

IMPRESSIONS OF THOMAS CARLYLE IN 1848.*

BY RALPH WALDO EMERSON.

THOMAS CARLYLE is an immense talker, as extraordinary in his conversation as in his writing,—I think even more so.

He is not mainly a scholar, like the most of my acquaintances, but a practical Scotchman, such as you would find in any saddler's or iron-dealer's shop, and then only accidentally, and by a surprising addition, the admirable scholar and writer he is. If you would know precisely how he talks, just suppose Hugh Whelan (the gardener) had found leisure enough in addition to all his daily work to read Plato and Shakspeare, Augustine and Calvin, and, remaining Hugh Whelan all the time, should talk scornfully of all this nonsense of books that he had been bothered with, and you shall have just the tone and talk and laughter of Carlyle.

I called him a trip-hammer with "an Æolian attachment." He has, too, the strong religious tinge you sometimes find in burly people. That, and all his qualities, have a certain virulence, coupled though it be in his case with the utmost impatience of Christendom and Jewdom and all existing presentments of the good old story. He talks like a very unhappy man,—profoundly solitary, displeased and hindered by all men and things about him, and, biding his time, meditating how to undermine and explode the whole world of nonsense which torments him. He is obviously greatly respected by all sorts of people,—understands his own value quite as well as Webster, of whom his behavior sometimes reminds me,—and can see society on his own terms.

And, though no mortal in America could pretend to talk with Carlyle, who is also as remarkable in England as the Tower of London, yet neither would he in any manner satisfy us (Americans) or begin to answer the questions which we ask. He is a very national figure, and would by no means bear transplantation. They keep Carlyle as a sort of portable cathedral-bell, which they like to produce in companies where he is unknown, and set a-swinging, to the surprise and consternation of all persons, bish-

ops, courtiers, scholars, writers, and, as in companies here (in England) no man is named or introduced, great is the effect and great the inquiry. Forster of Rawdon described to me a dinner at the *table d'hôte* of some provincial hotel where he carried Carlyle, and where an Irish canon had uttered something; Carlyle began to talk, first to the waiters and then to the walls, and then, lastly, unmistakably to the priest, in a manner that frightened the whole company.

Young men, especially those holding liberal opinions, press to see him, but it strikes me like being hot to see the mathematical or Greek professor before they have got their lesson. It needs something more than a clean shirt and reading German to visit him. He treats them with contempt; they profess freedom, and he stands for slavery; they praise republics, and he likes the Russian Czar; they admire Cobden and free trade, and he is a protectionist in political economy; they will eat vegetables, and drink water, and he is a Scotchman who thinks English national character has a pure enthusiasm for beef and mutton, describes with gusto the crowds of people who gaze at the sirloins in the dealer's shop-window, and even likes the Scotch night-cap; they praise moral suasion; he goes for murder, money, capital punishment, and other pretty abominations of English law. They wish freedom of the press, and he thinks the first thing he would do, if he got into Parliament, would be to turn out the reporters, and stop all manner of mischievous speaking to Buncombe and wind-bags. "In the Long Parliament," he says, "the only great Parliament,—they sat secret and silent, grave as an ecumenical council, and I know not what they would have done to anybody that had got in there, and attempted to tell out-of-doors what they did." They go for free institutions, for letting things alone, and only giving opportunity and motive to every man; he for a stringent government that shows people what they must do, and makes them do it. "Here," he says, "the Parliament gathers up six millions of pounds every

* By arrangement with the Massachusetts Historical Society and Mr. Emerson, we have the honor of here printing this record of the writer's impressions of Carlyle, collected from letters home in 1848, for the occasion referred to in Mr. Ellis's note on page 91.—ED. S. M.

year, to give to the poor, and yet the people starve. I think if they would give it to me, to provide the poor with labor, and with authority to make them work, or shoot them,—and I to be hanged if I did not do it,—I could find them in plenty of Indian meal."

He throws himself readily on the other side. If you urge free trade, he remembers that every laborer is a monopolist. The navigation laws of England made its commerce. "St. John was insulted by the Dutch; he came home, got the law passed that foreign vessels should pay high fees, and it cut the throat of the Dutch, and made the English trade." If you boast of the growth of the country, and show him the wonderful results of the census, he finds nothing so depressing as the sight of a great mob. He saw once, as he told me, three or four miles of human beings, and fancied that "the air was some great cheese, and these were mites." If a Tory takes heart at his hatred of stump-oratory and model republics, he replies: "Yes, the idea of a pig-headed soldier who will obey orders, and fire on his own father at the command of his officer, is a great comfort to the aristocratic mind." It is not so much that Carlyle cares for this or that dogma, as that he likes genuineness (the source of all strength) in his companions.

If a scholar goes into a camp of lumbermen or a gang of riggers, those men will quickly detect any fault of character. Nothing will pass with them but what is real and sound. So this man is a hammer that crushes mediocrity and pretension. He detects weakness on the instant, and touches it. He has a vivacious, aggressive temperament, and unimpressionable. The literary, the fashionable, the political man, each fresh from triumphs in his own sphere, comes eagerly to see this man, whose fun they have heartily enjoyed, sure of a welcome, and are struck with despair at the first onset. His firm, victorious, scoffing vituperation strikes them with chill and hesitation. His talk often reminds you of what was said of Johnson: "If his pistol missed fire he would knock you down with the butt-end."

Mere intellectual partisanship wearies him; he detects in an instant if a man stands for any cause to which he is not born and organically committed. A natural defender of anything, a lover who will live and die for that which he speaks for, and who does not care for him, or for anything

but his own business,—he respects: and the nobler this object, of course, the better. He hates a literary trifler, and if, after Guizot had been a tool of Louis Philippe for years, he is now to come and write essays on the character of Washington, on "The Beautiful," and on "Philosophy of History," he thinks that nothing.

Great is his reverence for realities,—for all such traits as spring from the intrinsic nature of the actor. He humors this into the idolatry of strength. A strong nature has a charm for him, previous, it would seem, to all inquiry whether the force be divine or diabolic. He preaches, as by cannonade, the doctrine that every noble nature was made by God, and contains, if savage passions, also fit checks and grand impulses, and, however extravagant, will keep its orbit and return from far.

Nor can that decorum which is the idol of the Englishman, and in attaining which the Englishman exceeds all nations, win from him any obeisance. He is eaten up with indignation against such as desire to make a fair show in the flesh.

Combined with this warfare on respectabilities, and, indeed, pointing all his satire, is the severity of his moral sentiment. In proportion to the peals of laughter amid which he strips the plumes of a pretender and shows the lean hypocrisy to every vantage of ridicule, does he worship whatever enthusiasm, fortitude, love, or other sign of a good nature is in a man.

There is nothing deeper in his constitution than his humor, than the considerate, condescending good-nature with which he looks at every object in existence, as a man might look at a mouse. He feels that the perfection of health is sportiveness, and will not look grave even at dullness or tragedy.

His guiding genius is his moral sense, his perception of the sole importance of truth and justice; but that is a truth of character, not of catechisms.

He says, "There is properly no religion in England. These idle nobles at Tattersall's,—there is no work or word of serious purpose in them; they have this great lying church; and life is a humbug." He prefers Cambridge to Oxford, but he thinks Oxford and Cambridge education indurates the young men, as the Styx hardened Achilles, so that when they come forth of them, they say, "Now we are proof: we have gone through all the degrees, and are case-hardened against the veracities of the Universe; nor man nor God can penetrate us."

Wellington he respects as real and honest, and as having made up his mind, once for all, that he will not have to do with any kind of a lie.

Edwin Chadwick is one of his heroes,—who proposes to provide every house in London with pure water, sixty gallons to every head, at a penny a week; and in the decay and downfall of all religions, Carlyle thinks that the only religious act which a man nowadays can securely perform is to wash himself well.

Of course the new French Revolution of 1848 was the best thing he had seen, and the teaching this great swindler, Louis Philippe, that there is a God's justice in the Universe, after all, was a great satisfaction. Czar Nicholas was his hero: for, in the ignominy of Europe, when all thrones fell like card-houses, and no man was found with conscience enough to fire a gun for his crown, but every one ran away in a *coucou*, with his head shaved, through the *Barrière de Passy*, one man remained who believed he was put there by God Almighty to govern his empire, and, by the help of God, had resolved to stand there.

He was very serious about the bad times; he had seen this evil coming, but thought it would not come in his time. But now 'tis coming, and the only good he sees in it is

the visible appearance of the gods. He thinks it the only question for wise men, instead of art, and fine fancies, and poetry, and such things,—to address themselves to the problem of society. This confusion is the inevitable end of such falsehood and nonsense as they have been embroiled with.

Carlyle has, best of all men in England, kept the manly attitude in his time. He has stood for scholars, asking no scholar what he should say. Holding an honored place in the best society, he has stood for the people, for the Chartist,* for the pauper, intrepidly and scornfully teaching the nobles their peremptory duties.

His errors of opinion are as nothing in comparison with this merit, in my judgment. This *aplomb* cannot be mimicked; it is the speaking to the heart of the thing. And in England, where the morgue of aristocracy has very slowly admitted scholars into society,—a very few houses only in the high circles being ever opened to them,—he has carried himself erect, made himself a power confessed by all men, and taught scholars their lofty duty. He never feared the face of man.

* The Chartists were then preparing to go in a procession of 200,000, to carry their petition, embodying the six points of Chartism, to the House of Commons, on the 10th of April, 1848.

[At the meeting of the Massachusetts Historical Society in April, 1857, Hon. Edward Everett communicated a valuable manuscript received from Mr. Carlyle, containing memoranda of the Franklin family before the Doctor's father came to this country. In January, 1870, Mr. Carlyle himself made a communication to the Society through its recording secretary, Mr. Deane. In February he was chosen an honorary member, gratefully acknowledging his election the next month. Just preceding the monthly meeting of the Society last February had come the intelligence of Mr. Carlyle's death. In conformity with the usage of the Society that the President should announce the death of a member, with remarks of his own, to be followed by those of one or more of the Society, as the occasion or the subject may suggest, Mr. Winthrop promptly wrote to Mr. Emerson to insure his attendance on the occasion. He was the only man in the whole country who, by the warmest relations of personal intercourse, friendship, and correspondence, and by the appreciative sympathies of kindred genius, could meet and fill the demands of that occasion. It was on the day, perhaps at the very hour, when the rural grave in Scotland was to receive the mortal relics of the stern and rugged philosopher. Mr. Emerson kindly responded to the call, and appeared with his helpful daughter. But few of the members most constant in their attendance were aware what was to occur, and the regrets of many who might have been present are keen. Mr. Winthrop had, with his wonted felicity, introduced the theme and recognized the presence of Mr. Emerson. The scene which followed was a memorable one, never to be forgotten by those who felt what a privilege they enjoyed in taking the full impression of it, with all its vividness and suggestiveness, into heart and thought. In recalling it some may possibly have wished that the camera had been there to fix, for more elaborate art, the singularly suggestive and impressive elements of the scene. But anything like form, disposal, or preparatory effect would have marred the charm of its exquisite simplicity. The newspapers have, as fully as facts warrant, and much more so than a tender delicacy can approve, commented freely upon the character and degree of the disablement which the passage of years has visited upon Mr. Emerson. It is enough to say that such visitation as is upon him was manifested simply in enhancing the impression of his gentle, placid mien and tones, and, on this occasion, gave an added charm to his features and utterance. Some of the most impressive and memorable elements of the scene, which will be most fondly cherished by the witnesses, do not allow of description or relation. A small table, with two chairs for Mr. Emerson and his daughter, were brought into the Dowse library-room, where the meeting was held. The manuscript, long since written but never put in print, was a loose one, and only parts of it were to be read by Mr. Emerson. Of the incommunicable features of the scene, very touching to its witnesses was his gentle reference and compliance as he looked to his daughter for direction as to the passages to be read, and to the connection of them. Some slight labial impediments caused an occasional halting in the delivery of elongated words, never favorites with Mr. Emerson. These served, in part, for those delays on words which are so familiar to his hearers as marking his pauses and

emphasis. For the rest, he was helped in imitative utterances of them by the silent lips of his daughter. The apt and racy significance of the most pointed passages came forth in full force, and with the old incisiveness and humor. So hushed was the silence and so intent was the listening that those who were quick of hearing lost nothing of word or intonation. But even these, the more removed in their seats, one by one drew nearer in a closing circle around the reader. Their faces and inward workings of thought showed the profoundness of their interest as they waited for the interpretation of the great philosopher of England by the greatest philosopher of America.

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THE LITERARY WORK OF THOMAS CARLYLE.

THIRTY years are conventionally supposed to constitute the space of time which is loosely spoken of as a generation, and those whose memories can run to that length may, perhaps, be allowed to speak for the generation to which they belong, with, as it may be, less or more of authority, but, certainly, with sufficient knowledge. It is safe, therefore, for the present writer to say that at no time during the present generation in England has such a feeling been aroused in regard to the death of a man of letters as that which was felt in London when the announcement was made that Mr. Carlyle's condition was hopeless, or, as our simpler forefathers would have had it, that "Thomas Carlyle, Esq., lay a-dying at his house in Chelsea." On the extreme verge of the period of memory to which I have alluded, the death of Wordsworth gives the first landmark of this peculiar kind. It was followed nine years afterward by that of Macaulay in the very height of his fame. Thackeray, who had written on this latter recruit for "the majority" some of his most pathetic words, followed in 1868. Seven years afterward, his rival, as some thought, went to join him, and a bare month ago, George Eliot, whom a strong faction would even with these great names, preceded her neighbor, and, perhaps, in some sort, teacher, to the grave. These are the five greatest names borne on the literary schedule of England's necrology during the last thirty years, but none of them has occupied anything like the position which was occupied by Mr. Carlyle. In some cases their fame had passed its zenith, and had begun to descend; in others it was a matter rather of partisan assertion than of universal acceptance. In others, though they were acknowledged as consummate masters of one particular portion of the field, that portion was hardly thought by the general reader to be a very extensive one. But Mr. Carlyle, though

with inconsiderable exceptions he confined himself entirely to prose, and though in prose he hardly cultivated more than two plots, the historical and that of the critical essay, has yet for many years been accepted by competent critics of all shades of opinion as the undoubted head of English letters. He had gained that position fifteen years ago by some forty years of laborious work, and, unlike some of his predecessors in the throne both in our own and in other countries, he had not endangered his supremacy by neglecting the adage, *solve senescentem*.* In the rare instances in which, during the last stage of his career, he broke silence, no loss of power was observable, and if the king did not often meddle in the common jousts, he never took his spear in hand without acquitting himself in a manner becoming royalty. The hot debates which had once taken place as to his style, his principles, his moral influence, his philosophical value, had long died out. No one, save perhaps a very few very foolish people, looked on him any more as a dangerous pantheist, or an immoral defender of might instead of right, or a corrupter of the English language. Few people, on the other hand, upheld him as an inspired prophet, or an apostle of a new politico-ethical faith, or a harbinger of reformation in the language. He had passed the unquiet stage of violent acceptance and violent refusal, and had entered upon that placid possession of respect for his merits and tolerance for his short-comings which is usually reserved for those who have ceased to live. The three English editions of his collected works had, for some years, put a complete knowledge of what he had done while it was day with him within the reach

* Dismiss the aging horse from service, etc.

*Solve senescentem mature sanus equum, ne
Peccet ad extremum ridendus et ilia ducat.*

HORACE, Epist. 1, 1, 8.