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VOLUME 12:

HISTORY OF FRIEDRICH II OF PRUSSIA,
CALLED FREDERICK THE GREAT I

EDITED BY HENRY DUFF TRAILL



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CENTENARY EDITION
—
THE WORKS OF
THOMAS CARLYLE
IN THIRTY VOLUMES
—
VOL. XII
HISTORY OF
FREDERICK THE GREAT
I

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Frederick the Great.

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THOMAS CARLYLE

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FRIEDRICH II. OF PRUSSIA
CALLED
FREDERICK THE GREAT

IN EIGHT VOLUMES
VOLUME I

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THE vast historical project which was in its execution to occupy nearly the whole remaining portion of Carlyle's working life may first have suggested itself to him as early as 1844, a good many years, that is to say, before it took definite shape as a determined plan. For, as we know from his distinguished biographer, it was in 1844 that he first came across Preuss's work upon Frederick, and he had thoughts of an expedition to Berlin after finishing *Cromwell*. In the interval, however, between the birth of his conception and the beginnings of his attempt to realise it, he had still much literary work to do. It was during these years that he published the *Latter Day Pamphlets*, the most vehemently controversial of all his writings, and the *Life of Sterling*, which, on the other hand, is perhaps the one among them all which divides readers the least. Not until this last-named volume had been got off his hands did he at length resolve upon undertaking the great biography and settle resolutely down to the collection and arrangement of his mountainous materials. From that time forth until the appearance of the last volume—fourteen years later—his life, according to his own incessant complaints, was a continuous martyrdom, in which Mrs. Carlyle too often involuntarily shared. It was at the end of 1851 that he set seriously to work, commencing by six months of steady reading, during which he cut himself almost entirely from his wife's society, and was only at last driven from his seclusion by the 'maddening' noise of the workmen engaged in the repairs of his house. A tour in Germany followed in the autumn of 1852, and, returning enriched with fresh materials for his biography, Carlyle applied himself doggedly to his task in

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London throughout the whole of the next two years. Nor indeed till the autumn of the year following does he seem to have allowed himself any respite from his labours. In August 1855, however, and at intervals in 1856, we find him indulging in occasional holidays; but in the winter of the latter year, he again buried himself among his books at Chelsea and took another long spell of work in the 'sound-proof' room which he had erected at the top of his house. In July 1857 the first chapters of *Frederick* were at last getting into print, and in the autumn of 1858 he again visited Germany on a tour of inspection of the historic scenes of the Seven Years' War, thus enabling himself to combine the fine dramatic quality of his battle-pieces with a technical and scientific accuracy which has earned for his *Frederick the Great* a well-merited place among the text-books of German military students. He returned to England in September 1858, and a little later—that is to say, more than seven years after the commencement of the work—its first two volumes were given to the world. Its success was immediate, and considering its subject, remarkable, four thousand copies being sold before the end of the year. The third volume appeared in 1862, the fourth in 1864, and the fifth and sixth, by which the great work was brought to a conclusion, in 1865.

To call in question the merits of this colossal biography would be of course absurd. Even were it not informed—one cannot perhaps say throughout, but in many brilliant passages and pages—by Carlyle's extraordinary genius, it would yet remain a monument of historical industry and acumen, and an achievement on which, though it stood alone, the most ambitious of historians might be well content to rest his fame. We cannot even say that, with due allowance made where allowance is due, it is in any way inferior in execution to its author's lofty standard of literary workmanship. Emerson, as quoted by Mr. Leslie Stephen, pronounced it 'the wittiest book in the world,' and it is certainly rich in the inimitable humour of the mind which gave it birth.

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Still it cannot be denied that the work is guilty of a double offence against the canons of proportion. Great as was the part played by Frederick II. in the history of his country, and indirectly in that of Europe, it can hardly be contended that it deserved treatment at such portentous length. Nor, even if such a contention were tenable, can it be admitted that the various parts of this monumental structure stand in due relation to each other. The biographer unquestionably dwells at excessive length on the parentage and upbringing of his hero, and takes an unconscionable time in getting to close quarters with the real subject of his narrative. The early years and training of Frederick, and the stern experiences of his youth, had, no doubt, an important bearing on his future career, which indeed would be hardly intelligible without a somewhat full account not only of his predecessor's work of military organisation, but of the singularly though undesignedly fortifying discipline to which he subjected his son. But Carlyle lingers beyond all tolerable measure over his minute portrait of the brutal old grenadier, and his readiness in excuse or palliation of Frederick William's half-insane excesses of savagery, is not only irritating in itself, but, worse still, is apt to beget a not unnatural distrust of his advocacy when he comes to deal with the more questionable passages of his hero's life.

The general dimensions, however, of the '*Frederick*,' and even the undue elaboration of its preliminaries, were determined by causes which it is not difficult to indicate. Carlyle had always been too apt to write both history and biography in the spirit of the denunciatory political prophet, and the habit had grown upon him with years. The spirit in question may almost be said to have dictated his choice of a subject. His enthusiasm for the founder of the Prussian Monarchy was partly factitious; indeed if certain reported remarks may be taken as seriously meant, he had in reality no very high opinion of Vater Fritz. But, unsatisfactory though he was as a hero in one sense of the word, he served Carlyle's turn well enough in another. When Carlyle speaks of Frederick

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as the last specimen of the King ('King, König, Canning, Able-Man, 'one who kens or cans'), his eulogies must be taken with some reservation. All that can fairly be said of Frederick in the character of the 'Hero as King,' is that he was a good enough stick to beat the dog of Democracy withal. Carlyle was just then in his most contentious mood. The *Latter-day Pamphlets* had, as has been said, aroused vehement protest. He had a feeling that it had set the world against him, and he became daily more and more convinced that he had been cast by destiny for the rôle of Athanasius. This is hardly the spirit in which to look about for a subject of biography, and certainly if a writer is to select a hero with a special view to using his biography for a temporary polemical purpose, it is just as well that he should not plan his work on such a scale as to make it last him the remainder of his life. But no doubt it was the selection which determined the plan, and it was the mass of biographical detail which German industry, German formlessness, and German in-artistic lack of perception for the inessential had accumulated round the hero, which made the choice so fatal a one. It was not exactly a free choice either. Theoretically speaking, any born 'leader of men,' any one of the figures, for instance, whom he had robed and crowned as ideal rulers in his lectures on Hero-Worship, would have answered that temporary polemical purpose to which he eventually made so gigantic a sacrifice. But practically he found on examination that none of them would do. 'He thought of Ireland,' writes the late Professor Nichol, 'but that was too burning a subject; of William the Conqueror, of Simon de Montfort, the Norsemen, the Cid; but these may have seemed to him too remote. Why, ask patriotic Scotsmen, did he not take up his and their favourite Knox? But Knox's life had been fairly handled by M'Crie, and Carlyle would have found it hard to adjust his treatment of that essentially national hero to the exodus from Houndsditch. Luther might have been an apter theme; but there too it would have been a strain to steer clear of theological con-

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trovery, of which he had had enough. Napoleon was at heart too much of a *gamin* for his taste. Looking over Prussia in more recent times, he concluded 'that the Prussian monarchy had been the centre of modern stability, and that it had been made so by its actual creator Frederick II. called the Great.' And thus it was that he found himself at last, spade in hand, before that Titanic midden, that 'Pelion laid on Ossa of Prussian Dryasdust,' which in the result it took him fourteen mortal years to dig through.

Merely to have played the 'Golden Dustman' to this huge pile of biographical refuse; merely to have 'screened' and sifted it with such resolute and untiring labour; to have extricated, stored, arranged, labelled and catalogued its buried treasures, and to have carted away the mass of superincumbent rubbish, to be 'shot' once for all in its proper limbo of oblivion—this alone would have been a great and valuable work. But seeing that to this Carlyle has added the construction of a magnificently imposing, if imperfectly proportioned, museum, for the safe custody and perpetual preservation of the recovered treasures, it might seem ungracious to grudge the long years that were consumed on the accomplishment of the work. Regret only awakens when we turn away from what we have gained—no doubt a quite indefensible proceeding—to consider what we have lost; to reflect on the matchless excellence and perfect adequacy of so many of Carlyle's shorter pieces; and mentally to enumerate all those memorable events in the world's history which have waited in vain to hear their story told as he alone could tell it, all those its epic figures who might be living for us now with the full and vivid life of a Mirabeau or a Cromwell, had not he who of all men was best fitted to play their *vates sacer* been 'otherwise engaged.'

H. D. TRAILL.