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# A failure of faith: Herbert Grierson, Thomas Carlyle, and the British Academy 'Master Mind' Lecture of 1940

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ON 4 DECEMBER 1940, *The Times* announced in its 'Today's Arrangements' column, 'British Academy: Annual Lecture on "A Master Mind", by Sir Herbert Grierson on "Carlyle", 3pm.' To the left of this notice appeared the ominous head-line, 'Invader in the University. Nazi Henchmen's Purge of Dutch Seats of Learning', detailing the closing of the Technical High School at Delft and the University of Leiden by the Germans. The report noted that Leiden had produced a number of illustrious scientists, including Boerhaave, Lorentz, Kamerlingh Onnes, and Einstein, and that 'its history and achievement stand for eternal values which represent all that is best in the human mind ... and which in the last resort will always prevail.' Possibly for many readers of the newspaper, the subject of 'Carlyle' – a writer dismissed in an 1932 anthology of essays on *Great Victorians* as 'much praised and seldom read'<sup>1</sup> – seemed strangely remote from the events of the day. But from Sir Herbert Grierson's perspective, the two subjects were intimately linked. The question of Carlyle's culpability for the rise of Nazism had preoccupied him at least since 1930, when he delivered the Adamson lecture at the University of Manchester entitled 'Carlyle and Hitler'. With a sharper sense of urgency lent by the historical circumstances, he revisited the topic 10 years later at the British Academy, determined to resolve a controversy that he himself had played a pivotal role in creating.

In the Adamson lecture, Grierson insisted at the outset that it was not his aim to treat Carlyle as a precursor of National Socialism. On the contrary, he sought to encourage a re-evaluation of Carlyle based mainly on his merits as a historian rather than as a polemicist. This distinction was important to Grierson (1866–1960), a professor of Rhetoric and English Literature at the University of Edinburgh, whose academic career was launched when he won a scholarship to Christ Church, Oxford, for an essay that he wrote on fanaticism. A tenacious and scrupulous editor, a subtle interpreter of Sir Walter Scott's historical novels, an

accomplished linguist, a keen lecturer in rhetoric, and a self-effacing Scotsman from Shetland and Aberdeen, he was ideally suited to explicate the writings of the self-proclaimed 'paradoxical philosopher'<sup>2</sup> from Ecclefechan. Grierson's student and friend David Daiches recalled that he was 'one of the few men who have put together scholarship, literary sensitivity, historical understanding, verbal investigation, literary criticism and creativeness.'<sup>3</sup> He would need to summon all of these qualities in his attempt to unravel the riddle that lay at the core of Carlyle's writings: how the most trenchant foe of mechanistic social engineering in the 19th century was now being identified with Nazi and Bolshevik blueprints of violent social reorganisation.

According to Grierson, Carlyle was the first historian to dramatise the dangerous allure of what later came to be known as the 'totalitarian temptation'.<sup>4</sup> In two of his finest works – *The French Revolution* (1837) and *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches* (1845) – he wholeheartedly immersed himself in the psychology of political religions, imaginatively re-enacting through his primary sources the *sturm und drang* of their seductive and fatal appeal. Well before Jules Michelet and Alexis de Tocqueville, Carlyle recognised that the French Revolution was a spiritual as well as a political phenomenon. The most salient aspect of the Sansculottes' 'Gospel according to Jean-Jacques' (*FR, W 2:4*) was its absolute repudiation of the past and its messianic embrace of a purified future, worshipped and sanctified in popular public rituals, symbols, and liturgies. In *The French Revolution*, he unfolded the tragic consequences of the Jacobins' brutal attempts to harness the inchoate religious sentiments of the masses towards the creation of a 'new Political Evangel' (*FR, W 2:128*). In *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches*, Carlyle explored political religions from a different angle. He conceived the Protector as a man who had awakened a genuine spiritual urge among the English masses, but who was thwarted by his inability to find a successor who could carry his mission forward. Carlyle

<sup>1</sup> A. Wyatt Tilby, 'Thomas Carlyle 1795-1881', in H. J. Massingham and Hugh Massingham (eds), *The Great Victorians* (Harmondsworth, 1937), p. 131.

<sup>2</sup> *The French Revolution, The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, ed. H. D. Traill, Centenary Edition (London, 1896-99), 2:27. Volume and page references in the text are to this edition (abbreviated as *W*).

<sup>3</sup> 'Memories of Grierson. Address to the English Department Centenary Dinner on 14 October 1994', *Aberdeen University Review*, No. 193 (Spring 1995), p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> See Jean-François Revel, *The Totalitarian Temptation*, trans. David Hapgood (New York, 1977).



Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881).

one Hero whom he accepts with his whole heart, and that is Oliver Cromwell' (AL 34). This choice was 'luminous, because in [Cromwell] the two strains of thought in [Carlyle's] conception of Justice, Law, combine. ... He drove through where others discussed abstract rights. But he was also the first of Heroes, because he was the soldier of God, had, as no other of the great soldiers of history, a moral and religious end' (AL 37). Nevertheless, Grierson believed that Carlyle went too far in his admiration. His zealous championship of Cromwell's 'moral and religious end' diminished his compassion for those who did not share the dictator's vision of the one true faith.

Carlyle's signal error of judgment in *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches* was to exalt the Protector's fanaticism. He failed to see how Cromwell's ruthless inflexibility contributed to his demise: 'It is ... what Carlyle most admired in Cromwell that most distinctly marks his limitation as a Hero, his fanaticism – or if his personal fanaticism was less than his language suggests, his too great dependence on the fanatical element in his following, so that he could not free himself and the country from the tyranny of Saints and Majors Generals' (AL 39–40). Grierson admitted that Carlyle's primary aim was to rescue Cromwell from the charge that he was a cynical and amoral schemer who had abused religion in order to obtain power. In this respect, the biographer had succeeded beyond his expectations. The Cromwell who emerged from Carlyle's edition of the letters, despite his 'fanaticism', was considerably larger than his faults. In earnestness and commitment, he rose above Napoleon, a sincere leader who became corrupted by the cult of own invincibility. Unattractive as some traits of Cromwell's character might be, Grierson contended, no serious comparison could be drawn between him and the Austrian-born German corporal now proclaiming himself to be Germany's messiah.

Grierson was aware that Carlyle was already being used as an instrument of propaganda by Nazis and their English fellow-travellers. He carefully countered their claims by reminding his listeners of Carlyle's cautious attitudes to the prominent political figures of his own times: 'He was not quick to discover heroic traits in a contemporary. And the Hero, to-day as ever, presents the same dual aspect, good and evil. If in measuring that good and evil we may be misled ... by too abstract standards alike of goodness and greatness, the problem yet remains' (AL 61). Moreover, Carlyle's disillusionment with liberalism and democracy was driven by his sympathy for the poor and by his contempt for those who invoked the pseudo-scientific formulas of *laissez-faire* as a universal panacea. His impassioned demands for responsible leaders were not illogical or mystical. If anything, Grierson argued, the condition of Europe in 1930 seemed to ratify his view in *Past and Present* that 'the natural demand ... of every working man for two things, a living wage and security of employment' (AL 63) could not be

lamented, 'Puritanism, without its King, is kingless, anarchic; falls into dislocation, self-collision, staggers, plunges into ever deeper anarchy' (Cromwell, W 9:207).

Carlyle fathomed the elusive psychology of political religions largely because his own faith was rooted in a reverential acceptance of God's ineffability. Friedrich Nietzsche famously contended in *Twilight of the Idols* (1888) that he was 'an atheist seeking to be honoured for *not* being so',<sup>5</sup> but for Carlyle, such formulas were irrelevant to his personal experience of what he called 'religiosity'.<sup>6</sup> Grierson argued, '[H]e recovered for himself, or believed he had, a religious outlook on life, a faith that, inscrutable as is the nature of God, there is a meaning in the word God – there is justice at the heart of things.'<sup>7</sup> This belief led him to the hope that in the protracted battle between justice and injustice in human affairs, 'Right and Might will be found to be identical' (AL 27). From this vaguely Darwinian version of human progress sprang Carlyle's interest in heroes, those exceptional beings who strove to reconcile right and might through their actions. Carlyle was too observant a historian to believe that genuine heroes were an abundant species. Grierson observed, 'He touches on Mirabeau and Napoleon, and he was to write the Life of Frederick, but there is only

<sup>5</sup> *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Duncan Large (Oxford, 1998), p. 49.

<sup>6</sup> *Sartor Resartus*, ed. Rodger L. Tarr (Berkeley, 2000), p. 121.

<sup>7</sup> *Carlyle and Hitler. The Adamson Lecture in the University of Manchester December 1930 with some additions and modifications* (Cambridge, 1933), p. 17. Page numbers in the text are abbreviated as AL.

subordinated forever to the anarchy of the free market. Grierson's tentative opinions reflected the nuanced quality of his analysis. No one in attendance at his lecture could have mistaken his intent, which was to distinguish Carlyle's historically situated notion of hero-worship as a civic ideal from Hitler's vitriolic proclamations about Teutonic superiority and racial purity. But the distinctions that Grierson sought to develop were already in the process of being trampled on by Nazi ideologues.

Between the period of the Adamson lecture and Grierson's lecture at the British Academy in 1940, Carlyle was being systematically adopted by National Socialists as the intellectual fountain-head of their movement. In *Thomas Carlyle und Houston Stewart Chamberlain, zwei freunde Deutschlands* (1935), Wilhelm Vollrath, professor of theology at the University of Erlangen, traced the influence of the Scottish 'philosopher-king' on Chamberlain's prediction of the inescapable global triumph of the Teutonic master-race. In *Bild und Wirklichkeit bei Thomas Carlyle* (1936), Liselott Eckloff discerned in Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1833-34; 1837) a pattern of conversion that prefigured the mythology of National Socialism. In *Carlyle und der Nationalsozialismus* (1937), Theodor Deimel singled out Carlyle as a major inspiration behind Hitler's ideal of Germany as an organically reconstructed superstate. Nazi ideologues writing in English were equally enthusiastic to recruit Carlyle to their movement. In *Twilight Over England* (1940), which he published in Berlin from where he was broadcasting propaganda on the Reichsrundfunk's English-language service, the Irish-American William Joyce ('Lord Haw-Haw'; 1906-46) lauded him as 'a great National-Socialist: and Germany has repaid him for his scholarship on her behalf by honouring his philosophy which is scorned in Britain.'<sup>8</sup>

What unified the various Nazi apologias for Carlyle was the conviction that he had espoused a radically alternative definition of individualism. In place of the atomised Utilitarian unit driven by self-interest and 'mammon worship', Carlyle envisaged a spiritual relationship between the citizen and the national ideals of the state. For Eckloff, this realisation lay at the heart of Teufelsdröckh's 'Everlasting Yea'. Since religion was the soul of a society, it followed that a state would only become an actual partnership if citizens were imbued with respect for obedience to their country, and if individual morality were tied to a national sense of duty and glory. In Eckloff's view, Carlyle's symbolism in *Sartor Resartus* suggested that national order stands in harmony with the order of nature. Germany was a living organism, 'Körper' and 'soul' at the same time, and its leader an inspired expression of this 'natural-supernatural' unity. Carlyle's philosophy buttressed the National Socialist view that genius was innate, and that upbringing and environment merely augmented racial advantages. Deimel too lauded Carlyle's attacks against the mechanistic society of his day, but he detected shortcomings in the Scotsman's outlook. Both as an historian and as a believer, Carlyle was hindered by his religious scruples. He had not yet appreciated the primacy of the racial element to

the national idea. Carlyle's private doubts – he deeply distrusted all theory and theorists – prevented him from adopting a more robustly 'scientific' view of human behaviour based in eugenics. Joyce similarly berated Carlyle for his religious confusion. He had overestimated the accomplishments of Cromwell, whose decision to readmit Jews into England was a fatal one for the future health of the country. Still, Carlyle grasped 'the cardinal philosophical principle of National-Socialism', which was 'the transcendental ability of the human, non-material will, to overcome all material obstacles and to make environment the slave of human personality' (*Twilight*, 165).

This avalanche of testimony in favour of Carlyle as a prophet of Nazism coupled with Britain's declaration of war against Germany in 1939 prompted Grierson to rethink his previous estimate. In a review of Louise Merwin Young's *Carlyle and the Art of History* in March 1940, he was notably more critical of Carlyle as a historian. He ridiculed the American author's benign summary of her subject's poetic conception of the past. Too often, Grierson contended, Carlyle had no interest in the past for its own sake. In *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches* he treated his subject self-reflexively, venerating the Protector for muzzling dissent and dismissing his brave quest to uphold liberty of conscience: 'Cromwell did not share Carlyle's preference of military to parliamentary government. His strenuous effort was to restore the government of parliament and secure the freedom to vindicate which he had taken up the sword.' It was a sign of Carlyle's rigidity that, during the American Civil War, he lauded the military exploits of Frederick the Great while he ignored the far nobler example set by Abraham Lincoln. Perversely and cruelly, he mocked and diminished 'a conflict in which a democracy vindicated its ability to govern itself, to find and follow a hero who, leading not forcing his people, brought them through the perils of a civil war with no help from suppression of criticism, lying propaganda, secret police, and concentration camps, a hero perhaps equal in ability and certainly superior in character to any of Carlyle's choice.' Grierson's closing remarks left little room for equivocation: 'To Carlyle the great event of European history in the nineteenth century was the emergence of Prussia and military power. His hero is well on the way to become a Hitler or Stalin.'<sup>9</sup>

Yet nine months later in his lecture to the British Academy, Grierson disputed this earlier conclusion. He vigorously denied the accusation made by the French journalist Ernest Sellière in *Un Précurseur du National-Socialisme: L'Actualité de Carlyle* (1939) that the Scottish thinker had provided a convincing and persuasive rationale for Hitler and Stalin. Grierson dismissed these 'absurd' charges and declared that '[f]rom the outset [Carlyle] had clearly seen that the relation of right to might was a problem not easy of solution. ... The essence of right is just that it is *not* might, that the idea has its source in the recognition by *homo sapiens* ... that there are things he will not do, and that not because another desire is stronger than that which prompts to the act, but because something within himself,

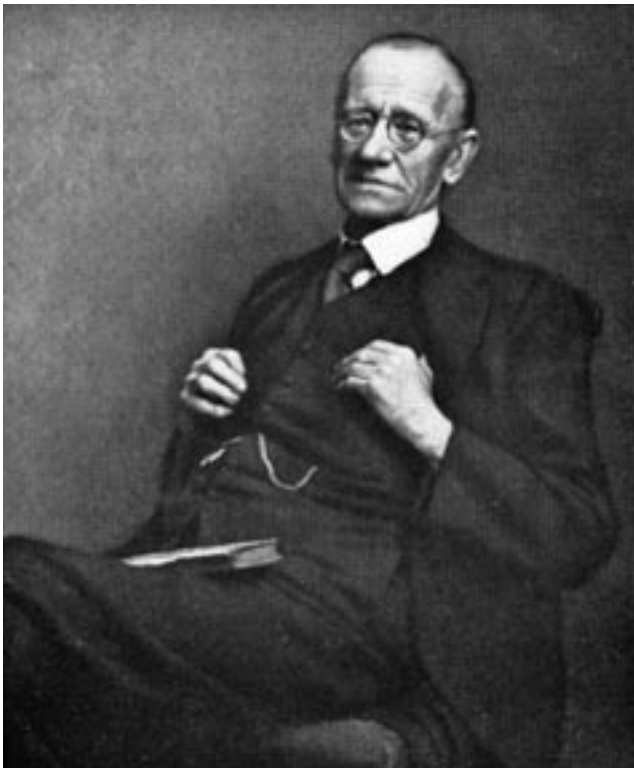
<sup>8</sup> *Twilight Over England* (Berlin, 1940), p. 165.

<sup>9</sup> 'The Hero and the Führer', *Aberdeen University Review*, 27 (March 1940), pp. 104, 105. Grierson published a second version of this review,

essentially identical in content, in *English Historical Review*, 55 (April 1940), 318-21.

his practical reason, says with authority that he ought not to do what he can.<sup>10</sup> Carlyle's rejection of the 'ballot-box' as a means of reform did not mean that he rejected the principle of democracy entirely. He believed 'that every man should find a place in the social organism, *la carrière ouverte aux talents*' (BAL 317), and his disappointment with Victorian society stemmed from the failure of its governing classes to awaken to their duties, to abandon their reckless pursuit of wealth, and to replace the 'cash-nexus' with an institutional ethos of paternalistic co-operation and development.

Seeking an explanation for Carlyle's disturbing proximity to 'fanaticism', Grierson attributed his increasing intolerance to his loss of faith and likened his predicament to that of John Milton: '[W]hat failed them was faith, faith in God and in their fellow men, and the two seem to be inextricably interwoven. Neither of them could believe that a people was capable of finding and following a leader uncompelled, if they felt, however confusedly, that he was to be trusted, and that he respected their essential liberties' (BAL 319). Faith in God and, indirectly, in humanity stood at the core of Carlyle's understanding of the past. History was a mysterious unfolding of humankind's aspiration to gauge its own possibilities and limitations in relation to divine authority. Faced with the task of unravelling this mystery, Carlyle frequently reminded himself and his readers of the contingency of human judgment. Yet his hardening impatience with human weakness, his disdain for contradiction, and his reverence of natural strength led him to the precipice of totalitarian logic. His apologies for



Cromwell and Frederick revealed an insouciant disregard for their victims. Asked Grierson, '[O]n what ground of right can one justify Cromwell's execution of the King, his dismissal of the Parliament to which he owed his power? Frederick had a certain claim to Silesia, but had the right to invade it on the plea that he was acting for the Empress, and half conquer it before war was formally declared – and we have seen similar outrages in our time? It is a difficult question, and Carlyle could only fall back on the belief in the ultimate justice of the universe, of God' (BAL 322). For Grierson, Carlyle's tragedy was that he 'lost the faith which gives inspiration to what the prophet says' (BAL 324). Stripped of its apocalyptic trappings, his 'faith' too neatly resembled the violent creeds of those who were striving to harness humanity to their inhuman doctrines of social regeneration.

Seldom in the history of the 'Master Mind' lectures, which were inaugurated in 1916, has one talk exerted such a profound impact on the future reputation of its subject. Grierson had amply realised the aspirations of the founder of the series, the Jewish philanthropist and art collector Henriette Hertz (1846-1913), to consider 'some Master-mind ... with reference to his life and work, especially in order to appraise the essential elements of his genius'. His commentary provoked a debate that lasted well into the 20th century and had important repercussions for the study of literature, history, and philosophy. Scholars embracing a wide range of viewpoints wrestled with the fugitive problem that Grierson had outlined with such care and precision: to what extent could thinkers be held responsible for the posthumous use or misuse of their ideas? It was a tribute to the suppleness and to the subtlety of Grierson's approach that participants on both sides of the issue often unwittingly echoed his analysis. Carlyle's advocates followed him in stressing the unsystematic quality of his mind and temperament. In *The Myth of the State* (1946), the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer pointed out that to 'read into Carlyle's work ... a definite philosophical construction of the historical process ... or a definite political program is precarious and illusive.'<sup>11</sup> Critics less tolerant of Carlyle's confusion also found corroboration in Grierson's assessment. Jacob Salwyn Schapiro, professor of history at City College in New York, amplified Grierson's forebodings about Carlyle's illiberal leanings in *Liberalism and the Challenge of Fascism* (1949). Recalling Carlyle's racist caricatures of Jews, Negroes, and Irish Catholics, Schapiro categorised Carlyle as 'as a prophet with a sinister message for our generation' whose 'views on social and political problems, divested of their moral appeal, imply an attitude of mind characteristic of fascism of our time.'<sup>12</sup> Dismissing Grierson's more calibrated verdict, Schapiro represented Carlyle as the chief progenitor of the vicious racial narratives that had fuelled the fantasies of the Third Reich.

Sir Herbert Grierson (1866-1960), Fellow of the British Academy. Photo: E. Drummond Young, Edinburgh.

<sup>10</sup> 'Thomas Carlyle (Annual Lecture on a Master Mind, Henriette Hertz Trust)', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 26 (1940), p. 321. Page numbers in the text are abbreviated as BAL. (The text was also printed as a separate pamphlet.)

<sup>11</sup> *The Myth of the State* (London, 1946), p. 191.

<sup>12</sup> *Liberalism and the Challenge of Fascism: Social Forces and England and France (1815-70)* (New York, 1949), p. 370.



Fortunately, the value of Grierson's humane estimation of Carlyle in the British Academy lecture was not lost sight of amidst the fractious disagreement that it had provoked. With a fitting symmetry – Carlyle would have labelled the coincidence 'a conflux of two eternities' (*FR, W* 2:134) – it was a distinguished Dutch scholar with a doctorate from the University of Leiden who memorably reaffirmed the enduring importance of Grierson's contribution. In *Debates with Historians* (1955), Pieter Geyl (1887-1966), professor of history at the University of London between 1919 and 1935, nimbly staked out the grounds for Carlyle's possible redemption in the 20th century. Imprisoned by the Nazis in Buchenwald for 13 months, Geyl fully comprehended the intellectual depravity inherent in National Socialist ideology. He refuted Schapiro's contention that Carlyle was a proto-fascist, '[b]ut by recognizing this obvious fact,' he argued, 'we have not solved the problem of the connection between [his] teachings . . . and the twentieth century anti-liberal revolutions.'<sup>13</sup>

The 'problem', as Grierson had demonstrated, was difficult to explicate because Carlyle's clairvoyance was so intricately and intimately tied to his inner darkness. Those who credited him with powers of insight too often failed to notice his emotional proximity to the abyss that he described. Reinforcing Grierson's commentary, Geyl asserted, 'How well ... did Carlyle foresee it all: the crisis of democracy, the crisis of capitalism, the crisis of liberty, law, stability, assaulted by passion and by power. ... It is, however, also possible to say: how much ammunition – against reason, against science, against the parliamentary method, against gradualness and compromise, humanity, and peace – was supplied by his philosophy to the powers of destruction!' In Geyl's view Carlyle's career amounted to a 'tragedy', for 'he succumbed to what was his strength; that he fell into evil because he resented the imperfect so keenly and searched for the good with so unsparing a passion, unsparing essentially also with respect to himself.' As a consequence, he was much less a 'prophet' than an 'abettor of the upheaval' (*Debates* 54, 39) that exploded in the 20th

century. Having waged such an effective war against reason and the intellect, Carlyle could not be exculpated merely because he did not live to see the nightmarish repercussions of his too successful campaign.

It is illuminating, and somewhat humbling, to revisit the controversy surrounding Carlyle in the period of European civilisation's darkest hour, and in particular, to study Herbert Grierson's germinal role in this controversy. The attempts by various literary critics in the late twentieth century to cordon off the deconstructionist Carlyle of *Sartor Resartus* from the reactionary author of 'The Negro Question', *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, *Frederick the Great*, and 'Shooting Niagara', have obscured the primary role that he played in the political debates of the 1930s and 1940s. Grierson's British Academy lecture serves as a salient reminder of why the sage of Chelsea still matters, both as a prophet and a historian. The elements in his writing that have made him attractive to the architects of final solutions and re-education camps, and more recently to Islamic jihadists, should neither be ignored nor underestimated. Nonetheless, Carlyle can still speak to those who are disillusioned by the shrill certitudes that divide liberal democratic societies. As Grierson rightly asserted, he 'was to his generation, the most potent voice of the spirit in reaction against a mechanic view of society, against a too great faith in the findings of an economic science which claimed infallibility, which claimed to have discovered the laws governing both the production and the distribution of wealth' (*BAL* 324).

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<sup>13</sup> *Debates With Historians* (The Hague, Nijhoff, and Groningen, 1955), p. 39. Volumes and page numbers in this text are to this edition.