

To Thomas Carlyle¹

date 18 May 1837

from Edinburgh

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My Dear Carlyle – A thousand thanks for your book of the F. Revolution² – It would have been very welcome to me – (whatever its quality had been) – as [a mark of *crossed out*] <indicating> a return of that old kindness, which I had feared you were withdrawing from me: But it certainly gives me greater pleasure, as it is a work which I feel assured will do you more honor and bring you into more notice than anything you have hitherto produced — It is a book, written most emphatically in your own manner – and yet likely to be very generally read – and which cannot be read anywhere, without leaving the impression that the author (whatever else may be thought of him) is a man of Genius and originality – and capable of still greater things than he has done even here — It is no doubt a very strange piece of work – and is really, as Coleridge I think said of something else, like reading a story by flashes of lightning!³ — It is beyond all question the most poetical history that the world has ever seen – and the most moral also – tho' perhaps not the fullest of wisdom. The descriptions are the finest things in it – and next, the sentiments – especially those of [the *crossed out*] a soft, indulgent and relenting character – which are generally full of truth and beauty <and it must be owned outnumber all the others —> Your ratiocinations (as those of poets are apt to be) – are less satisfactory, and not very intelligible – You will be called affected – and I fear, in some sense, not unjustly – and by many readers you will <certainly> be found obscure [-] But all the better judges will admire you – and allow that, with many faults, you have innumerable excellences – and above all that you have power, and originality, which atone for everything — I do not myself approve of the style of the composition – It is too odd, broken and ostentatiously singular – But what I object most to, is the tone of mockery – and mephistophilistic humour, in which not only grave but tragic matters are treated – which jars upon our gentler feelings, and, according to my experience at least, is painful and out of place – Your clever Devils may view our poor human doings in this spirit – but not a man, with [so *crossed out*] a heart so soft and compassionate as yours —

All this time tho', I have read only the first volume quite thro' – and dipped into a dozen places in the others – I only got the book the day before yesterday – and have neglected my judicial duties to get thro' so much of it – Of course I have heard nothing of it from other quarters – But I feel assured of its success – I mean of its coming to notoriety and being spoken of, and admired, and abused — In good truth it deserves both, pretty heartily —

I will not resume our old points of disagreement – If I have ever seemed to have too little indulgence for what I thought your errors, I hope you will believe

that it is far less from any impatience even of dogmatic contradiction, than from a sincere belief that your persistence in them obstructed not only your fame and prosperity – but your usefulness, and authority as an instructor – It will give me great and unmingled pleasure to find that, in spite of all that persistence, you have succeeded in all these things – and I can truly assure you that no renunciation of your heresies could gratify me half so much as this way of justifying them. You have likings and dislikings too (I mean in your book) with which I do not at all sympathise – and seem to me very often to despise and admire very capriciously – tho’ it is not your disposition I think generally, to err in overmuch admiring — Why does not your bookseller advertise industriously and puff a little in the journals? You I daresay despise all such base devices – But the trades should not be above them – and tho’ they may not give popularity they certainly accelerate it — — — And now I have no time to say any more – I was obliged to give up my London visit this year – It is barely possible – if Parl[iamen]t sit late – that I may still run up about the end of July – But it is most likely not till next Spring – when I shall have great pleasure in finding you famous and flourishing – Have you no idea of being in Scotland before that time?

And my fair cousin! – I hope she does not mean to disclaim me – I think of her often, with the greatest regard – I hear sometimes of her, circuitously, thro’ Empson – and am glad to learn that she is well and blooming, since her influenza – Why should she not tell me so with [her *omitted*] own fair hand?

God bless you, my Dear Carlyle – I shall ever think of you but with kindness – and shall always rejoice most sincerely in all your good fortune —

Ever Very Faithfully Yours

E. Jeffrey

National Library of Scotland MS. 787, ff. 72-5.

1. Jeffrey enclosed this letter for forwarding to Carlyle within a short message to Henry Brougham, which is reproduced above in the introduction.
2. *your book of the F. Revolution* Carlyle’s *The French Revolution* was printed in April but not published until 1 June (Campbell, p. 105), so Jeffrey was commenting on a pre-publication copy Carlyle had sent to him. A product of his wide reading and developing thoughts on history and on social and cultural change – as well as of intensive creative work over the years that he and Jane had been settled in London (including the famous rewriting necessitated by the accidental destruction of a first manuscript while in the possession of John Stuart Mill) – *The French Revolution* was the work which finally established Carlyle’s reputation as one of the important individual thinkers of his age.
3. *like reading a story by flashes of lightning* in the *Table Talk* of Coleridge’s published in 1836, he is recorded as having said of Edmund Kean: “To see him act, is like reading Shakespeare by flashes of lightning”. See *Table Talk Recorded by Henry Nelson Coleridge (and John Taylor Coleridge), The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 14, ed. Carl Woodring, in 2 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), II, 41.