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Jane Carlyle: Newly Selected Letters (review)

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Jane Carlyle: Newly Selected Letters.

Edited by Kenneth J. Fielding and David R. Sorensen. Pp. xxxviii, 334.

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Aldershot: Ashgate. 2004. £50.00.

One quibble at the outset: the version of the author's name. 'Jane Carlyle' is unexpected, given that Jane herself frequently used 'Jane Welsh Carlyle' (with due prominence to her maiden as well as her married name), and that this form has been pretty well invariably adopted in the past. Even here, 'JWC' crops up, as in the introduction from time to time. Yet any concern that the book might attempt to recast Jane merely as her husband's wife, and not as the independent and outstandingly talented individual she was, is soon dispelled by the contents. The editors—both associated with the definitive, ongoing *Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle* [sic!]¹—have gone to extraordinary lengths to give a selection of some 250 letters (out of roughly 2000 surviving) which is both representative and novel. Thus there are rather fewer letters to Thomas than in previous collections; some well-known set-pieces easily available elsewhere, such as the sequence written from Troston in 1842, are omitted; there is a new selection from the haunting and intimate journal that Jane kept in 1855-6; and, most importantly, several letters and other documents are printed from sources—some of them private—which were overlooked or unknown in the past.

Yet the story that unfolds in this volume is not essentially unfamiliar. The doctor's daughter from Haddington marrying the brilliant but penniless Thomas; years of isolation and poverty at Craigenputtoch; the move to London in 1834; the rapidly changing cast of servants and visitors at Cheyne Row; the deep embitterment of Jane's middle years by her husband's infatuation with the first Lady Ashburton; and, in the end, illness, recovery and sudden death in Hyde Park in 1866. What the book provides is, rather, a deepening of some traditional perspectives. Most significantly, it supplies fresh material for a reconsideration of Jane's friendships with other women, problematic though these still remain. The brief but intense correspondence with the American actress Charlotte Cushman—of which Jane's side is given in full, Cushman's in extract—is a case in point. The extravagance and fervour of Cushman's writing in particular (Jane's is a trifle cooler), and Cushman's known history of attachments to other women, inevitably arouse the modern reader's curiosity. Could Jane all her life have suppressed 'a lesbian inclination' (p. xxvi)? The letters that the editors have carefully selected throughout the volume show how such a suspicion travesties the complex and many-layered nature of Jane's female friendships. That some women who were (like Cushman) in modern terms lesbian or bisexual were attracted to Jane seems undeniable. Jane herself was drawn to, or at least amused by, women who defied convention in their private lives, ranging from the courtesan Catherine Walters to George Eliot. But even her most affectionate letters to women are more maternal than erotic in tone ('Carina', 'Baby', 'little Woman'), and as the editors point out, she politely but definitely held back from Cushman's advances, using illness as an excuse for not replying. The letters printed here will make possible a properly nuanced analysis of the various kinds of emotional need and elaborate role-playing acted out in Jane's correspondence with other women.

To a remarkable degree, every editor of the Carlyles' letters is still in dialogue with his or her predecessors, for some early depictions of the couple had a long life. J.A. Froude, entrusted by Thomas with the tasks of writing his biography and editing Jane's letters, drew a highly coloured and often misleading portrait of the couple, alleging that life in Cheyne Row was 'a protracted tragedy' owing

to Thomas's neglect and self-absorption—and, notoriously, his physical incapacity to consummate the marriage. An important source for this interpretation was Jane's confidante Geraldine Jewsbury, who discussed the marriage at some length in a letter of 1876 to Froude only recently published in full. In the book under review, the ghosts of Froude and Jewsbury still loom large—perhaps too large, for their exaggerations and distortions have long been recognized, and it hardly seems necessary for them to be rehearsed at the length they are here. The pursuit is carried from the introduction to the edition itself, where several opportunities are taken to repeat Jane's (and others) expressions of disdain and impatience for her friend (e.g., 'a flimsy tatter of a creature like Geraldine', p. 261, and the 'everlasting Jewsbury', p. 195).

Yet Froude's and Jewsbury's dramatizations, misleading though they were, derived to some extent from Jane herself. For what emerges with astonishing clarity from this selection is the extent to which the letters are performances—sustained monologues, complete with confiding addresses to the reader, snatches of repeated dialogue, crisp and often cynical asides. It is no coincidence that one of Jane's most extended writings (an appeal to Thomas to increase her allowance) is cast in the form of a parliamentary speech, while another (describing a visit to Haddington in 1849) takes its name from a play (*Much Ado about Nothing*). Particularly remarkable is the use of 'coterie speech'—characteristic turns of phrase (sometimes only a single word), deriving from friends, family or servants. Jane's writing is densely crowded with these, often marked off by inverted commas, underlined, or phonetically spelt, and sometimes juxtaposed with allusions to more conventional written or remembered sources, including Goethe, George Sand, the Bible and indeed her husband—for surely the famous account of Jane's appearance before the Tax Commissioners in 1855 (printed in extract here) echoes the description of the trial of Marie Antoinette in *The French Revolution*. Yet these collocations are achieved without the slightest incongruity: the sense is rather one of a continuous but controlled orchestration of voices, a summoning-up of the past and the distant, the written and the oral, to be heard on equal terms in the present.

Unfortunately, some of these voices may not be audible to the uninitiated reader, for the 'coterie speech', puzzling though it sometimes is, is nowhere explained or glossed. In other ways, too, the texts are less accessible than they might be, for though there is a sensitive and helpful linking narrative (along the line of Trudy Bliss's in her excellent earlier selection) and a useful index, practically none of the letters is given complete and the book is entirely without footnotes. Two texts that I was able to collate against the originals in Oxford (pp. 146-51, 184-6) turned out to have a considerable number of errors of transcription, most of them of little significance, but one or two quite serious (about thirty words have been omitted through 'eyeskip' in the fourth paragraph on page 150, for example).

There will inevitably be points of interpretation or emphasis in this book on which views may differ, and it is regrettable that more pains were not taken to provide an absolutely reliable text. But where so much of the material is new, and the editors' knowledge so deep, one must resist the temptation to cavil. The publication of a selection of Jane Welsh Carlyle's writings as extended and wide-ranging as this one is warmly to be welcomed, and the editors are to be thanked for introducing another generation of readers to this most self-conscious, contradictory and finally enigmatic of letter-writers.