

# Lives of Scottish Women

WOMEN AND SCOTTISH SOCIETY, 1800–1980



WILLIAM W. J. KNOX

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Edinburgh University Press

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*Again, for Patty*

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## *Contents*

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	iv
<i>List of Plates</i>	v
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	vi
Introduction	1
1 Jane Welsh Carlyle: Living with Genius (1)	10
2 Eliza Wigham: Religion, Radicalism and the Origins of the Women's Movement in Nineteenth-Century Scotland	33
3 Madeleine Smith: Sex and the Single Girl in Victorian Scotland	50
4 Sophia Jex-Blake: Women and Higher Education in Nineteenth-Century Scotland	70
5 Lady Frances Balfour: The Radical Aristocrat	98
6 Mary Mitchell Slessor: Serving God and Country	117
7 Elsie Maud Inglis: Scotland's Joan of Arc?	140
8 Katherine, Duchess of Atholl: The Red Duchess?	161
9 Willa Muir: Living with Genius (2)	182
10 Mary Brooksbank: Work, Poverty and Politics in Twentieth-Century Scotland	203
<i>Annotated Bibliography</i>	220
<i>Index</i>	227

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## *Abbreviations*

AASS	American Anti-Slavery Society
AFASS	American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society
BFASS	British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society
CPCW	Committee for the Protection of Coloured Women
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
CSCMEWE	Committee for Securing the Complete Medical Education of Women in Edinburgh
DWWG	Dundee Working Women's Guild
EIC	East India Company
ELES	Edinburgh Ladies Emancipation Society
ESMW	Edinburgh School of Medicine for Women
GES	Glasgow Emancipation Society
GFASS	Glasgow Female Anti-Slavery Society
GLES	Glasgow Ladies Emancipation Society
LEA	Ladies' Educational Associations
LSMW	London School of Medicine for Women
NCW	National Council for Women
NJCSR	National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief
NUWM	National Unemployed Workers Movement
NUWSS	National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies
ODC	Open Door Council
PCF	Communist Party of France
RAMC	Royal Army Medical Corps
RCM	Royal College of Music
SAMED	Scottish Association for the Medical Education of Women
SFWSS	Scottish Federation of Women's Suffrage Societies
SWH	Scottish Women's Hospitals
TAS	Total Abstinence Societies
TAS	Traveller's Aid Society
WFL	Women's Freedom League
WLUA	Women's Liberal Unionist Association
WSPU	Women's Social and Political Union
WWS	Women's Working Society
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association

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## *Introduction*



Writing biographies presents special challenges and creates both moral and methodological problems for the historian. These might be fairly easy to define theoretically, but in practice much more difficult to resolve. Fundamentally, the biographer must ask: what is the appropriate approach to adopt in trying to understand the actions and motivations of an individual? Do we try and recreate the mindset of an individual by absorbing ourselves in their writings, both public and private, or should we reject this as impossible as other people are unknowable? The celebrated biographer Philip Ziegler<sup>1</sup> has argued that ‘biographers must aim to embrace the totality of the subject’s life’, and urged them to never lose ‘their hunger for the minutiae of their subject’s everyday life’. Following Ziegler, one would want to know about minor details such as his taste in ties, or her perfume, whether they took a bath or a shower, whether they preferred claret to burgundy, and so on.<sup>2</sup> By absorbing ourselves in such trivial and seemingly inconsequential information the subject might somehow reveal their true self, or at least provide insights into themselves and their actions that are unattainable from documentary texts. But if we can add to our knowledge of the subject and become more sensitive to the nuances of their character through interrogating the mundane, how far should we go in empathising with them? The earliest biographies were adventures in hagiography in the sense that they sought to emphasise the specialness of a king or a saint vis-à-vis the rest of society.<sup>3</sup> However, in spite of the greater objectivity of biographical writing, the temptation to write hagiography remains as the more one comes to know an individual the greater the tendency towards empathy and that leads, if overdone, to inevitable distortions and unreasonable justifications of conduct. If the subject is still alive then the possibility of collusion between subject and biographer is, of course, all the greater, even if the latter attempts to hold an objective position. An example of this might be Robert Skidelsky’s much criticised biography of Oswald Mosley.<sup>4</sup> Written in 1975, the book powerfully demonstrated the dangers of charisma in overriding a talented historian’s judgment and training. As a

result, Skidelsky's biography failed the most basic historical tests of objectivity and record. Skidelsky's shortcomings raised another important issue for biographers. Where is the line to be drawn between fact and fiction? When does the historian's imagination come into play, especially when documentation produces silences rather than answers? Myths become reality, and conversely reality can assume mythical status. Robert the Bruce and the Spider, Isaac Newton and the Apple, might be a couple of the best known examples of this kind of thing, but there are obviously many, many more. Even in this volume we encounter the juxtaposition of myth and reality. Every biographer has told the same story of Mary Slessor's conversion to Christ when as a child an old lady threatened her with the burning fires of hell. A nice story and one that Slessor colluded in. But in the annals of Presbyterian history her experience could be reproduced ad nauseam since it was part of the conversion/repentance basis of Presbyterianism: St Paul on the Road to Damascus. The reality was that on her mother's side she was from a devoutly religious family.

These are just some of the major issues that all historians face when writing biography. I have deliberately eschewed an internal approach in favour of an external one as I do not know any of my subjects. I have never seen them lose their tempers, shed tears, laugh, flirt; I have never observed the inflections and nuances of their speech, the smiles and smirks and other non-textual signs that alert us to the hidden self. They only exist for me in their writings, letters and diaries, their works and other peoples' observations and interpretations of them. This echoes Bernard Crick, in his critically acclaimed study of George Orwell, who argued that all the biographer can do with their subjects is to 'observe their behaviour in a variety of different situations and through different perspectives'.<sup>5</sup> Thus, my approach is one that is empathetic, but critical; one that seeks to understand actions and motivations but does not claim privileged or special knowledge. Essentially, these are essays in interpretation, and bearing in mind the limits of space and time, could be nothing else since the main objective was to explore the dynamic relationship between individual women and the patriarchal society they inhabited in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Scotland.

The subjects in this volume were not chosen at random, indeed, inclusion was the result of a fairly long process of reflection and debate on the nature of female subordination over the last 200 years or so. A major influence in determining my approach was Theodore Zeldin's work on nineteenth-century France in which he uses the experiences of specific individuals to personalise the historical experience of the French people

at important moments in their history.<sup>6</sup> Another influence was Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918). Although a much flawed analysis of nineteenth-century British history, Strachey's book remains one of the most influential and pioneering works into exploring the possibilities of group biography as a way of summing up an age or epoch. Under these influences, the intention was to choose a woman whose story or experience, although interesting and provoking in its own right, also provided insights into wider issues facing women in Scotland in the course of the last 200 years or so. For example, the Duchess of Atholl, Scotland's first female MP, and the first woman to hold Cabinet rank in a Conservative government, was selected because her political experiences, interesting and irritating in equal measure, opened the way to a discussion of women and representative participatory politics. Elsie Inglis, the Edinburgh doctor and war hero, was chosen not only because her story was little short of amazing in terms of courage, but because it allowed for some exploration of the theme of women and militarism. The personal is therefore hugely important in this set of studies, but only insofar as it establishes a basis for a wider discourse on the nature of women's private and public lives in this period.

Of course, such an approach is open to criticism regarding the exclusivity of the selection process. Were these women not exceptional and therefore as such unrepresentative of the broad mass of Scottish women and their lives? Why these ten, and not others, is another obvious and pertinent question. Firstly, the intention was to move away from what might be termed the 'usual suspects' of female biography in Scotland. Thus a conscious decision was made not to include Mary Queen of Scots, Flora MacDonald, Saint/Queen Margaret, indeed, any woman who had lived before 1800. This is not to say that their stories are not important or relevant, but it was felt that a new set of female actors, whose activities, dilemmas and problems were more immediately recognisable to women in contemporary Scotland, was needed. And although many of the chosen subjects will be known in academic circles, to the general public they are obscure figures, but a number of them, such as Sophia Jex-Blake, campaigner for medical education for women, are deserving of more popular recognition; indeed, why do we know more about Florence Nightingale than Jex-Blake? Simple: Florence did not question existing constructions of femininity, while Sophia posed a fundamental challenge to what was and was not possible for women in the second half of the nineteenth century. Her activities opened the doors of Scottish and British universities to succeeding generations of women. Secondly, all these women in some way shaped the development of modern Scotland

in both direct and indirect ways, and in doing so affected the lives of other women. Whether it was Jex-Blake and university education, or Lady Frances Balfour, daughter of the Duke and Duchess of Argyll, and the campaign to win the vote for all women, or Eliza Wigham's championship of women's rights and anti-slavery in the first half of the nineteenth century, Scottish and indeed British society was irrevocably changed through their activities.

However, not all the women were political activists; some changed perceptions through their writings and others through notoriety. Jane Welsh Carlyle sat at home most of the time writing letters that articulated the simmering discontent of middle-class women with domesticity and the growing desire for a life less ordinary and more socially meaningful. Jane's death in 1866 marked the transitional point in which private emotions became the stimulus for public protest by middle-class women over a whole range of issues, from education to the franchise. Similarly, the writer Willa Muir analysed the contemporary position of women in Scotland and the history of subordination in a series of influential novels and shorter polemical pieces of writing. Madeleine Smith, on the other hand, by being charged and tried for the murder of her French lover, whom she had sex with outside of marriage, redefined the feminine in bourgeois society. Her trial and eventual acquittal posed serious questions for traditional views concerning female sexuality and the innate nurturing quality of women. Generally, then, inclusion was based on importance, or the way an individual's life, although less celebrated, highlighted an important aspect of women's lives. Mary Brooksbank, Dundee weaver and poet, is an obscure figure outside of her native city, but the fact that she was one of the first women to join the British Communist Party made her an interesting subject as it opened up the wider issue of women's relationship to the Left in Britain.

Of course, other women could have been chosen in their place, for example, Isabella Bird,<sup>7</sup> the renowned Victorian traveller, who had interesting things to say on the British Empire and women's rights in Victorian Scotland, might have been included, as might Jane Smeal, anti-slavery and women's rights campaigner. There is also no inclusion of women scientists, but then there were very few before 1950. The most important – Mary Somerville – has been comprehensively covered in a number of impressive biographies.<sup>8</sup>

The issue of inclusion was partially resolved by another important consideration: the existence of sources, that is, diaries, letters, autobiographies, and so on, which by reading provided a basis to challenge existing historiography of such iconic figures as Jane Welsh Carlyle, Mary

Slessor and Sophia Jex-Blake. Although it was not possible to read all the sources relating to a subject, and in the case of Jane Welsh Carlyle impossible, since there are 3,000 letters, most of the existing material was researched. The only exception was Eliza Wigham, of whom there exists only the flimsiest of sources on which to construct her story, but given the size of her contribution to the development of the women's movement in Scotland it was felt appropriate to include her in the volume. The sources themselves are rather problematic and as such have to be carefully handled. In a number of cases a great deal of the primary material has been destroyed on the instructions of the subject. Margaret Todd, the biographer of Sophia Jex-Blake, was permitted access to her private papers on the condition that she would burn them once the biography had been written. All biographies since of Jex-Blake have relied on the carefully selected fragments of correspondence and diary extracts reproduced in Todd's volume. Mary Slessor also ordered all her personal papers to be destroyed on her death as she was afraid that they subsequently might have been invested with some magical or mystical properties. What exists today of Slessor's voluminous correspondence are the letters written mainly in the early 1900s to her friend and confidante District Commissioner Charles Partridge. The importance of the destruction of texts is that it leaves us with a view of the subject that has been conditioned by them. In some ways, and in spite of our adherence to objectivity, we end up colluding with the dead or their agents in conveying a set of images of them that they have actively influenced and one which they even may have approved of. However, even where the primary sources are abundant we may still fall into the trap of collusion. We know Jane Welsh Carlyle mainly through her letters and journals, although other witnesses' observations also provide clues to her character and to her relationship with her husband, Thomas. The purpose of her correspondence was to construct or organise her life, to make it not only intelligible, but bearable. In doing so Jane entertains, informs and impresses the reader and draws them, and ultimately us, into a collusive interpretation with her of her life.<sup>9</sup> The ways in which she defined herself and her marriage succeeded in convincing Thomas, and later biographers, of his guilt, of his wasting of her talent in the service of his career. Jane leaves us an overwhelming image of self-sacrifice and, as a result, we are compelled to share her sense of frustration at being recognised as only the helpmate of genius rather than a talent in her own right.

The other important source for the biographer is a subject's autobiography. These are normally written as a form of self-justification for one's past deeds and decisions, but those written in the confessional mode can

represent an individual's quest for self-knowledge, even if this goal is ultimately unattainable. Until recently this form of literature was dismissed by literary critics as a simplistic narrative device mainly associated with women's literature, which, as Valerie Baisnee points out, had been considered in some quarters as a 'giant autobiographical act', implying that women could only write about their own lives and little else.<sup>10</sup> The last twenty years or so has witnessed a seismic shift in literary criticism and autobiography has become fashionable as a genre, indeed, an individual writing their story at a given time is now considered to have been writing 'about the whole of humanity of that period'.<sup>11</sup> Only four of the women in this volume – Frances Balfour, Katherine Atholl, Willa Muir and Mary Brooksbank – penned an autobiography with varying degrees of success. Balfour's and Atholl's stories straddle the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, while Brooksbank and Muir write mainly about the twentieth century. Only Muir's autobiography can be considered introspective, the others fail to address the dramas and emotional crises of their private lives and concentrate instead on their public persona, the one that was concerned with political struggle and important causes. Thus, Balfour fails to mention her husband's descent into alcoholism, Atholl ignores her husband's serial adultery, and Brooksbank also tells us little about her married life except that she was happy. Pain is excised in these stories, and the desire not to offend the living or the memory of the dead is very evident. Muir stands out in this respect as she confronts the difficulties in her relationship with her husband, Edwin, and addresses her frustrations with living with genius. But as honest and soul-bearing as she is in this respect, her account of her relationship with her son is a dishonest and somewhat weak attempt at self-justification. Thus, it is doubtful if autobiography, the telling of an individual's story, can somehow speak for the experience of humanity at a particular period as there exists within the pages too many inconsistencies, too many excisions and unreliable memories. But what autobiography does provide is a basis for examining the intersections between public and private experience, particularly if the individual is less well-known. In these cases we acquire fragments of and glimpses into 'ordinary life, private drama, personal success and failure, sometimes heroism, sometimes the underside of fame'.<sup>12</sup>

It is clear that all primary sources that shape the way we view a subject and his or her life contain unwary traps for the naive as well as the experienced writer. The modern trend towards psychoanalytical approaches to biography has created even more unwitting snares for the contemporary biographer. It also demonstrates the quite impossible task of finding

the true self in one's subject: something that reinforces Bernard Crick's point regarding observation and perspective, and underscores Lytton Strachey's interpretative approach, of filtering out the mass of indigestible minutiae concerning a subject's life. As he says, in the preface to *Eminent Victorians*, by moving away from what might be termed worthy standard biographical approaches to a life, it becomes possible to attack the subject 'in unexpected places', shooting 'a sudden and revealing searchlight into obscure recesses, hitherto un-divined'.

However, most of what has been written from a theoretical perspective on the art and nature of biography concerns individual subjects, while this volume strays into less well-explored literary/historical territory – group biography. The subjects, as explained above, were chosen to illustrate some aspect of women's experiences over the last two centuries. The first chapter examines the life of Jane Welsh Carlyle and the domestic lives of middle-class women in the early to mid Victorian period, as well as detailing what it was like to play second fiddle to genius. The second chapter explores, through Eliza Wigham's life, the public lives of women in this period and chronicles the origins and development of the women's movement in Scotland. Chapter 3 deals with Victorian ideas on female sexuality and the challenge to these strongly held beliefs posed by the revelations concerning unmarried sex during the trial of the Glasgow femme fatale, Madeleine Smith, for murder in 1857. While Smith and Welsh Carlyle challenged gender stereotypes in highly personal ways, other women after 1860 confronted them more openly. One of the main arenas of conflict was education and Chapter 4 details the heroic struggle of Sophia Jex-Blake to gain acceptance to the medical faculty of the University of Edinburgh and open the doors of the institutions of higher learning to all women. Education, of course, was only one part of the strategy of equality, the other was the franchise. Chapter 5 focuses on the role of Lady Frances Balfour in the general agitation of women in Britain for the franchise, while Chapter 8 looks at the life of Katherine Ramsay, Duchess of Atholl, a lifelong opponent of votes for women, who ironically became Scotland's first female MP. Both chapters include reflections on women and politics in Scotland in the post-1918 era. Chapter 7 explores a complex set of moral issues concerning the relationship between women and warfare. Elsie Inglis' decision to establish field hospitals at the front in France and Serbia during the First World War posed important questions as to what constituted the feminine and paved the way for the use of women as combatants in warfare. While these women were pursuing equality in the world of politics, Mary Slessor, the subject of Chapter 6, had already achieved fame and real

power in Africa. Her rise from humble weaver to become the first female vice-consul in the British Empire not only raises issues regarding the part played by women in the imperial project, but also shows how women could exploit loopholes in the ideology of patriarchy to empower themselves. Indeed, like the women political activists, Slessor's experience explodes the theory of separate spheres, in which women inhabit the private while men the public. The penultimate chapter deals with the inconsistencies between feminism as an ideology and its practitioners, feminists. Willa Muir wrote some interesting studies on the place of women in Scottish society and more generally on the history of female subordination,<sup>13</sup> and attacked existing institutions such as marriage and the church for the role they played in the subordination of women, but in her own life she willingly accepted a part that reduced her to one of service to genius. The final chapter looks at the life of Mary Brooksbank and of working-class women living and working within a hard and unforgiving environment. These experiences radicalised Mary, who joined the Communist Party, but she was part of a very small band, on the whole, and in spite of the progressive nature of its policies, the Left has failed to mobilise women in Britain in large numbers.

Mary's experiences highlight some of the dissimilarities between the women chosen for inclusion in this volume. One of the problems in writing about women is that we, as K. D. Reynolds points out, see them only in terms of their gender, while men are free 'to construct themselves in line with (or to acquire their identity) from class, religion, race or any other ongoing concept of their choice'.<sup>14</sup> Outside of the obvious fact that they are both female, there is very little that connects the Duchess of Atholl with Mary Brooksbank. One lived a life of luxury and privilege, the other one of poverty and hardship. Moreover, the Duchess exercised a degree of power that involved the subordination of men of inferior social classes, something which was denied to Mary. But however wide the disparities of wealth and power, they both experienced subordination in socio-economic and political structures that were predicated on male dominance, albeit in different forms. Emotionally, the importance of the father-figure in these women's lives cannot be overstressed. Welsh Carlyle wore black for seven years after her father's death; Brooksbank's, Inglis' and Wigham's social views were heavily influenced by their respective fathers; Smith went as far as murder to cover up her liaison with her French lover so as not to offend her father; and Willa Muir was drawn to Edwin as he represented a father-figure she never knew. The impact was, however, not always positive. Mary Slessor's father was drunken and abusive and his behaviour indelibly influenced her views of men and alcohol. Only those of the upper

classes were more influenced by their mothers than their fathers: a phenomenon that was perhaps the result of the distant, shadowy role men in this social class played in their children's lives. Frances Balfour's mother influenced her from an early age into taking an interest in social questions and this she carried with her into adulthood.

Individually, these subjects all represent some aspect of women's lives in Scotland over the last two centuries. The disparities between them make it difficult to argue that they collectively make up the totality of the female experience, or that together they form the basis for the construction of a theoretical model of subordination. What they do is offer a window and hopefully some light into the history of women's struggle in this country for equal rights with men, and the different routes taken to achieve this. The pursuit of equality and the outstanding women who undertook it thus becomes the main theme of this volume. If these women find the recognition they undoubtedly deserve then the effort will be repaid many times over.

## NOTES

1. Ziegler has written biographies on Harold Wilson, Lord Mountbatten and Edward VIII.
2. P. Ziegler, 'Biography: the Narrative', in I. Donaldson et al. (eds), *Shaping Lives: Reflections on Biography* (Canberra, 1992), pp. 225–6.
3. J. L. Clifford, 'Introduction', in J. L. Clifford (ed.), *Biography as an Art: Selected Criticism 1560–1960* (Oxford, 1962), p. x.
4. R. Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley* (1975).
5. B. Crick, *George Orwell: a Life* (London, 1980).
6. T. Zeldin, *France 1848–1945: Politics and Anger* (Oxford, 1979); *France 1848–1945: Intellect and Pride* (Oxford, 1980).
7. O. Checkland, *Isabella Bird and 'Woman's Right'* (Edinburgh, 1996).
8. C. E. Patterson, *Mary Somerville and the Cultivation of Science 1815–40* (1983); K. A. Neeley, *Mary Somerville: Science, Illumination and the Female Mind* (Cambridge, 2001).
9. A. Christianson, 'Rewriting herself: Jane Welsh Carlyle's letters', *Scotlands*, 2 (1994), p. 52.
10. V. Baisnee, *Gendered Resistance: the Autobiographies of Simone de Beauvoir, Maya Angelou, Janet Frame and Marguerite Duras* (Amsterdam, 1997), p. 4.
11. Baisnee, *Gendered Resistance*, p. 5.
12. J. Strouse, 'Semiprivate lives', in D. Aaron (ed.), *Studies in Biography* (Cambridge, MA, 1978), p. 124.
13. W. Muir, *Women: an Inquiry* (London, 1925).
14. K. D. Reynolds, *Aristocratic Women and Political Society in Victorian Britain* (Oxford, 1998), p. 4.

*Jane Welsh Carlyle: Living with Genius (1)*

Of the women discussed in this volume, Jane Welsh Carlyle, is perhaps the most private and the least public. Her world revolved round the home, husband, and the minutiae of everyday life, rather than the dramatic arenas of political struggle and women's rights. Yet, in spite of this, more publications have been devoted to discussing her life than any of the others. Indeed, without fear of exaggeration, it can be said that rarely has a woman and her marriage come under such close scrutiny as hers. But, then, Jane was married to a genius – Thomas Carlyle. He was a historian and philosopher, one of the intellectual colossuses of nineteenth-century Britain. At first glance, compared with Thomas, Jane appears inconsequential: the woman behind the great man. Like other women who have stood in her shoes, she was seen as sacrificing her life and talent to further the career of her husband. While he wrote the weighty tomes on history and society, she cleaned and cooked, sewed and swept, ran the house and made his life as comfortable as she could. Jane it seems was there simply to service genius. The truth, however, is much more than this. Jane was not simply a footnote in the history of a great man; in fact, she was one of the great letter-writers of the nineteenth century and even a fleeting glance at her correspondence with family and friends shows not only her literary merit, but establishes her as an exceptionally witty and insightful commentator on both domestic and public matters. Indeed, her letters, of which over 3,000 have survived, provide an insight into the life of middle-class women at this time that is far removed from the Victorian stereotype of the 'angel in the house'. They allow us a unique insight into bourgeois marriage in the early to middle decades of the nineteenth century and convey, among other things, the frustration of gifted women with no outlet for their talents outside of home, church and philanthropy, as well as the emotional and psychological problems of living with such a troubled and tortured figure as Thomas undoubtedly was. While the domestic side of her life has generally been of less interest to biographers, from the highly controversial original by Anthony Froude through to the most recent award-winning publication by Rosemary Ashton,<sup>1</sup> this

exceptional chronicle of nineteenth-century domesticity has rightly fascinated social historians. Jane's letters provide the basis for a historical interrogation of the intimate, inner details of bourgeois society as represented in gender relationships in the home and in marriage. Using this approach, the major questions concerning the Carlyles' marriage which have long been the basis of biography – for example, was the marriage consummated; who was to blame for Jane's unhappiness, herself or Thomas; would Jane have realised her talent as a writer if he had not overshadowed her – can be placed within the broader context of gender relationships rather than simply as a means to understand the psychodrama of two ill-suited, but ultimately dependent, lovers. The other advantage of adopting a gendered approach is that it allows for a more detached analysis of the Carlyles, one that avoids the kind of partisanship that has led to the construction of a two-dimensional Thomas, who is either depicted as an insensitive and overbearing monster or, alternatively, as a devoted husband, who had the misfortune to be married to Jane, an attention-seeking hypochondriac.

Regardless of what view one takes of the Carlyles and their marital difficulties, it seems rather unlikely given her upbringing that Jane would have found herself later married to the socially awkward and gloom-prone Carlyle, although there is much to suggest that her childhood would have a profound affect on her relationships with the men in her life. She was born in Haddington in 1801, the only child of John, physician, and Grace Welsh. Her childhood was an extremely happy one, and Jane, or 'Jeannie' as she was called, enjoyed and revelled in the attention her doting father paid her. Writing some years after her death, Carlyle remarked: 'Of her father she always spoke with reverence: he was the only person who had any real influence over her.'<sup>2</sup> John Welsh was in many ways determined that his daughter should be the son he never had, and because of this he gave in to practically all her demands. From an early age she showed a talent for Latin and was reading Virgil when only nine.<sup>3</sup> When she asked to be allowed to study Latin more academically, a very unusual step for a girl to take in early nineteenth-century Scotland as it was a subject reserved for male pupils who intended to go on to university, Jane was allowed to attend school in Haddington. She proved to be a very precocious girl who had a love of learning and life, indeed, so great was her thirst for study that she used to tie a weight at bedtime to her ankle so that she would not oversleep. It was not unknown for Jane to be in school at the earliest hour. She recalled herself being found in class by her teacher, James Brown, asleep at seven in the morning 'after two hours of hard study'.<sup>4</sup> By the age of fourteen Jane had completed a

tragedy and had written some verse. Although far too flirtatious, talented and sharp for a provincial town, she proved very popular with the young men and was referred to as 'the flower of Haddington'<sup>5</sup>, but privately she thought the place 'the dimmest, dearest spot . . . in the Creator's universe'.<sup>6</sup> Of her flirtatious nature, Carlyle wrote: 'If flirting were a capital crime, she would have been in danger of being hanged many times over.'<sup>7</sup>

When she was ten years old Jane made the acquaintance of Edward Irving, a mathematics teacher at Haddington, who was hired at the age of eighteen by John Welsh as a tutor for her. The hours were between 6 a.m. and 8 a.m. Irving was handsome and flamboyant and Jane developed an infatuation for him that later blossomed into love. She sent him a lock of hair, something that she did not privilege any other admirer, including Carlyle, with.<sup>8</sup> However, Irving moved to Kirkcaldy in the summer of 1812 for a better-paid teaching position; one that also allowed him to devote time to his theological studies in Edinburgh. While working in Kirkcaldy he became engaged to the daughter of the local minister, Isabella Martin, in 1816, but, in spite of this, he continued to pay calls on Jane, who by this time was attending Miss Hall's finishing school in Edinburgh and residing with her cousin. Jane saw a future for herself as Irving's wife and there is little doubt that he encouraged her feelings. But this ambition was thwarted by the fact that Isabella's parents felt the engagement, although only verbally contracted, was both legally and morally binding. As a result Irving, who by now had decided on a career in the church, was left with the choice of work or love. He chose his career and in 1820 he married Isabella.

This was a double blow to Jane as a year before John Welsh had died of typhoid contracted from a patient he had been treating. Jane found it extremely hard to come to terms with the loss of her father as he had meant so much more to her than anyone else, including her mother. As a mark of respect she wore black until the day of her wedding in 1826. Carlyle said that so affected was Jane by the death of her father that 'to the end of her life, his title even to me was "He" and "Him" [and] not above twice or thrice, quite late in years, did she ever mention (and then in what sweet slow tone!) "my Father"'.<sup>9</sup> By referring to her father almost continuously in the third person, Jane constructed an emotional barrier between herself and the event, which may have in the short term softened the blow of the tragedy, but in the long term it prevented her from coming to terms with the reality of his death. She vowed two purposes for the life ahead: 'to be a comfort to my poor mother, & to make myself worthy of being reunited to my adored father'.<sup>10</sup> However, her construction of masculinity, based on an adoring and loving father,

would make it very difficult for any man, far less the self-absorbed and increasingly trying Carlyle, to live up to her expectations.

In spite of the end of Jane's relationship with Irving, he continued to call on her and her mother, and it was he who introduced her to Carlyle during a visit to Haddington in late 1821. Coincidentally, Carlyle had also suffered the pain of emotional rejection and a broken engagement. While working as teacher in Kirkcaldy he had become engaged to Margaret Gordon, later by marriage Lady Bannerman. Margaret's aunt, with whom she stayed, disapproved of Carlyle and that was enough to put an end to the relationship. Thus, when they met both were on the rebound from failed emotional entanglements and somewhat vulnerable. Carlyle was immediately smitten by Jane's vivacious personality and her looks and agreed to act as her tutor in German. He wrote to his brother that in spite of his dyspepsia, he returned from Haddington 'so full of joy that I have done nothing but dream of it'.<sup>11</sup> Some ten years later in a short story he said of Jane that 'never was there such another beautiful, cruel, affectionate, wicked, adorable, capricious little gipsy sent into this world for the delight and vexation of mortal man'.<sup>12</sup>

Entranced, Carlyle used every trick in the book of flattery and manipulation to win Jane's hand. He flattered her literary skills and intellectual ability, encouraging her to believe that 'she had great future as an author, that she was the best German student imaginable'.<sup>13</sup> Thus, she was to write a sonnet every day, begin a tragedy and an essay on some striking change in the nation's history. On top of this, as part of her education, Carlyle mapped out a programme of study that included the main historical works from ancient times, a reading list of major works in literature, as well as continuing with her French and German classes. Jane initially responded enthusiastically to Carlyle's suggestions and when he recommended four hours of study, she decided on eight. But unfortunately the zeal very quickly began to temper itself and the study regime became less intensive. As Jane herself admitted: 'I am a shuttlecock of a creature: I have no stamina.'<sup>14</sup> Although she continued with her languages, she spent much of her time going to tea parties, playing chess and shuttlecock with one of her admirers, Dr Fyffe, and as Drew says, 'flirting with any other young man who happens to be available'.<sup>15</sup> She was also being seriously courted by a local Haddington man, George Rennie, the nephew of the architect of London's Waterloo Bridge, and at one time 'she considered herself practically engaged to him'.<sup>16</sup> However, Rennie's decision to go to Italy saw her wash her hands of him, saying, 'Oh, the devil take him! He has wasted all the affections of my poor heart.'<sup>17</sup>

When Jane proved to be somewhat lacking in the discipline necessary to become a serious writer, Carlyle, now without competition, changed his strategy. He began to idealise domesticity and portrayed the notion of being the mistress of a home as 'the highest destination of even the noblest woman'.<sup>18</sup> However, in spite of the flattery and manipulation, Jane found herself unable to reciprocate Carlyle's obvious feelings of affection and love. For a start her mother disliked him. She saw in Thomas a poor financial prospect (a view shared by Jane) and forbade any contact. Jane had to keep a secret correspondence going until her mother's attitude to Carlyle softened. But more important than her mother's disapproval was the fact that at this point she had no desire to marry Carlyle or any other suitor. In a letter to Thomas at the end of 1821, Jane says: 'Falling in love and marrying like other misses is quite out of the question. I have too little romance in my disposition to marry you or any other man; and too much ever to marry without love.'<sup>19</sup> She also made certain that if someone married her it would not be for her money as in 1823 Jane executed a deed transferring the whole of her father's property worth £200–300 per annum, which he had left to her, to her mother.

The relationship carried on in a platonic manner and mainly through written correspondence. This suited Carlyle since in many ways he was more impressive on paper than in the flesh. But even as late as 1825, a year before marriage, Jane still rebuffed all Carlyle's entreaties and declarations of love. She wrote to him saying:

I love you . . . but I am not in love with you; that is to say, my love for you is not a passion which overclouds my judgement and absorbs all my regard for myself and others. It is a simple, honest, serene affection made up of admiration and sympathy.<sup>20</sup>

One year later they were married, an event that raises a number of questions that have lingered since Froude's first biography of Carlyle. According to Froude, Jane had married beneath herself; she was still in love with Irving; Carlyle was distinctly 'second best'; she only married him out of sympathy; and Carlyle loved his mother above Jane. However, while it is fair to say that Jane prior to marriage did not feel the kind of physical passion for Thomas that one might expect of lovers, she was not indifferent. Indeed, if one examines her letters at the time she was in many ways besotted with his intellect and honesty. Writing to Eliza Stoddart in February 1822 she dismissed critics of Carlyle, saying that they would claim:

he is poor . . . and in the next place . . . [they would] set him down as unpolished and ill-looking. But . . . they would not tell you he is among the clever-

est of men of his day . . . [who] possesses all the qualities I deem essential in a husband – a warm true heart to love me, a towering intellect to command me, and a spirit of fire to be the guiding star – light of my life.<sup>21</sup>

Jane wanted a genius for a husband and she succeeded in finding one, but she had to wrestle emotionally with the idea and work hard to convince herself that she was making the right decision and that is why the letters at this time are so contradictory in terms of her emotions. They reflect the doubts and insecurities she had in making such a match with a man with no certainty that his genius would be recognised by society. Perhaps, it had also taken this long to excise the passion she had felt for Irving, as it was not until July 1825 that Jane was prepared to reveal to Thomas that she had ‘*once*, passionately loved’ him.<sup>22</sup>

However, after five years of dithering, the marriage finally took place at Jane’s grandfather’s farm, Templand (in Nithsdale, near Penfillan), in the presence of her immediate family and Carlyle’s brother, John.<sup>23</sup> From the outset Thomas made it clear that the marriage was to be based upon a traditional patriarchal model, stating: ‘The man should bear rule in the house not the woman . . . I must not and I cannot live in a house of which I am not the head.’<sup>24</sup> Jane it would appear colluded with her subordination from the beginning and, as Kaplan notes, her marriage was premised ‘not only on her recognition of her husband’s genius but also on her total identification of his mission and his values’.<sup>25</sup> Thus, Jane’s life became one of service to genius and only Carlyle and his work gave meaning to hers. As Aileen Christianson says, ‘she centred herself in this periphery making a triumphant virtue of her situation as a genius’ help-mate’.<sup>26</sup> Only very occasionally, as we will see, did she ever challenge her subordination within marriage; however, that does not mean to say that she was not conscious of it. In a letter to a friend, Jane criticised the patriarchal attitudes of Carlyle saying that ‘he thinks us an inferior order of beings – that is, an order of beings born to obey’.<sup>27</sup>

As a newly married woman Jane played the dutiful wife to perfection. Their first home was in Comely Bank, Edinburgh – ‘a perfect model of a house’, according to Carlyle.<sup>28</sup> With little in the way of income and a lifestyle by necessity frugal, the Carlyles did not accept dinner invitations, as they had no means of reciprocating them. In spite of this, many visitors called to talk, among them Francis Jeffrey, founder of the *Edinburgh Review*, Christopher North, of *Blackwood’s Magazine*, and John Wilson, Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh, among others.<sup>29</sup> Although they had a maid, Jane was forced for the first time to turn to domestic matters. As Carlyle recalled, ‘until she married,

she had never minded household things', but within a short space of time 'she could do everything and anything, from mending Venetian blinds to making picture-frames or trimming a dress'.<sup>30</sup> When the Carlyles moved from Comely Bank, where Jane was happy, to Craigenputtock (a high moorland farm standing on Dunscore Moors, sixteen miles from Dumfries), where she was not, there was an appreciable increase in her repertoire of domestic skills.

The years at Craigenputtock, that 'savage place', were among the unhappiest for Jane. The social isolation, the grinding poverty, Carlyle's irritability, his mean-hearted brother Alexander and his fiery sister Jean, all combined to make her life wretched. In an extremely candid letter to a young female friend in Carlisle, Jane detailed the misery of rural life and her sense of domestic inadequacy:

Craigenputtock a whit less of a peat bog, and [a] most dreary, untoward place to live at! In fact, it was sixteen miles distant on every side from all the conveniences of life – shops and even post office! Further, we were very poor; and further and worst, being an only child, and brought up to 'great prospects', I was sublimely ignorant of every branch of useful knowledge, though a capital Latin scholar and a very fair mathematician!! It behoved me in these circumstances to *sew*! . . . Also it behoved me to learn to *cook*! No *capable* servant choosing to live at 'such an out of the way place', and my husband having 'bad digestion', which complicated my difficulties dreadfully . . . it was plainly my duty as a Christian wife to bake at home! So I sent for Cobbett's 'Cottage Economy', and fell to work at a loaf of bread . . . it came to pass that my loaf got put into the oven . . . I remained the only person not asleep . . . One o'clock struck . . . and then three; and still I was sitting there in an intense solitude, my whole body aching with weariness, my heart aching with a sense of forlornness and degradation. That I who had been so petted at home . . . who had never been required to do anything but *cultivate my mind*, should have to pass all those hours of the night in watching *a loaf of bread*! Which mightn't turn out bread after all! Such thoughts maddened me till I laid my head down on the table, and sobbed aloud.<sup>31</sup>

Jane's loneliness was made worse by Carlyle's working routine that, because of its intensity, led to a general disregard for those around him. As Jane explained in a series of letters written between 1828 and 1834 to Ellen Twistleton,

it wasn't as if I saw anything of Carlyle – he went to his own room after breakfast and worked till an hour before dinner, & always rode alone . . . then he came to dinner all worked up, as bilious people always are by a rule . . . he was dangerous, there was no freedom of communication during dinner; then he went for a walk for an hour.<sup>32</sup>

A question asserts itself regarding Thomas' routine: was it to avoid intimacy with his wife? This leads to a further, and more debated, question: was the marriage consummated? The source of this speculation was Froude when he remarked – in *My Relations with Carlyle* (1903) – that rumour had it that the Carlyles' marriage was 'not a real marriage, and was only companionship'.<sup>33</sup> The notoriously unreliable novelist Frank Harris, in an article in *The English Review* (1911), embroidered on this remark by claiming that Carlyle had confessed to him in 1878 that 'he had never consummated his marriage'. In his autobiography – *My Life and Times* (1925) – Harris went even further, claiming that Jane's physician in later life, Sir Richard Quain, had declared her to be *virgo intacta*. These suggestions, mainly anecdotal, unleashed a frenzy of counter claims as to the virility of Carlyle and a fierce assault on the reliability of Froude and Harris by those close to Thomas, in particular his nephew, Alexander Carlyle, and the distinguished physician, Sir James Crichton-Browne.<sup>34</sup> Alexander Carlyle went as far as to claim that Jane was pregnant but had a miscarriage during the journey from Craigenputtock to London.<sup>35</sup> Historians have dismissed the nephew's claim as highly unlikely,<sup>36</sup> and, at the same time, shown little sympathy for allegations of the anti-Carlyle camp. Even a cursory reading of the letters that passed between Jane and Thomas in the early years of marriage shows two people completely in love and devoted to each other. Examples of their passion for each other can be seen in the following extracts, which could be multiplied many times over. Thomas wrote to her from his mother's home at Scotsbrig during their first separation:

I promised that I would think of you *sometimes*; which truly I have done many times, or rather all times . . . as if till now I had never known how precious my own dearest little Goody was to me, and what a real Angel of a creature she was! I could bet a sovereign that you *love* me twice as well as you ever did; for experience in this matter has given me insight. Would I were back to you! I would have ten thousand kisses, and my own Jane's heart would beat against her Husband's!<sup>37</sup>

When on a visit to her mother at Templand, Jane pining for her husband writes:

Goody, Goody, dear Goody, – you said you would weary, and I do hope in my heart that you are wearying. It will be so sweet to make it all up to you in kisses when I return. You will *take me* and hear all my bits of experience, and your heart will beat when you find how I have longed to return to you . . . Darling, dearest, loveliest . . . I think of you every hour and every moment. I love you and admire you like – like anything . . . Oh, if I was there I could put

my arms so close about your neck and hush you into the softest sleep. Good night. Dream of me.<sup>38</sup>

The passion is obvious and reciprocated and there is little to suggest that they were incompatible sexually at this point in their marriage. It would appear, however, that the physical side of their relationship diminished over time, particularly as Thomas became increasingly devoted to his writing and Jane became worn down with medical problems, real or imagined. At the end of the day, as Rosemary Ashton recognises, 'No amount of speculation, or reviewing the speculation of others, can take us further into the mystery at the heart of this, or any other, marriage.'<sup>39</sup>

The long rural sojourn came to an end when in 1834 the Carlyles moved to Cheyne Row, in unfashionable Chelsea, London – 'our little household', as Jane described it. This was the kind of environment in which Jane thrived, and she confessed to Carlyle's sister, Jean, that in 'most respects my situation is out of sight more suitable than it was at Craigenputtock'.<sup>40</sup> There were interesting people to meet and converse with, there was the general hustle and bustle of city life, and there were the social occasions, such as balls and the theatre, to attend if one cared to. In the city, the mundane and the petty events of everyday life could be the stuff of high drama in the hands of a skilful and imaginative storyteller and writer, as Jane undoubtedly was. Her audience included some of the most important cultural and political figures of the nineteenth century. Charles Dickens, Giuseppe Mazzini, John Stuart Mill and John Ruskin, among others, all made their way through the front door of 5 Cheyne Row. While there Jane would regale them with witty cameos of domestic life that created a sort of drama documentary of domesticity replete with accurate impersonations of servants and friends and neighbours and told with a venomous wit. One of her favourite subjects was the extravagance of middle-class Englishwomen. She wrote to her mother:

Englishwomen turn up the whites of their eyes, and call on the 'good heavens' at the bare idea of enterprises which seem to me in the most ordinary course of human affairs. I told Mrs Hunt, one day, I had been very busy *painting*. 'What', she asked, 'is it a portrait?' 'Oh! No', I told her, 'something of more importance – a large wardrobe'. She could not imagine, she said 'how I could have the patience for such things.' And so, having no particular for them herself, what is the result? She is every other day reduced to borrow my tumblers, my tea cups; even a cupful of porridge, a few spoonfuls of tea, are begged of me, because 'Missus' has got company, and happens to be out of the article; in plain unadorned English, because 'missus' is the most wretched of managers, and is often at the point of having not a copper in her purse. To

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