INTRODUCTION

Carlyle and Social Criticism

Carlyle wrote most of the essays included in this volume at moments when he felt compelled to speak out about the state of contemporary society. It begins with “Signs of the Times,” which represents his first opportunity to focus primarily on his own views, rather than write about those of others. That essay established a mode of prophetic writing—employed in many of the essays in this volume as well as books such as *Past and Present*—that led to his being regarded as chief among the Victorian sages. While a few of the pieces included here are merely occasional, the majority represent Carlyle the incisive, and sometimes controversial, social critic.

In this respect, the majority of the items in this volume are truly essays—the development and exposition of an idea or theme—rather than book reviews. Of course, book reviews often became essays, and indeed, “Signs of the Times” was itself putatively a review. However, there is no mistaking the difference between an essay like “Signs of the Times,” in which Carlyle barely mentions the authors and books he is purportedly reviewing, and his literary reviews, all of which focus squarely on authors and their writings.

Carlyle was quite familiar with the traditions of the essay. He had written the article on the essayist Montaigne for Brewster’s *Edinburgh Encyclopedia*, and in his writings he makes numerous allusions to the great British essayists, including Bacon, Addison, Steele, and Johnson. Insofar as his essays, especially from “Chartism” onward, address particular political as well as social concerns, he was writing in the tradition of more recent nonfiction works with a political bent, such as William Cobbett’s *Rural Rides* (1822–1826; 1830), William Hazlitt’s *Spirit of the Age* (1825), and Robert Southey’s *Sir Thomas More; or, Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society* (1829), the last of which, appropriately, he proposed to review in what would turn out to be “Signs of the Times.”

The first two essays in this volume, “Signs of the Times” and “Characteristics,” as George Landow has demonstrated, employ several formal and rhetorical devices drawn from biblical prophecy. In this mode, the author, like the prophet, occupies a stance at a critical distance from the social mainstream, criticizing contemporary society for losing sight of fundamental values and eternal truths. In doing so, Landow has shown, Carlyle employs a four-part Old Testament pattern in which the prophet begins by calling attention to the “grievous condi-
tion" of his hearers, points out the sufferings that result from falling away from God’s law, warns of further suffering if they continue in their sinful ways, and, finally, offers a vision of an idyllic society they will enjoy if they return to the ways of God (Landow 26).

“Signs of the Time” and “Characteristics” not only assert that contemporary society has lost sight of universal, or divine, truth, but also, as suggested by the central metaphor of the latter essay, seek to diagnose the ways in which they have done so, “Signs” arguing that society has become “mechanical” and “Characteristics” that it has become overly “conscious,” what we would now call self-conscious. In these essays, Carlyle is less concerned with the behavior of his contemporaries than with their attitudes, beliefs, or perspectives. Their failing is precisely their denial of the spiritual domain that is implied by the reduction of all human life to the mechanical, or what can be perceived by the senses. In this respect, they are concerned with the social but not the political, with the state of society but not with any particular political problems. This perspective accords with what would be for Carlyle an enduring skepticism about the political realm, his belief that political solutions are themselves merely mechanical.

By the same token, the duty he felt to speak out on the state of society or, as he put it, the “condition of England,” led him from the social to the political. He first used the phrase “condition of England” in “Chartism,” which he wrote in response to the economic hardships endured by the working classes who created the Chartist movement. This essay manifests the tension between the social and the political in Carlyle’s writings, in that it contends that the Chartists are mistaken in their belief that achieving their political goal (universal male suffrage) will solve the social problems that had arisen from industrial capitalism. While he concurs with them that they are badly governed, he does not agree that they will be better governed if they choose their own governors. He instead calls on the upper classes to become better governors, thus establishing a principle that he will repeat throughout the remainder of his writing career. In this respect, “Chartism” sets out the ideas that Carlyle would develop more fully in Past and Present, arguably his greatest, and certainly his most incisive, work of prophetic writing.

In keeping with his belief that social problems will not be solved solely by political action, Carlyle developed his conception of the ideal governor in On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History. The hero might be said to mediate between the social and the political. His role is to discern eternal or divine laws and then to enforce them. This conception underlies Carlyle’s essay on José Gaspar Rodríguez Francia, the dictator who ruled Paraguay from 1814
to 1840, which set the pattern for the great historical works that would follow, *Oliver Cromwell’s Letters and Speeches* and *Frederick the Great*. In these works, Carlyle portrays his subjects as men who restore order to a nation in a state of crisis. His conception of the heroic in each case rests on the contention that only certain individuals are capable of governing and that the majority will be happiest if they submit to them. In this respect, one could place Carlyle in the line of philosophers advocating for a benevolent dictator, but his dictators—and he does not balk at calling Francia a “dictator”—often resort to draconian measures in the course of realizing their ideal of social order. The same principles underlie his last significant piece of prophecy, “Shooting Niagara,” written when the Chartists’ demand for universal suffrage began to be fulfilled by the Reform Bill of 1867.

Carlyle’s belief that some people are born to govern and others to be governed extends to his conception of race. For Carlyle both are part of the natural order ordained by divine law. Consequently, he accepts the principle of scientific racism that accords to race a quasi-species-like status, clearly delineating individuals of different races. In “The Negro Question”—later, in defiance of his critics, retitled “The Nigger Question”—he wrote of freed slaves of African origin: “You have to be servants to those that are born wiser than you, that are born lords of you; servants to the Whites, if they are (as what mortal can doubt they are?) born wiser than you” (Essays 4:379). In *Past and Present* Carlyle had argued for a “permanent” relationship between employers and their employees as opposed to the contractual relationships that often left workers unemployed in the modern factory system. In accord with this book’s contrast between the medieval and the modern, he had depicted the relationship between the Saxon lord Cedric and the serf Gurth of Scott’s *Ivanhoe* (1820) as a model for his ideal of permanence. With “The Negro/Nigger Question,” he contended that chattel slavery similarly manifests this ideal, an argument that underlies the squib published during the American Civil War, “Ilias (Americana) in Nuce,” included in this volume.

Carlyle’s views of race also play a significant role in his essays on the Irish Question. What slavery was to nineteenth-century America, Ireland was to nineteenth-century Britain. In accord with his other socio-political writings, his basic contention is that the Irish are incapable of governing themselves, and that the British have a divine mandate to govern them. Irish resistance to the Union of Ireland and Great Britain in 1801 made Ireland a constant concern for politicians and thinkers throughout the century, no less so for Carlyle, who repeatedly returns to it in his writings. As we discuss below, a chapter on
Ireland in “Chartism” brought Carlyle in contact with Irish nationalists, and, while he never wrote the book on Ireland that he once contemplated, the Irish play a major role in his most intemperate piece of prophetic writing, *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, in which he developed and incorporated ideas and themes that he had addressed in a series of newspaper articles on the state of Ireland and the campaign to repeal the Union—all of the items from “Repeal of the Union” to “Trees of Liberty” in this volume—published during the two preceding years.

Two essays in this volume—“Project of a National Exhibition of Scottish Portraits” and “Portraits of John Knox”—arose from Carlyle’s belief in the importance of physiognomy for the judgment of character, which led him to value portraiture as a key to historical analysis. These essays are linked to his other writings by their implicit acquiescence in a now discredited form of biological determinism. Physiognomy, like race science, regards character as something inscribed from birth, marking out some individuals for greatness while also setting limits to individual development. In “Portraits of John Knox,” Carlyle works in reverse, starting from the character of Knox to argue that the face in the only portrait historians considered authentic could not be that of Knox and opting for a portrait of highly dubious provenance because the visage depicted there came closer to his conception of Knox. While his histories and works like “Chartism” and *Past and Present* show him to be a shrewd critic of the workings of societies and individuals acting in particular historical situations, his belief in fixed character sets a limit to his powers of perception.

The remaining essays in this volume were written for particular occasions rather than to address a social problem. The most important of them is the “Inaugural Address,” which he delivered when he was elected rector of the University of Edinburgh, soon after the success of his *Frederick the Great*, and which helped restore his reputation after the immoderation of *Latter-Day Pamphlets*. The remainder are short items that in various ways manifest his generosity to friends and acquaintances. They include obituary notices of his friend Edward Irving and his former student Charles Buller, a petition on behalf of a copyright bill, written at the behest of its sponsor, and a piece on the opera, written to provide financial support to a woman in need.

**The Writing, Publishing, and Reception of the Social and Political Essays**

Having begun his literary career as a reviewer, Carlyle longed to develop his own ideas and finally found an opportunity to do so in 1829, when Francis
Jeffrey, about to give up the editorship of the *Edinburgh Review*, invited him to contribute what Carlyle considered “Jeffrey’s last speech” in that journal (*Note Books* 140). Froude reports that Jeffrey suggested Carlyle review Disraeli’s *Vivian Grey* (1826) or Bulwer Lytton’s *Pelham* (1828) but left him free to choose for himself. Carlyle proposed writing on Southey’s *Colloquies* (1829), a work of social critique more in line with his eventual focus on millennialist works, but it had already been assigned to Macaulay (Froude *Early Life* 2:59). We do not know whether reviewing Edward Irving’s *The Last Days; or, Discourses on These Our Times*, along with two anonymous books in a similar vein, was Carlyle’s idea, but given that Irving was an old friend, it seems likely that this was the case. While on a preaching tour in Scotland that year, Irving spent two nights with the Carlyles at Craigenputtoch (D. Wilson 2:97). Since we have no clear evidence of when Carlyle began writing the essay, we cannot determine precisely how the visit and writing of the essay were related to one another. The decision to make Irving’s text the occasion for his essay might have been inspired by Irving’s visit, but it might also have been suggested by the tour itself and Irving’s activities earlier in the year as well as the publication of *Last Days*. In any case, Carlyle knew about the tour well before the visit, and so it at least bears some relationship to the essay, the title of which undoubtedly was inspired in part by another Irving text, entitled “Signs of the Times.” Carlyle was busy with “Voltaire” and “Novalis” in March and possibly later, so it seems likely that he wrote “Signs” sometime in the period from April to July (the article was published in the June issue, but, as discussed in the note on the text, that issue did not appear until August). In his notebook, he recorded on August 5, 1829: “Just finished an Article on the *Signs of the Times*, for the Edinr Review” (140). A few days later, on August 11, he commented in a letter that he had not yet received a copy and that he did not “know when the work is to be out; but only that it is printing” (*Letters* 5:21).

Wilson claims that while Jeffrey made no changes to the essay, he did suggest an improvement in the translation of Goethe’s verses that stand near the beginning of the essay, revising the last two lines, “Calmly wait the Morrow’s

---

1 David Wilson says Carlyle turned to the essay “after he parted from Irving” in June (2:103), but he does not indicate the source of his claim. There is no further mention of writing the essay in Carlyle’s letters or journals or in his reminiscence of Irving that might clarify the matter. Wilson apparently had access to Jeffrey’s letters, but there is no mention of “Signs” in Christie’s edition of them (see xli). Kaplan writes that Irving was preaching in the region in June, the month “Signs of the Times” is dated, which would suggest he must have written the essay before the visit, but as the June issue did not appear until August, Wilson’s assertion could be correct.
hidden season, / Need'st not fear what hap soe'er it brings,” to “Then calmly wait the Morrow's hidden season, / And fear not though what hap soe'er it brings!” In the end, however, Jeffrey acquiesced in Carlyle’s request to retain his own translation (D. Wilson 2:104). About a year after the article appeared, he wrote to his brother that he had “written to Irving, explaining his share in that ‘Signs of the Times,’ and saying all manner of mystic things” (Letters 5:81).

The Examiner devoted a full page to “Signs” in its October 4 issue, calling it a “curious rhapsody” that obtains its “force” from “diction” that gives it “a manner of strength that disguises the feebleness of the ideas.” It also defended the utilitarian principles that Carlyle had described as “mechanical” and materialistic (625). Interestingly, given that he had considered discussing Southey’s Colloquies, the review suggested that, if it had not appeared in the Edinburgh Review, the article might “be attributed to Doctor Southey” and went on to suggest parallels between Carlyle’s essay and Southeby’s book. The Edinburgh Literary Journal, discussing this issue of the Edinburgh Review, named Carlyle as the author and deemed it one of the two best articles in the issue (218). The reviewer complained that the style was “lumbering” but nonetheless praised its “rich vein of humour” and found its views on contemporary society “just.”

The response to the essay extended beyond Britain. In April 1830, about a year after “Signs” appeared, Gustave d’Eichthal, a follower of the utopian thinker Claude Henri de Saint-Simon, sent Carlyle a packet of Saint-Simonian writings, prompted in large part by the belief that “Signs of the Times” showed him to be a kindred spirit:

Les disciples de Saint-Simon ont lu avec un vif intérêt l’article intitulé: Caractères de notre époque . . . Ils ont admiré la vigueur avec laquelle vous avez tracé le tableau des travers de la Société actuelle; ils se sont réjouis du sentiment d’amour et de foi qui vous fait désirer, espérer un meilleur avenir; . . . et maintenant ils viennent à vous, ils vous appellent à jouir de cette lumière qui a lui sur eux et que vous semblez plus que tout autre préparé à recevoir. (The disciples of Saint-Simon have read with lively interest the article titled Signs of the Times . . . They admired the vigor with which you trace the picture of current society; they rejoiced in the sentiment of

---

2 We have not been able to corroborate this claim. We do not find Jeffrey’s suggestion in his correspondence or any reference to it in Carlyle’s. There is no mention in Froude’s biography or Carlyle’s Reminiscences. See preceding note.
love and of faith that makes you desire and hope a better future; ... and now they come to you, call you to enjoy this light shed on them and which you seem all the more prepared to receive) (d’Eichthal 292–93; see Letters 5:133n18).

The enclosed materials included responses to “Signs” by P. M. Laurent in the Saint-Simonian paper, L’organisateur. Laurent incorrectly attributed “Signs” to “Smith,” presumably Sydney Smith, who had died in 1827 but had been a regular contributor to the Edinburgh until the year before his death. The articles consist primarily of extracts from the essay that Laurent finds similar, for the most part, to Saint-Simonian views of the era (“reproduit la plupart de nos jugemens sur l’époque actuelle” [March 24, p. 2]). While Carlyle was somewhat baffled and bemused by this response, he was clearly pleased, as he wrote to d’Eichthal, that “these views of mine find some acceptance with you” (Letters 5:136; see also Note Books 158, Letters 5:133, 5:156).

Jeffrey was very supportive of Carlyle, assigning him several commissions—a major addition to his income—so when Jeffrey stepped down as editor of the Edinburgh Review in 1829, Carlyle was somewhat apprehensive about whether his successor, Macvey Napier, would keep him on. However, Napier expressed eagerness to retain Carlyle as one of his reviewers, and soon thereafter Carlyle resumed his contributions, though, as it turned out, his relationship with the Edinburgh was coming to an end. At this moment, he was busy with other projects, including a history of German literature that he eventually abandoned as well as articles commissioned by other reviews. In October 1830, more determined than ever to write “something of [his] own,” he began writing Sartor Resartus (Letters 5:164), a draft of which he finished in July 1831. In the meantime, he still needed to write reviews as a source of income. In October 1832, he commented: “I had hoped that by and by I might get out of Periodicals altogether, and write Books: but the light I got in London last winter showed me that this was as good as over. My Editors of Periodicals are my Book-sellers, who (under certain new and singular conditions) purchase and publish my Books for me; a monstrous method, yet still a method” (Letters 6:241). The slow process of finding a venue for Sartor, which ultimately resulted not in book publication but serialization in Fraser’s Magazine, meant that he would continue publishing in the reviews for the next several years, until he began to work in earnest on The French Revolution.

That November, Carlyle began a “sort of second Signs of the Times”—the essay “Characteristics”—written in response to Napier’s suggestion, made on
September 9, that he write a review of Thomas Hope’s *An Essay on the Origin and Prospect of Man* (Letters 6:61, 5:420; see also 6:49, 54, 58, 70). On September 13, he wrote to the publisher Longmans for a copy of the book, while also seeking it from other sources (Letters 5:427; see 5:430). Longmans replied by sending a copy of William Godwin’s *Thoughts on Man* (1831), which he apparently also had requested, and informing him that they would send for a copy of Hope (Letters 5:440). On September 22, frustrated that he had not yet received Hope’s book, he consulted it at the British Museum (Letters 5:444). On October 8, still without a copy, he wrote to Napier that he could imagine writing an essay about Hope as well as by Godwin (whom he had met in August), Coleridge, and Friedrich Schlegel’s *Philosophische Vorlesungen* (1830), proposing that “by grouping two or three of these together contrasting their several tendencies, and endeavouring, as is the Reviewer’s task, to stand peaceably in the middle of them all, something fit and useful might be done” (6:13).

On November 10, he reported that he had begun writing but was finding the going difficult (Letters 6:39; see 6:49). On November 26, he informed Napier that he had settled on Hope and Schlegel as his subjects and determined on the title “Characteristics,” adding that he intended to say little about either author, because “Hope’s [book] could not be reviewed except with peals of laughter mingled with groans, and he is now in his grave; Schlegel’s I left at Craigenputtoch, and cannot find a copy of here: so the Titles and some distant allusion are all I meddle with.” At this point, he had drafted only six pages, but promised Napier that in no less than three weeks he would provide an essay of twenty to twenty-five pages (Letters 6:58).

It was a just little more than three weeks later, on December 17, that he submitted the article, which, it turns out, was thirty pages long. He conjectured that there would not be time to correct proofs, so he left it to the editors but requested return of the manuscript and three copies of the essay (Letters 6:66). Napier had not yet agreed to take the article, and Carlyle seems to have feared that he might find it too outspoken, though he was nonetheless confident that he could place it somewhere (Letters 6:70, 78; see also 6:66, 74, Note Books 230). Napier did accept the article and, furthermore, sent proofs for correction, which Carlyle completed reviewing by January 4, 1832, with the expectation that it would be published in the next couple of days, though he was still saying the same thing on January 14 (Letters 6:85, 92). He reported having received a copy of it on February 6 (Letters 6:116), and at some point he also received the requested “separate copies” (Letters 6:125). After waiting nearly a year, he was paid about
thirty-five pounds (Letters 6:290).  
Given that Carlyle had recently completed *Sartor Resartus*, it is not surprising that he reported that “Characteristics” “is Teufelsdreckish” and written “in the aphoristic style” (Letters 6:70, 58; see also Note Books 230). In early January 1832, he confided to his journal his fear that “no one will understand” it (Note Books 230–31). This anxiety may have been prompted by the response of his editor: “Napier . . . receives it with respect, yet finds it ‘inscrutable’ on a first perusal: my own fear was that it might be too *scrutable*; for it indicates decisively enough that Society (in my view) is utterly condemned to destruction, and even now beginning its long travail–throes of Newbirth” (Letters 6:85). As the latter phrase indicates, his anxiety might have been not so much that it was difficult to understand in itself but that readers would find his way of thinking incomprehensible. Nonetheless, he was pleased to learn that the essay had been “well received; approved seemingly by every one whose approval was wanted” (Letters 6:132). Elsewhere he reported, “As to the ‘Characteristics,’ it has prospered better than I could have expected, and goes not without a response from various quarters” (Letters 6:125).

Certainly, it caught the attention of many of his contemporaries. His friend Irving, who had been the nominal subject of “Signs of the Times,” read “Characteristics” with quite *high* estimation of the talent though, Carlyle reported, “he seemed to think I was going a very wrong road to work, and should consider myself, and take into the ‘Tongues’” (Letters 6:132). Leigh Hunt, a decade older and a major figure in the London literary scene, sought Carlyle out after reading it (the Carlyles were on an extended visit to London that autumn) and sent him a copy of his own *Christianism* (1832) (Note Books 256; Letters 5:448, 6:117–18). Nor was the response confined to divines and men of letters, for in Scotland the following summer he encountered a tailor “who had vehemently laid to heart the ‘Characteristics’” (Froude, *Life in London* 2:293).

Perhaps the most significant impact was on the young Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was just breaking with the Unitarian church about the time the essay appeared. The following August (1833), in the much–rehearsed story, Emerson suddenly appeared on the Carlyles’ doorstep at Craigenputtoch bearing a letter of introduction from John Stuart Mill. During this visit, Emerson asked him “at what religious development the concluding passage in his piece in the Edin. Review upon German Literature (say 5 years ago [“State of German Literature”]) & some passages in the piece called Characteristics, pointed?” (Letters 6:131).

3 On August 17, 1832, Carlyle wrote, in reference to “Characteristics” and “Corn-Law Rhymes,” that Napier owed him sixty pounds, “some of it for nine or ten months” (Letters 6:247). Our estimate of the payment is based on the proportion of pages in each article.
INTRODUCTION

7:262). While we get no further indication of what Emerson’s thoughts were, we know the influence was immense, not only on him but also on the emerging transcendentalist circle.

Of course, not everyone was favorably impressed, not least some of the Edinburgh’s main supporters and contributors, notably Thomas Macaulay, who wrote to Napier: “As to Carlyle, or Carlisle, or whatever his name may be, he might well write in Irving’s unknown tongue at once” (Macaulay 2:113). In a letter that confirms Carlyle’s complaints about him as an editor, Jeffrey recommended that Napier take a firm hand with Carlyle:

I fear Carlyle will not do, that is, if you do not take the liberties and the pains with him that I did, by striking out freely, and writing in occasionally. The misfortune is, that he is very obstinate and, I am afraid, conceited, and unluckily in a place like this, he finds people enough to abet and applaud him, to intercept the operation of the otherwise infallible remedy of general avoidance and neglect. It is a great pity, for he is a man of genius and industry, and with the capacity of being an elegant and impressive writer. (quoted in Shattock 39)

A mournful occasion, the death of his old friend Irving, on December 7, 1834, occasioned the next essay in this volume. As we have already noted, “Signs of the Times” purported to review one of Irving’s books, and Irving responded positively to “Characteristics.” Their friendship went back twenty years to their days as students. Even as Carlyle had lost his faith and given up plans to enter the ministry, Irving had embraced his ministerial vocation and in 1822 was appointed to the Caledonian Church in London, where he became immensely popular. In the late 1820s Irving became intensely interested in prophecy, millenarianism, and, eventually, the speaking in tongues, to which Carlyle alludes in “Signs of the Times.” These views resulted in controversy and disapproval by more conventional church members, eventually forcing Irving to establish a new church. As his comments suggest, Carlyle himself felt Irving had lost perspective, and their relationship cooled in the early 1830s. Nonetheless, when Irving died, Carlyle was deeply moved:

Poor fellow! he was here the week before leaving this huge Confusion of a Place: it was most touching to see the feeling
INTRODUCTION

of old years feebly struggling thro’ the distractions that had now closed thick over it; I once or twice even raised in him a faint laugh of the true old Annandale time—most melancholy to remember. This mad City (for it is mad as Bedlam, nine-tenths of it) killed him; he might have lived prosperous and strong in Scotland, but there was in him a quality which the influences here took fatal hold of; and now—Alas! alas! (Letters 7:344)

Carlyle addressed these words to David Hope, an old friend of Carlyle and Irving, who had apparently asked him to write a memorial notice, but Carlyle had already written “The Death of the Rev. Edward Irving” for Fraser’s Magazine, which had become his primary outlet for publication after Jeffrey’s departure from the Edinburgh Review (Letters 7:343, 344).

Fraser’s was owned by James Fraser, who had early on sought Carlyle as a contributor (Letters 5:80 and n. 9), and edited by William Maginn, who soon made it one of the liveliest publications of its time. Carlyle characteristically expressed reservations about it, deeming it on more than one occasion “a Dog’s-meat Cart of a magazine” (Note Books 232; see also 259, Letters 6:85, 124, 349), but he acknowledged that Fraser “pays best, and is the sweetest to deal with” (Letters 6:290). Nonetheless, there were difficulties with the proofs of the Irving article, which led Carlyle to complain that Fraser had “introduced [it] into such an Irish stew of circumambient matter, that [he] decided forthwith in having the thing either printed separately, or suppressed.” However, Fraser asked him to wait so that he could sort things out, and on December 24 Carlyle received the printed article—presumably one of the separate copies he had requested (Letters 7:344, 347). It appeared in the January number of Fraser’s.

From 1834 to early 1837 Carlyle was at work on The French Revolution, and the only articles he published during this era, apart from “Death of Edward Irving,” were essays derived from his French Revolution research. In the late 1830s, still in need of income, he gave lectures and returned to writing articles, but as the income from The French Revolution and his other books grew, he ceased writing for the reviews unless he felt compelled to speak on a particular topic of contemporary concern. Along with a few occasional pieces, such articles comprise the remaining essays in this volume, which constitute by far the majority of the essays he published after 1837.

The next essay in this volume was occasioned by a petition in favor of a bill
aimed at lengthening the term of copyright, which Thomas Noon Talfourd introduced in Parliament on February 12, 1839. John Forster, who at the time was literary editor of the *Examiner* newspaper and would eventually become its editor in chief, apparently approached Carlyle to write in its behalf. The Carlyles had been receiving the *Examiner*—which still retained its position as the voice of “radical” opinion though it was considered much more respectable in the 1830s than in its early years—for nearly a decade, and it remained the one paper to which they consistently subscribed (see *Letters* 5:98). Carlyle and Forster had recently met and would have a long and productive relationship. About a month before Forster approached him about the copyright petition, Carlyle had sent him a prospectus outlining the proposal for what would become the London Library, so it is not surprising that Forster would approach him in turn (*Letters* 11:6-7; see 7-9).

Although copyright was a topic that mattered to him, Carlyle was reluctant to put himself before the public with a petition, explaining: “But as to Petitioning in my own name, it does appear to me, after all the consideration I can give it, that neither my age, my position nor pretensions could authorize such a step on my part. Ridicule, it seems to me, and the general inquiry, Who is this pretentious ‘Single Person’? would be the too probable result” (*Letters* 11:34-35). Talfourd had that day (February 27) presented to Parliament petitions by Wordsworth and other authors who were more established than he was, and Carlyle seems to have been concerned that submitting his own petition might seem presumptuous (*Hansard* 45:920-33, *Letters* 11:35). Nonetheless, a day or so later, he changed his mind and sent Forster his petition, remarking that he found it “impossible to write gravely on such a subject” (*Letters* 11:37; see also 11:88). Wordsworth, who had campaigned for the bill, wrote to Talfourd on April 8 that Carlyle’s petition was “quite racy” (*Letters* 11:3712). Talfourd presented Carlyle’s petition, along with others, to the House of Commons on May 1. As it turned out, the bill did not pass, and the copyright legislation was not enacted until 1842.

A year earlier, perhaps at the suggestion of John Stuart Mill, Carlyle began thinking about “writing on the Working Classes” (*Letters* 10:14). This possibility receded for the time being, but on December 3, 1838, he wrote in his journal: “I had a notion, and have, of writing some sort of address to English fellow-men on the condition of men in England. My heart has for twenty years had feelings of its own on that subject; a faint monition born of conscience urges me on. But it is difficult to articulate such a thing; but I am rude, inexpert:—alas, but I am lazy and foredone in heart: that is the great *but*! We shall see” (*Letters*