A SHELF OF RECENT BOOKS

CARLYLE REDIVIVUS

By Gerald Hewes Carson

THOMAS CARLYLE has not been fortunate in his posthumous fame. He did not win popular recognition until middle age was upon him. And immediately after his death he was dismissed without a character by his unfortunate biographer, J. A. Froude, as a selfish egotist who ruined the life of his brilliant wife and spent the remainder of his days in "agonizing remorse" for his monstrous callousness.

Thus there arose a great legend of conjugal infelicity. It has lived because "Sartor Resartus", "Heroes and Hero Worship", and "The French Revolution" have lived too — and because of that natural taste in people for scandal in high places which is so effectively nourished by our daily journalism.

However, Froude's work is less known to our generation than to his own, and steady accretions to the Carlyle bibliography are slowly restoring the picture of the personal life of the Carlyles to its true proportions. Of this character is "Jane Welsh Carlyle: Letters to Her Family, 1839-1863", edited by Leonard Huxley. The 165 letters in this volume bring the total published correspondence of Mrs. Carlyle to something like 766 letters, truly the performance of an inquiring and indefatigable mind. Taken at any point, they have a quick, dashing descriptive power, and a vividness of characterization which an eternity cannot impair. They are not "literary"; their chief instrument of punctuation is the dash; they were not intended for posterity. But they have preserved forever in lively and effective contrast the simple Spartan material existence of the establishment at 5 Cheyne Row, and the intellectual brilliance of the circle which had its centre there.

The present letters, with two exceptions, are addressed to Mrs. Carlyle's cousins, Helen and Jeanne Welsh, and have reached the public through the hands of the latter's daughter, Miss Chrystal. Mr. Huxley has briefly "placed" each letter, when necessary, with explanatory remarks.

The glimpses of the great ones of the Victorian era are charmingly intimate. "Darwin and Mazzini met here the other day and the three of us sat with our feet on the fender." And again:

> I . . . had made up my mind for a nice long quiet evening of *looking into the fire*, when I heard a carriage drive up, and men's voices asking questions, and then the carriage was sent away! . . . [It proved to be] Alfred Tennyson of all people. . . . Alfred is dreadfully embarrassed with women alone — for he entertains at one and the same moment a feeling of almost adoration for them and an ineffable contempt! . . . The only chance of my getting any right good of him was to make him forget my womanness — so I did just as Carlyle would have done, had he been there; got out *pipes* and *tobacco* — and *brandy and water* — with a deluge of *tea* over and above. — The effect of these accessories was miraculous — he *professed* to be *ashamed* of polluting my room, . . . but he smoked on all the same — for *three* mortal hours! — talking like an angel — only exactly as if he were talking with a clever *man* — which — being a thing I am not used to — men always *adapting* their conversation to what they *take to be* a woman's taste — strained me to a terrible pitch of intellectuality.

A note on the trials of being the wife of a literary genius occurs while Carlyle was in the throes of his "Cromwell" (1845).

> Carlyle is now got about as deep in the *Hell* of his Cromwell as he is likely to get — there is a certain point of irritability, and gloom which when attained I say to myself "now soul take thy ease — such ease as thou canst get — for nothing worse can well be!" Desperation in that case induces a sort of content. Still I wish the Spring would make haste and favour my getting out of doors — for the (moral) atmosphere within doors is far too *sulphury* and *brimstoneish*.

It was about a year later than this that the Carlyles entered upon their saddest days. Mrs. Carlyle, always a nervous, high strung woman, succumbed to a neurasthenic condition which did not leave her for ten years. Excessive indulgence in "blue pills", tea, morphia, and cigarettes engendered an unhappy, irritable, hypersensitive state of mind, or rather, state of emotion. Carlyle's frank delight in the friendship of Lady Harriet Ashburton aroused Mrs. Carlyle to a venomous pitch of jealousy. She was sure, without the slightest basis for the idea, that the affair was ever tending toward a sinister and disastrous outcome.

The patience, sympathy, and forbearance which Carlyle extended his wife through these trying years must surely atone for the demands he made upon her for new wall paper, intelligent servant maids, and surcease from the pianoforte next door. Therefore the note of querulous reproach with which Mrs. Carlyle often touches upon him in these letters must be discounted as part of her "mental dyspepsia". But throughout her emotional derangement she retained her intellectual vivacity. Her shrewd, incisive comment still runs the gamut of her daily contacts, and she still accords every animate being, human or dumb, the ready sympathy of the childless woman. These qualities of mind and character shine forth from Jane Welsh Carlyle even in her darkest years. Today her new series of letters serve to remind us of the divine and inexplicable dualism of human nature, and its "admirable riches".

Jane Welsh Carlyle: Letters to Her Family, 1839–1863. Edited by Leonard Huxley, LL.D. Doubleday, Page and Co.