

A Visit to the Grave
OF
THOMAS CARLYLE.

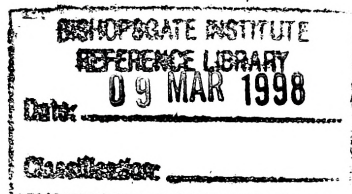
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ERECTED TO THE
MEMORY OF JANNET CARLYLE,
SPOUSE OF JAMES CARLYLE, MAS
ON, IN ECCLEFECHAN, WHO DIED
THE 11TH SEP^{TR}, 1792, IN THE 25TH
YEAR OF HER AGE.

ALSO JANNET CARLYLE, DAUGHTER TO
JAMES CARLYLE AND MARGARET AIKEN,
^{DIED}
SHE AT ECCLEFECHAN JAN^R 27TH, 1801,
AGED 17 MONTHS, ALSO MARGRET
THEIR DAUGHTER, SHE DIED JUNE 22ND, 1830,
AGED 27 YEARS. AND THE ABOVE
JAMES CARLYLE, BORN AT BROWN KNOWE
IN AUG^T 1758, DIED AT SCOTSBRIG ON THE
23^D JAN^{RY} 1832, AND NOW ALSO RESTS HERE
AND HERE NOW RESTS THE ABOVE
MARGARET AITKEN, HIS SECOND
WIFE, BORN AT WHITESTANE, KIRKMA-
HOE, IN SEPT^M 1771; DIED AT SCOTSBRIG,
ON CHRISTMAS DAY 1853. SHE BROUGHT
HIM NINE CHILDREN WHEREOF FOUR
SONS AND THREE DAUGHTERS SURVIVED
GRATEFULLY REVERENT OF SUCH
A FATHER AND SUCH A MOTHER.



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[Reprinted from THE SECULAR REVIEW.]

A VISIT TO THE GRAVE

OF

THOMAS CARLYLE.

BAREFOOTED lads and lasses, when I was some seventeen years of age, came skelping over the red heather and yellow broom of the moors from Carlyle's Craigenputtock to my school at Glenesslin, Dunscore. I well knew Mr. Cumming, the seven-feet-high child of Anak, who was then Carlyle's tenant farmer, and who showed me some of Carlyle's "business" letters to himself, and which, for the incipient soul which was then in my body of length without breadth, I could not decipher. "I should flog the smallest boy in my school for perpetrating a handwriting like that!" exclaimed I, with the full flavour of pedagogic strut. As far as I am aware, Carlyle never visited the Dunscore district without calling upon my venerable and highly-gifted friend, Thomas Aird; and dear old Aird of "The Devil's Dream" made up his mind that I, his raw and vehement young *protégé*, should take tea with Carlyle in the little upper room at Mountain Hall, near Dumfries, where the grand and quiet old poet had often told me tales of his earlier years to cheer me through the toil and blighted hope of mine. What tales he could tell, too, of his early associates in literature; of John Wilson, with his radiant genius and majestic manhood; of De Quincey, with his dreamings over the borderland of the world; of the lovable "*Delta*" of "Casa Wappy," and of Blackwood and of Lord Jeffrey; and of that marvellous shepherd of Ettrick, who fashioned the glamourie of "Kilmeny" out of the dim mists of his native hills.

Carlyle took tea exactly like any other uncouth mortal. I was young and blate and timid. By the grace of a Titan I, a big schoolboy, with his legs too long for his breeches, was stuck between a Titan and a Deity, and I shrank into nothingness under the fierce light that beat upon me. I was told that the butter was from the Barnkin (which was ever Aird's guarantee of that article's excellence), and I was recommended to try it with the soda-scone. Thus appealed to, I felt that it devolved upon me to immortalise myself. Now was the chance for me to come out of my shell and show Carlyle that Aird was correct in his predilection for me, and that I was no common country hobbledehoy. I would astonish Carlyle—and I daresay I did. I began a sentence, which I intended to be a long, eloquent, and elegant one. I would demonstrate that I could orally marshal more than monosyllables. I would prove that I was a scholar, and could weild the sesquipedalian thunders. But, O shade of Tully, in my blateness and trepidation a word of tremendous length got inextricably and inappropriately jammed into the sentence, and all the wits I had left got jammed in along with it. I lost my meaning altogether. I abandoned the old sentence, and began a new one, less ambitious and perfectly commonplace and trite; but, before I had got half way through with it, I had forgotten what I had intended to say. I stuttered and blushed, let my knife fall upon the floor with a bang, the perspiration broke upon my brow, and I subsided into silence and despair. I dared not look up to observe the facial effect my discomfiture had produced; but I doubt not that, if Carlyle deigned to think of me at all, he set me down as a complete idiot, or the nearest to it that could well be conceived.

Much has come and gone since then. Now I am bolder and my sentences are less ambitious. A raw youth, I broke down in the orgies of my hero-worship before the furrowed cheeks and the rugged brow of one of the most exceptional men that ever ate bread prepared from the cereals of our planet. In the morning of August 29th, 1884, I repeated wierdly: "Brief, brawling day, with its noisy phantoms, its poor paper crowns, tinsel gilt, is gone, and divine, everlasting night, with her star-diadems, with

her silences, and her veracities, is come,"* and I determined, since I was only some fifteen miles from Ecclefechan, that I should go and see my old master's resting-place, and cull a few blades of grass from the clay of death which now fills up the wrinkles indented with the graving tool of a weary life. I reached Ecclefechan. There is a key to the plain iron gate of the sepulchre; but, as regards the cottage where the key is kept, there was no one within and the door was locked. A substantial and ungainly wall of whin-stone and lime rose, some nine or ten feet high, between me and the Ecclefechan city of the dead. But, standing within a few feet of where Carlyle lay, was I to be turned aside by a wall of stone—aye, or a wall of fire? It was Carlyle who had first prompted me to be heroic enough to become a Free-thinker and repudiate the moral suicide of attempting to force upon the credence that which is repulsive to the reason. I buttoned my coat, glanced critically at my boot-soles, and, repeating between my set teeth, "What is incredible to thee thou shalt not, at thy soul's peril, attempt to believe! Elsewhither for a refuge, or die here. Go to perdition if thou might; but not with a lie in thy mouth; by the Eternal Maker, no;"† rushed at the jagged, hard, and ungainly wall, scrambled up it like a cat, and leapt from its top like a deer.

A plain, spear-headed iron railing, set on a coping of stone, the spear-points reaching as high as your chin, encloses three headstones standing in line, to the left old James Carlyle, the stone-mason; to the right Thomas Carlyle, the baby; in the centre Thomas Carlyle, the God-knows-what, lying waiting for God-knows-what. "Yes, thy future fate, indeed? Thy future fate, while thou makest *it* the chief question, seems to me extremely questionable."‡ "Or, alas, perhaps at bottom *is* there no Great Day, no sure look-out of any life to come, but only this poor life; and what of taxes, felicities, Nell Gwynes, and entertainments we can manage to muster here?"§ Outside the rail, in a drizzling shower, I copied the inscriptions upon the three several grave-stones, for the benefit of him who may not care to visit

* "Past and Present."

† "Life of Sterling."

‡ "Past and Present."

§ *Ibidem.*

Ecclefechan at all, and also for the benefit of him who may visit Ecclefechan, but who may not see his way to leaping over a ten-foot wall at the risk of breaking his neck.*

The Thomas Carlyle on tombstone No. 3 was the son of James Carlyle, brother of Thomas the Great. This brother James still vegetates in Ecclefechan, but was invisible. He was described to me as "wee and eccentric," and was, till lately, farmer in the Scotsbrig, of tombstone celebrity. I called at his house; but, although he did not pretend to be absent, he was more difficult of access than even his brother's grave, and I had to return to London without even a glimpse at Carlyle the undistinguished. I, however, saw his son, nephew of him whom Gilfillan dubbed "the cursing Polyphemus of Chelsea." He is a rough, broad-set, bucolic-looking person, with a wrinkled, bull-dog sort of face, but full of ingenuousness and sonsy integrity. In a quiet and stolid, but unostentatiously polite, manner he took me upstairs and pointed out to me several mementoes of his illustrious uncle. Among these was a framed oil painting of a person of about forty-five years of age, not a ladies' man by any means, but the possessor of a grim, hard face of heather and granite, under which the volcanic fires of genius might slumber, and which I had no difficulty in predicating to be the face of Thomas Carlyle. It is noteworthy that, from this oil painting, no impression whatever has yet been taken, as the nephew laconically assured me. In the room there is also a framed oil painting, purporting to be the counterfeit presentment of Jane Welsh Carlyle. But the thing has a face as long as your arm, and has, altogether, such features and expression as I cannot charge God Almighty with having bestowed upon any being I have yet seen. If the father of Teufelsdröckh had really a wife like that, the key is furnished to the secret of his bearishness, dyspepsia, and misanthropy.

I next went to the house in which Thomas the Uncanny was born. It has a wide cart-arch running right through it to some unspeakable stables or lumber

* For an exact transcript see cover.

houses behind. In a little room upstairs, on December 4th, 1795, a baby came howling and wailing, as we have all done, out of Mystery into Mystery; and this baby, instead of an ordinary clod-hopper, turned out to be—THOMAS CARLYLE. Scotland, although she has specially the knack of turning cuckoos—or, rather, eagles—out of sparrows' nests, had done nothing so tremendous in this line since the immortal twenty-fifth of January, 1759, when she parturited in an "auld clay biggin" near Alloway Kirk the infant that developed into that portentous jumble of dirt and deity known as ROBERT BURNS. In the little room there is a chair, brought from Chelsea, and which is interesting as being reputed to have often sustained the somatic foundations of the author of "Sartor Resartus." There is also, in a corner, a bracket, on which are arranged copies of the whole of the author's works—his own present to the room. The house, although a poor and plain, is a strong and substantial one, and was built with the undistinguished hands of a father whose son built up with distinguished hands, not a little whin-stone house in a little obscure village, but a fabric whose august and rugged masonry forms a fane in which millions worship, and in which succeeding millions will continue to worship when the present celebrants are wiped off the slate with the sponge of Death. The natal room is shown off by a smart and pretty young dressmaker, who exposes for sale some Carlyle nicnacks, one of which I brought away with me in the shape of a wooden pin-tray, with a photograph of Ecclefechan in the bottom thereof.

But, as to Ecclefechan itself, it is not worth going the length of your leg to see. Its principal feature is the red and rustic U. P. church, which overlooks Ecclefechan's sole attraction—its graveyard. I saw at least four public-houses, two or three of which had the cheek to dub themselves inns. All seemed dead as the graveyard, except these "inns," and one old man wheeling a barrow, and one frail old woman carrying a back-load of sticks. Where did the money come from to purchase the "liquid Madness sold at tenpence a quartern, all the products of which are, and must be, like its origin, mad, miserable, ruinous, and that only"?* And yet,

let the "inns" flourish; their "black, unluminous, unheeded *Inferno* and Prisonhouse of souls in pain"† of fiery whisky must surely be better than the waters of the Ecclefechan burn as it "wimples through the clachan." Even for Carlyle's sake, I did not taste the liquid of this burn that runs down the main—in fact, the only—street of the village, and quite close to the door of the tenement in which Ecclefechan's only man was born. The day was showery; watery clouds scudded athwart the autumn sky, and the tide of the unclassical burn had the appearance of dirty milk. This appearance was considerably enhanced the wrong way by the presence in the bed of the stream—which is now, however, partly covered over—of old boots, old sardine tins, scraps of old newspapers, the heads of herrings, the parings of potatoes, yellow cabbage leaves, and the mortal remains of unburied cats. I should think Ecclefechan should be a tolerably ready place to die in, never to speak of the privilege of being buried beside a man who has left an indelible mark upon his century. Off trudges the dirty burn to join Mein Water, which, in its turn, falls into the River Annan, and the miasma of dead cabbages and the malodour of the corpses of cats are lost in the tossing tides and saline winds of the Solway. Ecclefechan has a woollen factory (I took it for a gaol, or a madhouse), which, when business is brisk, employs forty hands; but it now employs only fourteen. Alas for the local Plugstone of Undershot! *Ichabod* is over every door. The glory has departed. There is no vitality in the woollen factory, in the dotard with the wheelbarrow, or in the beldame with the bundle of sticks. The village's only heirloom is decay; its only source of life—a grave! I looked beyond the wheelbarrow, the public-house, and the bundle of sticks, into the depths of the silent and mysterious sky, and murmured: "The Past is a dim, indubitable fact; the Future, too, is one, only dimmer—nay, properly, it is the *same* fact in new dress and development. For the Present holds in it both the whole Past and the whole Future: as the LIFE-TREE, IGDRASIL, wide-waving,

* "Chartism."

† *Ibidem*.

many-toned, has its roots down deep in the Death-Kingdoms, among the oldest dead dust of men, and with its boughs reaches away beyond the stars, and in all times and places is one and the same Life-tree."*

By the way, speaking of Scotsbrig, I had a chat with a hale and hearty old peasant, who had long been ploughman at that farm. He knew all the ins and outs of the Carlyles well, and had frequently, when a youth, "put the graith on the pony for baith Tammass and his brither John, the doctor. The doctor was a raal gentleman. I never pat on a saddle for him but he geid me half-a-croon; but Tammass was a meeserable screw. I never got as muckle as a bawbee frae him." So much for this aged yokel's estimate of him of the Eternities and Immensities!

It will be observed that, on his monolith, James Carlyle is described mas-on. The ancient ploughman of Scotsbrig assured me that the gravestone was the handiwork of the mason who sleeps below. I am sorry for this, as there is something on the obverse side of the stone which offends me. At the top there is an angel with wonderfully chubby cheeks, and the rest of the space is carved and scrolled over with two heraldic beasts and two heraldic shields, showing that the modern stonemason prided himself upon being connected with some strutting sept of ancient cut-throats. The two heraldic beasts have each an open mouth, from which proceeds what has evidently been intended to represent a tongue with terrible forks; but which, as they stand, would more readily suggest that each beast had swallowed a hen, all but one foot and leg, which still protruded from the open jaws, with all the toes spread. There are, furthermore, in sundry places on the stone, as many loose feathers carved here and there as would make a decent-sized pillow; but whether they had belonged to the angel, or the hen, or both, I could not determine. With its feathers and feet and detached nooks and corners and humbugs, the whole thing looks like a Kindergarten puzzle: "Given the pieces, put together the hen." So much for a peasant's heraldry.

* Proem to "Past and Present."

Howbeit, in the village stonemason all this might be overlooked and forgiven ; but the very two heraldic brutes that figure on the back of the tombstone of the father appear on the face of that of the son—he of the mongrel English and German kettle-drum with stick and calf's-skin thunder. Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Askelon. One more cynical than I might pronounce the *soi-disant* scarifier of shams himself a sham, and sneer that, if Carlyle's burial in Westminster would have savoured of vain-glory, his interment in Ecclefechan is redolent of burlesque.

But if there be here, over thy tomb, Thomas Carlyle, room for cynicism, still that cynicism is not for me. I leave to burn, as the only funeral tapers over thy grave, the few heads of red clover I found blooming there among the sweet and ungrimed green grass over which trod the feet of thy childhood. I am fain to forget thy poor little make-believes of heraldry. Thou, and not the red-handed cattle-reiver of the bygone centuries, art the founder of the house of Carlyle. Thine are the gules, d'argent, and d'or that should make every dead man of thy lineage, proud of thee, stand up in his grave, and utter a sepulchral hurrah. So much for thy lineage of the Past ; and, as for thy lineage of the Future, did no "two-legged animals without feathers"* proceed from thy loins ? Yet, thou hast ten thousand sons, no dwarfs and drowes either, but men with blood of fire and thews of steel—Atlases carrying the world on their shoulders. Over thy bed, with its clay sheets so cool, with its coverlet of green grass and white daisies, I lean, O my father, and ask thee for thy blessing. I am thy youngest and most unworthy son ; but I have the honour to be consanguine with thee in Scottish peasant blood, in sour peat bogs, in porridge and penury. Your boyish arm, like mine, bore a shield that was battered shapeless in the battle for bread ; and your right hand, like mine, bore a blade whose gladiatorial flashes of flame had rendered more terrible, but had not illumed, the invulnerable panoply of Ontology and Mystery.

* "Sartor Resartus."



HUMILITATE.

HERE RESTS THOMAS CARLYLE, WHO WAS BORN
AT ECCLEFECHAN, 4TH DECEMBER, 1795, AND DIED AT
24 CHEYNE ROW, CHELSEA, LONDON, ON SATURDAY
5TH FEBRUARY, 1881.

HERE ALSO RESTS JOHN AITKEN CARLYLE, M.D. LL.D.
WHO WAS BORN AT ECCLEFECHAN 7TH JULY 1801
AND DIED AT THE HILL, DUMFRIES ON MONDAY
15 SEPTEMBER 1879

IN
MEMORY
OF

THOMAS CARLYLE
SON OF JAMES CARLYLE AND ISABELLA CALVERT
IN SCOTSBRIG WHO DIED 27 DEC. 1841
AGED 3 YEARS AND ONE MONTH.
ALSO THE ABOVE ISABELLA CALVERT, WHO
DIED AT SCOTSBRIG 1ST JUNE 1859,
AGED 46 YEARS.

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