

📖 Topic Page: [Carlyle, Thomas \(1795 - 1881\)](#)

Definition: **Carlyle** from *Collins English Dictionary*

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1 Robert. born 1961, Scottish actor; his work includes the television series *Cracker* and *Hamish Macbeth* and the films *Trainspotting* (1996), *The Full Monty* (1997), *The Beach* (2000), and *28 Weeks Later* (2007)

2 Thomas. 1795–1881, Scottish essayist and historian. His works include *Sartor Resartus* (1833–34), *The French Revolution* (1837), lectures *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841), and the *History of Frederick the Great* (1858–65)

Summary Article: **Carlyle, Thomas**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

1795–1881, English author, b. Scotland.

Early Life and Works

Carlyle studied (1809–14) at the Univ. of Edinburgh, intending to enter the ministry, but left when his doubts became too strong. He taught mathematics before returning to Edinburgh in 1818 to study law. However, law gave way to reading in German literature. He was strongly influenced by Goethe and the transcendental philosophers and wrote several works interpreting German romantic thought, including a *Life of Schiller* (1825) and a translation (1824) of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*.

In 1826 he married Jane Baillie Welsh, an acidly witty, well-informed, generally disagreeable, but ambitious woman who did much to further his career. Their marriage, one of the most famous literary unions of the 19th cent. and one of the most unhappy, is meticulously documented in the more than 9,000 letters still extant that they wrote one another. The Carlyles moved to Jane's farm at Craigenputtock in 1828. There he wrote *Sartor Resartus* (published 1833–34 in *Fraser's Magazine*), in which he told his spiritual autobiography. He saw the material world as mere clothing for the spiritual one. The God of his beliefs was an immanent and friendly ruler of an orderly universe. In denying corporeal reality, Carlyle reflected his revulsion for the materialism of the age. In 1832 Ralph Waldo Emerson went to Craigenputtock and began a friendship with Carlyle that was continued in their famous correspondence.

Later Life and Works

In 1834 the Carlyles moved to London to be near necessary works of reference for the projected *French Revolution*. Finally completed in 1837 (the first volume had been accidentally burned in 1835), the book was received with great acclaim. Although it vividly recreates scenes of the Revolution, it is not a factual account but a poetic rendering of an event in history. Carlyle extended his view of the divinity of man, particularly in his portraits of the great leaders of the Revolution.

In subsequent works Carlyle attacked laissez-faire theory and parliamentary government and affirmed his belief in the necessity for strong, paternalistic government. He was convinced that society does change, but that it must do so intelligently, directed by its best men, its “heroes.” His lectures, published as *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History* (1841), express his view that the great men of the past have intuitively shaped destiny and have been the spiritual leaders of the world.

Carlyle's other works expanded his ideas—*Chartism* (1840); *Past and Present* (1843), contrasting the disorder of modern society with the feudal order of 12th-century England; *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches* (1845); *Latter-Day Pamphlets* (1850); *Life of John Sterling* (1851); and a massive biography of a hero-king, Frederick the Great, on which he spent the years 1852–65. In 1866 his wife died, and the loss saddened the rest of his life.

Assessment

One of the most important social critics of his day, Carlyle influenced many men of the younger generation, among them Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin. His style, one of the most tortuous yet effective in English literature, was a compound of biblical phrases, colloquialisms, Teutonic twists, and his own coinings, arranged in unexpected sequences.

Bibliography

See his *Reminiscences* (1881) and numerous collections of his letters and his wife's; biographies by J. A. Froude (4 vol., 1882-84, repr. 1971) and D. A. Wilson (6 vol., 1923-34, repr. 1971; Vol. VI finished by D. W. MacArthur); studies by E. Neff (1932, repr. 1968), E. Bentley (1944), J. Symons (1952, repr. 1970), G. B. Tennyson (1966), and A. J. LaValley (1968); studies of the Carlyle marriage by T. Holme (1965, repr. 2000), P. Rose (1983), and R. Ashton (2003).

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