

# Resurrecting the Carlyles

Jane Mornement *enjoys a poke around the house of a long dead literary power couple*

Things were done with much more panache in the old days. In these smothered times, it's hard to imagine the liberation of casting off a Calvinist upbringing to gain an education at the University of Edinburgh and become a literary figure revered by the likes of Charles Dickens and Alfred Tennyson. But that's precisely what Thomas Carlyle did nearly 200 years ago. And what's unforgivable is that despite his prolific output and wealth of literary figures he influenced, he has slipped down the literary crack behind the sofa. But surely the pen-wielding man who the ultimate sourpuss in all of history – Queen Victoria – declared to be gloomy and dour is worthy of resurrection?

Born in 1795, Carlyle disappointed his stolidly religious family by refusing to become a preacher – and, to make matters worse, losing his faith in Christianity. But it was this dogmatic approach to life that made him an ideal spokesperson for several generations of Victorians, who were struggling to come to terms with the new scientific and political changes that were shaking up the traditional values on which they had come to rely.

In 1826, Carlyle married Jane Welsh, already a recognised raconteur and hostess who is one of history's most well-respected letter writers (Jane's friend Leslie Stephens told his daughter, Virginia Woolf: "Jane was the most wonderful letter writer in the English language."). Despite the marriage passing as unconsummated, it lasted happily until Jane's death in 1866. Carlyle considered Jane to be 'beautiful, bright and earnest', while she was mesmerised by his intellect, although she found him uncouth and clumsy. Jane made it clear that while she did not love her husband, she respected him, and became his greatest champion.

The childless couple moved from Scotland to London in 1834 and set up home at 5 (now 24) Cheyne Row in Chelsea. And as Carlyle's notoriety grew – following the publication of *Sartor Resartus* in 1833 and two volumes of *The French Revolution: A History* in 1837 – the Carlyles became the ultimate hosts of the Victorian era: with figures such as Dickens, Tennyson, Robert Browning, John Ruskin and George Eliot flooding to the then-unfashionable Chelsea to sit in the poky Queen Anne house and discuss the matters of the day in the first floor library, of which the walls were sprinkled with works of art. Frédéric Chopin even popped in and tinkled the ivories of the Carlyles' drawing room piano.

The house is remarkable in itself. Built close to the River Thames in 1708 on a street named after the politician Lord Cheyne, it is a typical terraced house in a modest area. The Carlyles lived there with just one maid and paid the £35 a year in rent. The house may have been considered compact by many, but Carlyle found it perfect: "On the whole a most massive, roomy, sufficient old house with places, for example, to hang, say, three dozen hats or cloaks," he enthused of his new home.

The five-floor house is now maintained by the National Trust (it re-opens after winter in March and is well worth a visit), and is a rare example of Victorian life. After Jane died in Hyde Park in 1866 – from an angina attack after the upset caused by her dog hurting its paw in the park – Carlyle continued to live at Cheyne Row with his niece Mary until his own death in the drawing room in 1881. Because the Carlyles had never owned the house, Mary took his possessions and returned to Scotland and the house in Cheyne Row was rented out for a further 14 years. However, the Carlyles' supporters lobbied to preserve the heritage of the property and in May 1895 the Carlyle's House Memorial Trust took ownership of the property, which they passed to the National Trust in 1936.

A visit to 24 Cheyne Row is breath-taking. As you enter the wood-panelled hallway and go into the drawing room you are immediately in the centre of the 1857 painting of the property's ground floor by Robert Tait, *A Chelsea Interior* – which not only hangs in the room above the very piano once tickled by Chopin, but

which has also been reproduced in virtually every book concerned with the lives of the Carlyles. The painting, which spans the living room, dining area and china closet at the back, and which features Carlyle and Jane in the rooms, highlights the fact that the rooms have been immaculately recreated exactly as they once were.



Robert Tait, *A Chelsea Interior*, 1857

One book that really captures the feel of life for the Carlyles is Thea Holme's *At Home With The Carlyles* (which features the Robert Tait painting on the endpapers). Although she wrote it in 1965 (the book has since been reprinted and is available through Persephone), former actress Thea lived at 24 Cheyne Row for several years with her husband, Stanford, who was curator of the property. *The Carlyles At Home* evokes everyday life from the day the Carlyles moved in until Jane's death.

A prior visit to 24 Cheyne Row is recommended so that you can visualise exactly where the scenarios take place. Thea was evidently infused by the spirit of Carlyle and Jane, having lived among their possessions and spending every day re-treading their old footsteps for several years.

Exploring the house, you see the original water pump in the kitchen; the tin bath where Carlyle washed beside the marble wash stand he gave Jane one birthday; the red bed where Jane was not only born but where she also slept; and the attic-room Carlyle had specially built to try and counteract his hatred of noise. And it's this room that is one of the most fascinating.

Remembering that in the Carlyles' era the streets would have been tramped by clip-clopping horses and carts, the neighbours would have owned crowing cockerels and played plonking pianos, it is difficult to imagine the noise levels that would have tormented Carlyle. Even now, with the property only a few minutes' walk from the bustling Kings Road, it seems an oasis of peace. But Carlyle was irate at the noise and Jane was frequently sent to shush the neighbours before Carlyle commissioned a soundproofed study in the attic. While largely unsuccessful – as noise still filtered through – it was here, at his sloping desk, that Carlyle spent 13 years working on his six-volume biography of Frederick the Great.

But Carlyle is arguably best known for his almost poetic tome, *The French Revolution*, of which he completed the first manuscript in 1835. But when Carlyle lent the only copy of the unpublished manuscript to John Stuart Mills, the manuscript was accidentally destroyed in the fire by Mills' maid. Carlyle spent the next year re-writing the missing volume and in 1837 the books were finally published. Dickens was reportedly so impressed that he read the books 500 times – which is either some impressive speed-reading or a bit of a tall tale. Carlyle said of his work, "Writing is a dreadful labour yet not so dreadful as idleness," and one wonders if this period was in his mind.

Carlyle gives every impression of having been a cantankerous fellow, even though his many portraits and photographs confirm him as a rather handsome and statuesque man. But he remained a respected figure nonetheless. Despite his reputation suffering a severe blow in the 1850s with the publication of the *Latter-Day Pamphlets* – which revealed his controversial views on slaves, the Irish and corporal punishment – that did not tally with the majority. It took until his later years before Carlyle's reputation as the Sage of Chelsea was restored. But clearly the pamphlets were not too destructive, as in 1874 prime minister Benjamin Disraeli offered Carlyle a baronetcy (which he refused), and Prussian president Otto von Bismarck offered him the Prussian Order of Merit (which he accepted).

Admittedly, many of Carlyle's works are not very accessible. But his influence is undisputed and if you are of a brave constitution they come highly recommended, especially his essays. Contrastingly, the many

volumes of Jane's letters are much more agreeable, and were largely edited by Carlyle himself after his wife's death. The couple wrote exhaustively to each other, and the reams of letters stand as testament to the more simplified pace of communication.

One of the most interesting parts of their life together was the 17 years from 1843 when Jane was tormented by the inclusion of Lady Harriet Ashburton in her husband's affections. Whether or not Carlyle really was having an affair with Lady Harriet remains unconfirmed. But Carlyle said of Jane's loyalty: "In her bright existence she had more sorrows than are common, but also a soft invincibility, a clearness of discernment, and a noble loyalty of heart, which are rare. For 40 years she was the true and ever-loving helpmate of her husband, and by act and word unweariedly forwarded him, as none else could, in all that he did and attempted." Carlyle showed great warmth for his wife when he presented her with a birthday present (the first present he had ever given her) on her 41st birthday. Jane was grieving for her mother at the time, who had previously been the one to give her a birthday present. And after her mother's death, Carlyle assumed the role for the rest of his wife's life.

After Carlyle's death in 1881 it was made possible for him to be intoned in Westminster Abbey – but in accordance with his wishes, he was buried at Ecclefechan churchyard, in Dumfries and Galloway, beside his family. Yet even though the Carlyles are long since buried six feet under, it seems careless to let their memories and their inexhaustible works die with them. When Adolf Hitler was holed up in his bunker, preparing to take his own life, the last words he read were ones written by Thomas Carlyle – but don't let that be Carlyle's epitaph. Although we sadly now live in an age when school children are allowed to submit coursework essays using text-speak abbreviations and when James Joyce has been knocked off the set-text list, it is going to be an uphill struggle to keep the names of important literary figures in the minds of young people ... but if we all fight the small fight, hopefully in future some open-minded reader will dip their hand down the back of the sofa and pull out an enticing volume by Carlyle or one of his ilk.