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Carlyle Resartus? No. 24 Cheyne Row

SARAH OLWEN JONES

AT THE time of his death in 1881, Thomas Carlyle was at the height of his influence and among the most revered writers in Britain. A social critic, biographer, and historian, known in his later years as the "Sage of Chelsea," Carlyle was admired by many as a moral guide, steering his readers through the tumultuous nineteenth century. Leigh Hunt had idealized Carlyle as the next Percy Bysshe Shelley (CL 153), and, in 1855, George Eliot observed, "there is hardly a superior or active mind of this generation that has not been modified by Carlyle's writings; there has hardly been an English book written for the last ten or twelve years that would not have been different if Carlyle had not lived" (qtd. in Seigel 409–10). For decades, Carlyle was a figure around whom luminaries, celebrities, and aristocrats gathered, and he was considered a voice of and for the times, even if his works were not universally admired. At the end of the nineteenth century, however, Carlyle's reputation was in ruins. James Anthony Froude's publication of Carlyle's *Reminiscences* and biographies of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle exposed Carlyle's vulnerabilities and kindled a storm of allegations (among other criticisms) regarding Carlyle's perceived lack of manliness and social class, raising questions about Carlyle's capacity to serve as a model of Britishness.¹

In the midst of the controversy, in 1883, Mary Aitken Carlyle (commonly known as Mrs. Alexander Carlyle), Carlyle's niece, former amanuensis, and housekeeper, with great foresight secured and opened to visitors the house in which Carlyle was born (and lived for the first three years of life) and also initiated the collection of memorabilia and artifacts connected to her uncle and aunt. While the "Arched House" in Ecclefechan became an early site of pilgrimage for those seeking the origins of the "Sage of Chelsea," back in London the Carlyles' Cheyne Row residence was dirty, run down, and neglected, the home's condition being "the fitting accompaniment of all the malevolent abuse that has been heaped on Carlyle since his death" (qtd. in *Carlyle's House Catalogue* 2).

More than a decade after Carlyle's death, in 1894, the Manchester merchant George Lumsden visited the "holy ground" of No. 24 Cheyne Row, Chelsea, to pay homage to "the man whose influence upon my own life

had been, in many important respects, determinative” (qtd. in *Carlyle’s House Catalogue* 2). Lumsden, troubled by the neglected state of the house, determined that it should be bought by “Carlyle’s admirers” (qtd. in *Carlyle’s House Catalogue* 4) in an effort to rescue Carlyle’s reputation and (re)present him to the nation as one of the nineteenth century’s heroes. Lumsden’s arduous efforts to create a committee and raise the necessary funds eventually paid dividends: the house opened to the public in December 1895 as part of the centenary commemoration of Carlyle’s birth (fig. 1).

The transformation of No. 24 Cheyne Row, Chelsea, from a dilapidated private residence into a public museum demonstrates a process of museumization that is clearly more complex than simply recognizing the association of a surviving building with an influential public man. Over the course of a century, the Chelsea house transitioned from a derelict space, destitute of all memories when purchased in 1895, to an in-between state with “the look of something forcibly preserved” (Woolf, “Carlyle’s House” 3) in the early decades of the twentieth century, and through the subsequent acquisition of objects (originals and replicas) and the display of furniture, the house metamorphosed into a reproduction of a homely domestic scene, “snug and unpretentious,” “small and romantic” (qtd. in Fokschaner 48).



FIG. 1 : The parlour at Carlyle’s House, 24 Cheyne Row, London.
Courtesy of National Trust Images.

The metamorphosis of the Cheyne Row house reflects the rise of the institution of the house museum. The Chelsea house was a home, but it has become an invocation of a prior era; it is filled with traces of the life of the Carlyles but also conjures up the Victorian era and promotes the significance of the era's literature to the nation's identity. Looking through the metaphorical windows of the Carlyles' house, one sees the museological strategies that shape visions of the past through the prioritization of objects, negotiations with the visitor economy, and modes of presentation, as well as through the use of strategies that promote place and cultural significance. In this house, objects reference the past and present simultaneously and are both metonym and metaphor at the same time: an object's metaphorical nature allows for its meaning to be manipulated, but its metonymic nature gives it significant power as a symbol. Everyday objects, reinvented as artifacts, are elevated to the status of cultural treasure, symbolizing the literary genius of Carlyle, paying homage to the nineteenth century (though the house was built in 1708), and representing the continuity of elements of the city, despite the passing of time. Heroic, sacred, and quotidian elements intermingle seamlessly in the museum display, and Carlyle is refashioned into someone both ordinary and extraordinary—someone who transcends the mundaneness of ordinary life, recreated by the house museum, and who can stand as a representative of the nation.

In this sense, house museums become signifiers of the loss of a past, which is irredeemably past, but also signifiers of a present that has captured the past and can (re)present it as history. Here, also, history is made out of the quotidian. To the delight of modern-day audiences, particularly those reared on *Downton Abbey* and its ilk, the museum includes behind-the-scenes spaces and features backstage activities that once supported the Carlyles' front-stage performances. The Carlyles' bedrooms, their wash tubs, the water pipes, the basement kitchen with all its accoutrements, and the ten to twelve square metres of poorly lit and poorly ventilated living space for the maid are all powerful evocations of the past. The visitor is drawn into the details of the couple's daily existence, minutely documented in the Carlyles' letters, vividly showcased throughout by the museum installations and narrated by the custodians, the volunteers, and the catalogue. The house transports audiences into a seemingly authentic milieu and historical way of life; it is a reproduction, but it is a production that seeks to validate its historicity by displaying Robert Tait's *A Chelsea Interior* (fig. 2) and Helen Allingham's circa 1878 *Thomas Carlyle*. These portraits reflect back on the rooms in which they are displayed, mirroring their surroundings as if to provide incontrovertible proof of the authenticity of the place, and they also helped to guide the restoration process. Visitors are thus encouraged to suspend their sense of reality, to activate their fantasies, and to indulge in the belief that they are entering a world as close as possible to the original.



FIG. 2: Robert Scott Tait, *A Chelsea Interior* (1857–58).
 Courtesy of National Trust Images.

In 1931, Virginia Woolf observed that “one hour spent in 5 Cheyne Row will tell us more about [the Carlyles] and their lives than we can learn from all the biographies” (“Great Men’s Houses” 32). For those who visit these literary sites, value is realized by viewing or touching the desk upon which a piece of literature was written, or standing in the spaces vividly represented by the Carlyles in their letters and other published materials. The desire to achieve a simulacrum of intimacy with the author and his work is explicitly demonstrated by visitors to Cheyne Row demanding access to Thomas Carlyle’s bedroom (now the custodian’s private quarters), despite explanations that nothing within resembles Carlyle’s bedroom. For such visitors, the experience can assume an almost reverential quality. Meanings are inscribed in the walls, the empty spaces, and the furniture, as one imagines Carlyle composing one of his tomes or Welsh Carlyle penning an epistle, or reimagines a scene from one of their letters—Welsh Carlyle, for example, comforting Carlyle in the front parlour after John Stuart Mill confesses that his maid has burnt the manuscript of Carlyle’s *The French Revolution*. As Martin Drury, the former director of the National Trust, effused in 1995, “evidence of their lives helps you to understand them” (qtd. in Fokschaner 48). Both Woolf’s and Drury’s comments affirm the idea that a writer’s home facilitates transcendent insights into the author’s character. The idea that standing in an author’s room “bring[s] us closer to the

impalpable atmosphere which spilled naturally over from writers' lives into their books" (Ousby 10) has been a driving motivation for secular, literary pilgrims. The connection felt by the reader with a piece of literary work, and by extension with the author, gives meaning to a place connected with that writer and his or her work.

Museums, under the right conditions, have the power to reconcile tensions, to transform reputations, and to make objects and spaces into palatable and even heroic stories. Carlyle's house in Chelsea combines art, work, and life to represent national identity and a shared (global) heritage that recognizes the cultural authority of English literature. In these ways, and underscored by the ritual of pilgrimage, the Chelsea museum operates as a Norian *lieu de mémoire*, creating continuing relevancy that successfully avoids the petrification of the collection and the death of the museum (which was the fate of Jane Welsh Carlyle's Haddington house museum in 2004).

For all the claims of authenticity and faithfulness to history, however, the Carlyle house in Chelsea is not an accurate reflection of historical fact. Heritage is not the same as history. Carlyle's house is part of a creative process and not the preservation of what already existed. In order to make things appear realistic, this final product, available as "heritage," has undergone extensive repair, reconstruction, and frequent change since the Carlyles left it toward the end of the nineteenth century. This is clearly not the preservation of historical reality but the commodification of a product, of "the past," and this product will continue to change in response to present-day cultural, economic, and political demands. New understandings are always being erected, just as older ones are being reconstructed, or sometimes rendered invisible.

Henry James believed that death smoothed away the cracks and blemishes of a life well lived. Reflecting on the sanitization of memories of an individual at the moment of passing, he writes:

The hand of death, in passing over [the deceased individual], has smoothed the folds, made it more typical and more general . . . accidents have dropped away from it and shades have ceased to count; it stands, sharply, for a few estimated and cherished things, rather than nebulously, for a swarm of possibilities. (James, 516)

For the Carlyles, it was death itself that opened up and allowed for "a swarm of possibilities." Those involved in saving No. 24 Cheyne Row "from the tooth of time" (Woolf et al. 184) sought to solidify the image—to "smooth the folds"—and refashion Carlyle into someone ordinary and yet extraordinary—someone who could transcend daily life and stand representative of the nation. As a public institution, the museum continues to

allow for a multitude of interpretations, to mediate presentations of a life to the public, and the Carlyles will continue to be refashioned according to modern-day museological practice, as objects and artifacts become available, and as audience expectations and knowledge change.

Notes

- 1 For a full literature review of the Froude–Carlyle controversy and its aftermath, see Jones.

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The Soane after Soane: Housing the Museum

SOPHIE THOMAS

Sir John Soane’s Museum.—This valuable collection was opened yesterday to the public for the season, and during the day there was a great number of visitors. The arrangements are very satisfactory, and the collection is so varied as to gratify every taste. The preminent [sic] object is, of course, the alabaster sarcophagus which the testator obtained from the late Mr. Belzoni for 2,000 guineas. The museum