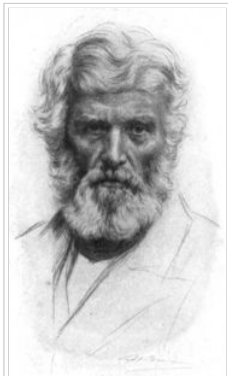


# Thomas Carlyle

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## **Thomas Carlyle**

(December 4, 1795 – February 5, 1881) was a Scottish essayist, satirist, and historian, whose work was hugely influential during the Victorian era. Coming from a strictly Calvinist family, Carlyle was expected by his parents to become a preacher. However, while at the University of Edinburgh, he lost his Christian faith; nevertheless, Calvinist values remained with him throughout his life. This combination of a



The most familiar view of Carlyle is as the 'bearded sage' with a penetrating gaze.

religious temperament with loss of faith in traditional Christianity made Carlyle's work appealing to many Victorians who were grappling with scientific and political changes that threatened the traditional social order.

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## **Early life and influences**

Carlyle was born in Ecclefechan, Dumfries and Galloway, and was educated at Annan Academy, Annan. He was powerfully influenced by his family's (and his nation's) strong Calvinism. After attending the University of Edinburgh, Carlyle became a mathematics teacher, first in Annan and then in Kirkcaldy, where Carlyle became close friends with the mystic Edward Irving. In 1819 - 1821, Carlyle went back to the University of Edinburgh, where he suffered an intense crisis of faith and conversion that would provide the material for *Sartor Resartus*. He also began reading deeply in German literature. Carlyle's thinking was heavily influenced by German Transcendentalism, in particular the work of Fichte. He established himself as an expert on German literature in a series of essays for *Fraser's Magazine*, and by translating German writers, notably Goethe. His home in residence for much of his life was Craigenputtock a beautiful house in Dumfriesshire, Scotland where he wrote much of his works. He often wrote about his life at Craigenputtock, "It is certain that for living and thinking in I have never since found in the world a place so favourable.... How blessed, might poor mortals be in the straitest circumstances if their wisdom and fidelity to heaven and to one another

were adequately great!"

## Writings

### Early writings

By 1821, Carlyle had abandoned the clergy as a career and focused on making a life as a writer. His first attempt at fiction was "Cruthers and Jonson", one of several abortive attempts at writing a novel. Following his work on a translation of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* he came to distrust the form of the realistic novel and so worked on developing a new form of fiction. In addition to his essays on German literature, he branched out into wider ranging commentary on modern culture in his influential essays *Signs of the Times* and *Characteristics*.

### *Sartor Resartus*

His first major work, *Sartor Resartus* (1832) was written at his home, Craigenputtock, and was intended to be a new kind of book: simultaneously factual and fictional, serious and satirical, speculative and historical. It

ironically commented on its own formal structure, while forcing the reader to confront the problem of where 'truth' is to be found. *Sartor Resartus* ("The Tailor Retailored") was first published periodically in Fraser's from 1833 to 1834. The



*A younger Carlyle*

text presents itself as an unnamed editor's attempt to introduce the British public to Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, a German philosopher of clothes, who is in fact a fictional creation of Carlyle's. The Editor is struck with admiration, but for the most part is confounded by Teufelsdröckh's outlandish philosophy, of which the Editor translates choice selections. To try to make sense of Teufelsdröckh's philosophy, the Editor tries to piece together a biography, but with limited success. Underneath the German philosopher's seemingly ridiculous

statements, there are mordant attacks on Utilitarianism and the commercialization of British society. The fragmentary biography of Teufelsdröckh that the Editor recovers from a chaotic mass of documents reveals the philosopher's spiritual journey. He develops a contempt for the corrupt condition of modern life. He contemplates the "Everlasting No" of refusal, comes to the "Centre of Indifference," and eventually embraces the "Everlasting Yea." This voyage from denial to disengagement to volition would later be described as part of the existentialist awakening.

Given the enigmatic nature of *Sartor Resartus* it is not surprising that it was first received with little success. Its popularity developed over the next few years and it was published in book form in Boston 1836 with a preface by Ralph Waldo Emerson, influencing the development of New England Transcendentalism. The first English edition followed in 1838.

### ***The French Revolution***

In 1834, Carlyle moved to London from Craigenputtock and began to move among

celebrated company. Within the United Kingdom Carlyle's success was assured by the publication of his three-volume work *The French Revolution, A History* in 1837. After the completed manuscript of the first volume was accidentally burned by the philosopher John Stuart Mill's maid, Carlyle wrote the second and third volumes before rewriting the first from scratch. The resulting work was filled with a passionate intensity, hitherto unknown in historical writing. In a politically charged Europe, filled with fears and hopes of revolution, Carlyle's account of the motivations and urges that inspired the events in France seemed powerfully relevant. Carlyle's style of writing emphasised this, continually stressing the immediacy of the action – often using the present tense. For Carlyle, chaotic events demanded what he called 'heroes' to take control over the competing forces erupting within society. While not denying the importance of economic and practical explanations for events, he saw these forces as essentially 'spiritual' in character – the hopes and aspirations of people that took the form of ideas, and were often ossified into ideologies ('formulas' or 'Isms', as he called them). In Carlyle's view only dynamic individuals could master events and direct these spiritual energies effectively. As soon as ideological 'formulas'

replaced heroic human action society became dehumanised.

### ***Past and Present***

This dehumanisation of society was a theme pursued in later books. In *Past and Present* (1843), Carlyle sounded a note of conservative scepticism that could later be seen in Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin: he compared the lives of the dissipated 19th century man and a medieval abbot. For Carlyle the monastic community was unified by human and spiritual values, while modern culture deified impersonal economic forces and abstract theories of human 'rights' and natural 'laws'. Communal values were collapsing into isolated individualism and ruthless laissez-faire Capitalism, justified by what he called the "dismal science" of economics.

### ***Heroes and Hero Worship***

These ideas were influential on the development of Socialism, but aspects of Carlyle's thinking in his later years also helped to form Fascism. Carlyle moved towards his later thinking during the 1840s, leading to a break with many old friends and allies



such as Mill and, to a lesser extent, Emerson. His belief in the importance of heroic leadership found form in his book "On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History", in which he compared different types of heroes. As one of the very few philosophers who witnessed the industrial revolution but still kept a transcendental non-materialistic view of the world, Thomas Carlyle made an attempt to draw a picture of the development of human intellect by using historical people as coordinates and accorded Prophet Muhammad a special place in the book under the chapter title "Hero as a Prophet". In his work, Carlyle declared his admiration with a passionate championship of Prophet Muhammad as a Hegelian agent of reform, insisting on his sincerity and commenting 'how one man single-handedly, could weld warring tribes and wandering Bedouins into a most powerful and civilized nation in less than two decades.' Observing Carlyle having such an open mind to the "other" puts him in a category of his own for trying to build bridges between the peoples of the West and the East as an early historical western representative of that dialogue. For Carlyle the hero was somewhat similar to Aristotle's "Magnanimous" man — a person who flourished in the fullest sense. However, for

Carlyle, unlike Aristotle, the world was filled with contradictions with which the hero had to deal. All heroes will be flawed. Their heroism lay in their creative energy in the face of these difficulties, not in their moral perfection. To sneer at such a person for their failings is the philosophy of those who seek comfort in the conventional. Carlyle called this 'valetism', from the expression 'no man is a hero to his valet'.

All these books were influential in their day, especially on writers such as Charles Dickens and John Ruskin. However, after the Revolutions of 1848 and political agitations in the United Kingdom, Carlyle published a collection of essays entitled "Latter-Day Pamphlets" (1850) in which he attacked democracy as an absurd social ideal, while equally condemning hereditary aristocratic leadership. The latter was deadening, the former nonsensical: as though truth could be discovered by toting up votes. Government should come from those most able. But how we were to recognise the ablest, and to follow their lead, was something Carlyle could not clearly say.

In later writings Carlyle sought to examine instances of heroic leadership in history. The "Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell" (1845)

presented a positive image of Cromwell: someone who attempted to weld order from the conflicting forces of reform in his own day. Carlyle sought to make Cromwell's words live in their own terms by quoting him directly, and then commenting on the significance of these words in the troubled context of the time. Again this was intended to make the 'past' 'present' to his readers.

### ***The Everlasting Yea and No***

*The Everlasting Yea* is Carlyle's name for the spirit of faith in God in an express attitude of clear, resolute, steady, and uncompromising antagonism to the *Everlasting No*, and the principle that there is no such thing as faith in God except in such antagonism against the spirit opposed to God.

*The Everlasting No* is Carlyle's name for the spirit of unbelief in God, especially as it manifested itself in his own, or rather *Teufelsdröckh's*, warfare against it; the spirit, which, as embodied in the Mephistopheles of Goethe, is for ever denying,—*der stets verneint*—the reality of the divine in the thoughts, the character, and the life of humanity, and has a malicious pleasure in scoffing at everything high and noble as hollow and void.

In *Sartor Resartus*, the narrator moves from the "Everlasting No" to the "Everlasting Yea," but only through "The Center of Indifference," which is a position not merely of agnosticism, but also of detachment. Only after reducing desires and certainty and aiming at a Buddha-like "indifference" can the narrator move toward an affirmation. In some ways, this is similar to the contemporary philosopher Soren Kierkegaard's "leap of faith" in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

In regards to the abovementioned "antagonism," one might note that William Blake famously wrote that "without contraries is no progression," and Carlyle's progress from the everlasting nay to the everlasting yea was not to be found in the "Centre of Indifference" (as he called it) but in Natural Supernaturalism, a Transcendental philosophy of the divine within the everyday.

### ***Worship of Silence and Sorrow***

Based on Goethe calling Christianity the "Worship of Sorrow", and "our highest religion, for the Son of Man", Carlyle adds, interpreting this, "there is no noble crown, well worn or even ill worn, but is

a crown of thorns".

The "Worship of Silence" is Carlyle's name for the sacred respect for restraint in speech till "thought has silently matured itself, ...to hold one's tongue till some meaning lie behind to set it wagging," a doctrine which many misunderstand, almost wilfully, it would seem; silence being to him the very womb out of which all great things are born.

### **Later work**

His last major work was the epic life of Frederick the Great (1858-1865). In this Carlyle tried to show how a heroic leader can forge a state, and help create a new moral culture for a nation. For Carlyle, Frederick epitomised the transition from the liberal Enlightenment ideals of the eighteenth century to a new



*Carlyle (left) depicted  
with Frederick Maurice*

modern culture of  
spiritual dynamism:  
embodied by

*in Ford Madox Brown's  
painting Work (1865)*

Germany, its thought  
and its polity. The book is most famous for its  
vivid portrayal of Frederick's battles, in which  
Carlyle communicated his vision of almost  
overwhelming chaos mastered by leadership of  
genius. However, the effort involved in the writing  
of the book took its toll on Carlyle, who became  
increasingly depressed, and subject to various  
probably psychosomatic ailments. Its mixed  
reception also contributed to Carlyle's decreased  
literary output.

Later writings were generally short essays, often  
indicating the hardening of Carlyle's political  
position. His notoriously racist essay "An  
Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question" [1]  
suggested that slavery should never have been  
abolished. It had kept order, and forced work from  
people who would otherwise have been lazy and  
feckless. This – and Carlyle's support for the  
repressive measures of Governor Edward Eyre in  
Jamaica – further alienated him from his old liberal  
allies. Eyre had been accused of brutal lynchings  
while suppressing a rebellion. Carlyle set up a  
committee to defend Eyre, while Mill organised for

his prosecution.

## Private life

Carlyle had a number of would-be romances before he married Jane Welsh. The most notable were with Margaret Gordon, a pupil of his friend Edward Irving. Even after he met Jane, he became enamoured of Kitty Kirkpatrick, the daughter of a British officer and an Indian princess. William Dalrymple, author of *White Mughals*, suggests that feelings were mutual, but social circumstances made the marriage impossible, as Carlyle was then poor. Both Margaret and Kitty have been suggested as the original of "Blumine", Teufelsdröch's beloved, in *Sartor Resartus*.<sup>[1]</sup> [2]

Carlyle married Jane Welsh in 1826, but the marriage was quite unhappy. The letters between Carlyle and his wife have been published, and they show that the couple had an affection for one another that was marred by frequent quarrels. There was a sexual incident that is the cause of much speculation by biographers. Whether this was a case of impotence or psychosexual neurosis, no one can be sure, but the couple was apparently celibate.

Carlyle became increasingly alienated from his wife. Although she had been an invalid for some time, her death (1866) came unexpectedly and plunged him into despair, during which he wrote his highly self-critical "Reminiscences of Jane Welsh Carlyle". This was published after his death by his biographer James Anthony Froude, who also made public his belief that the marriage was unconsummated. This frankness was unheard of in the usually respectful biographies of the period. Froude's views were attacked by Carlyle's family, especially his nephew, Alexander Carlyle. However, the biography in question was consistent with Carlyle's own conviction that the flaws of heroes should be openly discussed, without diminishing their achievements. Froude, who had been designated by Carlyle himself as his biographer-to-be, was acutely aware of this belief.

After Jane Carlyle's death in 1866, Thomas Carlyle partly retired from active society. He was appointed rector of the University of Edinburgh. *The Early Kings of Norway: Also an Essay on the Portraits of John Knox* appeared in 1875. His last years were spent at 33 Ampton Street London WC1 but he always wished to return to Craigenputtock.



Upon Carlyle's death on February 5, 1881 in London, it was made possible for his remains to be interred in Westminster Abbey, but his wish to be buried beside his parents in Ecclefechan was respected.

## **Influence**

Thomas Carlyle is notable both for his continuation of older traditions of the Tory satirists of the 18th century in England and for forging a new tradition of Victorian era criticism of progress. *Sartor Resartus* can be seen both as an extension of the chaotic, sceptical satires of Jonathan Swift and Laurence Sterne and as an annunciation of a new point of view on values. Finding the world hollow, Carlyle's misanthropist professor-narrator discovers a need for revolution of the spirit. In one sense, this resolution is in keeping with the Romantic era's belief in revolution, individualism, and passion, but in another sense it is a nihilistic and private solution to the problems of modern life that makes no gesture of outreach to a wider community.

Later British critics, such as Matthew Arnold,

would similarly denounce the mob and the naïve claims of progress, and others, such as John Ruskin, would reject the era's incessant move toward industrial production. However, few would follow Carlyle into a narrow and solitary resolution, and even those who would come to praise heroes would not be as remorseless for the weak.

Carlyle is also important for helping to introduce German Romantic literature to Britain. Although Samuel Taylor Coleridge had also been a proponent of Schiller, Carlyle's efforts on behalf of Schiller and Goethe would bear fruit.

Carlyle also made a favourable impression on some slaveholders in the U.S. South. His conservatism and criticisms of capitalism were enthusiastically repeated by those anxious to defend slavery as an alternative to capitalism, such as George Fitzhugh.

The reputation of Carlyle's early work remained high during the 19th century, but declined in the 20th century. His reputation in Germany was always high, because of his promotion of German thought and his biography of Frederick the Great. Friedrich Nietzsche, whose ideas are comparable

to Carlyle's in some respects, was dismissive of his moralism, calling him an "insipid muddlehead" in *Beyond Good and Evil* and regarded him as a thinker who failed to free himself from the very petty-mindedness he professed to condemn. Carlyle's distaste for democracy and his belief in charismatic leadership was unsurprisingly appealing to Adolf Hitler, who was reading Carlyle's biography of Frederick during his last days in 1945.

This association with fascism did Carlyle's reputation no good in the post-war years, but "Sartor Resartus" has recently been recognised once more as a unique masterpiece, anticipating many major philosophical and cultural developments, from Existentialism to Postmodernism. It has also been argued that his critique of ideological formulas in "The French Revolution" provides a good account of the ways in which revolutionary cultures turn into repressive dogmatisms. Essentially a Romantic thinker, Carlyle attempted to reconcile Romantic affirmations of feeling and freedom with respect for historical and political fact. Nevertheless, he was always more attracted to the idea of heroic struggle itself, than to any specific goal for which the struggle was being made.

## Works

- (1829) *Signs of the Times* The Victorian Web
- (1831) *Sartor Resartus* Project Gutenberg
- (1837) *The French Revolution: A History* Project Gutenberg
- (1841) *On Heroes and Hero Worship and the Heroic in History* Project Gutenberg
- (1843) *Past and Present* Project Gutenberg
- (1845) *Oliver Cromwell's letters and speeches, with elucidations*, ed. Thomas Carlyle, 3 vol. (1845, often reprinted). online version another online version
  - Morrill, John. "Textualizing and Contextualizing Cromwell." *Historical Journal* 1990 33(3): 629-639. ISSN 0018-246X Fulltext online at Jstor. Examines the Abbott and Carlyle edit
- (1849) *An Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question* Online text
- (1850) *Latter-Day Pamphlets* Project Gutenberg
- (1851) *The Life Of John Sterling* Project Gutenberg
- (1858) *History of Friedrich II of Prussia* Index to Project Gutenberg texts

## Definitions

Carlyle had quite a few unusual definitions at hand, which were collected by the Nuttall Encyclopedia. Some include:

### *Centre of Immensities*

an expression of Carlyle's to signify that wherever any one is, he is in touch with the whole universe of being, and is, if he knew it, as near the heart of it there as anywhere else he can be.

### *Eleutheromania*

A mania or frantic zeal for freedom.

### *Gigman*

Carlyle's name for a man who prides himself on, and pays all respect to, respectability. It is derived from a definition once given in a court of justice by a witness who, having described a person as respectable, was asked by the judge in the case what he meant by the word; "one that keeps a gig," was the answer. Carlyle also refers to "gigmanity" at large.

### *Hallowed Fire*

an expression of Carlyle's in definition of Christianity "at its rise and spread" as sacred, and kindling what was sacred and divine in

man's soul, and burning up all that was not.

*Mights And Rights*

the Carlyle doctrine that Rights are nothing till they have realised and established themselves as Mights; they *are* rights first only then.

*Pig-Philosophy*

the name given by Carlyle in his *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, in the one on Jesuitism, to the wide-spread philosophy of the time, which regarded the human being as a mere creature of appetite instead of a creature of God endowed with a soul, as having no nobler idea of well-being than the gratification of desire--that his only Heaven, and the reverse of it his Hell.

*Plugston of Undershot*

Carlyle's name for member of the manufacturing class

*Present Time*

defined by Carlyle as "the youngest born of Eternity, child and heir of all the past times, with their good and evil, and parent of all the future with new questions and significance," on the right or wrong understanding of which depend the issues of life or death to us all, the sphinx riddle given to all of us to rede as we would live and not die.

*Prinzenraub*

(the stealing of the princes), name given to an attempt, to satisfy a private grudge of his, on the part of Kunz von Kaufingen to carry off, on the night of the 7th July 1455, two Saxon princes from the castle of Altenburg, in which he was defeated by apprehension at the hands of a collier named Schmidt, through whom he was handed over to justice and beheaded. See Carlyle's account of this in his "Miscellanies."

*Printed Paper*

Carlyle's satirical name for the literature of France prior to the Revolution.

*Progress of the Species Magazines*

Carlyle's name for the literature of the day which does nothing to help the progress in question, but keeps idly boasting of the fact, taking all the credit to itself, like French Poet Jean de La Fontaine's fly on the axle of the careering chariot soliloquising, "What a dust I raise!"

*The Conflux of Eternities*

Carlyle's expressive phrase for *time*, as in every moment of it a centre in which all the forces to and from eternity meet and unite, so that by no past and no future can we be brought nearer to Eternity than where we at any moment of Time are; the Present Time, the youngest born of Eternity, being the

child and heir of all the Past times with their good and evil, and the parent of all the Future, the import of which (see Matt. xvi. 27) it is accordingly the first and most sacred duty of every successive age, and especially the leaders of it, to know and lay to heart as the only link by which Eternity lays hold of it and it of Eternity.

## Notes

1. ^ Simon Heffer, *Moral Desperado - A Life of Thomas Carlyle*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995, p.48
2. ^ <http://www.pakistanlink.com/Opinion/2006/Jan06>. "East Did Meet West - 3", by Dr. Rizwana Rahim

## See also

- Craigenputtock in Dumfriesshire
- Carlyle's House in Chelsea, London
- Great man theory
- Übermensch
- Muhammad
- Frederick II of Prussia
- Philosophy of history
- Max Weber's charismatic authority
- Annales School and New History



- Whig history

## External links

- Works by Thomas Carlyle at Project Gutenberg
- Project Gutenberg text of *Thomas Carlyle: Biography* by John Nichol
- Poems by Thomas Carlyle at PoetryFoundation.org
- The Life and Death of Thomas Carlyle @ *Ward's Book of Days*

Preceded by <b>William Gladstone</b>	<b>Lord Rector of Edinburgh University</b> 1865–1868	Succeeded by <b>The Lord Moncreiff</b>
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### Romanticism

18th century - 19th century

**Romantic music:** Alkan - Beethoven - Berlioz - Brahms - Chopin - Dvořák - Grieg - Liszt - Mahler - Mendelssohn - Puccini - Schubert - Schumann - Tchaikovsky - The Five - Verdi - Wagner

**Romantic poetry:** Blake - Burns - Byron - Coleridge - Goethe - Hölderlin - Hugo - Keats - Krasiński - Lamartine - Leopardi - Lermontov - Mickiewicz - Nerval - Novalis - Pushkin - Shelley -

Słowacki - Wordsworth

**Visual arts and architecture:** Briullov - Constable  
- Corot - Delacroix - Friedrich - Géricault - Gothic  
Revival architecture - Goya - Hudson River school -  
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nationalism

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