

**THE STUDENTS' SERIES OF
ENGLISH CLASSICS.
THOMAS CARLYLE'S
ESSAY ON ROBERT BURNS**

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The Students' Series of English Classics. Thomas Carlyle's Essay on Robert Burns by Thomas Carlyle & W. K. Wickes

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THOMAS CARLYLE'S ESSAY

ON

ROBERT BURNS.

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PREFACE.

IN reading this delightful monograph, it should constantly be kept in mind that Carlyle did not attempt, in any formal or biographical sense, to write a life of the poet, but simply used *The Life of Robert Burns*, by J. G. Lockhart (Edinburgh, 1828), as a convenient text about which to group many sentences of shining rhetoric, keen criticism, and, best of all, a great deal of noble and inspiring sentiment. Indeed, the monograph, first printed in the *Edinburgh Review*, No. 96 (1828), had as its title only that grand monosyllable which for more than a century has thrilled the hearts of the lovers of lyric poetry, — BURNS.

Therefore, let no student come to the reading of this little book with the purpose merely of finding certain facts in the life of the poet; for while the facts are there, they are incidental and subsidiary to the revelation of the mind and soul of the poet. To know the mind and soul of the poet, — that should be the aim of the student. Reading thus, Carlyle will be found to be the *revealer* of

“The light that never was, on sea or land;
The consecration and the Poet’s dream.”

And surely that should redeem the reader from slavery to a mere literary task, — a compelled service performed in slave-like fashion. It should, it must, suffuse his heart with the glow of sympathy. In such a frame, he will find Carlyle to be an *inspírer*, breathing into his soul many a sweet and pure suggestion, many a strong and purposeful sentiment; so helping him, as high literature ever should, to make his own life and action more noble.

W. K. W.

NOVEMBER, 1856.

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THOMAS CARLYLE.

IN seeking to trace the sources of a great man's power, it is easy to lay too much stress upon the influence of ANCESTRY. Not so, however, in the case of Thomas Carlyle; for had we no other testimony upon that point, his own would be complete and convincing. In his father, James Carlyle, were blended great natural mental aptitudes, clearness of judgment, strength of purpose, and an inflexible sense of duty. It was he, the son testifies, who was bent on "educating me; that from his small hard-earned funds sent me to school and college, and made me whatever I am or may become."

But not less potent, though in a different way, was the influence of his mother, Margaret Aitken, second wife of James Carlyle. In her was a fine mingling of native intelligence and emotional qualities; the latter serving to some extent to smooth away asperities, and even to introduce into the household certain homely amenities of life. Again the son testifies, at her death, in the wish that he may pass his days "with the simple bravery, veracity, and piety of her that is gone; that would be a right learning from her death, and a right honoring of her memory."

Of that good head-stock and heart-stock which was in James and Margaret Carlyle was born at Ecclefechan, Dum-

friesshire, Scotland, Dec. 4, 1795, Thomas Carlyle, the most original writer, certainly, of his time.

Carlyle, the lad, received the first lessons of his EDUCATION under the family roof-tree, his father teaching him to "count," his mother to read. Soon passing into the village school, he was pronounced by the schoolmaster "complete in English" at seven years of age. Thence he went to Annan Academy, there pursuing Latin, "less Greek," French, algebra, geometry. But the knowledge there gained did not satisfy the eager mind of the youth, — still less did it content the father, bent upon the completest education for his son which the schools of Scotland could furnish. And so the year 1809 found him in Edinburgh, a student of famous Edinburgh University. Reading between the lines which Carlyle himself has written concerning his college life, it is not difficult to believe that he pursued his studies with diligence, and yet with that independence and instinct of selection which mark the born student, more or less conscious of his innate powers. As a result of this "untaught ability" to discriminate, leading him to make a difference in the zeal with which he took up various subjects, the young Scotch student was not distinguished for his rank in college or the formal excellence of his scholarship. Yet beyond a doubt he received from his university training the very best thing which any university can bestow, — best stated by Carlyle himself, when, many years after his graduation, he returned as chosen rector of the university to deliver his rectorial address: The university, he declared, had taught him to read in various languages, in various sciences, so that he could go into the books which treated of these things, and gradually penetrate into any department he wanted to make himself master of. In other