think they surely may do well in nominating such a man to the Chair of English Literature in the London University; a post for which, I should expect, only few could be as fit.


While holding the London chair, Masson had astonishingly found time from 1858 to 1865 to edit the recently-established Macmillan’s Magazine. “Masson—a respected man of letters from Aberdeen” had been an unexpected choice of editor for Alexander Macmillan’s new magazine, where he worked with an early group “drawn together by the need they all felt to do something to ameliorate the lot of the London working classes—exploited, subjected to appalling living conditions, and generally deprived of significant power.”  Memories of London in the ’Forties makes it clear that Masson rapidly became part of a gifted and energetic coterie of literary figures, and in “Our Club” he paints a vivid picture of their discussions, and the wealth of talent from which he could draw contributors and reviewers—contributors who came to include Carlyle himself. Alexander Macmillan was a strong-minded proprietor, and George Worth notes that “Although Macmillan made an elaborate show of deferring to his editors, there is much evidence that it was he who ultimately determined the magazine’s contents.” Masson and Macmillan worked harmoniously together with very few disagreements, and Professor Worth notes “the long and friendly association between the two men, for theirs was clearly the sort of relationship that occasional differences cannot permanently spoil”.  

During his London years of editorship, before his move to the Edinburgh chair in 1865, Masson was a regular visitor at Chelsea, as Carlyle later on was to become a regular visitor to the Massons’ Edinburgh home in Regent Terrace, a welcome guest even when he (in

9 TO THE COUNCIL OF UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, LONDON (1 October 1852); quoted from Collected Letters, 27: 312-13
11 Worth, 22.
12 Worth, 24. Professor Worth notes “this equally notorious piece was also out of line with the opinions that then characterized most of the contributions to Macmillan’s, which were strongly pro-Reform and pro-democracy” (73). Macmillan’s under Masson also accepted Carlyle’s squib “Ilias (Americana) In Nuce,” described by Professor Worth as “quintessentially Carlylean if atypically terse” (30).
absent-minded old age) left his mackintosh behind. On 30 August 1879 Masson wrote from 10 Regent Terrace that he would be delighted to see Carlyle in Edinburgh, buoyed up by “the prospect of your visit, when almost all Edinburgh is away.” After the episode of the coat left behind:

Your mackintosh is sent off to the Railway Station, in a parcel addressed to you. It had escaped notice, till your note came this morning. We were all glad to have that note, & to know of your safe journey

Ever yours with affection
David Masson.

The correspondence bespeaks unforced friendliness.

The sequence of letters between them in the National Library of Scotland (MS 1768-9) offers a valuable illustration the regard Masson felt for Thomas Carlyle, who was (as Masson wrote) “the author of Sartor Resartus a book which was to me as the beginning of a new life.” While Masson was editor of *Macmillan’s Magazine*, he had been willing to encourage the older man in the completion of *Shooting Niagara*, which was eventually published in *Macmillan’s Magazine* in August 1867, and then in book form (“With some Additions and Corrections”) by Chapman and Hall in 1867. Although occasionally *Macmillan’s* had printed editorial comment distancing itself from more extreme political views, no such editorial demurral accompanied the most famous article on the Parliamentary reform question in *Macmillan’s*: Thomas Carlyle’s strident response to the 1867 Reform Act, ‘Shooting Niagara: And After?’ (August 1867). Although other writers in the *Magazine* expressed various shades of apprehension about the emergence of ‘democracy’, none was anything like as shrill as Carlyle in his dire predictions of the consequences that would follow the resort to ‘new supplies of blockheadism, gullibility, bribeability, amenability to beer and balderdash, by way of amending the woes we have had from our previous supplies of that bad article.’

It is some indication of the closeness between the two that even after the Rectorial address, where he witnessed the strain of the occasion on the

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13 National Library of Scotland MS 1769:231.
14 NLS MS 1769.230
15 NLS MS 1769.321.
old man, Masson was urging him to turn the force of his writing on “... the vocal classes... now that the Niagara is shot”:

How far might they use the existing machinery – Press, Pulpit, and Platform? – Forgive all this. I fancy I have need to ask forgiveness for having named to you the last ugly object.... There are many to whom your words might bring light.  

Carlyle, who had loathed public speaking all his life (though his lectures, particularly *On Heroes*, had enjoyed considerable public success), would certainly not rise to this bait. Masson himself was hardly an inspiring public speaker but he had obviously been impressed by the extraordinary force of goodwill expressed to Carlyle on the occasion of his rectorial address.

The correspondence further shows Masson’s tact in breaking the news to Carlyle of John Hill Burton’s appointment to the position of Historiographer Royal of Scotland (an honour for which Carlyle’s name had been a front-runner), after the appearance of the controversial *Shooting Niagara*: “After that it was felt that the proposed offer to you could hardly be made with comfort on either side.” Masson himself, in his old age, was to be holder of that office. On a happier note, a present of photographs from Thomas Carlyle himself brings out a very personal thanks: the photos “and the note that came with them is more touchingly precious to me than I can tell.”

The surviving letters are supplemented by his recollections in *Carlyle Personally and in his writings*, in particular his account of the jovial dinners which Carlyle enjoyed to the full after the Rectorial visit, as a corrective to the notion (which the *Reminiscences* would certainly give) that it was a sad and gloomy time.

It is plain that Masson formed a real bond over decades with Carlyle, both before and after the Rectorial, and on one of their walks round Chelsea he elicited from his hero, and noted down, a confession which is startling in its self-criticism.

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18 NLS MS 1768:287-8.
20 NLS 1769:196.
21 See particularly *Carlyle Personally and in His Writings*, pp. 27-9. Meeting John Gordon, an intimate from Comely Bank days, Masson asked Gordon (then a very old man) what Carlyle had been like in the early days of his marriage. Was he morose and unsociable? “Not a bit of it, not a bit of it,” was the immediate and emphatic reply: “the pleasantest and heartiest fellow in the world, and most excellent company” (p. 44).
From the mystery and the splendour of physical infinitude he passed to what ought to be the rule of human behaviour, the conduct of one’s own spirit, in a world framed so majestically and so divinely. There was too much jesting in it, he said, too much of mere irony and of laughter at the absurd, too little of calm religiousness and serious walk with God. In speaking of the over-prevalence of the habit of irony, sarcasm, and jesting, he used a sudden phrase of self-humiliation which I have never forgotten. ‘Ah! and I have given far too much in to that myself—sniggering at things’: these are the exact words.  

Masson himself, it is plain, was no sniggerer.  

A workaholic as a scholar, Masson is now most often remembered for his monumental seven-volume *Life of John Milton: narrated in connexion with the Political, Ecclesiastical, and Literary History of His Time* (London: Macmillan, 1859-1880), and he also edited a long-standard three-volume edition of Milton’s poetry. His long commitment to research on the most prominent puritan-radical poet of the seventeenth century perhaps owed something to the influence of Carlyle. Carlyle had expressed admiration for Milton, not only in his lecture “The Hero as Man of Letters,” but as early as his essay on “The Life of Friedrich Schiller” (1825). More significantly, Masson’s documentary approach in the biography echoed the similar method of Carlyle’s Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell.  

There is some indication that as a professor Masson put more emphasis on editing and writing than on his teaching. Winifred Bryan Horner has commented that Masson “obviously dictated his lectures, which, in the students’ notes ... appear to have been delivered unchanged for some thirty years.” The surviving student notes in Edinburgh University Library seem to reflect careful, methodical introductions to rhetoric and literary history rather than inspirational lecturing. In notes of Masson’s class taken late in his career, Sir James S. Flett found him by that time an old tired man and his class “a poor show.” Occasionally, Masson seemed to waken up and he would spout a few lines of Shakespeare or Milton with great gusto and to the hearty approbation of his students.  

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22 *Memories of London in the ’Forties* (Edinburgh and London, 1908) p.82.  
about Britain in Puritan times and he never got much further in his treatment of the subject. He was evidently a man of great scholarship and industry, a master of many parts of the history of England and Scotland, but he seemed to me to have exhausted himself by his prodigious labours and neither in his lectures nor in his writings did he show much originality or critical ability. He was, however, a charming old man, a picturesque figure, and honestly did his best to make his lectures instructive, if not interesting.²⁴

Plainly Masson was impressed by Carlyle’s approach to reading and the history of literature. *On the Choice of Books*, as the published title implies, is an exhortation to students to read, read widely, read for themselves.

It remains, however, practically a most important truth, what I alluded to above, that the main use of Universities in the present age is that, after you have done with all your classes, the next thing is a collection of books, a great library of good books, which you can proceed to study and to read. What the Universities can mainly do for you, – what I have found the University did for me, is, That it taught me to read, in various languages, in various sciences; so that I could go into the books which treated of these things, and gradually penetrate into any department I wanted to make myself master of, as I found it suit me.²⁵

To do Masson justice, he made a notable contribution to the just-emerging provision for the education of women, initially through night classes:

> we persevere in the guilt of a great injustice, and we dawdle on as a nation at but half our possible nobleness and strength until the needs of women’s education are met.²⁶

Writing in his *British Novelists and their Styles* (Cambridge, Macmillan, 1859), even before his move to Edinburgh, Masson had protested against the prevalent fashion of decrying women novelists:

> For my part, I know not a more unmanly outcry than that in fashion against ‘strong-minded women.’ Either the phrase is an

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²⁴ Sir J. S. Flett, notes on his student days, Centre for Research Collections, Edinburgh University Library, MS Dc6.116.
²⁵ *Inaugural Address at Edinburgh, April 2, 1866 by Thomas Carlyle* (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1866), 12.
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... irony which repetition has turned into a serious fallacy . . . or the phrase is cruel and mean.27

Masson also devoted a great deal of praise to Jane Austen:

I have known the most hard-hearted men in ecstasies with them; and the only objection I have heard of as brought against them by ladies is, that they reveal too many of their secrets.28

He also brought a considerable number of Scottish authors into his lectures as illustrations of both ancient and recent writing, at a time when many of them had not yet reached the status of classics. He emphasized the Scottish writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and his surveys of both criticism and creative writing included Scottish as well as English authors. Even before taking the chair at Edinburgh, Masson had delivered lectures to the Edinburgh Philosophical Institution which included a strong section, occupying the whole third lecture, on Edinburgh and its influence on Scottish writing:

What Burns then felt towards Edinburgh I believe that all educated Scotchmen, or all Scotchmen possessing anything of that amor patriae with which Scotchmen generally are credited, felt also in varying degree. Not an Ayrshire Scot alone, but an Aberdeenshire Scot, or a Scot from the west coast, or a Scot from Caithness or the remote Orkneys, must have regarded Edinburgh as the seat of his country’s most memorable traditions, the centre of her general life, the pride of her common heart.29

Already in 1843, as we have noted, Masson was aware of Carlyle, and aware of the fact that here was a notable Scot writing in far-off London. In writing about British novelists he makes an oblique reference, perhaps to Carlyle, perhaps to Carlyle’s German-influenced criticism and translation, when he writes that “the ‘North British Literature’” has advanced, with no diminished productiveness, during the seventy intervening years. As before, Scotland has still spared, and perhaps in greater numbers than before, many of her sons for the service of general British Literature, as organized more especially, and by commercial necessity, in London.30

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27 David Masson, British Novelists and their Styles (Cambridge: Macmillan, 1859), 180. Explaining the prevalence of Scottish themes in the third lecture, Masson noted “With respect to one of the Lectures—the third—it might even be obliging if the reader were to remember specially that it was prepared for an Edinburgh audience” (v).
28 Masson, British Novelists, 189.
29 Masson, British Novelists, 159.
A possible reference to Carlyle:

Our philosophy begins to deepen itself, affected partly by the
deeper social questions which the French Revolution had forced
on the attention of mankind, partly by the quiet diffusion among
us, through such interpreters as Coleridge of ideas taken from the
rising philosophy of Germany. 31

Certainly in his lecturing in Edinburgh, Masson was happy to use Carlyle
(in his lectures of 1882-3) in quoting examples of energy in writing (the
translations of Richter, the Diamond Necklace), and as an exemplar of the
prose lyric. 32 Uninspired he may have seemed to the student, but his
survey of literature does show a lifetime’s extensive reading and a desire
to give the students a wide view of their subject.

In instancing Carlyle among recent authors, Masson set an example
which his Edinburgh successors were to follow – incorporating Thomas
Carlyle in overall discussions of British literature, acknowledging the
centrality of his influence. His immediate successor George Saintsbury,
most prolific and well read of popular writers as well as deep scholar, is
particularly interesting as someone who grew up just after the zenith of
Carlyle’s reputation, and lived to see that reputation destroyed by the
controversy following Froude’s publication of the Reminiscences and the
4-volume Life. Thus, Saintsbury wryly remarks, in 1923:

I believe it will be generally admitted that there is nowadays no
more distinct sign of a man’s having reached the age of the fogey,
and of his approaching the fossil stage of intellectual existence
than the fact that he has an ardent admiration for Carlyle. 33

In the 1920s, Saintsbury wrote, liberal writers had come to regard Carlyle
as “a kind of hippopotamus, ravaging and trampling the fair fields of
promise,” and the astonishing thing for Saintsbury is that “no reaction of
the usual kind has come to his rescue”.

Though Carlyle himself had had thoughts of a University chair in
early life, he found his fame as an independent scholar and it is
particularly interesting to see his willingness to open friendship with
David Masson, to forward Masson’s career, to accept his friendship and
hospitality in old age. Plainly it was more than a polite friendship, for

31 Masson, British Novelists, 176.
32 Andrew David Sloan, notes on Masson’s course on rhetoric and belles lettres,
Centre for Research Collections, Edinburgh University Library, MS Dc5.100-2.
33 George Saintsbury, “Carlyle,” in The Collected Essays and Papers of George
208).
Masson’s published work made clear that he shared the admiration for wide and humane reading which Carlyle identified as the main result of his own University education in Edinburgh. The notes from Masson’s lectures preserved in Edinburgh University Library show a very wide coverage, a willingness to draw in many authors to illustrate a general point, and a sensitivity to Scottish and occasionally American literature as well as to English. More important, as Sir James Flett noted, they also give an occasional glimpse of the earnest enthusiasm which no doubt had endeared Masson to Carlyle, as it had done to Jane, in the 1840s when the friendship began.

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