CARLYLE AND SCOTTISH THOUGHT

Ralph Jessop

Literary/critical treatments of Thomas Carlyle and his works have traditionally tended to focus on his German intellectual inheritance, especially the writings of Goethe and Kant and virtually ignore the formative influence of the Scottish cultural milieu in which he was raised. It is the purpose of the above volume to redress this balance.

Developing an innovative interdisciplinary approach to Carlyle's writings, one that recontextualizes Carlyle within a distinctive Scottish philosophical discourse, Jessop successfully illuminates a subtle yet complex strand in Carlyle's evolution as historian, writer and thinker. Specifically, he explores the complex philosophic tradition, compounded of Humean skepticism and Reid's theory of ideas, that dominated intellectual debate in Scotland throughout the period 1780-1830 and remained in the forefront during Carlyle’s formative years. Deftly blending narrative and analysis, Jessop demonstrates clearly how Carlyle’s early links with Reid’s progressive philosophy of “common sense” extended through his readings of Dougal Stewart, the works of Thomas Brown, and ultimately to his friend,
the philosopher, Sir William Hamilton who was disseminating Reidian metaphysics in Scotland, about the time Carlyle was contributing important essays to *The Edinburgh Review* and preparing *Sartor Resartus* for publication. Jessop firmly substantiates his interpretation in five informative, richly documented chapters, exploring Carlyle’s friendship with Hamilton, his adoption of Hamilton’s doctrine of nescience (Chapters V and IX) and the presence of Scottish philosophical ideas in Carlyle’s essays for *Blackwood’s Magazine*, as well as in his “Sign of the Times” and more substantially, in *Sartor Resartus* reinterpreted in the final section of the book. Indeed, this reappraisal (Chapter IX) - a model of imaginative scholarship - serves to unify the volume as a whole by showing that the philosophic tenets woven throughout *Sartor Resartus* owed less to German idealism than to the mind/body dualism of Reid as modified by Hamilton. This solid grounding in Scottish enlightenment thought, Jessop shows convincingly, preceded and accompanied Carlyle’s study of German writers and, if anything, actually shaped his views of those writers (p. 190). The apparent agreement between the Cambridge Platonists, Reid and Kant made such later philosophers as Hamilton predisposed to Kantian philosophy as it also made Carlyle who “himself noted resonances between the Scottish and German schools” (p. 198). In each case, the growing influence of German idealism in both England and Scotland in the early 19th century, contributed to a decline in the Scottish philosophy of common sense and in turn, obscured
the connection between this philosophy and Carlyle's style and thought.

It is ultimately Jessop's expertise in both English literature and philosophy that makes his methodology, combining these disciplines, so effective. It allows him to approach Carlyle the literary artist via the latter's philosophical presuppositions and formulation. In the process, he not only recovers a neglected dimension of Carlyle's work, but provides a re-interpretation of Scottish post-enlightenment philosophy used as "an informing discourse which assists towards new readings of Carlyle's texts" (p. xiii). The resulting product represents a major contribution to Carlyle's studies and a worthy supplement to Charles F. Harrold's, *Carlyle and German Thought* (1934) and Elizabeth Vide's more recent, *Romantic Affinities: German Authors and Carlyle* (1993).

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