

# *Carlyle and the medieval past*

Article

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In September 1842 Carlyle found himself, for the first and only occasion, in Suffolk, and with time on his hands. He was waiting at Troston, a few miles north of Bury St. Edmunds, for his friend and former pupil Charles Buller, M. P., a Trinity man who in Canada had prepared the Durham Report, and who as head of the Record Commission had begun the task of putting our medieval records into some sort of order. For two years after finishing *Chartism* and *Heroes and Hero Worship*, Carlyle had been grinding away, not very successfully, at his Cromwell: a task he had justified by saying 'The matter is Past. But it is among the great things of the Past, which seen or unseen never fade away out of the Present'. Now, having walked to Thetford some eight miles distant the day after his arrival, hiring a horse 'of the completest Rosinante description', he seized the chance to see something of Cromwell's country. (A friend had given him a fine mare a few years back, and he had found riding in Hyde Park excellent for his dyspepsia).

His first halt was at Ely, where he sought out Cromwell's house and, having an hour to spare, took himself to the Cathedral. He had lately visited Bruges and Ghent, but it struck him at once as 'one of the most impressive buildings I have ever in my life seen'. 'Few masses of architecture could win more admiration ... the impressions they give me are too deep and sad to have anything to do with the shape of stones. Tonight, as the heaving bellows blew, and the yellow sunshine streamed in through those high windows and my foot-falls were the only sounds below, I looked aloft and my eyes filled with tears at all this, and I remembered beside it - wedded to it now, and reconciled to it for ever, Oliver Cromwell's "Cease your fooling, and come out sir." [so Cromwell had addressed a refractory cleric]. In these two antagonisms what volumes of meaning!' The scene is strangely suggestive of another East Anglian pilgrimage a century later, when the poet of *Little Gidding*

while the light fails  
On a winter's afternoon, in a secluded chapel

sees Cromwell and those who opposed him as 'folded in a single party' and history as a pattern of timeless moments. It was, perhaps, that harsh cry of the Protector's, heard in Carlyle's inner ear and contrasting sharply with the beauty of the music and the medieval stone, that first set up in his mind a tension in which verily did lie 'a volume of meaning'.

Next day he rode on to Huntingdon, Cromwell's birthplace, and to St. Ives, where he found his farm - but found also another searing contrast: 'sitting on wooden benches, in front of their Bastille, and within their ringwall

and its railings, some half-hundred tall, robust figures, of honest countenance but in a kind of torpor'; figures of grief and shame and manifold articulate distress. All around Earth, cried 'come and till me, come and reap me'. But for those eager hands no work offered. 'There was something of Dante's Hell in the look of all this, and I rode swiftly away'.

He rode, in fact, to Cambridge, to look diligently at colleges and examine Cromwell's portrait. But it was the picture of St. Ives' workhouse that remained imprinted on his mind - the more sharply, I suggest, because on his way back to Troston he would pass for the second time through the prosperous medieval town of Bury, 'beautifully diversifying, with its clean brick houses, ancient clean streets, and 20 or 15000 busy souls the general grassy face of Suffolk'. Cobbett, twenty years earlier, had thought much the same: see Rural Rides, 10 December 1821. His letters record several calls made at Bury during his stay with the Bulls; and at the heart of Bury lay the grounds of its once great abbey (also noted by Cobbett). He paid his shilling to enter the long ranges of 'venerable monastic ruins' (with internal spaces laid out as gardens then, as now). Here 'a stranger may persuade himself that an Abbey of St. Edmundsbury did once exist': 'see here the ancient massive gateway of architecture interesting to the eye of Dilettantism ... and that other ancient Gateway, now about to tumble, unless dilettantism, in these very months, can subscribe money to cramp and to prop it'. For once Carlyle is applying dilettante in its original English sense: a lover of art and architecture, a member of the Society of Dilettanti. And the passage (from Past and Present, Book II, c.1) suggests that he remembered proposals for repairing the gateway set forth in the Gentleman's Magazine towards the end of 1842. It foreshadows the activities of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. But it also recalls Dr. Johnson's visit (with Tom Warton) seventy years earlier to a similar ruin: the great abbey of Oseney outside Oxford, of which even less remained, and the sight of which left Johnson speechless with indignation.

Carlyle's visit to Bury (and to Ely) thus fixed for good in his mind the stark antithesis of the beautiful and spacious abbey and the harsh and grinding present. The juxtaposition of medieval abbey and modern workhouse is precisely what Pugin had pictured six years before in his Parallels between a Noble Edifice of the Middle Ages and Buildings of the Present Day: one of its plates depicts a vast Gothic Abbey, with insets showing the happy life of a poor medieval (and largely mythical) pensioner, alongside a view of a modern workhouse with inmates in ragged penury. Everything now induced Carlyle to push the Past, in his earlier antithesis of Past and Present, further back than Cromwell's day. Oliver, in fact, was eluding his grasp, and he registers a deep and growing feeling that it is impossible to write about him: 'the mighty has gone to be a ghost, and will never take body again'; whereas the ruins of the abbey had left an indelible impression. Years later he wrote that his visit was strangely vivid in all its details. 'I seem as if almost a denizen of that region, which I never saw before or since'.<sup>1</sup>

No sooner was Carlyle back at Cheyne Walk than he laid hands on two medieval texts that are still essential reading for the historian of twelfth-century England. The first was Jocelin's *Chronicle of the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds*, which was to have a catalytic effect; the second was Eadmer's *Historia Novorum*, cited twice from Selden's edition (1623) in *Past and Present* (II, vi, IV, i). He could not have found more appropriate pabulum. Selden's edition represents the first stage of modern English historical scholarship, the Camden Society's edition of Jocelin was the second.<sup>2</sup>

The Medieval ages, and the Medieval Church, had scarcely been indecently buried before historians and antiquaries had set about disinterring them, and collecting the manuscripts that the earlier Cromwell's henchmen had dispersed to the winds. The shades of the shaven men were never wholly exorcised. In the seventeenth century, Dugdale had set out the histories of the monasteries in his great *Monasticon* - accessible to Carlyle in the edition of Ellis and Bandinel (1636). In the eighteenth century, Lord Harley (aided by a librarian of genius, Humfrey Wanley) had built up the great collection of medieval texts that was the British Museum's first large acquisition and that took a hundred years to catalogue. It was in this catalogue (1803) that the first printed notice of Jocelin of Brakelond's *Chronicle* appeared. Thomas Hearne, as nonjurer ineligible for Bodley's librarianship, had made a living by publishing a whole series of medieval texts and chronicles, putting them out with miscellaneous matter designed as bait to hook readers of varied interests. Of Jocelin's *Chronicle* Hearne knew nothing, but it might have reached print long before 1840 if Gibbon had had his way. We do not usually think of Gibbon as sympathetic to medieval history. Yet one of his very latest writings was devoted to promoting a plan for a *Scriptores Rerum Anglicarum*. 'The consideration of our past losses', he wrote a few months before he died, 'should incite the present age to cherish the relics, instead of condemning the Monkish Historians silently to moulder in the dust of our libraries; our candour [we must give that word its earlier value] and even our justice, should learn to estimate their value and to excuse their imperfections'. Gibbon even defended their non-classical style, 'which had the advantage of providing a permanent and general idiom'.

It was a Scottish antiquary, John Pinkerton, who had broached this project of a uniform edition of early chronicles. Scott's novels (and not only *The Antiquary*) demonstrate how fervent was Scottish antiquarian zeal; nor was Scott's own zeal merely romantic: his earliest essay had been on feudalism. But Pinkerton died in 1826 with his scheme unrealised. Only in Victorian times did the great Rolls Series take shape. Only in the 1830s did such bodies as the Camden Society begin to busy themselves with the editing of texts. The Camden volumes began to appear in 1838, and Jocelin's *Chronicle* (the 13th in the series) was edited by John Gage Rokewode, FRS., Director of the Society of Antiquaries.

Carlyle was not a member of the Society. But in the 1830s he had helped to found the London library, which was one of several bodies that subscribed to the Society: he probably borrowed his copy from that Library.<sup>3</sup> And he doubtless read the *Athenaeum* review (9 January 1841), which includes literal rendering of almost all the passages he was to translate. It is this Camden volume, then, that Carlyle is referring to when he records in his journal for 25 October 1842: 'I have been meditating on the old monks' life in St. Edmund's monastery'. In the same week, writing to Thomas Erskine on his constant theme of the worth, dignity and blessedness of work, he remarks: 'I feel daily more and more what a truth there is in that old saying of the monks, *Laborare est orare*'. Whether or not this text can be understood apart from its Benedictine context, it was to find its place in the authorised version of the Gospel of Work according to Abbot Samson as revised by the Sage of Craigenputtock. A letter from Jane Carlyle shows that he had put something on paper by late November 1842 and the printer's copy for Part II is dated 7 December of that year. Early in January 1843 he writes to his mother: 'I am fast getting something ready for publication. Though it is not Cromwell yet, it is something more immediately applicable to the times in hand'.

A month later *Past and Present* was at press. Chapman and Hall published it in April 1843, and at once (like Carlyle's previous books), it aroused admiration - and anger. It will be sufficient here to note one response - pertinent, we shall see, because it came from Lockhart, Scott's biographer and son-in-law: who went so far as to say that it had made him 'conscious of life and feeling as he had never been before, and urged Carlyle to write something more about the Middle Ages, for he had more power of putting life into the dry bones than any one but Scott himself: a judgment that still stands, despite the achievements in this kind of an Eileen Power, or a David Knowles. For Carlyle never did a better thing than 'vulgarise' his old Jocelin. Others have brought to such tasks greater learning. No-one has showed such instinctive sympathy with the tone and temper of the Medieval Chronicles as the dyspeptic contemner of pomp and circumstance, the apologist of Cromwell and Frederick the Great.

But if Lockhart up in Scotland was stirred by the recreation of the Past, Carlyle's English readers were equally moved by his meditations on the Present. For though a medieval chronicle lies behind the central part of the book, the shadow of the Corn Laws hangs over the beginning, the middle and the end. Some of the diatribe was unintelligible even to the contemporary reader, and now seems so much hot air. It will be still more unintelligible if we read it without some knowledge of the Hungry Forties - the grim Present of pent-up idleness that Carlyle never for one chapter allows us to forget, separated though it be from Jocelin's Past by the Reformation, by the Whig Revolution, the Industrial Revolution and - for Carlyle the most ominous sign of all - the Manchester Insurrection.

This last has a whole chapter to itself, for it had raised spectres that Carlyle could not lay, not even by invoking the spirit of Cromwell. Never until now, he wailed, did the worker cry in vain for a fair day's wages (or at least food and warmth) for a fair day's work. The phrase, outworn today, was novel then, and it foreshadows the theme that he will later develop in medieval terms: 'Gurth, a mere swineherd, born thrall of Cedric, lacks not his due parings of the pigs he tends' (*Past and Present*, II, v: Everyman Library edition, p.63): an allusion that bespeaks not only Carlyle's acceptance of *Ivanhoe* as an accurate rendering of history, but also his public's familiarity with that novel;<sup>4</sup> and he will enlarge on the motif in a chapter on *Modern Democracy* (III, xiii, p.204), and again in Book IV (p.267). Behind it, as behind those drawings of Pugin's, one feels the pressure of Cobbett's insistent claim that the poor were better off in the twelfth century than in the nineteenth.

Book I draws to an end in a rumble of rhetoric, not to mention an irrelevant quotation from Tennyson's *Ulysses*. But it is a dead end. And with relief we turn to Book II, to consider 'a somewhat remote century ... in hope of perhaps illustrating our own poor century thereby'. Henceforth, the text of Jocelin's *Chronicle* provides the needed ballast for Carlyle's fire-balloons, as well as the particularity that engrosses readers who know little of medieval life and even less of life monastical.

Out of the 'monk-Latin' of this *Chronicle* Carlyle weaves a tale as graphic and dramatic as any *Waverley Novel*. He is, in fact, playing Scott to Jocelin's Dr. Dryastust - (who duly appears in c.ii). But though he dramatises and enlarges on Jocelin he does not embroider nor treat him with the superior archness that a modern writer might employ. He rightly recognises in him a man of 'wise simplicity, natural sense, veracity'. And it is as an historian that he first praises the book, and the edition: noting the occasional textual difficulties, and the editor's compendious Glossary, which occasionally drives Carlyle to the older folios of Spelman and Du Cange. All the virtues of Carlyle's sound grammar-school teaching show through here: it equipped him to handle such formidable works as Rymer's *Foedera* and Muratori's *Annals*. But he also sees Jocelin's virtues as a miniature Boswell, 'a magical if misted speculum or mirror of his time', a fossil mastodon made to speak, yet far more alive than the Gothic masquerades of Mrs. Radcliffe.

Carlyle's history can sometimes be faulted in detail. Every schoolboy now knows that John did not sign but seal Magna Carta, and Carlyle's etymologies of Bertricsworth (early name of Bury), Liverpool, or lord will not now pass muster. For the events of 1173 (II, xiv) he had to rely (like Rokewode) on Lytton's eighteenth-century *History of Henry II* (1766-71), to which Gibbon likewise had resorted. His picture of the saintly eight-century Edmund

as a landlord in leather shoes and the farmer's friend is mostly invention - owing more to Asser than to Jocelin: it seems unlikely that he knew the Passio Sancti Edmundi, which was not published until the 1890s when it was edited in the Memorials of St. Edmunds by Matthew Arnold's brother Tom, who came back from schoolteaching in Tasmania to embrace the medieval faith and made his living by such editorial chores.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, Carlyle could not have chosen a better 'background' text than Eadmer's Historia; as anyone who consults the modern edition in the Nelson/Oxford series of Medieval Classics will recognise. He read, too, Eadmer's Vita Anselmi. His evocation of Anselm, 'one of the purest minded men of genius', comes, however, not in the central book but in the last (IV): 'It is beautiful to read, in Monk Eadmer, how the Continental populations welcomed and venerated this Anselm. They had, by phantasy and true insight, the intensest conviction that a God's blessing dwelt in this Anselm - as is my conviction too'. So he diverges - not for the first time - from his theme of Aristocracy, to present, in the very manner of his rendition of Jocelin, the great scene in which the Archbishop confronts and brings to his knees the fierce Duke of Burgundy. After which he could scarcely leave out St. Thomas of Canterbury spilling his life 'as generally, a noble man and martyr has to do - not for nothing'.

In selecting scenes from the Chronicle, Carlyle shows a fine sense of fitness: sometimes paraphrasing, sometimes converting into the dramatic present, sometimes colouring his paraphrase with an evocative Latin phrase, sometimes assembling details from here and there to give us a vignette of twelfth-century life, with its feuds and its thieves: its fairs and its fullers. All of Jocelin's vivid scenes and characters are retained - such as the cellarer who, when he tries to collect reap silver due to the Abbey is driven off by old women with shrieks and distaffs - *minantes et exprobant*: just so will Chaucer describe the pursuit of the Cock and the Fox - 'ran Malkin with a distaff in her hand'. But only Carlyle could see these shrews as distant progenitors of female Chartists claiming women's rights, or describe the rebellion of some monks as an abortive strike: for his monks are not saints: their wirepulling and backbiting over elections makes them seem - or made them seem to Frederic Harrison like 'so many unionists and radicals'.

Carlyle's rural rides in Suffolk, short though they were, enabled him to 'place' and visualise the wide demesnes of the Abbey, even if he knew such names as Lackenheath and Long Melford and Fakenham (where Abbot Samson stopped a tournament) only from signposts. He can see Samson with his frock looped over his arm, and so 'showing substantial stern-works', striking across Fleam's Dike and Devil's Dike to present himself before Henry II at Waltham on the second Sunday of Quadragesima in 1182. Above all he sees Samson as a local man, speaking - and preaching in - broad Norfolk dialect, suspect, indeed, as a Norfolk barrator: Suffolk men saw Norfolk men as litigious types.

Carlyle knew just when to quote, and when to refrain from quoting. His first extensive excerpt is from the account of the young Samson's sleeveless errand to Rome on his abbey's behalf. It would catch a Scotsman's eye because Samson disguised himself as a Scot in garb and gesture, even brandishing his staff as if it were a Scottish ganeloc - which Carlyle recognised as modern Scots for crowbar. But Samson answered all questioners en route with the cryptic English phrase 'Ride, ride Rome, turne Cantaberei' - to dissociate himself from the supporters of Pope Octavian: so at least Carlyle conjectured, and Sir Roger Mynors in effect confirms him; though the Norman-trained chronicler may not have recorded English utterance exactly. It is when Carlyle comes to describe Samson's election as Abbot that he is at his best: keeping the Old English term husebond, as Jocelin does, and rightly glossing it as manager; adding a Scots touch when the electors chant Verba Mea, which he gives (as elsewhere he gives the Miserere: on E.L. p.79) in the metrical rendering of the Scots Psalter:

Give ear unto my words, O Lord,  
My meditation weigh . . . .

Eventually, Samson stands forth as a Dominus Abbas, Lord Abbot, a true Governor, The Man who Will get Things done. 'These superstitious blockheads of monks can do better than we enlightened £10 freeholders' (the first Reform bill had already lost its magic). It is as a monk doing well the supreme work of governing that Carlyle wants us to see his Samson. In the same week that he first picked up the Chronicle he voices once again, in a letter to Erskine, his hallowed doctrine of the blessedness of work, but now in the very terms of Benedictine monachism: 'I feel daily what a truth there is in that old saying of the monks, Laborare est Orare'. In due course the saying finds its place at the head of a chapter in Past and Present (II, xii).

Its application outside a Benedictine context may be questioned. But Carlyle restores it to that context in a later chapter (III, vx). And we must give him credit for seizing on another less familiar Benedictine truth: Samson governed well because he had learnt obedience: he is a servant of the servants of God. As such, he sees his first duty as radical reform of the Abbey's economy; which meant getting rid of debts and Jewish moneylenders; their presence had long been a sore point (so sore that the carver of the Bury Cross would not carve INRI but substituted Rex Confessorum: Carlyle's unexpected quip - 'there were many dry eyes at their [the Jews'] departure' - was not unwarranted).

Samson did not find it incompatible with his vows to become one of the King's new Justices-in-Eyre, which loosens Carlyle's Scots tongue again. He imagines the critics of the Abbot's judgments abusing him as a



'kinless loon': it was what the Scots had called one of Cromwell's judges intent on mere fair play; and it is one of the touches which reminds us that Carlyle had put by Cromwell to celebrate Samson.

Now and again the most commonplace phrase in Jocelin will set off a nineteenth-century rocket. Samson, he reports, did not hunt, but liked to watch the hunt from an 'opening in the woods' [*in aliquo saltu nemoris*]. Carlyle takes the occasion to lament deforesting due, he thought, first to increase of cattle eating out young seedlings but also to deliberate destruction temp. Henry VIII (perhaps a touch of Cobbett here): yet, he adds, not so sad a loss as that of monachism, 'so rich and fruitful once, now rotted into peat'.

Of the same order are other disparaging allusions to contemporary England with its Lords of the Treasury, its Methodism (forever eyeing its own navel and asking: 'shall I be saved?', its incipient Puseyism ('O Heavens, what shall we say of Puseyism?'). Against the moving scene of the midnight transference of St. Edmund's Shrine he sets the macabre report of the digging up in 1828 of John Hampden's remains ('best beatified man we have!') The early scene is luminous, effulgent. We see monks clambering on the roof at midnight to get a glimpse of the relics: 'The Convent all asleep, the Earth all asleep. Supernaturalism brought home to the very dullest' (it hardly matters that Carlyle misses the technical sense of Laudes or Completorium (Lauds and Compline). Against this he sets the little men hacking with penknives in Hampden Church: hero-worshippers dwindling to dilettantism, which Chartism will burn up with infernal fire! - at which point he takes leave of history and politics to become the poet-prophet. It is only as poetry that the rest of Past and Present can now be read.

For with this scene he stops. All else that Jocelin has to tell us he condenses into a paragraph; showing Samson running across to France to settle details of knight-service with King Richard; dining with the Oxford Caput (sic) at Coventry, <sup>6</sup> controverting the intrusive Bishop of Ely, and the still more intrusive Abbot of Cluny; Carlyle's visit to Ely would give him some sense of the medieval Bishops' sway, but he would not know that Cluny's action was part of a long take-over bid that had begun at Peterborough eighty years before. Jocelin's Chronicle, to be sure, ends as abruptly as Carlyle's, breaking off eight years before Abbot Samson's death. But in Carlyle, St. Edmund's shrine vanishes like the vision of Mirza (he could count on his readers' acquaintance with the Spectator) and there is nothing left of his Abbey but a mutilated black ruin amid those green botanic expanses (in our day extended by a war-memorial rose garden) 'with oxen, sheep and dilettanti pasturing thereon'. We are back to the beginning.

In his purpose of calling up the image of the Abbey walls as they had

looked when while in their new masonry and fresh chiselling he has succeeded almost without trying; succeeded, in fact, precisely because he is not an antiquary but sees beyond the monastic ruins to the monastic motive. 'Their missals have become incredible, a sheer platitude, sayest thou, and idolatry and blasphemy? ... and yet it is pity we had lost tidings of our souls'. What would John Knox's grim historic shade say to that? In these ruins a once-gigantic life lay buried; and Carlyle even wonders whether, if born in that earlier time, he might have himself fled to dwell there. Ruskin, so much more knowledgeable about medieval architecture, loving every part of a church, says Chesterton, except the altar, never got as far as this: it is Carlyle who divines that the altar is the basis of the whole even if he has little to say about 'personal religion'. He notes at once, and rightly, that there is no mention of that sort of religion in Jocelin's book. 'The whole gist of their thinking and speculation seems to be "the privilege of our order, strict exactness of our dues ... the honour of our saint", and so forth'. About perfecting and purifying their own souls they do not seem disturbed in any measure: 'The "Ideal" says nothing about its idea: says much about finding bed and board for itself! How is this?'

For one thing, he answers, it is much easier to speak of such matters than of ideas; and they are sometimes more pressing with some folk. For another thing, may not this religious reticence be perhaps a merit and a sign of health? 'Jocelin, Eadmer, and such religious men, have as yet nothing of 'Methodism' [or we might now add, of Margery Kemp's sighing and sobbings]; no Doubt or even root of Doubt. Religion is not a diseased self-introspection, an agonising enquiry: their duties are clear to them, the way of supreme good plain, indisputable, and they are travelling on it. Religion lies over them like an all-embracing heavenly canopy, like an atmosphere and life-element, which is not spoken of, which in all things is presupposed without speech. Is not serene or complete Religion the highest aspect of human nature?' (II, iv. E.L. p.58). It is much what the latest and greatest historian of the monasteries, David Knowles, was to say a full century later.

The epilogue to Book II, in bidding farewell to Jocelin, takes us beyond the origins of Monasticism to the origins of Man. Now Carlyle the poet ponders on the origin of poetry - as a form of prayer, Leitourgia, liturgy. The *Iliad* and most other epic things have arisen as Liturgy did - it is the well-edited 'Beauties' of an unmeasurable waste imbroglio of Heroic Ballads. Coleridge (in Table Talk) had broached the same notion ten years before - perhaps echoing Herder, whom Carlyle had certainly read. Carlyle finds a parallel in the Robin Hood Ballads as assembled by that cantankerous collector Joseph Ritson who flits through the pages of Scott. But this takes us worlds away from Abbot Samson, if a paragraph on Justice takes us momentarily back: beginning with the feudal statute De Tallagio non concedendo and leading to

the Court of Chancery that killed a man by inches (a hint here of Bleak House). The nexus is once more the notion of work, 'which alone is eternal'. Thus spoke Goethe - whom he will quote more than once hereafter - hence it must be true.

So we come to the third and last book, titled 'The Modern Worker', but largely a book of Lamentation. 'Our religion is gone. We no longer believe in St. Edmund.' The Popish religion, 'the most vivacious-looking to be met with at present', produced in Rome on Corpus Christi Day a stuffed figure to preserve the human pope from housemaid's knee. What sport would Gibbon or Voltaire have made - or even Ruskin - of this comic contraption! Carlyle, however, at once qualifies his derision: 'This pathetic amphibious pope gives loaves to the Poor withal and has in him more good latent than he himself is aware of'. His Jesuits, in the late Italian cholera, 'shone as luminous fixed stars when all else had gone out in chaotic night'. The pope keeps some memorial however ghostly, 'of the Highest, Blessedest, which once was, which will again partly have to be ...' In this practice of the scenic theory of worship (the phrase covers Squallaci & Gregorian Chant) is a frankness, says this stern ex-Calvinist, 'which I rather honour'. Is it worse mumbo-jumbo than the Champion of England, cased in tin, riding into Westminster Hall at the Queen's accession - or the Puffery of Modern Advertising? (Carlyle saw the portents there, clearly enough) or the cant of such prelates as Warburton and Hurd for whom the church was an avenue to emolument in this world and the next? 'Rhetoric, all this?' he imagines us asking after a page or two, as well he might. But he has a sharp answer: 'Reader, had thou any notion of heaven or hell?' The pen is Carlyle's but the utterance is that of a thousand persecuting Covenanters (they duly appear at the end of Book III, c. xiv). It sorts strangely now with his next assertion: 'We have forgotten everywhere that cash payment is not the sole relation of human beings'. Is not this Marx's cash-nexus, named years before Marx or Engels formulated it? And like Marx and Engels (but also like Matthew Arnold) he makes his point from particular cases like that of the Irish widow who is refused charity and so fatally infects 17 others in an Edinburgh tenement with fever. 'Laissez-faire' is thus exposed as the gospel of dilettante do-nothings.

It is well that an Appendix (added in 1858) provides chapter summaries, for not otherwise could we follow the train of his thought or rather the pattern of his fireworks in this last book. Only here and there does an epigram stick fiery off against the fuliginous prose. Such are:

'The English are a dumb people. They can do great actions but not describe them ... their epic poem is written on the earth's surface'; 'Blessed is the man who has found his work. Let him ask no other blessedness'; 'The great soul of the world is just: 'The Bible of Universal History'.

In this rag-bag of a book there are the makings of a pennant, or a duster, for almost any cause. 'Legislative interference' was soon to become a danger-cry; Carlyle asserts its necessity: 'There are already Factory Inspectors. There must be Mine-inspectors too. Interference has begun, and must continue ...' (p.254). A page or two later, Imperial Preference is adumbrated. Instead of Macaulay's melancholy New Zealander, he foresees colonials arriving 'in select samples, from the Antipodes and elsewhere, by steam and otherwise, to the "season" here. What a Future; wide as the world, if we have heart and heroism for it'. But if he now makes more cheerful reading than he did in 1843 it is because his picture of the hungry forties, his prediction - well before Marx - of a rising of the masses makes Mr. Callaghan's England look like a paradise. Many of his paragraphs cancel each other out. He had only a few important things to say and like Shaw, a later flail for the complacent English, he said them far too often; repeating himself and, what is less pardonable, repeating his favourite quotations from Goethe ad nauseam.

Two threads or themes, one dark, one bright, barely tie the last book together. The first is the folly of the Corn Laws (p.217). The second, the constant retrospective glances at the age of Anselm and of Abbot Samson. There are points at which one might expect at least some gesture towards other prophets - towards Wordsworth, Shelley or Blake rather than (p.162) to Pope or Phillips. But when he ponders on the Corn Laws he does not remember or cares not to cite Shelley's

Men of England, wherefore plow  
For the lords why lay you low?

He writes instead, like Cobbett, as a countryman, even though he never planted a single potato at Ecclefechan.

The wistful glances backward are now to the age of a glorious chivalry that emerged out of the spectacle of 'two men turning themselves into turnip manure', now to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle<sup>7</sup>; now to Robert of Gloucester (edited by Hearne), who yields a rare fragment of ancient English - 'Eu [sic] Sachsen, nimith euer Sachs'es'; now to Dante, whose work made him lean for many years, so that he looked like a man who had really been in Hell; (so Carlyle had presented Dante earlier, and used this phrase, in Heroes and Hero-Worship - and perhaps prompted his brother to produce that prose rendering of the Inferno that we still read in the Temple Classics). If Cromwell crops up it is doubtless simply because the unfinished study of him was on Carlyle's conscience.

There is other reading to be reckoned with here. For years Carlyle had been attracted, indeed almost besotted by - the German idealists, Fichte, Novalis, Schlegel - not to mention Goethe whose death in the same year as

Scott marked the end of a European epoch. Goethe had ventured into the Middle Ages in Götz von Berlichingen, which Carlyle had read long before his Suffolk saunter. Miss Alice Chaundler, who has some suggestive pages on this matter in her Dream of Order (1970) sees Götz as a forebear of Carlyle's medieval Anglian landlord Edmund (she seems not to realise that Edmund was a ninth-century saint) if not of Samson.<sup>8</sup> Novalis was much more the conscious medievalist, harking back to the time 'when one common Christian interest linked the most distant provinces of this vast spiritual empire ...' As a Catholic, Novalis had no difficulties about the veneration of relics. The relics of St. Edmund play a role in Jocelin's Chronicle. I do not detect any specific appeal to Novalis in Carlyle's account of them but the German philosopher doubtless encouraged an attitude of suspended disbelief ... and he does come into a later chapter, though in a different context (IV, vi: p.275).

Besides the Germans, there are French thinkers to take account of. Not the Enlightenment - that had perished in giving reluctant birth to the Revolution - but the reaction that came with the restoration of Monarchy and gazed wistfully back across the years of the Terror and Napoleon to a Medieval France of strong government and a strong church. To this backward vision Chateaubriand gave glamour and St. Simon an historical philosophy. Carlyle, having vicariously lived through the Revolution in the course of writing its history, must have attended to Saint-Simon, and he shared some of his fervour, if not his socialism; but Saint-Simonians get only a fleeting mention in Past and Present.

Far closer than any of these to Carlyle's way of thinking was English Cobbett. I cannot prove that Carlyle had read Cobbett's Rural Rides (1830) before he set out on his own little rural ride. But the contrast in Past and Present between the people of the medieval burh and the degraded factory hands or unemployed of the hungry Forties is already present in Cobbett, who had been converted by Lingard's overtly Catholic History of England (the last volume of which appeared in the very year of Rural Rides) to a favourable, even enthusiastic view of the medieval monastery and the medieval church as a beneficent part of the social fabric. As Carlyle rested his case on Jocelin's Chronicle, so Cobbett had rested part of his unashamedly partisan History of the Protestant Reformation on Fortescue's De Laudibus Legum Angliae. And as Carlyle points to the sheep grazing on the ruins of Samson's abbey, so Cobbett had pointed to the relics of the bishop of Winchester's palace at his native Farnham; whereas William of Wykeham in the age of so-called monkish ignorance, had dispersed his wealth to provide a school, a college, a hospital, the present incumbent, says Cobbett, now sells small beer.

Cobbett's history is wildly tendentious, his contrasts are as vehement

as Carlyle's, his philosophy is as ill-assorted. We value him now, not for his tirades but his remarks on the cultivation of turnips, and the condition of agricultural England. Where Cobbett writes about corn (including maize, which was derisively nicknamed Cobbett's corn), Carlyle fulminates over the Corn Laws. But his explosive rhetoric perhaps seemed a little less bizarre to readers of *Rural Rides* (and they were many). And as Cobbett balanced his rhetoric with precise proposals for improvement - in particular a system of small holdings and a common field, so Carlyle will advocate, in passing, a Teaching Service, an Emigration Service, even Imperial Preference: 'the speakers of the English Language' he too confidently predicted, 'will in all times have the ineradicable predisposition to trade with England'.

Past and Present can hardly be recommended in 1977 as a pertinent political tract: though to the Tory Radicals of the 1840s it was strong meat and intoxicating drink, and its Gospel won Carlyle a place in that quintessential Victorian painting by Ford Madox Brown entitled Work (where, as the artist doubtless intended us to remark, Carlyle himself is not labouring, but looking on). But if his book lives it is because that long-forgotten twelfth-century chronicle sparked off a train in Carlyle's thought that had been laid in that East Anglian holiday, and prompted him to present its central story in a graphic and generally accurate form that was relished by thousands of readers who had never heard of the Camden Society. That great benefactor of Mankind, J.M. Dent, early found a niche for Carlyle's volume in Everyman where it is still accessible. And readers who want to read the full text of the Chronicle and test Carlyle against it can now consult Sir Roger Mynors' scholarly edition, the only fault of which is that it does not once mention Carlyle. From this chronicle it was that Carlyle quarried his central chapters. It is the very font et origo of this - the rest is too often so much foaming at the mouth. Yet it was not the ruins of St. Edmund's or Jocelin's chronicle that had first drawn him to the Middle Ages or aroused his sympathies. No-one of Carlyle's generation could escape the spell of The Wizard of the North. At Scott's death Carlyle had written: 'He understood what history meant; this was his chief intellectual merit, ... a solid, well built, effectual mind. He has played his part and left none like or second to him. Plaudite'.

Ivanhoe, we have seen, provides a leitmotif for the whole work. A modern historian might find this enough to damn it - though I fancy Sir Maurice Powicke would have come to Carlyle's defence. Certainly Scott knew, or sensed, the Middle Ages better than any writer before him. Newman made the point, once for all. Scott, he said, 'turned mens' minds to the direction of the Middle Ages ... stimulating their mental thirst ... silently indoctrinating them with nobler ideals, which might afterwards be appealed to as first principles'. Of this dictum Balzac's historical novels are a single but

sufficient proof. Newman even attributed to Scott the revival of English monasticism, though on what grounds I cannot discover.

It is the Carlyle of the central book of Past and Present who was to wield such an influence on the intellects of his day, here and abroad. That Ruskin was touched by him is not surprising. But J.A. Froude's allegiance counts for more. If that apologist for Tudor Tyranny unexpectedly turns aside to paint a sympathetic portrait of St. Hugh of Lincoln, it is surely because of the impress made on Froude by Carlyle's monastic heroes - Samson and Anselm. His Bishop of the Twelfth Century (Short Studies II) depends on a recent edition of the Magna Vita Hugonis precisely as Carlyle depends on Jocelin. It owes much of its effect to direct quotation in Carlyle's manner; and Froude's detestation of Rome did not deter him from calling Hugh 'one of the most beautiful spirits ever incarnated in human clay'. And one can still detect much later Carlyle's influence in a similar study of St. Bernard by Frederic Harrison the Comtist as late as 1897 who wrote a lively preface to an edition of Past and Present. In America, Emerson at once reviewed Past and Present for The Dial in an essay that said once for all everything that needs to be said about the style of this 'sick giant': 'Every object in Carlyle attitudinises,' says Emerson, 'to the very mountains and stars almost . . . and instead of the common earth and sky, we have a Martin's Creation or Judgment Day'. John Martin's vast and lurid canvases are indeed the painterly counterpart to Carlyle's later pages. Emerson duly notes his vice of preaching, of summoning men of straw, but notes too that ever and anon 'as if catching the glance of one wise man, he will lance at him in clear level tones the very word. A strange, half mad poet, too burly to submit to metre, floating like a balloon over a whole continent'. In A Blithedale Romance (1852), Hawthorne implies that the idealistic community which had put Carlyle's Gospel of Work into practice and found it wanting, sometimes read from Past and Present 'voices from the shattered ruins of the Past will yet wake a hopeful echo'.<sup>9</sup> Twenty years later Whitman, moved by Carlyle's death, likewise acknowledged his power.<sup>10</sup> And still later another American, Henry Adams, was to transmute Carlyle's medievalism and his whole method into an enchanting study of Mont St. Michel and Chartres. Adams had devoured the volumes of Scott he found in the family farmhouse; and Miss Chandler has tracked down his copy of Past and Present, the pattern of which surely shows through the last pages of The Education of Henry Adams, with their juxtaposition of the Virgin and the Dynamo: the Virgin pointing to Chartres, the Dynamo being the very pulse of Chicago. Thus Adams, the last of a great Puritan line, gives to the Virgin the place that the Lowland Scots sage could never have accorded her. Carlyle's worship of Great Men - which colours his estimate of Abbot Samson - did not extend to Great Women.

It must, of course, be admitted that in its own day Past and Present was chiefly influential as contributing to a myth - the Victorian myth of an hereditary

paternalistic nobility exercising chivalric protection over the other ranks of society in a relation symbolised by the (imaginary) feudal feast in the feudal hall. Carlyle posits and even goes some way to justify a similar pattern of feudal society in which an over-mighty lord could be restrained by a strong abbot. A little study of (for instance) *Piers Plowman* would have modified these views of English feudal relations, but fourteenth-century English was not popular with the Victorians if it was not Chaucerian. The Victorian myth was a potent myth because it beautifully suited the book of the Tory Radicals - from Lord John Manners to Disraeli himself: a romantic novelist before he was a politician. It suited Marx's book too; he idealised the medieval guilds as much as any Tory idealised the feudal system. Curiously enough, it struck few answering chords in Catholic or crypto-Catholic minds. Newman had no time for dim religious light. He remained a Grecian at heart, and the Caroline chapel of Trinity spoke to him more than the Gothic arches of St. Mary's. The Ecclesiologists, devout as they were, were more concerned with holywater stoops and roodlofts than with the religious springs of medieval monasticism. It is Carlyle who went beyond antiquarianism to the foundations of that monasticism, and asserted its holiness. His saintly Anselm we now see as (amongst other things) the herald of the great age of Scholasticism. But in the nineteenth century St. Thomas Aquinas was hardly studied, even in seminaries. The intellectual and philosophical achievements of his age were unregarded. Not until the early twentieth century did a dilettante Wall Street lawyer, Henry Osborn Taylor, do for the great scholastic texts (and Romances) what Carlyle had done for medieval chronicle; no one has been bold enough to produce a new version of Taylor's *Medieval Mind*. It is less than fifty years since Gilson and Maritain set forth the comprehensive claims of scholasticism and their pertinence to our time. This was the true Medieval Revival. One wonders what Carlyle, or Frode, or Henry Adams would have made of it.

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This essay was written without reference to the excellent monograph by Grace J. Calder, *The History of 'Past and Present'* (Yale U.P. 1949) which is chiefly a study of Carlyle's method of composition as revealed in the two manuscript versions, but includes a useful account of the state and status of medieval scholarship in Carlyle's day. The manuscripts show that he usually wrote passages based on Jocelin from memory, then brought his draft closer to his source. Miss Calder notes that the first draft was labelled 'Samson of St. Edmundsbury: or Past and Present (A Historical Essay?)'. I have not drawn on D.M. Hughes' edition of *Past and Present* (Oxford, 1918) which has many useful notes chiefly on topical references; but errs in claiming that Yates' *History of Bury* (1805) was a major source. Nor have I added references to the various collections of Carlyle's letters, as they will be superseded by the new edition of his correspondence, of which the second volume is forthcoming.



## READING MEDIEVAL STUDIES

### NOTES

1. Letters ... of Jane Welsh Carlyle, i, 136.
2. They are both mentioned in Carlyle's Journal for 25 October 1842.
3. The lists of members printed in the first volume of the Camden Society show the extent of early Victorian concern in literary and historical antiquities. It is a roll-call of gentlemen-scholars - a species now as extinct as medieval chroniclers.
4. Cf. the less obvious allusion to The Heart of Midlothian, III, i (E.L. p.134).
5. But for his Catholicism, Thomas Arnold would have become professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford. He visited Bury and made a plan of the Abbey.
6. For once Carlyle (E.L. p.121) has misread his text (v. Mynors' edition, p.94): the meeting was at Oxford; and Caput is a Cambridge term, not strictly applicable to the Magistri scholarum qui summoniti fuerant.
7. The phrase about a child in William I's reign carrying a purse of gold unharmed derives ultimately from the AS Chron., s.a. 1087.
8. See further my review of this useful study in Review of English Studies, 1972. It was Miss Chaundler who directed me to the passage in Cobbett (cited below).
9. Carlyle actually alludes to such ventures in the closing pages of Past and Present: 'Socinian Preachers quit their pulpits in Yankeeland ... and retire into the fields to cultivate onion beds and live frugally on vegetables' (p.284).
10. 'No man else will bequeath to the future more significant hints of our stormy era, its fierce paradoxes, its din and its struggling parturition periods ... Feudal at the core, and mental offspring and radiation of feudalism as are his books, they afford ever-valuable lessons and affinities to democratic America': Specimen Days in America (World's Classics edition), pp.263, 280.