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GEORGE ELIOT AND THE CARLYLES

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Marian Evans's essay on Thomas Carlyle in *The Leader* in October 1855 summed up the influence of the Sage of Chelsea on her own mind and that of the age: 'There is hardly a superior or active mind of this generation that has not been modified by Carlyle's writings.' Even if all his books were burnt a century hence, his influence would live on, since 'it would be only like cutting down an oak after its acorns have sown a forest'.

We do not know if Carlyle or his wife Jane read this essay. We do know—as Marian Evans did—that Carlyle was disdainful of modern novels, calling even the work of his friends Dickens and Thackeray mere 'rope-dancing'. Therefore, when Marian Evans first went into print as 'George Eliot' in 1858, with *Scenes of Clerical Life*, she did not send a complimentary copy to Carlyle, though she did to Dickens and Thackeray.

She did, however, have the clever idea of sending a copy to *Mrs* Carlyle, who was known as a keen reader of fiction. And she was rewarded by an ecstatic reply, which began:

Dear Sir,

I have to thank you for a surprise, a pleasure, and a—consolation (!) all in one Book! and I *do* thank you most sincerely. I cannot divine what inspired the good thought to send *me* your Book; since (if the name on the Title Page be your real name) it could not have been personal regard; there has never been a *George Eliot* among my friends or acquaintance. But neither I am sure could *you* divine the circumstances under which I should read the Book, and the particular benefit it should confer on me! I read it—at least the first volume—during one of the most (physically) wretched nights of my life; sitting up in bed, unable to get a wink of sleep for fever and sore throat; and it helped me through that dreary night, as well—better than the most sympathetic helpful friend watching at my bedside could have done! . . .

[*Scenes* is] a *human* book—written out of the heart of a live man, not merely out of the brain of an author—full of tenderness and pathos without a scrap of sentimentality, of sense without dogmatism, of earnestness without twaddle—a book that makes one *feel friends*, at once and for always, with the man or woman who wrote it!

On the question of gender, Jane kept an open mind; the author was most probably 'a man of middle age, with a wife from whom he has got those beautiful *feminine* touches in his book'. Her praise, bestowed unawares on the 'strong-minded woman'—Carlyle's phrase—who had set up home with the married G. H. Lewes, was delightful to the sensitive author, who had chosen to write under a pseudonym largely because of society's disapproval of Marian Evans. By her genuine response, Jane Carlyle ensured that she would be a recipient the following year of the next work of 'George Eliot', the publishing sensation of the age, *Adam Bede*.