

Carlyle

**Past and
Present**

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THOMAS CARLYLE

Past and Present

INTRODUCTION BY
DOUGLAS JERROLD



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EVERYMAN, I will go with thee,

and be thy guide,

In thy most need to go by thy side

THOMAS CARLYLE

Born in 1795 at Ecclefechan, the son of a stone-mason. Educated at Edinburgh University. Schoolmaster for a short time, but decided on a literary career, visiting Paris and London. Retired in 1828 to Dumfriesshire to write. In 1834 moved to Cheyne Row, Chelsea, and died there in 1881.

INTRODUCTION

THOMAS CARLYLE was born at Ecclefechan in Dumfriesshire on 4th December 1795. He died at the age of eighty-five on 7th February 1881 in Cheyne Row, Chelsea. His father, James Carlyle, was a stone-mason, a fanatical Puritan and, in his youth, a man of violent temper. To his children he was neither loving nor gentle, although strictly just; his hand was never raised against them. There were few games and little spontaneous laughter in the Carlyle home and no idle conversation, but James Carlyle was evidently, to his eldest son, a good father, with deep and clear convictions and an interest in general ideas less unusual among Scottish folk than among those south of the border.

Thomas's mother, Margaret Aitken, was the penniless daughter of a bankrupt father but like her husband she was of strong character and with a narrow Puritan piety. The Carlyles had in all nine children, all but one of whom grew to maturity.

The background was remarkable for a spartan poverty and the debt of Thomas to his father was almost immeasurable. After exhausting the resources of the village schools in the immediate neighbourhood, Thomas was sent at the age of ten to a new academy at Annan, six miles away, where he stayed with an aunt during the week, walking home each weekend to stay from Friday till Monday. At the age of fourteen he was sent to Edinburgh University where he stayed until he was nineteen, in the year of Waterloo. Thomas Carlyle was thus able, by the continuous sacrifices of his parents, to remain with his books without need for concern about the earning of money until he had grown up.

The price paid was that of an absolute frugality of

living but this was common among the boys of the day when low living and high thinking was the rule for the young of all classes, even in England. In the Scottish working class, from which all the boys at Annan and nine-tenths of the students at Edinburgh were drawn, the standard was a great deal behind that which obtained south of the border. There was no cultural background and little or no attempt at a liberal education even in the universities. Carlyle himself, in *Sartor Resartus*, described what he was offered at Edinburgh as 'vain jargon of controversial metaphysics, etymology and mechanical manipulation falsely called Science.' The only professor of whom he had any opinion was the eccentric Professor Leslie who lectured on mathematics.

Carlyle, however, was by nature and inclination a self-educator. He read voraciously, taught himself history and, to a remarkable extent, German, Greek, French, Italian and Spanish. All the time he was registered as a student for the ministry and, after leaving Edinburgh to teach mathematics at Annan, he continued with his discourses for Divinity, the first two of which he completed and delivered successfully, though he failed to enrol for a third year.

This failure was due to nothing but lack of faith. He was by temperament a preacher and by emotional conviction a profoundly moral man. He was also, it must be admitted, by the circumstances of his birth and the conditions of his time, a profoundly ignorant man. That would surely have been the view of Acton, who said even of Macaulay that 'he knew nothing respectably' of the history of England and Europe before 1600. Carlyle read constantly, but the sheer labour of acquiring by dint of his own efforts even a student's proficiency in the literature of four living languages, in the philosophic ideas of his contemporary world, and in the history of his own country, of France during the revolution and of Germany since the rise of Prussia, absorbed the whole of his energies until he was well over forty. Meanwhile he had to live, which he did, until he was in his late twenties, by teaching and tutoring, and for the rest by writing—

not books but encyclopaedia articles and essays for the reviews which paid on a scale, having regard to the cost of living at the beginning of the nineteenth century, almost comparable with that paid in America today.

It would none the less be wrong to ascribe the slenderness of Carlyle's output in the first forty years of his life solely to his incessant pursuit of self-education. He was, which is very rare among Scots, uninterested in theology and equally so, which is less uncommon, in aesthetics and in art. He began at one time to study law but gave it up, regarding the subject as intrinsically a waste of time. He was profoundly uninterested in making money. He wanted to preach and, above all, to set the world to rights in an age when new forces were to require, and even, it seemed, to demand, a new pattern of society for which the prevailing fashion in Utilitarianism was making all too little preparation. In a world rotten with easy optimism, Carlyle, for all that he was no historian, no systematic philosopher and no economist, stood out as a seer, and it was the astonishing achievement of his genius and character that he came rapidly to the front when he decided that his years of apprenticeship were over. He founded no school: the liberal and rationalist creed which he attacked continued to triumph, but the influence of his mind lasted and is still today a great and refreshing relief from that of the dreary train of world-improvers whose popularity, so immense in the Victorian age, is only now beginning to diminish.

To say as much is to tempt the majority in this country to echo the lately fashionable denunciation of Thomas Carlyle as a precursor of the Fascist heresies. The denunciation is true enough in a very superficial way. Carlyle's political thinking is closer to the pattern of our own age than to that of his contemporaries. That is the chief interest for us today of the tract or sermon which was published by Carlyle in 1843 under the title of *Past and Present*, and which forms his unique contribution to political thinking about the problems of his own time and country.

By 1843 Carlyle had ended his long apprenticeship.

In 1827 he had married Jane Welsh, the daughter of Dr Welsh of Haddington, a descendant of John Knox. Her father had died young and had left her a remote farmhouse at Craigenputtock in Dumfriesshire. There the Carlyles went in 1828 and passed the first six years of their long married life. There he wrote many of the best of his essays and his first serious original book, *Sartor Resartus*, which, however, did not at once find a publisher. In 1834 he moved to the small house in Cheyne Row, Chelsea, where he was to die almost fifty years later. He had won, in his Scottish farmhouse, learning, health and the habit of regular work. He had also learned the need of an educated society among whom to talk and to exercise his personal influence, which by far exceeded that exercised by his published writings.

The Carlyles arrived in London only just after the Reform Bill of 1832 had become law, but the long reign of liberalism had begun. Gladstone was already in politics by the time *Past and Present* was published, and shortly afterwards was to make his dramatic resignation from Peel's administration on account of Peel's decision to increase the grant to Maynooth, a resignation which Gladstone morally repudiated soon afterwards by abandoning his earlier concept of a Christian state in favour of a neutral state recognizing no other public conscience in secular affairs than that of the *vox populi*. In this role he may claim to have been the first in the field just as surely as Carlyle some years before him was first in the field (as far as a writer so anti-political can be so described) as an advocate of the moral state under heroic leadership.

Carlyle, however, was no systematist, any more than Gladstone, or almost any other English politician for that matter. The moral state can be reconciled with democracy in conversation and in books and pamphlets, but not in practice. As the author of the *French Revolution*, which he wrote in his first years in Cheyne Row and published four years before *Past and Present*, he was stamped, to his contemporaries, as a radical, and so he was, but it was an emotional belief not a political creed.

He saw, and made his readers see again, the drama of the French Revolution and the price paid by a selfish, idle and criminally irresponsible aristocracy for centuries of misrule. He ended his brilliant picture too early in time for him to study the sequel. He was concerned to paint rather than to judge. He won, and in a sense enjoyed, the applause of the majority of the new middle class reading, writing and talking public. But he had little respect for it. He needed it as an audience but he never listened to it. Did he ever listen to anyone?

It is curious indeed to remember, as we read *Past and Present*, that in the very year of its publication Gladstone entered Peel's Conservative cabinet as President of the Board of Trade, where, according to the judgment of almost all the authorities, his own administration, by its wise economic policies, and in conjunction with other favourable circumstances, had laid the foundation of what he himself described many years later as 'an almost intoxicating growth of wealth' on which both political parties were to build a structure only destroyed in our own day and largely by our own hands. The fact escaped Carlyle's attention.

What concerned this ardent Puritan preacher was that no one was doing anything immediate and positive to remedy the crying social inequalities of the age, which unless they were ended must inevitably lead to revolution. He poured contempt on the liberal doctrines, most of all on *laissez faire*; he saw no virtue in the franchise; he says little about education. He demanded, in the name of morality and social justice, action; above all, he demanded work, not work for cash payment, not work for power over men, but work 'to make some nook of God's creation a little fruitfuller, better, more worthy of God; to make some human heart wiser, manfuller, happier—more blessed, less accursed. It is a work for a God' . . . 'Noble fruitful labour—the grand sole miracle of Man.'

Of all the men of his time Carlyle saw what was the real problem: 'How, in conjunction with inevitable democracy, indispensable Sovereignty is to exist: certainly it is the hugest question ever heretofore propounded to

mankind! The solution of which is work for long years and centuries.' But a little later he comments that there is something which cannot wait; talking of the 'millions of eager working men' shut up in 'Poor Law Bastilles' as he termed the new workhouses, he asks the leaders of the future 'How do you mean to manage these men? Where are they to find a supportable existence? What is to become of them—and you?'

Outside Cheyne Row there was also confusion. Sir Robert Peel was facing the possibility of nothing less than the repeal of the Corn Laws, a necessity to which he was ultimately driven in 1846 by the disastrously wet summer of 1845 which ruined not only the wheat harvest but the potato crop in England and also in Ireland, already in the throes of the disastrous famine which permanently reduced the Irish population from eight millions in 1830 to five or less by 1845. It was as a gesture of sympathy in 1844 that Peel had trebled and made permanent the Government grant to the Catholic seminary of Maynooth, a gesture which displeased the young Mr Gladstone but which, in John Morley's final opinion, was one of Peel's boldest achievements.

This ancient history is very relevant to Carlyle's *Past and Present*, which represents the start of his one major incursion into English politics. The connection is very tenuous but quite certain. There is, to be sure, nothing of practical politics in the book, but after its publication, which was not greeted with favour by his radical friends, admirers for the most part of the French Revolution, he had some conversation with Peel and later was invited to dine with him. It was with the recollection of these talks and under their stimulus that later, in 1848, he began to write the series of papers published the year after Peel's death under the title of *Latter Day Pamphlets*. This series of effusions, much criticized then and later, was never finished. Twelve papers had been planned, of which the eighth was being written when, in 1850, Peel suddenly died.

The style and content of the eight pamphlets is far less attractive than that of *Past and Present*. That book is a

sermon written at white heat and eloquent with passion. The eight pamphlets have some angry attacks on liberal and Christian philosophers whom he accused of creating nothing but a 'universal syllabus of philanthropic twaddle' but on the constructive side they fell far short of practicality.

The truth is that Carlyle was a 'prophet new-inspired' and no more able than had been Shakespeare's John of Gaunt to outline a programme of the much-needed contemporary reforms, nor was Carlyle's highly dramatized and exclamatory prose any better fitted than Shakespeare's blank verse to be an instrument for such a task of exposition. His analysis of the social problem as it was presented in 1843 in *Past and Present* is something altogether more profound and moving. It is also of great contemporary interest to readers in the middle twentieth century, most of all perhaps to those old enough to have watched and studied the economic crisis of the tragic years of unemployment in the twenties and thirties.

The book is remarkable for its intense moral fervour, the high level of the argument and for his rediscovery of the virtues of the high middle ages, also for his confidence in the ultimate triumph of moral force acting in defence of Divine justice. The loss of wisdom is the theme of his lament; the love of wisdom the inspiration of his hope. He faces and examines the liberal arguments as they then were—the widening franchise, the natural operation of supply and demand, the doctrine of free trade. There is no easy way, no single device, nothing but wisdom to see the light and courage and energy to follow it. But is above all a philosophy of individual endeavour, not a plea for tyranny, that Carlyle has written here for us. His terms have been the subject of misuse, but of his meaning there can be no legitimate doubt.

The problems which Carlyle faced, and alone faced, are still with us. The prophet of Chelsea would not today be singing paeans in favour of the British way of life. Still less would he be lamenting the failure of Hitler or mourning the lost glories of Mussolini's balcony empire.

His praise of the Norman and Angevin sovereigns, which read so strangely in his own day, would still be slightly repellent to the majority who in the past hundred years have been taught to see in the Angevin achievement, which brought England from the darkness of the Anglo-Saxon centuries to the glories of 1300, nothing but the evolution of parliament, which did not in fact begin to evolve into its modern shape till the Tudor tyranny was almost established. His enthusiasm for Cromwell brings him back into the current of contemporary historical thinking, but not for the contemporary reasons.

Carlyle nevertheless was not a liberal humanist. He was a Calvinist, long unsure of his faith. He certainly believed in a Supreme Power. He certainly believed the salvation of man to depend upon co-operation with the Divine purpose. He was completely without definite views as to what that purpose was. He was a moralist, not a metaphysician, and he certainly rejected the Calvinist theology in which he had been educated and which he had been intended to teach. His thought, which to Emerson, a sceptical American Unitarian, seemed profound, does not for that reason seem so to us, who are, in the great majority, either classical or Judaeo-Christian humanists, or Marxists, or Christians or determined sceptics. To the ultimate debate between these creeds Carlyle contributes nothing. Given the contemporary climate of opinion, the contemporary widespread distribution of learning, the immense improvement in historical scholarship, Carlyle if writing today would certainly have been an active contributor to these debates. The fear that obsesses many modern critics is that he would have been merely a blind authoritarian. It is more likely that he would have been as isolated today as he was a hundred and more years ago; that he would have been an anarchist and still a deist but no more. There is no trace of personal religion to be found in Carlyle, though he accepted a stern and compelling morality. For us today he remains a portent and a prophet; a portent of the inherent dangers threatening the foundations of liberal society, a prophet of society's

ultimate survival, thanks to the capacity of free man for heroic action.

There lies the lesson of the book for our times.

To those who think that, because Jack is now 'all right' one need fear no recurrence of crises, this may not be apparent. To those who remember the long and bitter crisis of the 1920's and who can bear to look beyond the present hour of prosperity to the portents on the distant horizon, the prophet of Cheyne Row is still worth more than a moment's scornful consideration.

DOUGLAS JERROLD

1960

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BOOK I.—PROEM

CHAPTER I

MIDAS

THE condition of England, on which many pamphlets are now in the course of publication, and many thoughts unpublished are going on in every reflective head, is justly regarded as one of the most ominous, and withal one of the strangest, ever seen in this world. England is full of wealth, of multifarious produce, supply for human want in every kind; yet England is dying of inanition. With unabated bounty the land of England blooms and grows; waving with yellow harvests; thick-studded with workshops, industrial implements, with fifteen millions of workers, understood to be the strongest, the cunningest and the willingest our Earth ever had; these men are here; the work they have done, the fruit they have realised is here, abundant, exuberant on every hand of us: and behold, some baleful fiat as of Enchantment has gone forth, saying, "Touch it not, ye workers, ye master-workers, ye master-idlers; none of you can touch it, no man of you shall be the better for it; this is enchanted fruit!" On the poor workers such fiat falls first, in its rudest shape; but on the rich master-workers too it falls; neither can the rich master-idlers, nor any richest or highest man escape, but all are like to be brought low with it, and made 'poor' enough, in the money sense or a far fataler one.

Of these successful skilful workers some two millions, it is now counted, sit in Workhouses, Poor-law Prisons; or have 'out-door relief' flung over the wall to them,—