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Jane Welsh Carlyle's Visit To Haddington

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Jane Welsh Carlyle's Visit Home

By Ann Burnett

Taking a few steps back and breaking into a run, Jane Welsh Carlyle launched herself at the kirkyard wall in Haddington, her childhood home. Despite the fact that this was 1849, she was 48 years old and the wall was seven feet high, she managed to climb over and jump down into St. Mary's graveyard. Straightening her bonnet and smoothing her long skirts, she set off to find her father's grave.

In her memoir, *Much Ado About Nothing*, written in that same year, she attributes her success in conquering the wall to training herself in climbing "at a more elastic age." A gentleman who knew her as a child later told her that, "I saw a stranger lady climb the wall, and I said to myself, that's Jeannie Welsh! No other woman would climb the wall instead of going in at the gate."

Jane Welsh Carlyle was born in Haddington in 1801, the only child of Dr. John Welsh and his wife, Grace. They lived in the centre of the town where their house still stands, though now it is a small cafe and restaurant, appropriately named Carlyle House in her honour. Her father encouraged her education and she went to the local school where she was

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Jane Welsh Carlyle by Samuel Laurence, circa 1852.

regarded as a bit of a tomboy. She secretly practiced walking across the parapet of the Nungate Bridge as the boys did, no mean feat, especially if the River Tyne was flowing high. Her best friends at school were Agnes and Janet Burns, nieces of the poet Robert Burns.

Her nurse, Betty Braid, described Jane as "a fleecin', dancin', light-heartit thing that naethin' would hae dauntit." In other words, she let nothing stand in the way of what she wanted to do.

In 1811, her father engaged the master of the mathematics school, Edward Irving, to tutor her at home for the next five years. By the age of 14, she had already written a play and a novel despite having frail health when she was younger. At 16, she went to Edinburgh for further education, so in 1821 when Irving introduced her to Thomas Carlyle, then an unknown writer, she was an extremely well-educated young woman.

Carlyle described her as having "a tall aquiline figure, of elegant carriage and air" and was immediately taken with her, especially when she listened intently as he described his literary ambitions. For her part, Jane was impressed by his learning, but found his

Borders accent and unsophisticated manners amusing.

It took five years before Jane accepted Thomas Carlyle's affections, by which time she had put her feelings for her former tutor aside. They married in 1826 and moved briefly to Edinburgh before taking up residence at Craigenputtoch Farm near Dumfries, which had been left to Jane by her father, who had died in 1819.

Carlyle worked diligently at his writing at Craigenputtoch, saying, "For living and thinking in, I have never since found in the world a place so favourable." However, Jane found it isolated and isolating. After six years they moved to Chelsea in southwest London, where Jane was much happier, and they entertained many of the celebrities of their time.

By 1834 Carlyle was still determined to achieve literary success, hoping his career would be furthered by their move to London. Although Jane was dogged by ill-health, perhaps partly of a psychosomatic nature (not unknown among educated and frustrated Victorian ladies), they led a busy social life. Charles Dickens, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Stuart Mill, Frederic Chopin, Alfred, Lord

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"It was very good of God to let Carlyle and Mrs. Carlyle marry one another, and so make only two people miserable and not four."
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Tennyson, Harriet Martineau, William Makepeace Thackeray and Edward Fitzgerald were just some of the acquaintances and friends they made in the city. Jane was renowned as a witty and entertaining hostess and by 1837, when Carlyle published his hugely successful *The French Revolution*, he became known as the "Sage of Chelsea" and his reputation grew.

Jane, too, developed a reputation as a prolific and entertaining letter writer. Kathy Chamberlain, in her biography of Jane, writes, "Jane's writing has a good deal in common with that other Jane, Jane Austen; both are sharply observant, humorous, ironic and morally astute." Jane was even thought at one time to be the author of *Jane Eyre*, which Charlotte Brontë released under the pseudonym Currer Bell.

In spite of these successes, their marriage was frequently punctuated by fierce arguments and stormy scenes. Jane was no wallflower, prepared to accept the Victorian ideal of a life of domesticity and pandering to her husband; she was far too feisty for that. The author Samuel Butler quipped, "It was very good of God to let Carlyle and Mrs.

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Jane Welsh Carlyle described this house in Haddington where she grew up as, "an opulent home from threshold to rooftere."

Jane Welsh Carlyle

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Carlyle marry one another, and so make only two people miserable and not four.”

They had no children and it was believed that the marriage had never been consummated, another burden that Jane carried throughout her life. Furthermore, Carlyle appeared to be paying rather too much attention to Lady Harriet Ashburton, another witty London hostess. Jane was jealous of her and the attention that her husband paid to her, but both she and her husband recognized her intelligence. A contemporary described Lady Ashburton as large, chinless and with an unusual nose, but Jane generously said she was “almost beautiful — simply through the intelligence and cordiality of her expression.”

For her own part, Jane had a close male friend in Giuseppe Mazzini, the Italian revolutionary in exile in London until 1848 when he was able to return to Italy and work on setting up a modern Italian state. Jane had considered leaving her husband over his behaviour towards Lady Ashburton, but Mazzini counselled otherwise. Their close friendship drifted apart, however, as Mazzini became more involved in planning his return to Italy and in

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making new acquaintances in the city.

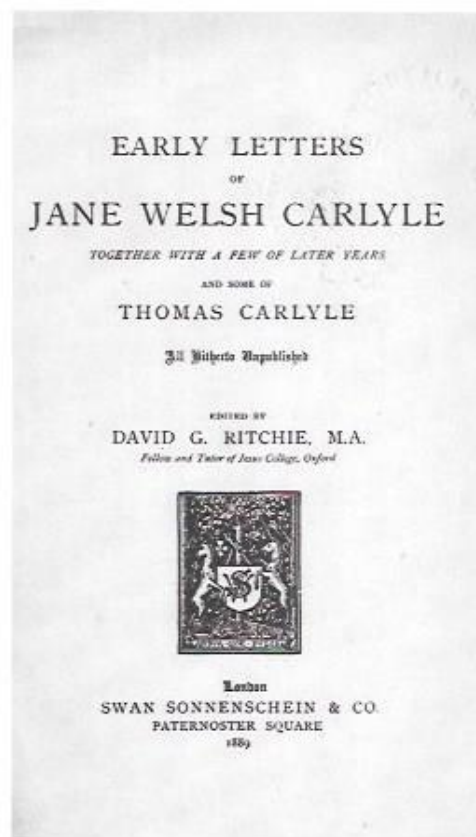
Throughout those years in London, Jane's star shone as brightly as her husband's. Though her letters were never published in her lifetime, the recipients read them aloud at soirées and her epistolary fame spread.

Neither of the Carlyles enjoyed good health. The emotional stresses of their relationship, combined with their frail constitutions, meant that

headaches, depression and “a bad nervous system,” as Jane described it, were common. In 1843, Thomas Carlyle turned down a dinner invitation from Charles Dickens by saying, “We are such a pair of poor sickly creatures here.”

In the summer of 1849, the Carlyles journeyed north into Scotland and Jane then traveled on her own to Haddington to revisit the scenes of her youth. To travel anywhere without the support of her husband or another person was a new experience for her. She arrived by train in Haddington and, since the station was some way out of the town, she took an omnibus to the George Inn. It still stands today in a commanding position looking down the High Street. (It is now a German restaurant and apartments).

From her room at the inn, she could see the pend, the entryway leading to her old house, but her



Carlyle's letters were treasured by her friends but only published for others to enjoy after her death.

first port of call was St. Mary's Parish Church where her family used to worship and where her father was buried. Her plan was to remain incognito and wander about the town as she pleased, but the person she engaged to let her into the churchyard was not long in surmising her identity.

He told her that he had lived next door to her and often looked after her when she was a child. He was to open the churchyard for her the next morning, but Jane arrived an hour early and made her entry over the wall. She cleaned the moss from her father's gravestone using his pearl-handled button-hook and wandered through the graveyard, noting how many of her family's friends were now also resident there.

She retraced the places of her youth: the school she went to, the walks she took with her friends, the shops in the High Street. Much had changed, and she was surprised at how quiet the town centre had become since the advent of the railway.

Another emotional visit was to Sunny Bank, the home of her god-mother, Jean Donaldson, and her sisters, Catherine and Jess. At first, Jane approached the back door, meaning simply to ascertain that the sisters were well. It was still early and Jane expected only the maids to be up. But to her surprise, the maid told her that the sisters had finished

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their breakfast and would she please make her entrance through the front door.

Jane waited in the drawing room. In her memoir, *Much Ado About Nothing*, she describes the meeting: "The door opened and showed me Miss Catherine changed into an old woman, and showed Miss Catherine me changed into one of — a certain

age! She remained at the door, motionless, speechless...but when I saw her eyes staring, I said, 'Oh Miss Catherine, don't be frightened at me!' and then she quite shrieked, 'Jeannie! Jeannie! Jeannie Welsh! My Jeannie! My Jeannie!'"

Everyone greeted her so warmly that it was with sadness that she left Haddington. Jane paid her bill at the George Inn, which she said was "the first inn bill I ever in my life contracted and paid on my own basis," and returned home.

In London, her health slowly deteriorated, and she died on April 21, 1866, while out in her carriage in

Hyde Park. She is buried in Haddington alongside her father. Thomas Carlyle erected a memorial stone to his wife inside St. Mary's Church. It reads:

"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 forty 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 of worthy that he did or attempted. She died at London, 21st April 1866, suddenly snatched away from him, and the light of his life as if gone out."

The wall that she climbed over still stands. ❧