

**CARLYLE'S LECTURES ON  
HEROES,  
HERO-WORSHIP AND  
THE HEROIC IN HISTORY**

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Carlyle's Lectures on Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History by Thomas Carlyle & P. C. Parr

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**THOMAS CARLYLE & P. C. PARR**

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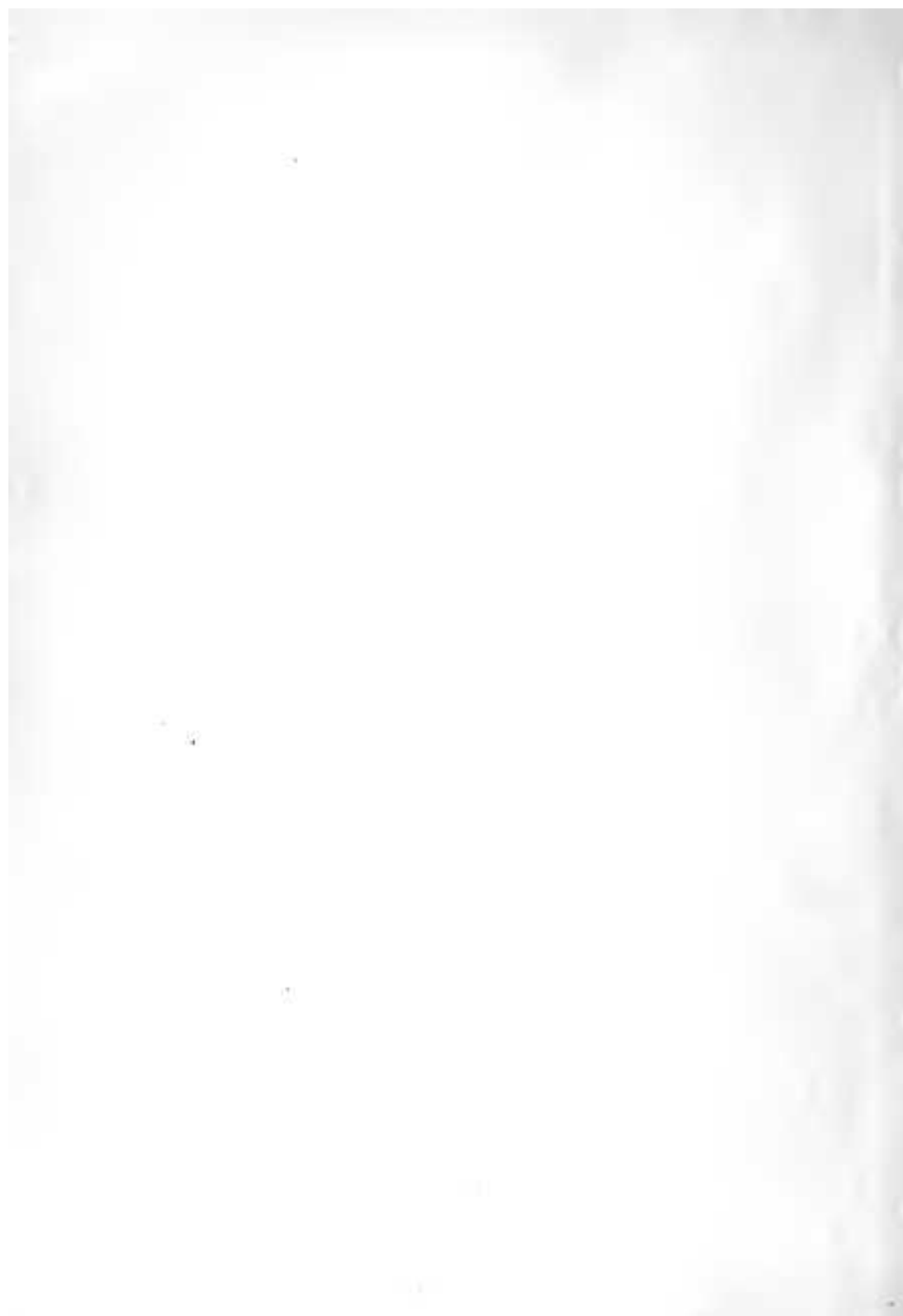


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## INTRODUCTION

THE material of this volume was first delivered to the world in the form of lectures during the month of May, 1840. That it took this shape was due to circumstances rather than deliberate choice on the part of Carlyle, who had no special aptitude, as he certainly had no inclination, for addressing a public audience. Froude indeed tells us that Carlyle 'had all the qualities which with practice would have made him a splendid orator', and that he refused the attempt to become one, because to succeed would have cost him his natural modesty and his love of truth. It is certain that Carlyle disliked orators, fearing, with Aristotle, their tendency to flatter rather than to advise the mob. But for quite other reasons the platform had no temptation for him. 'I am in no case so sorry for myself,' he writes to Erskine, 'as when standing up there bewildered, distracted, nine-tenths of my poor faculty lost in terror and wretchedness, a spectacle to men. It is my most ardent hope that this exhibition may be my last of such.' This hope was fulfilled. With the publication of *The French Revolution* his position among the literary men of his time had been secured, and the spur of poverty which, combined with the organizing ability of Miss Martineau, had been the determining cause of his thus making himself 'a motley to the view', was no longer operative. Necessity, as he

expresses it, with her bayonet at his back was never again to drive him thither, and his next public address was delivered to the students of Edinburgh University, twenty-six years later, on the occasion of his election to the Lord Rectorship.

Of the four series of lectures delivered by Carlyle since his migration to London some six years earlier, this was the most successful. 'I am telling the people,' he says in his diary, 'matters that belong much more to myself this year, which is far more interesting to me.' We have here not merely a literary essay, but a statement of the principles which form the basis of his theory of government and religion, and colour all his philosophy of history and politics. 'The History of the World,' he says, 'is the Biography of great men.' It was becoming a commonplace of the criticism of the day to represent the great man as a 'creature of the time', the product of his age, the froth on the summit of a wave of tendency. Like 'topmost Gargarus', he 'stands up and takes the morning', before its beams descend to the lower peaks and penetrate the deeper valleys. He is the first recipient of a message which would in time reach the world in general whether he were there or no, not in any sense like a beacon, the source of the light which he diffuses. Against such a view Carlyle's theory of Hero-worship is an emphatic protest, amplified later in all his historical work, and culminating in his colossal portraits of Cromwell and Frederick the Great.

That in the first place; but there is also a practical outcome to the theory, and in the Hero he finds his solution of the problem of the age. It was a period

of great distress, of great expectations and disappointed hopes. The return of peace after the long and dreary Napoleonic wars had failed to realize the anticipated millennium. On the contrary, the cessation of war had let loose a countless horde of discharged soldiers and sailors to compete in the already well stocked labour-market; knowledge that the high price of corn, on which the prosperity of agriculture depended, was due to artificial causes produced by the war had led to the passing, as a remedy for agricultural distress, of Corn Laws which prohibited the importation of wheat till famine prices had been reached; and the Reform Bill of 1832, though it had transferred the balance of power from the landed to the manufacturing classes, had done nothing to relieve the wants of the labourer and mechanic. The labouring classes, to whose agitations the measure of reform had been due, more than suspecting that they had been duped by their superiors in the social scale, were disposed to resort to violence, while the middle classes, secure for the moment in the fruits of victory, showed no inclination to help their poorer brethren. A succession of bad harvests had accentuated the general distress, and the cry of over-production helped to keep the mills idle. In this chaos of conflicting interests Carlyle recognized two main forces which he called Mammonism and Dilettantism,<sup>1</sup> the Captains of Industry, and the land-owning Aristocracy. He had little sympathy to spare for either, but of the two he much preferred the manufacturers, who were at least workers with a definite object in view, even though they might recognize no

*See Past and Present.*