

## Eccentrics

# Thomas Carlyle: Bizarre But Appreciated

By Chloe Lizotte



Scottish-born philosopher-writer Thomas Carlyle ended up taking a radically different turn in life than the one he had originally anticipated. Born in 1795 to a Calvinist household in southern Scotland, Carlyle initially assumed he would become a priest. However, he came to question his faith in such a way that his changing belief system led him away from what his church had to offer. In fact, Carlyle's very ability to question ultimately brought him great recognition as a philosopher even if his writing is the main reason he is now remembered.

Carlyle's major work, *Sartor Resartus* – Latin for “The Tailor Re-tailored” – introduced a unique style of writing, later dubbed “Carlylese.” This writing style would often combine a mixture of both German and English words, sometimes altering the word order of a sentence by effectively writing sentences backwards. In addition, *Sartor Resartus* was a highly complex work on its own, mixing fact with

fiction while weaving a story that indirectly commented on Carlyle's philosophy. Needless to say, the public found the book both bizarre and unreadable, making it difficult for Carlyle to get it published. Still, those who were able to appreciate Carlyle's eccentric style, including Ralph Waldo Emerson in the 19th Century and Dwight Eisenhower a century later, greatly admired the Scottish writer.

While Carlyle is well known for his interest in philosophy, it was his interest in history that paved the way for even more literature. After moving from Scotland to London in 1834, he started work on an extensive two-volume recollection of the French Revolution, fittingly titled *The French Revolution, A History*. After completing the first draft of the first volume, Carlyle lent it to his friend philosopher John Stuart Mill to read. Murphy's Law struck unexpectedly when Mill's maid mistook the manuscript for waste paper and threw the only draft of Carlyle's intensive history

into the fireplace to burn. Surprisingly, Carlyle showed very little anger, and simply started from scratch to rewrite the entire first volume once again. *The French Revolution* was finally published in 1837.

As Carlyle grew older, he became more and more convinced that fascism was the ideal form of government. His writing began to reflect this sentiment, causing his interests to move away from his earlier existential musings. Passing at the age of 85 in London, Thomas Carlyle is thus destined to be forever remembered as “that eccentric Scottish writer” who raised many eyebrows during England's otherwise exceedingly straight-laced Victorian era.

**NOTE: In August I visited Thomas Carlyle's home, a classic Queen Anne home in London. I recommend you do the same! Website: <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk>**

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