



Jane Welsh Carlyle and her Victorian World: A Story of Love, Work, Friendship and Marriage

Kathy Chamberlain

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Review by Janet Smith. To be published in *The Independent Scholar* Vol. 3 (2017, forthcoming)

Jane Welsh Carlyle, the most accomplished letter writer of the Victorian era, has hitherto been depicted in the historiography as either the emotionally abused or the manipulating, hypochondriac wife of the eminent Victorian writer and thinker Thomas Carlyle. Kathy Chamberlain's reassessment concentrates on letters, written by Jane and her contemporaries between 1843 and 1849, to reveal a more complex woman. Her aim is to discover the real Jane Carlyle, rather than the 'stereotypical images of this remarkable woman.' The book charts her development as a letter writer who broke free from her own social conservatism and domestic constraints through the irony, wit and subversion of her letter writing.

Chamberlain, a Professor of English at City University, New York, uses a literary technique to draw us into the Carlyle world and hook the reader, from the opening lines of the first chapter. She places the reader, in the present tense, outside the Carlyle's Chelsea home. We are looking from the noisy street into the living room where Jane Welsh Carlyle who is sitting on her sofa darning a pair of stockings. This literary device is the one for which Thomas Carlyle is credited, in the Oxford English Dictionary, as defining as 'visuality.' Jane also used visuality in her letters and referred to it as 'drama in one scene.' Chamberlain brings alive the sights and sounds of London and elsewhere through this placing of the reader amid the action in the same way as Jane brought them to life in her letters.

These letters were for public consumption. They were not private missals but were written to be passed around between friends and family and commented on and enjoyed. Chamberlain, in echoing Jane's style, recreates the tone of the original letters so that the reader physically feels that they are undertaking the noisy cold railway journey which Jane made to Hampshire and the amateur dramatic soiree hosted by Charles Dickens.

Having anchored the reader firmly in early Victorian London, Chamberlain chronologically examines the Welsh Carlyle letters and those with whom Jane corresponded over a seven-year period. These years have been chosen as the time of her 'richest experience and development.' The letters begin in 1842 as Jane reaches forty-two years of age. Chamberlain reminds us that the average life expectancy at the time was only forty-five so we get a sense of the urgency of Jane's search for intellectual achievement. Jane called the sense of identity she found through her writing 'I-ity.' Domestic duties often meant that Jane had to choose between 'the needle or the pen,' a dilemma which resonates still for many women of today.

The letters are full of domestic drama, of drunken servants, of the pain of her husband's emotional affair with Lady Harriet Baring, of journeys and stays in various households of the country. They depict the daily domestic life of a Victorian woman whose domestic chores included de-worming a horse-hair chair and nailing carpet to the floor. The emotional

abuse Jane endured throughout her marriage is a thread throughout as Thomas refused to give up his emotional attachment to another woman. The Carlyle's contemplated separation at one point. Chamberlain evidences from the letters that we cannot, however, simply regard Jane as a victim. The Carlyle's were in a co-dependent marriage and both husband and wife fretted when separated if the other withheld contact and did not write. Jane also had a weapon she used when she felt emotionally hurt; she would give Thomas the silent treatment and withdraw from contact.

The letters reveal, another Jane, beyond the domestic. She is seen to be a woman who mixed with and was valued for her intellect by those most eminent in Victorian society. Literary figures, including Dickens, Thackeray and Tennyson, counted her as their friend, in her own right, not just as the wife of Thomas Carlyle. Dickens sought her opinion on his writing. Men of politics, including the Italian revolutionary Mazzini and the Young Irelander Charles Gavan Duffy, sought out her company and these meetings are all recorded in her correspondence. Thomas Carlyle patronisingly called her letters 'bits, but they are anything but. The events leading up to the revolutionary year of 1848, which saw widespread political rebellion against the status quo in Europe, are recounted with understanding and immediacy and her letters provide an important historical record.

This momentous year saw a large Chartist demonstration in London, unrest in Ireland led by the Young Irelanders, and revolution in France and Italy. The protagonists are depicted by Jane in all their humanity, as individuals. She enjoyed the company of the young Irelanders who visited the Carlyles and formed a strong emotional bond with the leader of the Young Italy movement Giuseppe Mazzini. Mazzini was a regular visitor to the Carlyle's house during his exile in London and he and Jane grew emotionally close. Jane's letters document the hundred days during which Mazzini led the short-lived Italian Republic. Each day she eagerly awaited the newspaper to learn if he is alive or dead and each day she feared the worst.

This long overdue reassessment of Jane Welsh Carlyle rescues the finest letter writer in the English language from the saint or sinner stereotype. A particular strength is the thread running through Chamberlain's narrative of the complexity of the Carlyle marriage, which takes us beyond the emotional abused or emotionally abuser fixation. The book also cleverly uses literary technique, that of 'visuality' to echo in its own style that of the letters being examined, strengthening the reader's sense of Jane's prose style. This book successfully appeals both to Carlyle specialists and non-specialists alike. It is an entertaining read, deepening our understanding both of the subject and her Victorian world. It left this reviewer desperate to know what happened next to Jane Welsh Carlyle and to wish that the remaining years of this remarkable woman's life could be reassessed in like manner. I hope Chamberlain will continue the story through an examination of the later letters to give us a full assessment of the life of this extraordinary Victorian.

Janet Smith received a Ph.D. in women's and gender history from the London Metropolitan University, England in 2014. Her doctoral thesis was on "The Feminism and Political Radicalism of Helen Taylor in Victorian Britain and Ireland" and she has presented papers at conferences throughout Great Britain, published in the peer-reviewed journal *Women's History*, and contributed a chapter to a book on legal firsts for women.