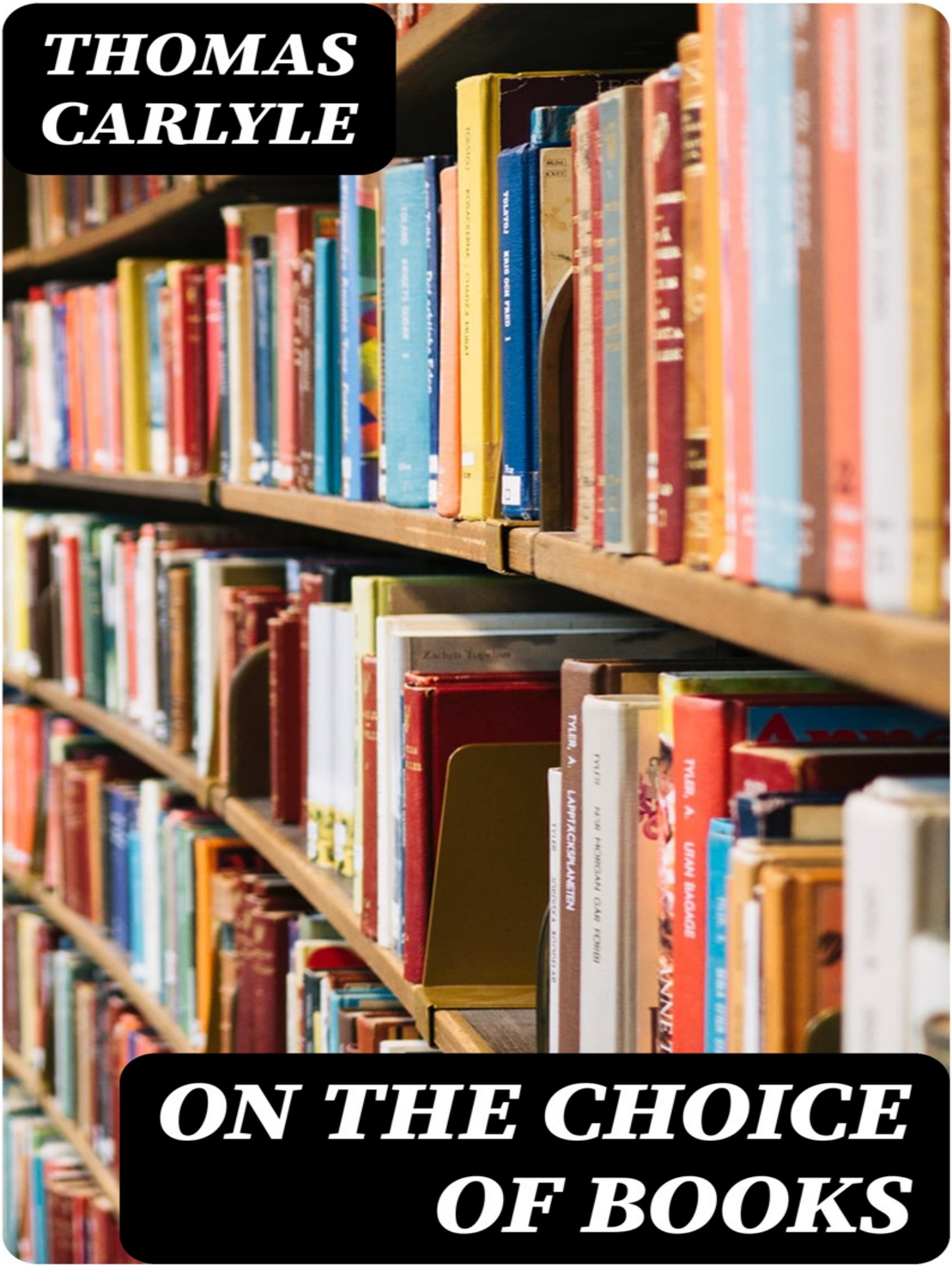
THOMAS CARLYLE



ON THE CHOICE OF BOOKS

Thomas Carlyle

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[Illustration]

BIOGRAPHICAL INTRODUCTION.

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There comes a time in the career of every man of genius who has devoted a long life to the instruction and enlightenment of his fellow-creatures, when he receives before his death all the honours paid by posterity. Thus when a great essayist or historian lives to attain a classic and world-wide fame, his own biography becomes as interesting to the public as those he himself has written, and by which he achieved his laurels.

This is almost always the case when a man of such cosmopolitan celebrity outlives the ordinary allotted period of threescore years and ten; for a younger generation has then sprung up, who only hear of his great fame, and are ignorant of the long and painful steps by which it was achieved. These remarks are peculiarly applicable in regard to the man whose career we are now to dwell on for a short time: his genius was of slow growth and development, and his fame was even more tardy in coming; but since the world some forty years ago fairly recognised him as a great and original thinker and teacher, few men have left so indelible an impress on the public mind, or have influenced to so great a degree the most thoughtful of their contemporaries.

Thomas Carlyle was born on Tuesday, December 4th, 1795, at Ecclefechan, a small village in the district of Annandale, Dumfriesshire. His father, a stone-mason, was noted for quickness of mental perception, and great energy and decision of character; his mother, as affectionate, pious, and more than ordinarily intelligent;[A] and thus accepting his own theory, that "the history of a man's childhood is the description of his parents' environment," Carlyle entered

upon the "mystery of life" under happy and enviable circumstances. After preliminary instruction, first at the parish school, and afterwards at Annan, he went, in November, 1809, and when he was fourteen years old, to the University of Edinburgh. Here he remained till the summer of 1814, distinguishing himself by his devotion to mathematical studies then taught there by Professor Leslie. As a student, he was irregular in his application, but when he did set to work, it was with his whole energy. He appears to have been a great reader of general literature at this time, and the stories that are told of the books that he got through are scarcely to be credited. In the summer of 1814, on the resignation of Mr. Waugh, Carlyle obtained, by competitive examination at Dumfries, the post of mathematical master at Annan Academy. Although he had, at his parents' desire, commenced his studies with a view to entering the Scottish Church, the idea of becoming a minister was growingly distasteful to him. A fellow-student describes his habits at this time as lonely and contemplative; and we know from another source that his vacations were principally spent among the hills and by the rivers of his native county. In the summer of 1816 he was promoted to the post of "classical and mathematical master" at the old Burgh or Grammar School at Kirkcaldy. At the new school in that town Edward Irving, whose acquaintance Carlyle first made at Edinburgh, about Christmas, 1815, had been established since the year 1812; they were thus brought closely together, and their intimacy soon ripened into a friendship destined to become famous. At Kirkcaldy Carlyle remained over two years, becoming

more and more convinced that neither as minister nor as schoolmaster was he to successfully fight his way up in the world. It had become clear to him that literature was his true vocation, and he would have started in the profession at once, had it been convenient for him to do so.

[Footnote A: James Carlyle was born in August, 1758, and died January 23, 1832. His second wife (whose maiden name was Margaret Aitken), was born in September, 1771, and died on Christmas Day, 1853. There were nine children of this marriage, "whereof four sons and three daughters," says the inscription en the tombstone in the burial-ground at Ecclefechan, "survived, gratefully reverent of such a father and such a mother."]

He had already written several articles and essays, and a few of them had appeared in print; but they gave little promise or indication of the power he was afterwards to exhibit. During the years 1820—1823, he contributed a series of articles (biographical and topographical) to Brewster's "Edinburgh Encyclopaedia,"[1] viz.:—

[Footnote 1: Vols. XIV. to XVI. The fourteenth volume bears at the end the imprint, "Edinburgh, printed by Balfour and Clarke, 1820;" and the sixteenth volume, "Printed by A. Balfour and Co., Edinburgh, 1823." Most of these articles are distinguished by the initials "T.C."; but they are all attributed to Carlyle in the List of the Authors of the Principal Articles, prefixed to the work on its completion.]

1. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu
2. Montaigne
3. Montesquieu
4. Montfaucon

5. Dr. Moore
6. Sir John Moore
7. Necker
8. Nelson
9. Netherlands
10. Newfoundland
11. Norfolk
12. Northamptonshire
13. Northumberland
14. Mungo Park
15. Lord Chatham
16. William Pitt.

The following is from the article on *Necker*:—

"As an author, Necker displays much irregular force of imagination, united with considerable perspicuity and compass of thought; though his speculations are deformed by an undue attachment to certain leading ideas, which, harmonizing with his habits of mind, had acquired an excessive preponderance in the course of his long and uncontroverted meditations. He possessed extensive knowledge, and his works bespeak a philosophical spirit; but their great and characteristic excellence proceeds from that glow of fresh and youthful admiration for everything that is amiable or august in the character of man, which, in Necker's heart, survived all the blighting vicissitudes it had passed through, *combining, in a singular union, the fervour of the stripling with the experience of the sage*."[A]

[Footnote A: "In the earliest authorship of Mr. Carlyle," says Mr. James Russell Lowell, alluding to these papers, "we find some not obscure hints of the future man. The outward

fashion of them is that of the period; but they are distinguished by a certain security of judgment, remarkable at any time, remarkable especially in one so young. Carlyle, in these first essays, already shows the influence of his master Goethe, the most widely receptive of critics. In a compact notice of Montaigne there is not a word as to his religious scepticism. The character is looked at purely from its human and literary sides."]

Here is a passage from the article on *Newfoundland*, interesting as containing perhaps the earliest germ of the later style:—

"The ships intended for the fishery on the southeast coast, arrive early in June. Each takes her station opposite any unoccupied part of the beach where the fish may be most conveniently cured, and retains it till the end of the season. Formerly the master who arrived first on any station was constituted *fishing-admiral*, and had by law the power of settling disputes among the other crews. But the jurisdiction of those *admirals* is now happily superseded by the regular functionaries who reside on shore. Each captain directs his whole attention to the collection of his own cargo, without minding the concerns of his neighbour. Having taken down what part of the rigging is removable, they set about their laborious calling, and must pursue it zealously. Their mode of proceeding is thus described by Mr. Anspach, *a clerical person, who lived in the island several years, and has since written a meagre and very confused book, which he calls a* HISTORY *of it*."

To the "New Edinburgh Review" (1821-22) Carlyle also contributed two papers—one on Joanna Baillie's "Metrical

Legends," and one on Goethe's "Faust."

In the year 1822 he made a translation of "Legendre's Geometry," to which he prefixed an Essay on Proportion; and the book appeared a year or two afterwards under the auspices of the late Sir David Brewster.[A] The Essay on Proportion remains to this day the most lucid and succinct exposition of the subject hitherto published.

[Footnote A: "Elements of Geometry and Trigonometry," with Notes.
Translated from the French of A.M. Legendre. Edited by David Brewster,
LL.D. With Notes and Additions, and an Introductory Chapter on
Proportion. Edinburgh: published by Oliver and Boyd; and G. and W.B.
Whittaker, London. 1824, pp. xvi., 367. Sir David Brewster's Preface, in which he speaks of "an Introduction on Proportion, by the
Translator," is dated *Edinburgh, August* 1, 1822.]

"I was already," says Carlyle in his *Reminiscences*, "getting my head a little up, translating 'Legendre's Geometry' for Brewster. I still remember a happy forenoon in which I did a *Fifth Book* (or complete 'doctrine of proportion') for that work, complete really and lucid, and yet one of the briefest ever known. It was begun and done that forenoon, and I have (except correcting the press next week) never seen it since; but still I feel as if it were right enough and felicitous in its kind! I only got £50 for my entire trouble in that 'Legendre;' but it was an honest job of work, honestly done."[A]

[Footnote A: *Reminiscences by Thomas Carlyle*, Edited by James Anthony Froude. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1881, Vol. 1., pp. 198-199.]

The late Professor de Morgan—an excellent authority—pronounced a high eulogium upon this Essay on Proportion.

In 1822 Carlyle accepted the post of tutor to Charles Buller, of whose early death and honourable promise, two touching records remain to us, one in verse by Thackeray, and one in prose by Carlyle.

For the next four years Carlyle devoted his attention almost exclusively to German literature.

His Life of Schiller first appeared under the title of "Schiller's
Life and Writings," in the London Magazine.

Part I.—October, 1823. Part II.—January, 1824. Part III.—July, 1824. " August, 1824. " September, 1824.

It was enlarged, and separately published by Messrs. Taylor and
Hessey, the proprietors of the Magazine, in 1825.

The translation of "Wilhelm Meister," in 1824,[A] was the first real introduction of Goethe to the reading world of Great Britain. It appeared without the name of the translator, but its merits were too palpable to be overlooked, though some critics objected to the strong infusion of German phraseology which had been imported into the English version. This acquired idiom never left our author, even in his original works, although the "Life of Schiller," written but a few months before, is almost entirely

free from the peculiarity. "Wilhelm Meister," in its English dress, was better received by the English reading public than by English critics. De Quincey, in one of his dyspeptic fits, fell upon the book, its author, and the translator,[B] and Lord Jeffrey, in the Edinburgh Review, although admitting Carlyle to be a talented person, heaped condemnation upon the work.

[Footnote A: Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship. 3 Vols., Edinburgh, 1824.]

[Footnote B: Curiously enough in the very numbers of the "London
Magazine" containing the later instalments of Carlyle's Life of
Schiller.]

Carlyle's next work was a series of translations, entitled "German
Romance: Specimens of the chief Authors; with Biographical and
Critical Notices." 4 vols. Edinburgh, 1827. The Preface and Introductions are reprinted in the second volume of Carlyle's Collected Works: the Specimens translated from Hoffmann and La Motte
Fouqué, have not been reprinted.

"This," says Carlyle, in 1857, "was a Book of Translations, not of my suggesting or desiring, but of my executing as honest journey-work in defect of better. The pieces selected were the suitablest discoverable on such terms: not quite of *less* than no worth (I considered) any piece of them; nor, alas, of a very high worth any, except one only. Four of these lots, or quotas to the adventure, Musæus's, Tieck's,

Richter's, Goethe's, will be given in the final stage of this Series; the rest we willingly leave, afloat or stranded, as waste driftwood, to those whom they may farther concern."

It was in 1826 that Mr. Carlyle married Miss Jane Welsh, the only child of Dr. John Welsh, of Haddington,[A] a lineal descendant of John Knox, and a lady fitted in every way to be the wife of such a man. For some time after marriage he continued to reside at Edinburgh, but in May, 1828, he took up his residence in his native county, at Craigenputtoch—a solitary farmhouse on a small estate belonging to his wife's mother, about fifteen miles from Dumfries, and in one of the most secluded parts of the country. Most of his letters to Goethe were written from this place.

[Footnote A: Her father had been dead some seven years when Carlyle and she were married, and the life interest of her inheritance in the farm of Craigenputtoch had been made over to her mother, who survived until 1842, when it reverted to Carlyle.]

In one of the letters sent from Craigenputtoch to Weimar, bearing the date of 25th September, 1828, we have a charming picture of our author's seclusion and retired literary life at this period:—

"You inquire with such warm interest respecting our present abode and occupations, that I feel bound to say a few words about both, while there is still room left. Dumfries is a pleasant town, containing about fifteen thousand inhabitants, and may be considered the centre of the trade and judicial system of a district which possesses some importance in the sphere of Scottish industry. Our residence is not in the town itself, but fifteen miles to the north-west,