CARLYLE'S ESSAY ON BURNS

DRACASS

TWENTIETH CENTURY TEXT-BOOKS

CARLYLE'S ESSAY ON BURNS

EDITED
WITH INTRODUCTION, NOTES, AND
A SELECTION OF BURNS'S POEMS
BY

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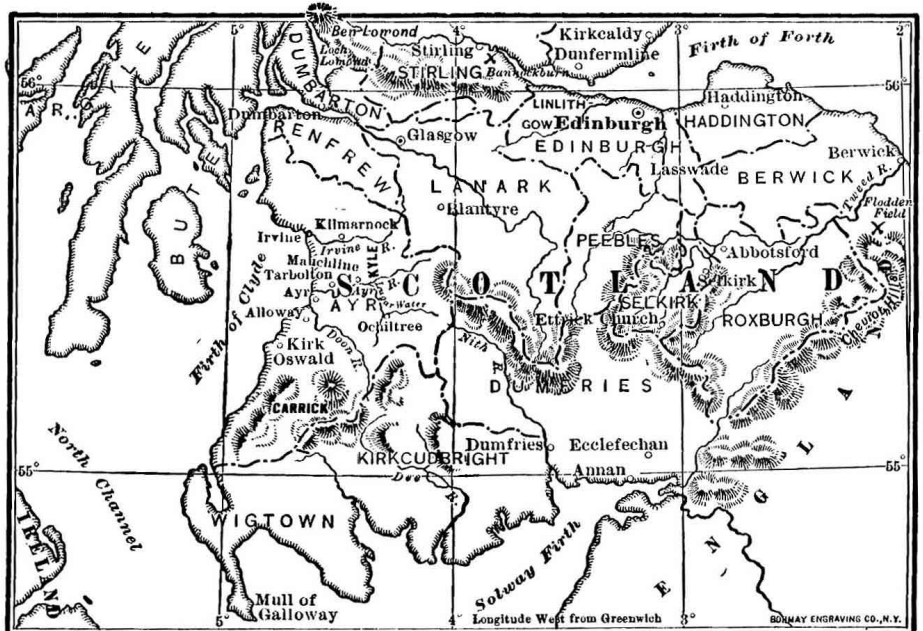

THE LAND OF CARLYLE AND BURNS.

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INTRODUCTION.

THOMAS CARLYLE.

HIS LIFE.

His Youth and Training.—Thomas Carlyle was born at Ecclefechan, Annandale, in the shire of Dumfries, Scotland, December 4, 1795. His father was a stone mason—his house, built with his own hands, was considered the best in Ecclefechan. Carlyle's mother was, like most women of her class, without "schooling"; but she was an intelligent woman of great force of character. After her son left home she learned to write that she might keep in correspondence with him. The family life of the Carlyles was the simple, sturdy, God-fearing life of the better class of Scotch peasantry; and they had the Scotch ambition to see their boy in the ministry.

The education of Thomas Carlyle began at home: his father taught him arithmetic, and his mother reading (for she had read the printed Bible daily). He continued his studies at the village school, and later at the "doleful and hateful Academy" at Annandale; and at fourteen he entered the University of Edinburgh. Here he spent as much time as possible in reading, declaring that the library was the best part of the University. When he had finished the course, he did what his parents wished him to do, without other pleasure in the choice: he registered as a non-resident divinity student.

Then for several years he taught, first at Annandale and later at Kirkcaldy, to get money to pay for his course in theology. To Carlyle everything in life—every belief and every act—was of tremendous significance; and he himself did nothing lightly. Now, as he said, a "voice came to me saying, 'Arise and settle the problem of thy life!' And so I entered into my chamber and closed the door. . . . Doubt, Fear, Unbelief, Mockery, and Scorn were there; and I arose and wrestled with them." It seems that Carlyle had lost his hold on the old unquestioned religious beliefs and had not yet found anything to take their place. At least he knew that he was not in accord with the doctrine of the Scottish Church, and turned from theology to law.

He went to Edinburgh. He had hoped to get some literary work; but, so far as known, the only writing that he did during these years was on articles for the *Edinburgh Encyclopedia*. However, he read widely in the University library—Spanish, French, and German, romance and history. Also, he tutored Charles Buller, the son of a prominent London family. It was through this friendship and that with his old comrade Edward Irving, now a rising London clergyman, that opportunity came for him to visit both London and Paris.

His German Translations.—In London, in 1824, Carlyle met the editor of the *London Magazine*, who made him an offer for some translations from the German. Thus began his connection with the literary life of London, and his special work in German literature.

At the time that Carlyle made these translations the greatest era of German literature was passing almost unnoticed by English men of letters. Few of them even could have read easily a page of Goethe or Schiller or Wieland. Carlyle not only had mastered the German language, but

had comprehended the German mind. He had himself the German's insight—the tendency and the ability to look deeper than the surface, to discern an underlying principle where others see none, and to interpret events by their moral significance. Writing of his German studies he says, "I could tell you of the new heaven and the new earth the study of German literature has opened up to me." Probably he was the only English writer of his day ready to open it up to his countrymen.

Some of his papers for the *London Magazine* he afterwards developed into a *Life of Schiller*, which brought him warm praise from Goethe, then an old man, the last of the great group of German writers. Before 1825 he had translated also Goethe's *Apprenticeship of Wilhelm Meister* and a series of shorter tales from Goethe, Richter (who died in 1825), Tieck, Musäus, and others. He had written besides a number of criticisms, including one on the first part of Goethe's *Faust*, and had translated Legendre's *Geometry and Trigonometry*, to which he had added notes and a new chapter.

At Craigenputtock.—It was in 1826 that he married Jane Welsh and went to Edinburgh to live. But Carlyle cared little for the social life of the city and needed quiet for his studies; so two years later they moved to Craigenputtock, a small property belonging to Mrs. Carlyle, fifteen miles from Dumfries.

Up to this time, despite the amount he had written, Carlyle had not become popular. Like all leaders of thought, he had to create his own public. Englishmen were not yet in sympathy with his subjects; his point of view towards everything in the universe seemed to differ from theirs; and his manner of expression was not at all what had been accepted as polished literary style. But when he had placed some of his articles with Francis

Jeffrey, then editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, the foremost literary periodical in Great Britain, he seemed a step nearer to recognition. Most of the articles now printed in the three volumes of his *Miscellanies* were written at Craigenputtock and published first either in the *Review* or in *Frazer's Journal*. In this latter magazine appeared the series of papers called *Sartor Resartus*, which by its originality and force drew to Carlyle the attention of the world and marked the beginning of his literary fame.

It was while Carlyle was at Craigenputtock that John Lockhart's *Life of Robert Burns* was published. In a letter of June 10, 1828, Carlyle wrote, referring to a visit he had recently made to Jeffrey, "I am to write him an article on Burns. . . . Lockhart had written a kind of 'Life of Burns,' and men in general were making another uproar about Burns. It is this book, a trivial one enough, which I am to pretend reviewing." In Carlyle's diary stands this note: "Finished a paper on Burns, September 16, 1828, at this Devil's Den, Craigenputtock."

It was this "review," which, by Carlyle's inevitable treatment had developed into an essay, that prompted Jeffrey to read his friend an editorial lecture. He had found Carlyle "verbose and prone to exaggeration"; and he rated him roundly on "your extravagance . . . that makes your writings intolerable to many and ridiculous to not a few; . . . an unlucky ambition to appear more original than you are," and "the delusive hope of converting our English intellects" to German thought and style. Furthermore, Jeffrey urged that what he called Carlyle's "idolatries," his belief in the necessity and power of the individual leadership of men of genius, would be—in fact, had been—offensive to the dominant Liberal party, which was agitating democratic reforms. But so sure was Carlyle's belief in the worth of what he had written, and so unalterably

was his style the outward and visible sign of the depth and sincerity and vehemence of his feeling, that the essay was finally printed with but very slight changes, appearing in No. XCVI of the *Edinburgh Review*, December, 1828.

In London.—At Craigenputtock both Carlyle and his wife had suffered much from ill-health and straitened circumstances, and Carlyle had felt the lack of reference books that he needed in his writing; so they decided to move to London (1834). The new home was in Cheyne Row in the Chelsea district, and as the "Seer of Chelsea" Carlyle is known in literary history.

He won his first personal popularity through a series of lectures on German literature. Other courses followed: *On the History of Literature, The Revolutions of Modern Europe, Heroes and Hero Worship.* Of these Leigh Hunt says, "It was as if some Puritan had come to life again, liberalized by German Philosophy and his own intense reflections and experiences."

Meanwhile Carlyle was bringing out his masterpieces and collecting and revising for publication some of his earlier writings: *The French Revolution, Chartism* (a discussion of the condition of the working classes), *Past and Present* (a review of motives—a comparison of ancient and modern ideals), *Cromwell's Letters and Speeches, The Life of John Sterling,* and *Latter-Day Pamphlets*; and *Sartor Resartus* now complete, and the first edition of his *Miscellanies.* In 1865 he finished the sixth volume of his *History of Frederick, Commonly Called The Great*—"the last of Carlyle's great works, the last and grandest of them." This history Carlyle had been writing for twelve years and meditating longer. In collecting material for it, he had visited Berlin and the German battle-fields.

In 1865 Carlyle was elected Lord Rector of Edinburgh University, and in April of the following year he delivered

his Installation Address. The hour of his greatest honor was the hour of his greatest affliction. Before he could reach London on his return trip, his wife died—as he wrote on her gravestone, "suddenly snatched away from him and the light of his life as if gone out." For fifteen years he mourned her loss. During this time he wrote but little: some articles for *Macmillan's Magazine*, a series of criticisms on the *Portraits of John Knox*, and some papers on the *Early Kings of Norway*, which appeared in a small volume in 1875. He died at his home in Chelsea, December 4, 1881. At his own request he was buried in the churchyard at Ecclefechan, and not in Westminster Abbey.

HIS THEORIES.

Of Realities and Shows.—To understand at the outset Carlyle's interpretation of life and the universe as a whole, one should read *Sartor Resartus* ("The Tailor Patched"), a "Philosophy of Clothes." By "clothes" Carlyle means the outward evidence, show, or "vesture" of whatever exists.

"Thus in this one pregnant subject of Clothes, rightly understood, is included all that men have thought, dreamed, done, and been: the whole External Universe and what it holds is but Clothing; and the essence of all Science lies in The Philosophy of Clothes."

This is the lesson that Carlyle emphasizes, not only here but in every one of his writings: Judge nothing by its clothes or its semblance, but find out the thing itself—its reality.

Of Heroes and Hero Worship.—"The history of what man has accomplished in this world is at bottom the history of the great men who have worked here," said Carlyle,

in beginning his London lectures on *Heroes*. The sentence suggests not only Carlyle's interest in biography, but his view of history as a succession of epochs, each epoch standing for the ideals of its greatest man. "All Society is based on hero-worship," he declared; . . . "the modelers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men [have] contrived to do or to attain" —these have been their leaders and "real kings." In his several lectures on the Hero as Prophet, as Poet, as Priest, as Man of Letters, and as King, he showed how men like Mohammed, Shakespeare, Luther, Rousseau, and Napoleon had pointed the way each for a vast following, ruled the hearts of men and changed the course of thought. "Heroism" Carlyle defined as "the divine relation . . . which in all times unites a great man to other men." He rejoices that "all of us reverence and must ever reverence great men"; for it proves that mankind still through shams and cant is seeking Truth, though not always do men recognize this great man when he appears among them, even do not discover him at all. The Hero "stands upon things and not shows of things"; it is by virtue of his insight that he leads. Such a hero he found in Robert Burns.[1]

Of Industry.—So out of sympathy was Carlyle with the tendencies of his time that he has been called the "Censor of the age." It was a period of great industrial activity; but to Carlyle the modern use of "industrialism" meant "selfishness." He watched with growing anxiety and sadness the division of the business world into the few wealthy capitalists and the thousands of struggling wage earners. It was in *Past and Present* that he used

[1] Note how (p. 129) Carlyle introduces Burns into *The Hero as Man of Letters.*

that phrase which has since become famous, "Captains of Industry," by which he meant the leaders of organized labor. He believed that with the increase of capitalists there would be a widening of class inequalities—the class distinctions against which Burns had protested in *A Man's a Man for a' That*; and as a remedy for this he advocated, with Ruskin, "getting back to the land," or coöperation. He called himself a Liberal of the quiet sort; but against the reforms of the Liberal party he held his general ground of complaint, that they did not sufficiently take into account the value of spiritual forces in controlling the lives of men. No abstract theories of economics could interest him; he saw in all alike only hardness of heart—one man pitted against another for material gain. Yet no man ever preached more vigorously by both precept and example, "Work!"

HIS LITERARY INFLUENCE.

More than is the case perhaps with any other writer, Carlyle's moral influence is his literary influence. His passion for truth—his detestation of a superficial judgment; his impatience with statements obtained second hand and passed on as if for very fact; his scorn of the cant of literary criticism, that is satisfied with an affected phrase of long respectability in place of an honest opinion; and, above all, his own fearlessness and his hatred of this very indifference to untruth—of all this his own writing is a great example. Add to this his clear, just view of what a biography should be, of what a criticism should be, and of the attitude of the critic, as given in this *Essay on Burns*, and we see that it is his moral influence in literary matters that is more impressive than any method of his style.

"Opinion has in the main followed Carlyle's luminous

finger," says Dr. Richard Garnett. We may cite in support of this his *Cromwell,* which entirely changed the world's judgment of the great Puritan, because it presented the whole man, not the one side of him that appealed to a favorable or an unfavorable prejudice.

We insert the following quotation about his *Frederick II*—a criticism worth the student's while to read carefully. Every sentence is a telling comment on some characteristic of Carlyle's mind or work and suggests his influence on after historians. In 1882, writing Carlyle's biography, the English historian James Anthony Froude set down this:

"'Frederick' was translated instantly into German. . . . The sharpest scrutiny only served to show how accurate was the workmanship. Few people anywhere in Europe dreamt twenty years ago of the position which Germany, and Prussia at the head of it, were so soon to occupy. Yet Carlyle's book seemed to have been composed in conscious anticipation of what was coming. He had given a voice to the national feeling. He had brought up as it were from the dead the creator of the Prussian monarchy, and had replaced him among his people as a living and breathing man. He had cleared the air for the impending revolution; and Europe, when it came, could see how the seed had grown which had expanded into the German Empire. . . . The book contained . . . a gallery of historical figures executed with a skill which placed Carlyle at the head of literary portrait painters. . . . The tone of 'Frederick' nowhere harmonized with popular sentiment among us, and every page contained something to offend. Yet even in England" . . .

and the passage closes with further praise.

Carlyle recreated the past largely by the dramatic use of episodes. He did this most notably in his *French Revolution,* which is a succession of vivid scenes. Into each

scene he crowded the movements of high personages and squalid mobs, making the whole an epitome of the passion and terror that once moved its living men.

As to details of style, we will note but two by which Carlyle put new vigor into English prose. First, he did not try to follow some conventional practice of rhetoric in constructing his work, as if rhetorical form were a vessel ready-shaped into which he must pour his meaning, and not rather the outward shape his meaning must develop as it grew. Secondly, he chose words and phrases of literary and historical association to express even what might seem to be the simplest literal statement. Here is a Biblical phrase, here one from myth, here a word from Milton, here one from Shakespeare, and here an epithet from history. His language is rich in content, and the more forcible because of the abundance of this unobtrusive illustration.

ROBERT BURNS.

HIS LIFE.

Boyhood at Ayr.—Robert Burns was born January 25, 1759, at Ayr, parish of Alloway, Scotland. His father, William Burness, as the name was then written, was a man of "stubborn integrity," conspicuous even among the Scots for his deep-seated piety. His mother was "sincerely religious, of an equable temper, and with a memory stored with old ballads, songs, and traditions, with which she amused her children."

During Burns's childhood there resided in the family an old woman "remarkable for her ignorance, credulity, and superstition." Of her he says, "She had, I suppose, the largest collection in the country of tales and songs

concerning devils, ghosts, fairies, brownies, witches, warlocks, spunkies, cantraips, giants, enchanted towers, dragons, and other trumpery"; and these fostered in him the latent seeds of poetry.

He received such education as was common at the time, and, in addition, read at home such works as the *Spectator*; the *Iliad*, translated by Pope; Locke *On the Human Understanding*; some of Shakespeare's plays, Allan Ramsay's *Works*; and a collection of songs. Of the latter Burns says, "This was my *vade mecum*. I pored over them driving my cart, or walking to labor, song by song, verse by verse; carefully noting the true, the tender, or sublime, from affectation and fustian. I am convinced I owe to this practice much of my critic-craft, such as it is."

During his fifteenth year, while engaged in the work of the harvest field, he composed his first song, *Handsome Nell*, to the tune of the "favorite reel" of the young woman, who, according to the custom of the time, was working with him. "Thus with me," he says, "began love and poetry"—and what is known as the first period of his literary work. From this time on he continued writing love-songs, epistles, satires, and poems both humorous and descriptive, full of the feelings and experiences of the simple rural folk among whom he lived.

Songs, Satires, and a Book (1779–1787). — When Burns was twenty years old, the family moved to Lochlea in the parish of Tarbolton, where they stayed for seven years. Burns took advantage of an opportunity that came to him of attending school one term at Kirkoswald. Later, he went to Irvine, learned the flax-dresser's art, and set up a shop. The venture was not successful, as his partner cheated him, and the shop burned down while he was indulging in a New Year's carousal. Here also he formed companionships which led him into habits of dissipation.

In 1784, shortly after Burns's return to Lochlea, his father died. The headstone by his grave, bearing the verses by his poet son, still stands in the kirkyard at Alloway.

From Tarbolton the family moved to Mossgiel. In the four years here Burns did his best work—here wrote most of the poems of which Carlyle speaks in the Essay. His favorite time for composition was while following the plow; and when the day's labor was over, he would go up to his room in the attic to write down the verses he had made.

At this time there was in Scotland, especially in the western part, a division in matters of religion; one party held rigidly to the older and more exacting rules of the Church and were known as the adherents of the Old Light; the other, somewhat less strict in religious observance and broader in doctrinal views, were known as the adherents of the New Light. In the controversy waged in Ayrshire, Robert Burns allied himself with the New Lights.

He had been publicly rebuked for violating the rules of the Church; one of his close friends had suffered also. So Burns wrote a poem to satirize the narrow-minded zeal and strict discipline of the orthodox faction. This was *The Twa Herds, or The Holy Tulzie*;[1] and he soon followed it by *Holy Willie's Prayer*, *The Ordination*, and *The Holy Fair*.

It was not likely that an unbending member of the Old Lights would care to see his daughter married to such an independent wit as the writer of these satires; and so it was that Robert Burns and Jean Armour took matters into their own hands, secretly vowed their faith to each other and set their names to a written bond between

[1] Brawl.