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Edited by Henry Duff Traill
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The Works of Thomas Carlyle

VOLUME 5:
ON HEROES, HERO-WORSHIP
AND THE HEROIC IN HISTORY



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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo, Mexico City

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108022286

© in this compilation Cambridge University Press 2010

This edition first published 1897
This digitally printed version 2010

ISBN 978-1-108-02228-6 Paperback

This book reproduces the text of the original edition. The content and language reflect the beliefs, practices and terminology of their time, and have not been updated.

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CENTENARY EDITION

—
THE WORKS OF
THOMAS CARLYLE
IN THIRTY VOLUMES

—
VOL. V

HEROES AND HERO-WORSHIP

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William Shakespeare.

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THOMAS CARLYLE

ON

HEROES, HERO-WORSHIP

AND THE

HEROIC IN HISTORY

IN ONE VOLUME

LONDON
CHAPMAN AND HALL
LIMITED
1897

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INTRODUCTION

FOR the lectures on *Heroes and Hero-Worship*—in their form, at least, of oral dissertations—the world is indebted to poverty and Harriet Martineau. Unimpelled by the goad of the one, or undirected by the friendly counsel and practical organising ability of the other, it is most unlikely that Carlyle would ever have undertaken a task so thoroughly uncongenial to him as that of expounding his opinions on life and morals to, of all audiences, an assembly gathered together mainly from the ranks of polite society. Yet he delivered no fewer than four courses of lectures between 1837 and 1840, and hated the business as heartily at the end as at the beginning. To Emerson on April 17th, 1839, he writes:—‘My lectures come on this day two weeks. O heaven! I cannot “speak”; I can only gasp and writhe and stutter, a spectacle to gods and fashionables, being forced to it by want of money.’ And on the very eve of the delivery of this, his last course, the *Heroes and Hero-Worship* series, he describes himself as ‘feeling like a man going to be hanged.’ His severe self-criticism of his oratorical style, and platform manner was, no doubt, largely just. ‘At times,’ wrote one who had attended his lectures, ‘he distorts his features as if suddenly seized by some paroxysm of pain . . . he makes mouths; he has a harsh accent and graceless gesticulation.’ Yet the lectures themselves were fairly successful from the pecuniary point of view—the last course, indeed, more so, which is significant, than the first. Apparently the desire of the ‘fashionables’ to see and hear this uncouth man of genius was something more than a mere passing whim; and his simple but dignified words of farewell are clearly those of a man who was well

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satisfied with his reception. 'Often enough with these abrupt utterances thrown out isolated, unexplained, has your tolerance been put to the trial. Tolerance, patient candour, all-hoping favour and kindness, which I will not speak of at present. The accomplished and distinguished, the beautiful, the wise, something of what is best in England, have listened patiently to my rude words. With many feelings I heartily thank you all, and say, Good be with you all!'

There is no denying that their tolerance must have been 'put to the trial.' The very first lecture was, in fact, the very last with which any lecturer anxious to 'draw' would have opened a series. No doubt it was congenial with Carlyle's mystical turn of mind, and not unimportant to his argument, to connect the line of heroes with the family of the gods; and for that purpose Odin, to be sure, will serve as well as another. But no judicious lecturer would have given this semi-mythical shadow a lecture all to himself in Albemarle Street. His very name as it appears in the contents-list of the republished discourses, 'The Hero as Divinity—Odin,' rubbing a phantasmal shoulder against such very solid and definite figures as Mahomet, Dante, and Luther, to say nothing of later worthies, has an almost ludicrous effect. 'The Hero as Divinity—Hercules' would have been scarcely more grotesque.

The first lecture, therefore, suffers unavoidably and grievously from its subject. As we really know nothing of Odin, except as a force, to discourse of him to the length of some thirty-five pages naturally compelled Carlyle to lay increased stress on that side of his own teaching which least needed additional emphasis. Odin is not really the 'Hero as Divinity,' or does not really emerge as such from the mists of legend, even after Carlyle's most industrious efforts so to body him forth. He remains merely 'The Hero as Strong Man' to the last, and the father of all such as are strong and brave, just as the Norse Sea Kings themselves were, as Carlyle puts it, 'progenitors of our own Blakes and Nelsons.' This is,

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no doubt, a sound thesis, but it is also an eminently simple one, and does not bear expanding over as many pages as Carlyle devotes to it. The attempts to diversify it, as when he speaks of the Norse Skald as a 'huge untutored Brobdingnag genius, needing only to be tamed down, into Shakespeares, Dantes, Goethes,' are purely fantastic.

No doubt the interest of the lectures increased as the course proceeded; but they suffer throughout from endless repetition and from the obviously artificial character of their subdivisions of subject. An undertaking to deliver six lectures on Heroes necessitates at least a sixfold classification of the various forms of the heroic, and this, as a matter of fact, has only been accomplished by dint of varying the definition of the word. 'Hero' sometimes stands for an actual leader of men; sometimes merely for a man by whom men, in Carlyle's opinion, would do well to take example; and sometimes simply for a man of genius, whom men may admire enthusiastically, and by whom they may be intellectually and spiritually influenced, but whom, in some respects, the mass of them could not imitate if they would, and in other respects should not if they could. Mahomet and Luther, Cromwell and Napoleon, are examples of the first variety, Johnson of the second, Rousseau and, still more distinctly, Burns of the third. Indeed, the presence of the last in this particular company is as mysterious, as the collocation of his two companions Johnson and Rousseau, the former of whom, it may be remembered, observed of the latter, 'I would sooner sign a sentence for his transportation than that of any felon who has gone from the Old Bailey these many years; yes, I should like to have him work in the plantations.' It is evident enough from this, that one hero may stand to another in the same relation as he proverbially stands to his valet.

Not only, however, would many of Carlyle's heroes have been astonished at their company; they would probably have been almost as much surprised at their own apotheosis. Johnson is a typical man of letters, as Burns is a typical poet of nature: one

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of them had not the slightest inclination to pose as a propagandist, a man 'with a mission,' or even, except in conversation, as a 'leader' of any kind; the other, though he occasionally figures as a preacher of somewhat vague democratic doctrines, is not at his best, or his most characteristically poetic, when he is doing so. The truth is, that both the 'man of letters' and the poet have, as such, no natural place in a Walhalla of such heroes as Carlyle's exhortations to hero-worship must be assumed to postulate. As a definite creed, as a religion of practical life, it presupposes a hero who is, before all things, a man of action, one of the Mahomets, Luthers, Knoxes, Cromwells, Napoleons of the world. If the attitude of their followers, or of those who in later generations find these great men's lives reminding them, with Longfellow, that 'they can make their lives sublime'—if this attitude, I say, is rightly called hero-worship, we are clearly using the same word in a radically different sense when we apply it to the admiration which we feel for Dante as the author of the *Divina Commedia*, or for the Shakespeare of the *Midsummer Night's Dream*, or for the Burns of *Tam o' Shanter* and the matchless lyrics. Worship in the latter case begins and ends with a state of the emotions; in the former case it aims at, and is only completed by, the adoption of a rule of conduct.

And in effect this distinction accurately divides what is vital and permanent in Carlyle's teaching, from what was perishable and has passed away. Hero-worship, in so far as it 'drives at practice,' hero-worship considered as the attempt to escape from political and social difficulties by deliberate choice of, and pledge of unquestioning submission and obedience to, an autocratic leader was early perceived to be a hopelessly unpractical creed. And later on Carlyle himself delivered a serious blow at it in adopting Frederick the Great as his second King-hero, and dismissing Napoleon not without contumely to the limbo of swaggering quacks. But these six lectures, considered not as enforcing any specific creed, but simply as so many sermons on the text that 'reverence is good for the soul,' possess a lasting though, it is true, a diminished value.

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The public of our own day shows plenty of disposition to make heroes, and is not at all too apt to think that they can be dispensed with. But the doctrine which Carlyle preached in the late Thirties and early Forties was a doctrine 'very necessary for those times'; for they were times when a democracy, which had not yet 'found itself,' was being fed full on the delusion that the 'age of the individual' was gone by for ever, and that salvation was to be found in political machinery and blind reliance on the operation of certain economical principles, applicable only over a narrow area of human life.

For the reader as well as, though no doubt less than, the listener the lectures suffer from a thesis too narrow, and, as regards some of them, too fanciful for such elaborate treatment. There are, of course, fine and striking things in the volume, as there were in everything Carlyle wrote or, with due preparation, uttered:—the Dante and Shakespeare in the 'Hero as Poet,' the austere figure of Knox in the 'Hero as Priest,' the brief but brilliant sketch of Burns in the 'Hero as Man of Letters.' But, on the whole, an end-to-end perusal of the volume produces an effect of monotony rare in Carlyle, and diversified only by a more than Carlylean inconsistency. On the same page of the 'Hero as King' he represents Cromwell at one moment as having sent the Rump Parliament packing because they 'were hurrying through the House a kind of Reform Bill,' whereas he recognised the probability that 'the great numerical majority of England' was indifferent to his cause, while in the next breath he is spoken of as having 'dared to appeal to the genuine Fact of this England whether it will support him or No'—which obviously is just what, for the excellent reason above stated, he dared not do. And it is midway in the 'Hero as Man of Letters' that he suddenly breaks forth into an amazing panegyric on the Chinese system of testing practical aptitude for the work of government by the methods of the examination schools. Anything which in his ordinary moods would have been more provocative of Carlyle's most scornful merriment it would be difficult to imagine.

H. D. TRAILL.