

**MODERN HUMANISTS: SOCIOLOGICAL  
STUDIES OF CARLYLE, MILL, EMERSON,  
ARNOLD, RUSKIN, AND SPENCER WITH  
AN EPILOGUE ON SOCIAL  
RECONSTRUCTION**

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Modern Humanists: Sociological Studies of Carlyle, Mill, Emerson, Arnold, Ruskin, and  
Spencer with an Epilogue on Social Reconstruction by John M. Robertson

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**JOHN M. ROBERTSON**

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SOCIAL RECONSTRUCTION**



## P R E F A C E.

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THE following papers, excepting the Epilogue, which condenses an unwritten lecture, were first prepared and delivered last winter as a course of lectures for the South Place Ethical Society, London, under the title "Modern Criticisms of Life." The title "Modern Humanists" is now substituted because of a strong representation made to me that "Criticism of Life" is an esoteric conception, which has not yet conquered the general intelligence, however wide be the literary vogue of the phrase. "Humanist" is, perhaps, not quite a popular conception either, but the significance of that term is less easily missed, and it properly covers the different lines of thought dealt with. At the same time, the original title determined the small amount of space given to the purely literary side of the work of the writers discussed.

To a certain extent some of the lectures have been extended, and all have been revised; but they substantially keep the lecture form, which, in respect of some past experience, I trust will be more conformable to the general reader's convenience than it has been to my own bookish prejudice. I have attempted to increase the value of the book so far as may be by adding a number of references and elucidations. This has been done more particularly in the section on Carlyle, for the reason that that section stands the greatest chance of exciting opposition, and so most needs to be backed by evidence and testimony. I

have elsewhere contended that one of the greatest needs in literary criticism is the comparison and analysis of conflicting judgments, after the example set in the physical sciences; and this will hold good of criticism of characters and doctrines as well as of the discussion of æsthetic qualities. Despite attacks made on this view, I can only regret that want of leisure and consequent want of knowledge have hindered me from more fully annotating many points in these papers.

In the essay on Emerson, for instance, certain propositions are made as to the spontaneous nature of critical as of other ideas. Only since those pages went to press have I met with the *Théorie de l'Invention* of Professor Souriau (1881), which handles the whole problem with remarkable freshness and penetration. And here is a new instance of the need of more careful documentary record in mental and moral science: chancing to resume a former examination of the *Idéologie* of Destutt de Tracy, I find that he had to a large extent made the investigation independently taken up by M. Souriau. Needless to say, there are other writers to be cited in the same connection.

I have only to express, further, my sense of the inadequacy of the following studies all round, and of one or two in particular. In the essay on Emerson I now note an omission to dwell on valuable points in his teaching which I had formerly acknowledged. Lack of due leisure caused other oversights. But to remedy all would have been to make each section into a treatise; and I fancy I do better to keep nearly within those limits which, at least, secured an audience for the lectures.

*June, 1891.*

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# MODERN HUMANISTS.

THOMAS CARLYLE.

## L.

It is now over sixty-three years since the aged Goethe, in talk with the devout Eckermann, passed on Carlyle an encomium which has often been quoted. ("Carlyle," he said, "is a moral force of great importance. There is in him much for the future, and we cannot foresee what he will produce and effect."<sup>1</sup> This notable praise, from the greatest modern man of letters, was bestowed when the subject of it was little over thirty years old, and had done only his "Life of Schiller" and a few translations and reviews to earn it. Heine and Mr. Swinburne combine to remind us that Jupiter's approving nods were bestowed with a somewhat Olympian caprice; and Carlyle himself must sometimes have grimaced at the fact that the eye which saw a great moral force in him saw a greater in Byron.<sup>2</sup> But, thirty years afterwards, a very different authority summed up Carlyle's achievement in terms of the forecast of Goethe. Of Harriet Martineau, though she did him a substantial service at a time when he confessedly needed it,<sup>3</sup> Carlyle never speaks in his letters or journals, after a first allusion, without some of his plentiful derision; but

<sup>1</sup> Eckermann's *Conversations*, Eng. tr., p. 277.

<sup>2</sup> Goethe said that a character of such eminence "as Byron had never existed before, and probably would never come again." *Id.*, p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> See Froude, *Carlyle's Life in London*, i., 97, 103.

she is none the less one of his best advocates in the end. When she wrote her account of her life in the belief that it was near its close, she thus eulogised him: "If I am warranted in believing that the society I am bidding farewell to is a vast improvement upon that which I was born into, I am confident that the blessed change is attributable to Carlyle more than to any influence besides."<sup>1</sup> But she made some remarkable concessions, which raise a question that we shall have to face again in our survey. "He may be," she grants, "himself the most curious opposition to himself; he may be the greatest mannerist of his age while denouncing conventionalism—the greatest talker while eulogising silence—the most woeful complainer while glorifying fortitude—the most uncertain and stormy in mood while holding forth serenity as the greatest good within the reach of man; but he has none the less infused into the mind of the English nation sincerity, earnestness, healthfulness, and courage." Some of Harriet Martineau's judgments—for instance, that on Macaulay—fail to recommend themselves to posterity; but her eulogy of Carlyle, though he would have been the last to acknowledge the results she ascribed to his works, states a popular view; and, in any case, there are plenty of accomplished and influential men of letters who have in the main taken up her parable—Mr. Morley, Mr. Lowell, Dr. Garnett, Mr. Hutton, Professor Masson, Mr. Conway, and many more. Certainly, Carlyle was one of the leading figures in English life in his old age, and M. Taine, twenty years ago, remarked that he was the writer to whom average Englishmen referred a foreigner who asked for the leading English thinker.<sup>2</sup>

This celebrity, as everybody knows, was built up by a long course of literary work certainly not planned to conciliate the British public, either in style or in doctrine; and while we must remember that in all ages it has been a popular thing to denounce the age, the fact of Carlyle's fame and standing is in itself significant. To estimate him aright, we have first to realise what kind

<sup>1</sup> *Autobiography*, I, 387.

<sup>2</sup> Herr Oswald, writing in 1882, notes that already the rising generation is going away from Carlyle. *Thomas Carlyle: ein Lebensbild*, S. 3.

of a society it was into which he was born, and how he stood related to it. And, to begin with, without deciding how far Harriet Martineau was right in her explanation, we have to allow for an immense difference in moral culture between the age into which he came and ours. (Perhaps the best side of the old *régime* is to be seen in Jane Austen's incomparable novels.) We there contemplate a middle-class and upper-class society in which nobody has a suspicion that social reconstruction is a thing to be considered. Jane Austen's people, indeed, are impossible in this one point of their exclusion of all human problems from their minds at a time when England was in the first furious swing of the reaction against the French Revolution. But while we can see that they must have talked in cant formulas about the horrors of democracy, as they and she talked in cant formulas about the great issues of life and death, it remains clear that they did little more. The society of that age held the ethic of its classic novels, in which the problem of the hero was to get an income somehow without doing anything to earn it,<sup>1</sup> and that of the heroine to combine disinterested love with a good final settlement. Religion was a paralysing convention, which, when she touched it, reduced Jane Austen's own acute intelligence to torpor and inanity.<sup>2</sup> That good society could, or should be, anything but a fortuitous collection of people with easy incomes, nobody ever surmised: that society is, in truth, an organic though monstrous whole, in which the rich live on the labour of the poor, was a doctrine never even discussed, since mere political democracy was itself a horror of great darkness.

At the beginning of this century, it must be remembered, the average English intelligence was abnormally deadened and hide-

<sup>1</sup> The vogue of this ideal in fiction is a measure of the socio-economic ethic of any period. Originally it was universal, either in the shape of the "prince" motive or in that of the young man who comes to fortune. We have it in our best fiction as late as Thackeray's "Philip," and it is still prevalent in the worse.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, her preparation for poetical justice on Mr. Elliot *Persuasion*, by the revelation that in his youth he had done a good deal of Sunday travelling.