

# A Skeptical Elegy as in Auchtertool Kirkyard

Kenneth J. Fielding  
Edinburgh University

A problem in writing about Carlyle and his beliefs is that people think that they know what they are.<sup>1</sup> He was “a Calvin-ist.”<sup>2</sup> He may have almost never attended church, believed Christ to be no more than a man, made pungent remarks about Christianity and its ministers, and had been the butt of friends who asked him what the devil his religion was. Yet there were those who really knew better. One of them was the rationalist historian William Lecky, who had long talks with him in his old age, and said that Carlyle was perfectly clear. Though once “fully orthodox,” Lecky wrote, “Carlyle believed that Christ was ‘most authentically human

<sup>1</sup>The present essay is revised and expanded from “A Carlylean Elegy in Auchtertool Kirkyard.”

<sup>2</sup>This oversimplifies a common assumption or implication, but see, for example, C. H. Harrold and A. A. Ikeler. Carlyle’s contemporaries often had a much clearer grasp. With all his admiration for Carlyle, John Tulloch is clear that Carlyle respected Calvinism not because “it was a great intellectual or theological phenomenon, with a continuous historical life of its own,” but as “the faith of his father and mother” (201), and that he was evidently not a Christian.

. . . a poor and noble teacher but nothing more.’”<sup>3</sup> Christianity “as to revelation ‘vanished’ as he said ‘into thin air.’” Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall* (1776–88), which he had read at Kirkcaldy in 1817, had sent “a burning arrow through” his heart. No doubt all this is true. Yet there are always various aspects to Carlyle, to be found at different times, moods, and places. Lecky found this out himself, as he talked with his friend on his walks around London; and while he could persuade Carlyle in old age to read the Old Testament, he could not get him to look at the New, even though “a religious life, mind or character he valued beyond all others” and though “religious lives were to him the noblest of illusions.” Men and women sought Carlyle to consult him because they saw his sincerity and felt his unexpectedness.

Three aspects of Carlyle’s religion have recently arisen in the course of editing his Letters. One is Lecky’s extensive and largely unused notes of their conversations, which have been left untouched since his widow, Elizabeth, drew on them for her memoir of her husband. The second comes from paying a visit to Auchtertool Kirk in Fife, so easy to reach yet seemingly remote in the past.<sup>4</sup> This was the charge held for forty-seven years by Jane Welsh Carlyle’s cousin, the unmarried Rev. Walter Welsh, who occupied its fine Tudor-style manse, where Jane and Thomas often visited and found something they felt they had lost in London. The third aspect was the discovery of an entirely unknown tribute to the agnostic Carlyle paid by his friend Thackeray that appeared anonymously in the weekly *Leader* in November 1851. It has not only been completely overlooked till now, but in its place an entirely different, savagely back-biting, bitter, and hypocritical review in the *Times* has been wrongly but confidently said to be Thackeray’s.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Lecky’s comments on Carlyle are contained in a notebook, mixed up with much else among his largely unindexed papers in Trinity College Library, Dublin. Passages from the notebook are quoted with the permission of the trustees of Trinity College.

<sup>4</sup>Thanks are due to the minister, the Rev. George Cowie, for being able to see the church.

<sup>5</sup>In “Thackeray and ‘The Great Master of Craigenputach’” I discuss both Thackeray’s authentic review appearing in the *Leader* on November 8, 1851, and “The Life of Sterling” in the *Times* for November 1, 1851,

The point in bringing the three aspects together is to suggest probable agreement by many with Nietzsche's pointed remark that Carlyle was almost an "atheist" or agnostic without the willingness or courage to admit it,<sup>6</sup> and this is where much of his influence lay. For he was able to reconcile a general wish to believe in the divine while rejecting a great deal that had come to be plainly incredible. He had arrived at this conclusion by mid-nineteenth century without sheltering in the fantasy of *Sartor Resartus* (1833–34) or some of the double-talk found in other works. At the same time he was humanistic and rightly saw himself as a man of piety.

Certainly, the setting of his cousin's church at Auchtertool is evocative. Lying across the Forth Bridge from Edinburgh, almost three miles from the small town of Kirkcaldy, and three-quarters of a mile from the village, the kirk is approached by little more than a long lane, set back, hidden by tall beeches and elms, with a commanding view from the crest of a hill looking east to the Firth, the Isle of May, the Bass Rock, and North Berwick Law or hill; and legend even once had it that part of *The French Revolution* (1837) was anachronistically written at the manse because it mentions a little hilltop kirk, with the dead "slumbering round it, under their white memorial-stones" (2:8). In fact, all that one may authentically rediscover of Carlyle is a path in the manse garden formerly called Carlyle's Walk, an actual tale that he once took a child by the hand and gently led her round the garden, and another story about a somewhat unspecified dinner-table quarrel with a local clergyman. A more characteristic anecdote details his behavior in the little church. He is said once to have wandered slowly in to hear a sermon, sat down in the manse pew, listened to the sense of it, and left, perhaps reasonably enough, before the service was over—without waiting for the collection.<sup>7</sup> This latter incident probably hap-

---

misattributed to him, pointing out how the review in the *Leader* highlights Carlyle's skeptical independence, and how widely this was shared by others at the time.

"Basically Carlyle is an English atheist who makes it a point of honour not to be one" (49).

pened later in life—a great improvement on his behavior as he groaned aloud throughout the sermon, when James Anthony Froude tried to enliven him in London by taking him to Westminster Abbey (*Reminiscences* 2:451).<sup>8</sup>

The surroundings of the kirk are quietly impressive: the kirkyard with its ponderous old seventeenth-century table tombstones (for “the rude forefathers” of the hamlet [Stevenson xviii]), with behind it the splendid former manse and large garden laid out “according to the idea” (109) of Jane’s uncle, John Welsh, and now in private hands. In the distance is Kirkcaldy, where Carlyle had been a schoolteacher in 1816–1818, following Edward Irving, and Humble Farm is a little to the east, where he and Jane escaped for a holiday in the summer of 1858.<sup>9</sup> They meant to “take a long flight to solitude and the seashore,” Jane sauntering on a horse or donkey led by the bridle, and Carlyle galloping through the district on his favorite Fritz. On October 7, 1859, he told his brother Alexander in Canada that he had ridden up Kirk Wynd in Kirkcaldy to look at where they had both once stayed, had called on the corpulent provost Peter Swan, once “a little black-eyed boy,” and had found the town “all new paved, old Jail quite swept away; screaming with railways etc” (MS 516.94, National Library of Scotland). He wrote to his friend John Forster on July 10, 1859, wishing for his company, and he told Joseph Neuberger how Fritz was “among the silent Hills and Valleys, by the shore of the beautifullest sea in the world” (Forster Collection); and a few days later on July 21, he told another how Fritz was

astonished beyond measure at the new phenomena of nature here, the sea waves, the precipitous stony paths, the cows almost most of all. It is one of the finest scenes I ever saw in the world: woody airy

<sup>7</sup>All these stories are from William Stevenson’s *The Kirk and Parish of Auchtertool* (1909) (109–14).

<sup>8</sup>The visit came after a more successful one to St. Paul’s Cathedral, where Carlyle happened to be able to enjoy the service and music without being annoyed by the sermon.

<sup>9</sup>The Carlyles stayed at Humble Farm for six weeks, five more at Auchtertool House (a vacant mansion now occupied), and maybe for a while at the manse, fifteen minutes’ walk away.

Hills (mostly made of trap rock, & very well cultivated); ours is a Farm House mounted on a Knoll of its own, and looking far over the Forth and its Islands (Inch-Colm has a monastery on it) and its steamers & ships special and miscellaneous, with Edinb. 10 miles off on the other side . . . “like a scene in the theatre,” varying in its aspect from hour to hour; truly I question whether the Bay of Naples is prettier on a fine day. . . . I try to be solitary. . . . But the ground itself is eloquent to me, with memories of 40 years back and more; I find old friendly faces still extant too, tho in small number. (MS, NLS 553.201)

Yet the close connection with Fife has never been counted as part of *The Carlyle Country* (1904), as J. M. Sloan’s book has it, though often visited over this period and having many other associations.<sup>10</sup> On this visit they stayed close to Auchtertool Manse and Church where they had often been before. Though no family papers of this period exist, one can see that the Rev. Walter Welsh’s long ministry there may have come from his and his father’s strong desire to resettle in Scotland, not unlike his cousin Jane Carlyle’s deep feeling for her birthplace in Haddington. For Jane’s most memorable piece of writing, “Much ado About Nothing,” is her account of her return after about thirty years to Haddington and scenes of her childhood; and there was her profound emotion about Templand where her mother had died, so strong that when she revisited, her friend Mrs Russell would not give her a bedroom with a view of the old home. It was hardly weaker with Carlyle, who speaks of entering Scotland as one of “those vacant kingdoms of the past” (*Reminiscences* 201). Each was accordingly to select an appropriate burial-place or memorial: Jane with her father in Haddington, her mother with her own family at Crawford (further south in Lanarkshire), her uncle John Welsh with his family in Liverpool though

<sup>10</sup>Carlyle maintained his connections through John Fergus and his family at Kirkcaldy. John was the local MP. He kept in touch with other friends, and through “Kirkcaldy Helen,” the witty, loved, innocent-hearted, alcoholic, suicidal servant they recruited after they were in London, they must have felt that Kirkcaldy almost colonized Cheyne Row. She was with them a dozen years (1837–49).

memorialized at Auchter-tool, and Carlyle firmly rejecting the prospect of Westminster Abbey to be buried with his kin at Ecclefechan. For, whatever else they professed, they all showed that their piety is to be found in their sense of place, family, and familiar ways, and thus almost necessarily connected with their final resting places and their church and its rituals for birth, marriage, and particularly death.

In a corner of the Auchtertool kirkyard still lie the graves of some of Jane's family: Walter Welsh, and, presumably, his sister Helen, and the monument to their father, Jane's beloved uncle John Welsh. There they are crowded "as near to the manse as it was possible to lay them," "their graves still covered in spring" with snowdrops (Stevenson 142). Walter's heavy gravestone is twinned with another like it that has fallen face down; this is presumably the one spoken of as erected in memory of his father, probably also recording the burial of Walter's sister Helen. They were Jane's family rather than her husband's, but the tale of the connection as told in the Carlyles' letters and the remote setting in time and place evoke both their own and other aspects of Victorian religious life. One may also easily recall Gray's "Elegy," echoes of it quoted in Carlyle's *Reminiscences* (1881) (the "short and simple annals" [21]), "our humble forefathers" with its occupants casting "one longing ling'ring look behind" (26), and even Carlyle's elegiac *The Life of John Sterling* (1851). As with Sterling's biography, Gray's poem, Carlyle's memories, and even the two Carlyles' endless letters, one may think of them as bound up with a religion of affection and piety rooted in place, family, and conduct.

This is not entirely fanciful, for though rural Scots then were usually unpoetical in their inscriptions, Hoddam kirkyard in Ecclefechan where Carlyle was born still has at least one gravestone quoting a full stanza of Gray's "Elegy." Visiting these graveyards with their massive stones provokes a profound sense of the deep desire to memorialize and be remembered, a desire surely at the root of *Reminiscences* and its origin in the memoir of "James Carlyle," written in 1832 when Carlyle was in London unable to attend his father's funeral, and figuring at the heart of his account in what might seem at first the casually added recollection of the local "Schoolmaster of Hoddam," John Orr. He was a "de-

vout” man, yet given to heavy drinking followed by “gnawing remorse” (*Reminiscences* 24). Perhaps it was in “some dark interval of this kind,” writes Carlyle, that he remembered a tombstone he had ordered for his own father, prepared but neglected at a local mason’s (24). Without money to hire a carter, Orr had “hurried off” and “desperately got the Stone on his back. It was a load that nigh killed him. . . . The night fell: I think some one found him desperately struggling with it near Mein Mill, and got it set in its place.—Should I not go and look whether it is still to be found there: in Pennersaughs Churchyard?” (24). Whether he did is unknown, but Orr’s stone is still there, along with those of Carlyle’s “feared and respected” uncles and grandfather whom he celebrates by name and achievement so far as memory allowed (26).<sup>11</sup>

To return to Auchtertool, nephew Walter is memorialized in the same spirit within the church, where a tablet says that it is sacred to the memory of

THE REVEREND WALTER WELSH  
ORDAINED MINISTER OF THIS PARISH  
AND AT HIS DEATH  
FATHER OF THE PRESBYTERY  
A LEARNED DIVINE  
A WISE COUNSELLOR  
LOVED AND REVERED BY HIS FRIENDS,  
A GENIAL AND INSTRUCTIVE COMPANION,  
AND ALL EXEMPLARY IN HIS LIFE;  
HE LIVED IN HONOUR AMONGST MEN,  
AND DIED LAMENTED

<sup>11</sup>Pennersaughs is an Ecclefechan graveyard, which holds the ponderous slabs commemorating Carlyle’s forebears, including his great-grandfather John (d. 1727), grandfather Thomas (d. 1806), uncles John (d. 1801), Thomas (d. 1816), and Francis (d. 1803), and numerous other relatives. Carlyle’s father James and close family, including Carlyle himself, are of course in the more central parish churchyard that lies behind the birthplace. Several of the earlier Carlyles have the family crest (with the motto “Humilitate”) that Carlyle used

ON THE 17TH DAY OF DECEMBER 1879  
AGED 64 YEARS.

It is perhaps too involved to trace the family connections in detail. What they come to is that the Rev. Walter Welsh was Jane Carlyle's cousin because he was the son of her mother's brother Uncle John. Their father had been Walter Welsh of Templand, near Thornhill, Dumfriesshire, vividly described in *Reminiscences*. Early in life, as one of a large family, John Welsh had set out for a business career in Liverpool, where he made, lost, and remade a considerable living in brass and copper founding. But the eldest of several sons, the physically lamed Walter was enlisted in the church, licensed to preach at Penpont (near the family's old home), and in 1842 somehow came to be presented as assistant and designated successor to the minister at Auchtertool.

Obviously, this had his father's backing, and no doubt he helped with what Jane Carlyle was to call Walter's "poor little stipend" of just over £200 a year (*Collected Letters* 31:201). For "dusty, sooty, ever noisy Liverpool," as Carlyle wrote, had not been John Welsh's "element, few men's less, . . . but his heart and all his pleasant memories and thoughts were in the breezy Hills of Moffatdale" (*Reminiscences* 132). All this he had greatly suppressed except for once bursting "into brief fiery recognition . . . in his own drawingroom . . . with memorable emphasis and fury" (133). Hence his delight in helping his son in his new home, which he was able to visit until he died there in 1853, and thus his association with the church where he is remembered by the memorial in the kirkyard though buried (with members of his family) in Liverpool at the Old Street Church of Scotland.

It was Jane Carlyle's deep affection for her uncle as well as her liking for Walter that drew her to Auchtertool. Walter had called on them at Cheyne Row soon after his appointment as assistant, when Jane wrote to his sister Jeannie on January 8, 1843, "Do you know I find him far more intelligent and agreeable away from all you young ones" (CL 16:12). Though staying late, he had not bored them. The attachment stood the strain of family differences, so that she could write to Carlyle in 1862, "After all I have no kinder relative or friend

than poor Walter. Every summer, when invitations were not so plenty, his house and all that is his, have been placed at my disposal. It is the only house where I could go, without an invitation, at any time that suited myself" (Froude *Letters* 3:120). Just as on July 29, 1856, after both Carlyles had been there, she noted,

I am never done thanking heaven for the freshness and cleanness and quietness into which I have been plumped down, and for my astonishingly comfortable bed! and the astonishing kindness and good humour that wraps me about like an eider-down quilt! . . . Of course I am sad at times—at all times sad as death—but *that* I am used to, and don't mind. (CL 31:139–40)

Yet at first, Jane had kept away from Scotland because it reminded her of the devastating loss of her mother in 1842; it was not until August 1849 that she accepted an invitation to the manse after first paying the "Much ado" visit to her old home in Haddington entirely on her own. Even then, she hardly felt up to staying at the same time as other summer visitors, sisters, various in-laws, and nieces and nephews: "Breakfast at ten—dinner nearer seven than six—'dandering Individuals' constantly dropping in—dressings and undressings world without end! All that is so wholly out of place in a Scotch manse!—and then the chit-ter-chatter!"—not helped by trying to understand her uncle when he had lost his teeth (CL 24:178).

She does not mention church-going, usually rejected in spite of her uncle's disapproval, but does describe the marriage of a collier, caught because Walter conducted it in his study when she happened to be present. The "girl had one *very* large inflamed eye" and her partner "a glass too much to keep his heart up." Walter married them

*very well indeed*, and his affecting words, together with the Bridegroom's pale excited face and the Bride's *ugliness*, and the 'poverty needcessity and want' imprinted on the whole business—and above all fellow-feeling with the poor wretches there rushing on their fate—all so overcame me that I fell a-crying as desperately as if I had

been getting married to the Collier myself. (CL 24:178-79)

She shook hands with them, presented them with the snuff-box she had meant to give Walter, and so infected her cousin with her generosity that he gave the bride a new Bible. Jane Carlyle's love for her neighbor comes out in this "fellow-feeling," as she notes in the grateful collier's cry, "'Oh Miss!—Oh Leddy!—may ye hae mair comfort and pleasure in your life than ever you have had yet!' Which might easily be!—" (CL 24:179).

Yet if one is merely thinking of "the Carlyle Country," much more might be said of the associations of the Carlyles with the manse, the district, and the kingdom of Fife. Little is to be found in most accounts of their later lives, which sail past almost everything but the Edinburgh rectorship; but Jane Carlyle's letters telling of visits in the 1850s and 1860s give a detailed account of or references to her bathing at Kirkcaldy, shopping in Aberdour, interest in the manse garden, vivid family interchanges, and encounters with old Kirkcaldy friends such as Provost William Swan. She met him at Auchtertool House, she told Carlyle, and made him "a pretty little speech about your enduring remembrance of his Father's and Mother's kindness to you . . . which had the greatest success." He had to be dined at the manse and given the "treasure" of her husband's photograph, though, "So fat a man one rarely sees" (CL 31:190). He was followed by another member of his family, Peter, also dutifully dined. And this might all remind one of how Carlyle's connections went back to his first venture into life outside Dumfriesshire and Edinburgh and to his "first love" for the "poorish proud and well-bred" Margaret Gordon of Kirkcaldy, who was to be transformed into Blumine of *Sartor*. She was "the cleverest and brightest" of those he then knew of

[t]he Kirkcaldy population . . . a pleasant honest kind of fellow-mortals . . . of good *Old-Scotch* in their works and ways; more *vernacular*, peaceably fixed, and almost genial, in their mode of life, than I had been used to in the Border home-land. Fife we generally liked . . . and We, I in particular, always rather liked the people. (*Reminis-*

cences 238–39).

They were happy to return.

Yet Jane cannot have been an easy guest at the manse. On later summer holidays she would arrive at Auchtertool, taut nerves fluttering in ribbons, anxious to enjoy its peace, though her female cousins strained to dine, dress up, and entertain, and—if not resisted—to fuss. She was thrust into the silent conflict between the ideals of the manse and those of ordinary country society. Walter might be exempt from this and allowed to follow his calling; but one sister (Maggie) had to exert herself to run the manse, while another (Jeannie) was so outrageous as to arrive with a baby and two six-foot nursemaids. As members of a large and increasing family, perhaps none of them had the time—if the disposition—to mourn their father, her loved uncle, mainly remembered in his kirkyard corner, nor their elder sister Helen who lay beside him. For it had been to Helen that Jane had written on October 12, 1853, on the death of her

beloved Uncle, all that remained to me of My mother. A braver, more upright, more generous-hearted man never lived . . . it was well he should die thus—gently and beautifully—with all his loving kindness, fresh as a young man’s—his enjoyment of life not wearied out all our love for him as warm as ever—and well he should die in his own dear Scotland, amid quiet kindly things . . . to know that kind good Uncle was in the world for me—to care about me however long absent . . . was a sweetness in my lonely life, which can be ill spared. (CL 28:286–87)

Helen died a few months later.

Carlyle was also affected by the news of John Welsh’s death, reporting to his sister,

Last night we got a sad shock, by the evening Postman; which fell *heaviest* by far on my poor Jane, and might as readily on me: the Death of her Uncle at Auchtertool! . . . Of course they are all in deep distress, . . . poor Helen writes without *dating*. As to Jane

here, she has *spoken* little since; and is very sad and low indeed, poor soul; sitting down stairs, making up mournings I can see; refusing to go out any whither. He was a good, brave and honest and kindhearted man, this Uncle that is gone; and last of all her kindred too, in some measure: so that it is as if the old things had come up upon her again. What can we do? What can we do? Nothing,—except, as it is said, “kiss the rod”; and confess that One is sovereign over us, and that His Will is our law. Oh dear, Oh dear!<sup>12</sup> (CL 28:286)

Years later, writing from Aughtertool to Mary Russell on September 8, 1862, just after the tribute to Walter’s kindness, Jane spoke of her cousins’

naturally hospitable and kindly natures . . . still I miss that congeniality which comes of having mutually suffered; and taken one’s suffering to heart! I feel here as if I were “playing” with nice, pretty, well-behaved children! I almost envy them their light-hearted capacity of being engrossed with trifles! And yet, not that! There is a deeper joy in one’s own sorrowful memories surely, than this gaiety that comes of “never minding”! Would I, would you, cease to regret the dear ones we have lost if we could? . . . Oh no! better ever such grief for the lost, than never to have loved anyone enough to have one’s equanimity disturbed by the loss! (Froude *Letters* 3:121–22).

In its way this is little different from the “Worship of Sorrow” expounded in *Sartor Resartus*, in “The Everlasting Yea” (Book II, chapter 9), which derived from Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* (1795, 1821), which is said to look back to “blessed are they that mourn” (Matt. 5:4), and more might be made of this conjunction of elegiac sorrow in the face of death and its power to awaken a sense of eternity, the passage of

<sup>12</sup>Walter Welsh’s gravestone reads, “In memory of the Revd. Walter Welsh who died at the mans of Aughtertool, on the 17th of December 1879, in the

time, love, regret, and the irretrievability of the past.

One can see from later letters and Carlyle's *Reminiscences* how sharply yet tenderly he was aware of this on Jane Carlyle's death. Soon after it he realized how on many of her visits to Scotland Jane had made a special point of calling to see her old widowed nurse, Betty Braid, in Edinburgh. No doubt at first for Jane's sake, their friend Thomas Erskine of Linlathen, the theologian and friend of upper-class families in Scotland, whom Carlyle called "Saint Thomas" (Wilson and MacArthur *Old Age* 136), went on calling on Betty. Carlyle thanked him for his kindness and charity on January 23, 1868:

The world has not many shrines to a devout man at present, and perhaps in our own section of it there are few objects holding more authentically of Heaven. . . . The love of human creatures, one to another, where it is true and unchangeable, often strikes me as a strange fact in their poor history, a kind of perpetual Gospel, revealing itself in them . . . the heart and mother of all that can in any way enoble their otherwise mean and contemptible existence in this world. (Qtd. in Shepherd 2:256)

This is a side of Carlyle often denied or not allowed to be seen. Carlyle called on old Betty later in the year, his only other visit in Scotland apart from consulting the famous Edinburgh surgeon Professor James Syme. David Alec Wilson and David Wilson MacArthur remark that when Erskine "died at 82 in the year 1870, [Betty] was already 80, but had five years more during which Carlyle continued to write her every July and there were many friends of both spared the trouble of replying by keeping him posted as to how she was" (*Old Age* 136). This presents a view of Carlyle that is remote from the caricature of him as a vehement worshiper of power. Such affections were sacred to him in human terms, as such intimate friends as Robert Browning and Erskine recognized.

For the saintly Erskine was closely drawn to his great friend Carlyle, saying of him, "I love the man . . . he has a real belief in the invisible, which, in these railroad and steam-engine days, is a great matter." They

agreed in believing, as Erskine writes, that “the inward revelation in conscience makes us independent of the outward revelation,” and that “outward” belief must be learned from inward (qtd. in Henderson 22–23). This is at the heart of their agreement, and of “Carlylism.” One recalls the evangelistic Prussian ambassador C. J. K. Bunsen’s pride in the completion or restoration of Cologne Cathedral, and Carlyle’s dismissive “[i]t is a very fine pagoda, if ye could get any sort of God to put in it” (qtd. in Wilson, *David Threescore* 429). In return, as Tulloch says, Carlyle “might well love Erskine,” for he had a warm place always “in Erskine’s heart, who mourned for his unhappiness as if he had been a brother” (133).

Yet Erskine was possibly disturbed by the misgivings of his influential friend and fellow theologian, Dr. John McLeod Campbell. Campbell was usually another Carlylean admirer and is still more widely known (and remembered today) for questioning certain aspects of Scottish Calvinistic theology and his consequent ejection from the Church of Scotland. For though he liked Carlyle’s *The Life of John Sterling* because it made Carlyle known to him “as a brother man,” he was dismayed at what seemed to be its self-congratulatory tone and triumph at seeing Sterling voluntarily leave his Church: “His joy over Sterling is a most painful . . . contrast to Paul’s joy over Timothy” (Campbell 2:238–40). The main point of noting Campbell’s and Erskine’s liking for Carlyle is that both were known as *non-Calvinist*, both in some ways at least theologically liberal, and that while one was disturbed by the life of Sterling, the other seems to have accepted it together with everything else he agreed on with Carlyle. These were the clergy who usually approved of Carlyle and with whom he kept on the friendliest terms.

To return at length to Thackeray’s significantly anonymous review of *The Life of John Sterling*: he also makes explicit the distinction between loving one’s God and loving one’s neighbour. Thackeray’s anonymity allowed him to be precise and yet make a general expression of his inability (like Carlyle’s) to accept the Church’s dogmatic teaching:

let us not forget to note the plain and emphatic language in which he at last speaks out his deep-rooted antagonism to all Established Churches. Much abuse, much hatred, this will probably draw down. . . . To all orthodox minds Carlyle must now unhesitatingly stand confessed as *not* of them. Hitherto he has written on religious subjects, as if he hated Cant and Shams; but somehow, by the very ambiguity of his language, he has always seemed to *have a Bishop in tow*. Now he has fairly cut the cables. . . . Carlyle is working by his powerful denunciations against the *make-believe* which reigns at the present day. For it is in the want of due recognition of free thought that so much hypocrisy lives; men pretend to believe what they do not believe. (Qtd. in Fielding "Thackeray" 310)

Thackeray makes clear his extreme dislike of the close control that apparent orthodoxy had over public opinion and allied himself with the admirably earnest Professor Francis W. Newman's call, from within the church, for a rational discussion of belief. For Newman, the future Cardinal John Henry's brother, was arguing with some success in his *Phases of Faith* (1850) and other persuasive works for much greater openness and honesty. Here is a loop into the Carlyle connection. For, as well as Newman's being referred to in Thackeray's novel *Pendennis* (1850), he was praised in Carlyle's biography and had been chosen by Sterling as guardian for his eldest son. Also, the altercation with the clergyman over dinner at the manse at Auchtertool about 1851 took place when the Rev. George Gilfillan of Dundee was attacking Carlyle in a peculiarly bitter review of *The Life of John Sterling*, which had set off the argument (Wilson, *David Threescore* 354).<sup>13</sup> Yet in his unknown review Thackeray spoke

<sup>13</sup>George Gilfillan, popular preacher, writer, and United Presbyterian minister of School-Wynd Church, Dundee, at first admired and praised Carlyle, who was wary of him because, as he told Emerson on January 31, 1844, his "position as a Preacher of bare old Calvinism under penalty of death sometimes makes me tremble for him" (CL 17:255). In the bitter disputes following the publication of *The Life of John Sterling*, Gilfillan had reviewed it for *Eclectic Review*, starting favourably and then (after reading the false *Times* review) adding a savagely hostile postscript (728-29). He wrote about Carlyle to Sydney Dobell as someone who "laughs at if not abuses

of the biography as “inexpressibly charming,” with “simple solemnity of . . . language,” which expressed “a noble soul” (qtd. in Fielding “Thackeray” 309). He knew Carlyle well, and Carlyle’s affection for Sterling was one with his love for Erskine, who came to teach universal atonement and “the essential character of the Gospel as a Revelation of divine Love” (Tulloch 140).

Certainly, Carlyle was paradoxical, and it is not at all clear that Carlyle’s “idea of the Divine,” as Tulloch says, readily and almost exclusively “sank back into the idea of a Supreme Force” (204–05). Carlyle had a deep human sympathy. He and Jane were negative about dogma but positive to much in Christian moral teaching, even when seeming to deny it. He was not, of course, an atheist, any more than he was a Calvinist, a curmudgeon, a historian confined to Prussian history, or an Englishman cut off at Chelsea from his Scottish origins.

The question of Carlyle and Calvinism deserves more enlightened investigation, of course, and a willingness to consider his attitudes as more nationally than intellectually “Calvinistic.” One might also notice his apparently detached appraisal of the sermon at Auchtertool as like his response in Westminster Abbey where Froude had taken him to hear Dean Stanley, only to encounter a popular preacher.

Stanley, Froude, Carlyle, and many in their immediate circle in later years were desperately engaged in trying to arrange their ideas in response to dramatically changing conceptions of belief at mid-century; and they sometimes advanced at a different pace from each other, or felt divided within themselves. For, as Rector of St. Andrews University, Froude assured its students how deplorable it was that “Calvinism” had “come to be regarded by liberal thinkers as a system of belief incredible in itself, dishonouring in its object, and as intolerable as it has been intolerant” (“Calvinism” 3). He, too, could not believe in it; for he wanted to live by “Calvini[sm] without the theology” which he thought of as Carlyle’s creed (*Life* 2:2). But it may be truer to think of Carlyle as hav-

---

us both,” and who detests “the infidel . . . rabble-rout of Calvinists” in Edinburgh. Dobell wrote of Carlyle’s beliefs as mere “naturalism” based on “the

ing helped to release his own generation from an over-literal acceptance of past teaching, yet as someone who still found himself in a state of tension as his life extended and his beliefs were stretched with it. They stretched until sometimes they snapped back. Carlyle was a remarkable mixture of liberalism and illiberalism, and it is a pity that some of Carlyle's biographers, such as Froude, have been happiest when they thought they found him reverting to type—or their idea of his type. Perhaps, at his best Carlyle held to a religion of humanity.

Clearly, by the 1850s Carlyle's work was well recognized as a rallying-point for honest doubt. The troubled A. H. Clough was closely drawn to Carlyle, who did much to help him. The skeptical James Spedding introduced the young Froude to Carlyle when he was compelled to resign his Oxford fellowship for not accepting the Church's Thirty-Nine Articles, and his heretical *Nemesis of Faith* (1849) was publicly burned. When the unfortunate Thomas Wilson, a talented curate at Norwich, was forced from his appointment for not accepting the Thirty-Nine Articles, he turned to Carlyle for help. Wilson had already dedicated his booklet on *Catholicity Spiritual and Intellectual* (1850) to Carlyle as a genius "Hallowed by the Purest Life and Worthiest Work." In it Wilson had declared that he had found a stumbling block (among much else) in the impossibility of believing the Bible's account of Joshua's vengeful victory over the Amorites when "the sun stood still, and the moon stayed" (Josh. 10:13). Equally, it was a time when the lapsed cleric Frederic J. Foxtan used to call at Cheyne Row, before he accompanied Carlyle on their visit to Germany in 1858. Nor need one judge Carlyle only by the company he kept, for there is the witness of such later friends as David Davidson, who was desperate to reconvert both Jane and Carlyle to Christianity, but who only provoked Jane into giving up their friendship in exasperation and found a friendly Carlyle implacably indifferent. Davidson consoled himself by writing about it to their neighbor, the admiring but devout Henry Larkin, who was almost equally dismayed at Carlyle's refusal even to discuss his faith in Christianity.

Of course, Carlyle's beliefs partly changed throughout his life. As early as 1830 one could find him, for example, devoting himself to a

translation of Saint-Simon's *Nouveau Christianisme* (1825), at a time when he badly needed to be paid for writing. But it was far from showing any orthodox belief, especially perhaps any Calvinist inclination. It also taught that one should show love for one's fellow men and that salvation or progress depends on works not faith; and it was devoted to a concern for the poor. The lost work was never published. Yet it was one that Carlyle chose to write and raises the question of how far back one can trace his later skepticism.<sup>14</sup>

Yet to return at last to Auchtertool, its interest is that the atmosphere of its evocative setting, the kirk, the kirkyard, and their memorials to Jane Carlyle's nearest relatives, can set one thinking specifically about the actual past, which seems close enough to reach out and affect one even today. It makes the demand that if one is to know what the Carlyles meant, one should avoid generalization and look for verification in their actions and writing, the world they wrote about, and the actual beliefs they professed, challenged, and evaded.

#### WORKS CITED

<sup>14</sup>William Lecky recalled in his notebook conversations with Carlyle about religion,

I have spoken much to Carlyle on religious subjects & cannot at all concur with those who have believed that his opinions were undefined or cloudy. He saw I believe very clearly what could be known or if his vision of what lay beyond was not clearly defined it was because he believed that such definition lay beyond human faculties. On the subject of Xianity his views were emphatic—Educated by intensely religious parents, intended for the Church & at one time fully his early career as he told me was to the conviction that Christ was “most authentically human,” and that the miracles were not facts & were not acts of imposture, but were merely the . . . accretions & the X[ianity] was a noble teacher but nothing more. . . . He cared nothing for the compromises & half *wh* are so popular in our age, having come to the clear conviction that Christianity considered as a supposition or miraculous story & revelation was incredi-

- Campbell, Donald., ed. *Memorials of John Macleod Campbell, D. D.* 2 vols. London: Macmillan, 1877.
- Carlyle Letters. National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh.
- Carlyle, Jane Welsh. "Much ado About Nothing." *Jane Carlyle: Newly Selected Letters*. Ed. Kenneth J. Fielding and David R. Sorensen. Aldershot, Eng.: Ashgate, 2004. 146–51.
- Carlyle, Thomas. *The French Revolution*. 1837. *Works*. 30 vols. Ed. H. D. Traill. London: Chapman and Hall, 1896–99. Vols. 2–4.
- . *The Life of John Sterling*. 1851. *Works*. 30 vols. Ed. H. D. Traill. London: Chapman and Hall, 1896–99. Vol. 11.
- . *Reminiscences*. 1881. Ed. K. J. Fielding and Ian Campbell. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997.
- . *Sartor Resartus*. 1833–34. Ed. Rodger L. Tarr and Mark Engel. Berkeley: U of California P, 2000.
- Fielding, Kenneth J. "A Carlylean Elegy in Auchtertool Kirkyard." *Scottish Christianity in the Modern World*. Ed. Stewart J. Brown and George Newlands. Edinburgh: Clark, 2001. 37–51.
- . "Thackeray and 'The Great Master of Craigenputtoch': A New Review of *The Life of John Sterling*—And a New Understanding." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 27 (1999): 307–14.
- Forster Collection, National Library of Art, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
- Froude, James Anthony. "Calvinism. An Address to the Students of St. Andrews, March 17, 1871." *Short Stories on Great Subjects*. 4 vols. London: Longmans, Green, 1892–93. Vol. 2. 1–51.
- , ed. *Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle*. 3 vols. London: Longmans, 1883.
- , ed. *Reminiscences by Thomas Carlyle*. 2 vols. London: Longmans, 1881.
- . *Nemesis of Faith*. London: J. Chapman, 1849.
- . *Thomas Carlyle*. 4 vols. London: Longmans, Green, 1881, 1884.
- Gibbon, Edward. *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. 6 vols. London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1776–88.
- [Gilfallan, George]. "Life of John Sterling." *Eclectic Review*, N.S., 2 (December 1851): 717–29.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang, von. *Wilhem Meister*. 1795, 1821. Trans. Thomas Carlyle. 2 vols. London: Dent, 1930.

- Gray, Thomas. "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard." *Eighteenth Century Poetry and Prose*. 2nd ed. Ed. Louis I. Bredvold, Alan D. McKillop, and Lois Whitney. New York: Ronald P, 1956.
- Harrold, C. H. "The Nature of Carlyle's Calvinism." *Studies in Philology* 33 (1936): 475–86.
- Henderson, H. F. *Erskine of Linlathen: Selections and a Biography*. Edinburgh: Oliver, 1899.
- Ikeler, A. A. *Puritan Temper and Transcendental Faith: Carlyle's Literary Vision*. Columbus: The Ohio State UP, 1972.
- Lecky, William. Unpublished Notebook, Cat. 20228, Lecky Papers. Trinity College, Dublin.
- Newman, Francis. *Phases of Faith*. London: J. Chapman, 1850.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Twilight of the Idols, or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*. 1889. Ed. Duncan Large. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998.
- [Phillips, Samuel.] "The Life of John Sterling." *Times* 1 November 1851. 7.
- Saint-Simon, Henri. *Nouveau Christianisme*. Paris: Bossange, 1825.
- Shepherd, Richard Herne. *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Thomas Carlyle*. 2 vols. Ed. Charle Norris Williamson. London: W. H. Allen, 1881.
- Sloan, J. M. *The Carlyle Country*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1904.
- Stevenson, William. *The Kirk and Parish of Auchtertool*. Kirkcaldy: James Burt, 1909.
- [Thackeray, William Makepeace]. "Carlyle's Life of Sterling." *Leader* 2 (1851): 1066–67.
- Thackeray, William Makepeace. *Pendennis*. 2 vols. London: Bradbury and Evans, 1850.
- Tulloch, John. *Movements of Religious Thought in Britain in the Nineteenth Century*. 1885. Leicester: Leicester UP, 1971.
- Wilson, David Alec. *Carlyle to Threescore-and-Ten (1853–1865)*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1929.
- , and David Wilson MacArthur. *Carlyle in Old Age (1865–1881)*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1934.
- Wilson, Thomas. *Catholicity Spiritual and Intellectual*. London: John Chapman, 1850.