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Past and Present Details

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Author : Thomas Carlyle

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From Reader Review Past and Present for online ebook

Simon says

Pretty amazing stuff. Written with the volume at 11 the whole way through! The second part, about the medieval stuff, is very moving.

Ari says

Carlyle was one of the most prominent writers and thinkers of the mid 19th century. This is a short polemical work he knocked off as a break from writing a serious history. It is mostly Carlyle opining about the social ills of his time, but wrapped around a comparison with medieval life, illuminated via a newly-discovered monastic chronicle that Carlyle summarizes for us.

The book is vivid, illuminating, and written with the author's idiosyncratic but peculiarly powerful prose style. The problems he is interested in -- the social alienation of laissez-faire capitalism, corrupt incompetent political leaders, grasping selfish aristocracies -- are all very much still with us. He's not simply a conservative or an apologist for tradition. He thinks radical social reform is desirable and necessary - and in particular, reform to improve the condition of the poor.

It is also one of the wickedest books I can remember reading. The author is either one of the last enthusiasts of feudalism, or else one of the first proto-fascists: he is firmly in favor of hierarchy and rule, and not particularly fond of democracy. He speaks approvingly of things to make a modern reader shudder -- like medieval monasteries clearing their debts by having the Jewish money-lenders exiled or killed.

And yet...I have the sense that Carlyle does have useful things to say and teach. Liberal democracy is the "default" view in the western world today, but there are a great many opponents of liberal democracy. It is tempting, but wrong, to think that those opponents are either thoughtless or blinded by selfishness, anger, or some other mental condition. But this is not right -- there are people out there who really disagree, and Carlyle is an unusually articulate, informed, and relevant critic. If we cannot answer the philosophical challenge he offers, that suggests we are wrong in our beliefs, or at least confused about them. I don't think Carlyle is right, but I think it's important to do the mental work to understand where and why he goes wrong.

Mark Gonzalez says

If Carlyle's philosophy is successfully implemented and reached its natural conclusion, then the end result would be a utopian society ruled by a benevolent dictator. Of course this is if all things go well. I agree with Carlyle's premise on hero worship, but it just so happens that the "heroes" of our society are complete hacks and untalented, selfish buffoons. A true leader doesn't want to lead but feels a duty so. A true leader is a paragon of emotional and logical intelligence. A true leader is open-minded and is willing to take advice from those whom may have more experience and wisdom in a specific field. A true leader is decisive, goal driven but practices humility. A true leader knows how to make the smart yet difficult decision. Essentially, a true leader has to embody all the characteristics of a human being that has never existed--ever.

Brenna says

Carlyle makes some interesting points (that I think carry over to society today from the 19th Century) however at times his thoughts seems scattered. Parts of his writing are beautiful and read as prose, but at the same time there are other sections where it becomes easy to get bogged down in his wordy, and rather eccentric, descriptions.

Gregorius Wilhelm says

This was my first entry into Carlyle. It is quite a strange book. Past and Present is , essentially, a critique of Victorian Capitalism from a very Reactionary viewpoint, with a nice diversion into Mediaeval History. This is through a portrait of the 12th century monk, Abbott Samson. Carlyle considers Samson to be a true embodiment of "The Hero", something sorely missing in Carlyle's day.

Carlyle's writing is wonderfully flavourful even if it is quite disorderly and rambling.

Who else (when discussing Chartist and Fair Wages) can reference Cromwell and state: "and his wages, as I understand, were burial under the gallows tree near Tyburn Turnpike, with his head on the gable of Westminster Hall, and two centuries now of mixed cursing and ridicule from all manner of men."?

Elisa says

All I can say is that I am relieved to be finished this. I think I deserve credit for doing so. Carlyle's picture of his current-day England is highly relevant which is why I gave this two stars. The fact that he is pretty much a racist, egotistical windbag made this a tedious read.
