

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02234-7 - The Works of Thomas Carlyle, Volume 11

Edited by Henry Duff Traill

Excerpt

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## PART FIRST

### CHAPTER I

#### INTRODUCTORY

NEAR seven years ago, a short while before his death in 1844, John Sterling committed the care of his literary Character and printed Writings to two friends, Archdeacon Hare and myself. His estimate of the bequest was far from overweening; to few men could the small sum-total of his activities in this world seem more inconsiderable than, in those last solemn days, it did to him. He had burnt much; found much unworthy; looking steadfastly into the silent continents of Death and Eternity, a brave man's judgments about his own sorry work in the field of Time are not apt to be too lenient. But, in fine, here was some portion of his work which the world had already got hold of, and which he could not burn. This too, since it was not to be abolished and annihilated, but must still for some time live and act, he wished to be wisely settled, as the rest had been. And so it was left in charge to us, the survivors, to do for it what we judged fittest, if indeed doing nothing did not seem the fittest to us. This message, communicated after his decease, was naturally a sacred one to Mr. Hare and me.

After some consultation on it, and survey of the difficulties and delicate considerations involved in it, Archdeacon Hare and I agreed that the whole task, of selecting what Writings were to be reprinted, and of drawing-up a Biography to introduce them, should be left to him alone; and done without

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interference of mine :—as accordingly it was,<sup>1</sup> in a manner surely far superior to the common, in every good quality of editing ; and visibly everywhere bearing testimony to the friendliness, the piety, perspicacity and other gifts and virtues of that eminent and amiable man.

In one respect, however, if in one only, the arrangement had been unfortunate. Archdeacon Hare, both by natural tendency and by his position as a Churchman, had been led, in editing a Work not free from ecclesiastical heresies, and especially in writing a Life very full of such, to dwell with preponderating emphasis on that part of his subject ; by no means extenuating the fact, nor yet passing lightly over it (which a layman could have done) as needing no extenuation ; but carefully searching into it, with the view of excusing and explaining it ; dwelling on it, presenting all the documents of it, and as it were spreading it over the whole field of his delineation ; as if religious heterodoxy had been the grand fact of Sterling's life, which even to the Archdeacon's mind it could by no means seem to be. *Hinc illæ lachrymæ.* For the Religious Newspapers, and Periodical Heresy-hunters, getting very lively in those years, were prompt to seize the cue ; and have prosecuted and perhaps still prosecute it, in their sad way, to all lengths and breadths. John Sterling's character and writings, which had little business to be spoken of in any Church-court, have hereby been carried thither as if for an exclusive trial ; and the mournfulest set of pleadings, out of which nothing but a misjudgment *can* be formed, prevail there ever since. The noble Sterling, a radiant child of the empyrean, clad in bright auroral hues in the memory of all that knew him,—what is he doing here in inquisitorial *sanbenito*, with nothing but ghastly spectralities prowling round him, and inarticulately screeching and gibbering what they call their judgment on him !

‘The sin of Hare's Book,’ says one of my Correspondents

<sup>1</sup> *John Sterling's Essays and Tales, with Life* by Archdeacon Hare. Parker ; London 1848.

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in those years, 'is easily defined, and not very condemnable, but it is nevertheless ruinous to his task as Biographer. He takes up Sterling as a clergyman merely. Sterling, I find, was a curate for exactly eight months; during eight months and no more had he any special relation to the Church. But he was a man, and had relation to the Universe, for eight-and-thirty years: and it is in this latter character, to which all the others were but features and transitory hues, that we wish to know him. His battle with hereditary Church-formulas was severe; but it was by no means his one battle with things inherited, nor indeed his chief battle; neither, according to my observation of what it was, is it successfully delineated or summed-up in this Book. The truth is, nobody that had known Sterling would recognise a feature of him here; you would never dream that this Book treated of *him* at all. A pale sickly shadow in torn surplice is presented to us here; weltering bewildered amid heaps of what you call "Hebrew Old-clothes"; wrestling, with impotent impetuosity, to free itself from the baleful imbroglio, as if that had been its one function in life: who in this miserable figure would recognise the brilliant, beautiful and cheerful John Sterling, with his ever-flowing wealth of ideas, fancies, imaginations; with his frank affections, inexhaustible hopes, audacities, activities, and general radiant vivacity of heart and intelligence, which made the presence of him an illumination and inspiration wherever he went? It is too bad. Let a man be honestly forgotten when his life ends; but let him not be misremembered in this way. To be hung-up as an ecclesiastical scarecrow, as a target for heterodox and orthodox to practise archery upon, is no fate that can be due to the memory of Sterling. It was not as a ghastly phantasm, choked in Thirty-nine-article controversies, or miserable Semitic, Anti-Semitic street-riots,—in scepticisms, agonised self-seekings, that this man appeared in life; nor as such, if the world still wishes to look at him, should you suffer the world's memory of him now to be. Once for all, it is unjust;

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emphatically untrue as an image of John Sterling : perhaps to few men that lived along with him could such an interpretation of their existence be more inapplicable.'

Whatever truth there might be in these rather passionate representations, and to myself there wanted not a painful feeling of their truth, it by no means appeared what help or remedy any friend of Sterling's, and especially one so related to the matter as myself, could attempt in the interim. Perhaps endure in patience till the dust laid itself again, as all dust does if you leave it well alone? Much obscuration would thus of its own accord fall away; and, in Mr. Hare's narrative itself, apart from his commentary, many features of Sterling's true character would become decipherable to such as sought them. Censure, blame of this Work of Mr. Hare's was naturally far from my thoughts. A work which distinguishes itself by human piety and candid intelligence; which, in all details, is careful, lucid, exact; and which offers, as we say, to the observant reader that will interpret facts, many traits of Sterling besides his heterodoxy. Censure of it, from me especially, is not the thing due; from me a far other thing is due!—

On the whole, my private thought was: First, How happy it comparatively is, for a man of any earnestness of life, to have no Biography written of him; but to return silently, with his small, sorely foiled bit of work, to the Supreme Silences, who alone can judge of it or him; and not to trouble the reviewers, and greater or lesser public, with attempting to judge it! The idea of 'fame,' as they call it, posthumous or other, does not inspire one with much ecstasy in these points of view.—Secondly, That Sterling's performance and real or seeming importance in this world was actually not of a kind to demand an express Biography, even according to the world's usages. His character was not supremely original; neither was his fate in the world wonderful. What he did was inconsiderable enough; and as to

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what it lay in him to have done, this was but a problem, now beyond possibility of settlement. Why had a Biography been inflicted on this man; why had not No-biography, and the privilege of all the weary, been his lot?—Thirdly, That such lot, however, could now no longer be my good Sterling's; a tumult having risen around his name, enough to impress some pretended likeness of him (about as like as the Guy-Fauxes are, on Gunpowder-Day) upon the minds of many men: so that he could not be forgotten, and could only be misremembered, as matters now stood.

Whereupon, as practical conclusion to the whole, arose by degrees this final thought, That, at some calmer season, when the theological dust had well fallen, and both the matter itself, and my feelings on it, were in a suitabler condition, I ought to give my testimony about this friend whom I had known so well, and record clearly what my knowledge of him was. This has ever since seemed a kind of duty I had to do in the world before leaving it.

And so, having on my hands some leisure at this time, and being bound to it by evident considerations, one of which ought to be especially sacred to me, I decide to fling down on paper some outline of what my recollections and reflections contain in reference to this most friendly, bright and beautiful human soul; who walked with me for a season in this world, and remains to me very memorable while I continue in it. Gradually, if facts simple enough in themselves can be narrated as they came to pass, it will be seen what kind of man this was; to what extent condemnable for imaginary heresy and other crimes, to what extent laudable and lovable for noble manful *orthodoxy* and other virtues;—and whether the lesson his life had to teach us is not much the reverse of what the Religious Newspapers hitherto educe from it.

Certainly it was not as a 'sceptic' that you could define him, whatever his definition might be. Belief, not doubt,

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attended him at all points of his progress ; rather a tendency to too hasty and headlong belief. Of all men he was the least prone to what you could call scepticism : diseased self-listenings, self-questionings, impotently painful dubitations, all this fatal nosology of spiritual maladies, so rife in our day, was eminently foreign to him. Quite on the other side lay Sterling's faults, such as they were. In fact, you could observe, in spite of his sleepless intellectual vivacity, he was not properly a thinker at all ; his faculties were of the active, not of the passive or contemplative sort. A brilliant *improvisatore* ; rapid in thought, in word and in act ; everywhere the promptest and least hesitating of men. I likened him often, in my banterings, to sheet-lightning ; and reproachfully prayed that he would concentrate himself into a bolt, and rive the mountain-barriers for us, instead of merely playing on them and irradiating them.

True, he had his 'religion' to seek, and painfully shape together for himself, out of the abysses of conflicting disbelief and sham-belief and bedlam delusion, now filling the world, as all men of reflection have ; and in this respect too,—more especially as his lot in the battle appointed for us all was, if you can understand it, victory and not defeat,—he is an expressive emblem of his time, and an instruction and possession to his contemporaries. For, I say, it is by no means as a vanquished *doubter* that he figures in the memory of those who knew him ; but rather as a victorious *believer*, and under great difficulties a victorious doer. An example to us all, not of lamed misery, helpless spiritual bewilderment and sprawling despair, or any kind of *drownage* in the foul welter of our so-called religious or other controversies and confusions ; but of a swift and valiant vanquisher of all these ; a noble asserter of himself, as worker and speaker, in spite of all these. Continually, so far as he went, he was a teacher, by act and word, of hope, clearness, activity, veracity, and human courage and nobleness : the preacher of a good gospel to all men, not of a bad to any man. The man, whether in priest's

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cassock or other costume of men, who is the enemy or hater of John Sterling, may assure himself that he does not yet know him,—that miserable differences of mere costume and dialect still divide him, whatsoever is worthy, catholic and perennial in him, from a brother soul who, more than most in his day, was his brother and not his adversary in regard to all that.

Nor shall the irremediable drawback that Sterling was not current in the Newspapers, that he achieved neither what the world calls greatness nor what intrinsically is such, altogether discourage me. What his natural size, and natural and accidental limits were, will gradually appear, if my sketching be successful. And I have remarked that a true delineation of the smallest man, and his scene of pilgrimage through life, is capable of interesting the greatest man; that all men are to an unspeakable degree brothers, each man's life a strange emblem of every man's; and that Human Portraits, faithfully drawn, are of all pictures the welcomest on human walls. Monitions and moralities enough may lie in this small Work, if honestly written and honestly read;—and, in particular, if any image of John Sterling and his Pilgrimage through our poor Nineteenth Century be one day wanted by the world, and they can find some shadow of a true image here, my swift scribbling (which shall be very swift and immediate) may prove useful by and by.

## CHAPTER II

## BIRTH AND PARENTAGE

JOHN STERLING was born at Kaimes Castle, a kind of dilapidated baronial residence to which a small farm was then attached, rented by his Father, in the Isle of Bute, on the 20th July 1806. Both his parents were Irish by birth, Scotch by extraction; and became, as he himself did, essen-

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tially English by long residence and habit. Of John himself Scotland has little or nothing to claim except the birth and genealogy, for he left it almost before the years of memory; and in his mature days regarded it, if with a little more recognition and intelligence, yet without more participation in any of its accents outward or inward, than others, natives of Middlesex or Surrey, where the scene of his chief education lay.

The climate of Bute is rainy, soft of temperature; with skies of unusual depth and brilliancy, while the weather is fair. In that soft rainy climate, on that wild-wooded rocky coast, with its gnarled mountains and green silent valleys, with its seething rain-storms and many-sounding seas, was young Sterling ushered into his first schooling in this world. I remember one little anecdote his Father told me of those first years: One of the cows had calved; young John, still in petticoats, was permitted to go, holding by his father's hand, and look at the newly-arrived calf; a mystery which he surveyed with open intent eyes, and the silent exercise of all the scientific faculties he had;—very strange mystery indeed, this new arrival, and fresh denizen of our Universe: 'Wull 't eat a-body?' said John in his first practical Scotch, inquiring into the tendencies this mystery might have to fall upon a little fellow and consume him as provision: 'Will it eat one, Father?'—Poor little open-eyed John: the family long bantered him with this anecdote; and we, in far other years, laughed heartily on hearing it.—Simple peasant labourers, ploughers, house-servants, occasional fisher-people too; and the sight of ships, and crops, and Nature's doings where Art has little meddled with her: this was the kind of schooling our young friend had, first of all; on this bench of the grand world-school did he sit, for the first four years of his life.

Edward Sterling his Father, a man who subsequently came to considerable notice in the world, was originally of Waterford in Munster; son of the Episcopalian Clergyman there; and chief representative of a family of some standing in those



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parts. Family founded, it appears, by a Colonel Robert Sterling, called also Sir Robert Sterling; a Scottish Gustavus-Adolphus soldier, whom the breaking-out of the Civil War had recalled from his German campaignings, and had before long, though not till after some waverings on his part, attached firmly to the Duke of Ormond and to the King's Party in that quarrel. A little bit of genealogy, since it lies ready to my hand, gathered long ago out of wider studies, and pleasantly connects things individual and present with the dim universal crowd of things past,—may as well be inserted here as thrown away.

This Colonel Robert designates himself Sterling 'of Glorat'; I believe, a younger branch of the well-known Stirlings of Keir in Stirlingshire. It appears he prospered in his soldiering and other business, in those bad Ormond times; being a man of energy, ardour and intelligence,—probably prompt enough both with his word and with his stroke. There survives yet, in the Commons Journals,<sup>1</sup> dim notice of his controversies and adventures; especially of one controversy he had got into with certain victorious Parliamentary official parties, while his own party lay vanquished, during what was called the Ormond Cessation, or Temporary Peace made by Ormond with the Parliament in 1646:—in which controversy Colonel Robert, after repeated applications, journeyings to London, attendances upon committees, and suchlike, finds himself worsted, declared to be in the wrong; and so vanishes from the Commons Journals.

What became of him when Cromwell got to Ireland, and to Munster, I have not heard: his knighthood, dating from the very year of Cromwell's Invasion (1649), indicates a man expected to do his best on the occasion:—as in all probability he did; had not Tredah Storm proved ruinous, and the neck of this Irish War been broken at once. Doubtless the Colonel Sir Robert followed or attended his Duke of

<sup>1</sup> *Commons Journals*, iv. 15 (10th January 1644-5); and again, v. 307, etc., 498 (18th September 1647—15th March 1647-8).

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Ormond into foreign parts, and gave-up his management of Munster, while it was yet time : for after the Restoration we find him again, safe, and as was natural, flourishing with new splendour ; gifted, recompensed with lands ;—settled, in short, on fair revenues in those Munster regions. He appears to have had no children ; but to have left his property to William, a younger brother who had followed him into Ireland. From this William descends the family which, in the years we treat of, had Edward Sterling, Father of our John, for its representative. And now enough of genealogy.

Of Edward Sterling, Captain Edward Sterling as his title was, who in the latter period of his life became well known in London political society, whom indeed all England, with a curious mixture of mockery and respect and even fear, knew well as ‘the Thunderer of the *Times* Newspaper,’ there were much to be said, did the present task and its limits permit. As perhaps it might, on certain terms? What is indispensable let us not omit to say. The history of a man’s childhood is the description of his parents and environment : this is his *inarticulate* but highly important history, in those first times, while of articulate he has yet none.

Edward Sterling had now just entered on his thirty-fourth year ; and was already a man experienced in fortunes and changes. A native of Waterford in Munster, as already mentioned ; born in the ‘Deanery House of Waterford, 27th February 1773,’ say the registers. For his Father, as we learn, resided in the Deanery House, though he was not himself Dean, but only ‘Curate of the Cathedral’ (whatever that may mean) ; he was withal rector of two other livings, and the Dean’s friend,—friend indeed of the Dean’s kinsmen the Beresfords generally ; whose grand house of Curraghmore, near by Waterford, was a familiar haunt of his and his children’s. This reverend gentleman, along with his three livings and high acquaintanceships, had inherited political connexions ;—inherited especially a Government Pension, with