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The Works of Thomas Carlyle

Volume 10:
Past and Present

Edited by Henry Duff Traill
CENTENARY EDITION

THE WORKS OF

THOMAS CARLYLE

IN THIRTY VOLUMES

VOL. X

PAST AND PRESENT
THOMAS CARLYLE

PAST AND PRESENT

IN ONE VOLUME

Ernst ist das Leben

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PORTRAIT OF THOMAS CARLYLE .................................. frontispiece

From a photograph taken 31st July 1854
INTRODUCTION

CARLYLE, it was affirmed in the pages prefatory to the First Volume of this series, ‘is neither political prophet nor ethical doctor, but simply a great master of literature who lives for posterity by the art which he despised.’ This pronouncement has been challenged in some quarters, as it was inevitable that it should be; but it has, on the whole, been received with a greater amount of assent, express or tacit, than one would have ventured to count upon when the sentence was originally penned. To those who still find it a stumbling-block I would respectfully commend a careful perusal of the volume to which this is the Introduction. Nowhere, as it seems to me, is the contrast between the prophet who has perished and the writer who is immortal more ironically presented to us than in the pages of *Past and Present*. The irony enters into the very title; for it is the Present of Carlyle’s description which has now passed so completely away as to carry with it into the limbo of futilities the predictions which he based upon it; while it is the Past of his fond retrospect which his literary genius has made to live again for us with a reality to which our conceptions of his and even of our own Present seldom attain, and which they hardly ever surpass. In the first six chapters of this volume, which form Book i., and are entitled ‘Proem,’ as also to a considerable extent in Books iii. and iv., we have to do with a political pessimist who mistook a passing phase of trouble in the history of a nation for a crisis, probably a fatal crisis, in its fortunes; and his boding prophecies, stormily eloquent, grimly humorous as is the form of their expression, are marred for us of to-day by an ever-present consciousness of their subsequent falsification. But in Book ii., the preacher
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PAST AND PRESENT

and teacher retire into the background, the unrivalled master of historical narrative, the magical rebuilders of the past, assume their places, and the result appears in a picture of mediæval monasticism which will live as long as anything that Carlyle ever wrote. More than one professed romancier of the highest genius has dealt with the cloistered life; and the quaint mixture of nobility and naïveté, of dignity and childishness, of the pathetic and the absurd, which meets one in the typical monkish character, has attracted poets and humorists in all ages. But none among them has ever done fuller justice to it than the author of the wonderful sketch of Abbot Samson and the St. Edmundsbury monks. Perhaps if one were challenged to name ten pages in which Carlyle has most brilliantly exhibited the whole array of those gifts by virtue of which he makes history live again, one would do well to seek them, not in the dramatic pages of the French Revolution, but in the two short chapters of Past and Present wherein he describes the canvassing for the new Abbot of St. Edmundsbury, and the final election of Samson Subsacrista to that exalted office. The preliminary chattering of the monks among themselves; the despatch of the thirteen delegate electors to Henry II. at Waltham; their journey thither; and the formidable figure, dashed in with a few strokes, of the great King himself—it is all done in Carlyle’s inimitable manner, with that force and truth and humour and swift unerring touch that marks his handling of any historic incident which had once taken hold of his imagination. Jocelin of Brakelond’s narrative, is his sole authority throughout; but how vividly do the figures stand out on the faded tapestry of the monkish chronicler! And when at last the names of the competing candidates are one by one struck off, and the electors make their final unexpected presentment of the Subsacrista, how intensely real is the scene which follows!—

‘The King’s Majesty, looking at us somewhat sternly, then says: “You present to me Samson; I do not know him: had it been your Prior, whom I do know, I should have accepted him: however, I will
INTRODUCTION

now do as you wish. But have a care of yourselves. By the true eyes
of God, per veros oculos Dei, if you manage badly, I will be upon you!" 
Samson, therefore, steps forward, kisses the King's feet; but swiftly 
rises erect again, swiftly turns towards the altar, uplifting with the 
other Twelve, in clear tenor-note, the Fifty-first Psalm, "Miserere mei 
Deus,

After thy loving-kindness, Lord,
Have mercy upon me; 

with firm voice, firm step and head, no change in his countenance whatever. "By God's eyes," said the King, "that one, I think, will govern 
the Abbey well."

And admirably, as we all know, is his government described in 
Book ii. of this volume. We follow the history of the good 
Abbot's administration—its struggles, reforms, pieties, with the 
same strange sense of reality and nearness that we feel in reading of 
his election; and it is all too soon for us that Jocelin's Chronicle 
comes to an end, 'impenetrable time-curtains rush down,' the 
'real phantasmagory of St. Edmundbury plunges into the bosom 
of the Twelfth Century again,' and 'Monks, Abbot, Hero-worship, 
Government, Obedience, Cœur de Lion, and St. Edmund's Shrine 
vanish like "Mirza's Vision," leaving nothing but a mutilated 
black ruin amid green botanic expanses, and oxen, sheep, and 
dilettanti pasturing in their places.'

It is with some unwillingness that we pass from this picturesque 
and romantic episode to the two concluding books, and find our- 
selves again at hand-grips with professors of the dismal science, 
commercial capitalists, laissez-faire theorists, Plugson of Undershot, 
Sir Jabesh Windbag, and the rest of Carlyle's favourite bogies. 
They are all fallen silent—all gone dead to-day, and to fight the 
battle with them over again gives one, curiously enough, a far 
more 'phantasmagoric' feeling than that with which one joined in 
the struggles of Abbot Samson. Yet even now it is impos- 
sible not to observe with admiration how, again and again, in iso- 
lated passages, in whole chapters, the genius of Carlyle triumphs 
and preserves the vitality of his perishable materials. The
Past and Present

fifth chapter of the Third Book, the chapter on ‘The English,’ is a case in point: nothing truer, more inspiring, or at the same time more human, more genially humorous, has ever been written on the national character than this study of John Bull, in all his strength and weakness, his confusions of the mind and his heroisms of the will.

And to distinguish—as it is more necessary to do with Carlyle than with any other writer—between merits of subject and those of treatment, we should have, in respect of certain great qualities of its author, to give Past and Present a very high place in his works. For unflagging spirit and inexhaustible animation it is surpassed by none of them, and surpasses many: as well it may indeed, seeing that, as Professor Nichol truly observes of it, it is the ‘only considerable consecutive book, unless we also except the Life of Sterling, which the author wrote without the accompaniment of wrestlings, agonies, and disgusts.’ As a matter of fact this volume of upwards of two hundred and fifty pages was completed ‘from title-page to colophon,’ during the first seven weeks of 1848, actually one of the ‘four years of abstruse toil, obscure speculation, futile wrestling and misery,’ which, as he afterwards complained, it had cost him to get together his materials for the Cromwell. In spite of this formidable preoccupation, he was able to dash off Past and Present literally ‘at a heat.’ But perhaps I should have written ‘because’ rather than ‘in spite,’ for it may well have been to the rebound of the bent bow—to the unspeakable relief of being able to exchange distasteful for congenial work—that the pages which follow are indebted for that varying but unceasing play of eloquence, humour, and passion by which they are irradiated from first to last.

H. D. Traill.