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Edited by Henry Duff Traill

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# The Works of Thomas Carlyle

VOLUME 11:  
THE LIFE OF JOHN STERLING

EDITED BY HENRY DUFF TRAILL



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THOMAS CARLYLE  
IN THIRTY VOLUMES

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VOL. XI

THE LIFE OF JOHN STERLING

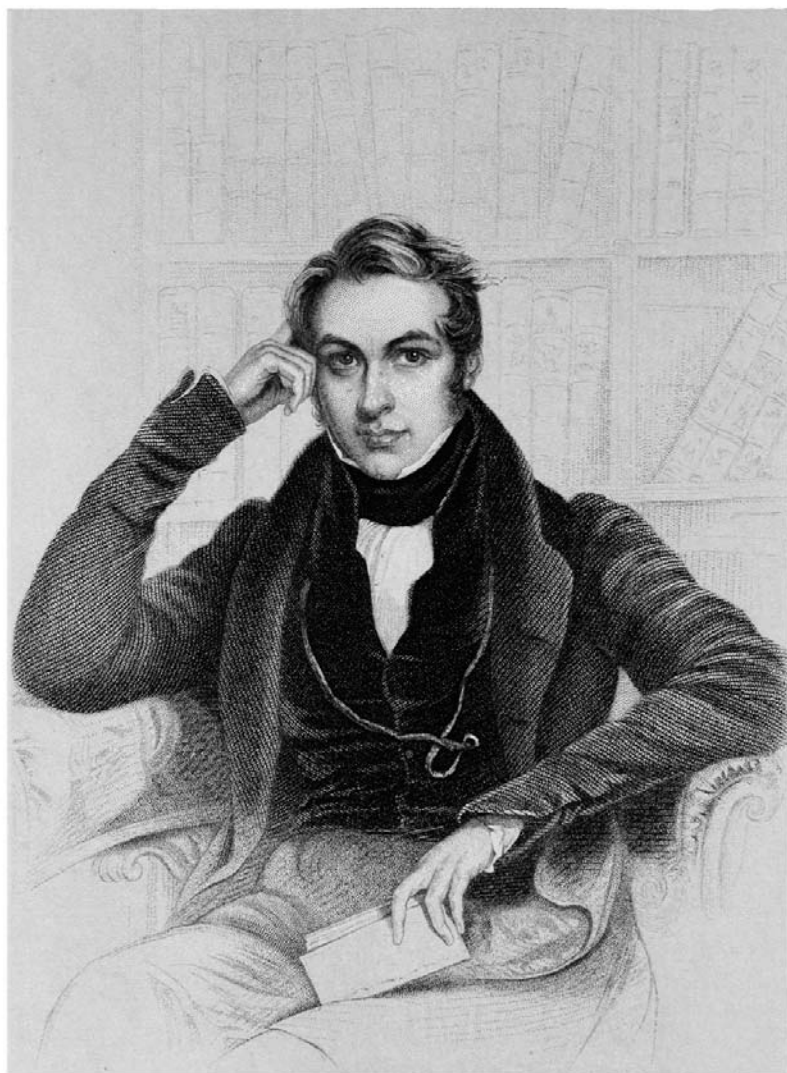
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THOMAS CARLYLE

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THE LIFE OF

JOHN STERLING

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PORTRAIT OF JOHN STERLING . . . . . *frontispiece*

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## INTRODUCTION

IF Mr. Froude was right in his conjecture as to the creative origin of the *Life of Sterling*, the world owes more to a country house symposium than it is generally aware of. For it is believed by Carlyle's biographer that the final impulse to this work was derived from a conversation at Lord Ashburton's, in which Carlyle and Bishop Thirlwall became involved in an 'animated theological discussion,' carried on in the presence of several other literary notables whom he names. What was its precise subject he does not tell us; its result, that is, its immediate result, we do not need to be told. It ended, beyond all possible doubt, in leaving the disputants exactly where they were at starting. But, as Froude surmised, it may well have assisted to 'precipitate' a resolve which was already beginning to crystallise out of Carlyle's still fluid dissatisfaction with the too theological spirit pervading Archdeacon Hare's 'Life' of their common friend. The process had been a very gradual one. It was already seven years since John Sterling had died, leaving Carlyle and the Archdeacon his joint literary executors; and three out of those seven years had elapsed since the publication of the biographical memoir, which, it was agreed between the two, should be undertaken by the latter. But during the musings of his fellow-executor between 1848 and 1851 the fire had kindled, and now at last—in the Introduction to this volume—he 'spake with his tongue,' and, with much warm commendation of the general merits of Hare's book, expressed his regret that its author should have written as though religious heterodoxy had been the grand fact of Sterling's life;

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thereby giving their cue to 'the Religious Newspapers and Periodical Heresy Hunters getting very lively in those years,' who had taken up the matter from this point of view, and had 'prosecuted it, and perhaps still prosecute it, in their sad way to all lengths and breadths.' And after a few more words, the kindled fire now beginning to blaze, he breaks into the characteristic exclamation: '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!'

This is a fine enthusiastic temper in which to set about a biography, and it is mainly to its ardour that we owe the acknowledged masterpiece of biographical writing which Carlyle has here produced. On no other emotional terms, indeed, does it seem probable that he could have produced it; or so at least it must seem to the most sympathetic reader who compares his own impression of the hero with that by which his biographer was possessed. For assuredly, to the great majority of the later-born world to whom he was unknown, the fascination of Sterling for Carlyle is even harder to comprehend than the spell which Arthur Hallam cast over Tennyson. A man of refined, subtle, self-tormenting intellect, of scholarly tastes and habits, an acute if somewhat too fastidious critic, and a literary artist whose conceptions not infrequently exceeded his by no means inconsiderable faculty of literary expression—a sort of Clough, in fact, after deduction of Clough's genuine, if limited, poetic gift,—that, I suspect, is the figure which Sterling presents to the imagination of most students of the present day; and though such a figure may be interesting, and, when associated with a brief and comparatively unsuccessful career in letters, even pathetic, one hardly recognises it as that of 'a radiant child of the empyrean, clad in bright auroral hues in the memory of all that knew him.'

No doubt the last five words are particularly emphatic, and pro-

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bably contain the key to the whole mystery. John Sterling, like Arthur Hallam, was evidently one of those men whom it is requisite to know in order not to undervalue, men who impress others not necessarily, perhaps not usually in any marked degree, by their conversation—or some record of it would have been preserved—but by their personality, and who in that way reveal to their companions the possession of powers of which they either do not endeavour, or from some cause or other fail, to convince the world. It is a familiar type enough—that of the youth of promise who comes from his University with a considerable reputation, which even to the larger society of London shows every appearance of being deserved, yet which, somehow or other, never contrives to justify itself in print. But what must always remain something of a puzzle is its complete capture of Carlyle. The two men did not meet until Sterling was just entering upon his thirtieth, and Carlyle upon his fortieth year—the latter, that is to say, at an age when enthusiasms have begun to lose their ardour, and the former at an age when unfulfilled promise has usually ceased to charm. *Primâ facie*, again, one would have said that Sterling's antecedents had little in them to attract Carlyle, and much to repel him. He was a man of super-refined academical culture, and ultra-fastidious tastes; a Radical of an order of Radicalism which the older man had outgrown; an ardent student of theology, metaphysics, and other sciences as windy and profitless, according to the Carlylean theory of life; a persevering and incorrigible dabbler in poetry, although solemnly and repeatedly adjured by his friend to confine himself to prose. In short, Sterling was something of a dreamer, and not a little of a dilettante—two varieties of the human race which Carlyle held in special aversion. On the other hand, it has, of course, to be remembered that the comparative lateness in the lives of both men—indeed the extreme lateness in one case—of the acquaintance formed between them in itself made for forbearance on the part of the elder towards the younger. For Sterling had already begun

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to show signs of the malady which, in less than another ten years, was to carry him off, and thus it was easier than it would otherwise have been for Carlyle to check the impatience, not to say disdain, with which we might have expected him to view the career of a man who, after years of agnostic wrestlings, had rushed suddenly into clerical orders, and taken a curacy, only to throw it up again after eight months.

There is, however, no explanation of the facts which does not leave some residue of the unintelligible. After all, we are thrown back upon the assumption of a "personal magnetism" exercised by Sterling over a few distinguished minds, and associated probably in this particular case with some subtle appeal to that curious vein of tenderness which lay among the deeper stratifications of Carlyle's rugged nature. Of the completeness of Sterling's conquest there can be no doubt. Living he proved it in the singular patience with which the author of *Sartor Resartus*—as a rule, no meek subject of censure—submitted to his frankly outspoken criticisms of that work; while after his death, it was still more strikingly shown in the strain of surely extravagant admiration in which Carlyle discusses the character and performances of his hero. He describes Sterling's political and theological hesitations—for which he has usually no toleration—almost with sympathy; he allows him, as a writer, an amount of literary fastidiousness which he would have ridiculed in others; he quotes his undistinguished poetry, which resembles that of an enervated Crabbe, with indulgent approval; he even forgives him his devout resort to the misty theosopher of Highgate Hill. But to the extent to which biographical truth has lost, by reason of the spell which has been cast over the biographer by his hero, English literature has gained. For it is pretty certain that but for the haze of glamour through which Carlyle saw his departed friend, the *Life of Sterling* would never have been written at all. He was not a man to turn aside from his preachings and teachings into the path of biography, unless his feelings had been very deeply moved; and

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we should be none the less thankful for the emotion, that it now seems to us to have been somewhat in excess of the occasion.

Moreover, even if Carlyle's presentment of his hero taxed our faith more severely than it does, it is, after all, but the central figure of a group of portraits, than which none more masterly have ever taken life from that master hand. Casual as are the references to Edward Sterling, the father of John, and Mr. Delane's predecessor in the conduct of the *Times* newspaper, they are full of picturesque and vivid touches, from which we are able to construct a complete picture of the man. Excellent, too, is the satirical, but not unkindly, vignette of Frank Edgeworth, son of Richard Lovell, and brother of the famous Maria; while, finally, it should be enough to remind the reader that Chapter VIII. of the *Life of Sterling* bears the heading 'Coleridge,' and contains, set in an exquisite piece of poetic landscape-painting, that famous portrait of the philosopher seated 'on the brow of Highgate Hill in those days,' which, for keenness of insight, and richness of humour, and depth of tenderness mingling with its raillery, stands unsurpassed, and perhaps unequalled, in the whole wonderful gallery to which it belongs.

H. D. TRAILL.