Froude’s
Life of Carlyle
Mr. Carlyle expressed a desire in his will that of him no biography should be written. I find the same reluctance in his Journal. No one, he said, was likely to understand a history, the secret of which was unknown to his closest friends. He hoped that his wishes would be respected.

Partly to take the place of a biography of himself, and partly for other reasons, he collected the letters of his wife—letters which covered the whole period of his life in London to the date of her death, when his own active work was finished. He prepared them for publication, adding notes and introductory explanations, as the last sacred duty which remained to him in the world. He intended it as a monument to a character of extreme beauty; while it would tell the public as much about himself as it could reasonably expect to learn.

These letters he placed in my hands eleven years ago, with materials for an Introduction which he was himself unable to complete. He could do no more with it, he said. He could not make up his mind to direct positively the publication even of the letters themselves. He wished them to be published, but he left the decision to myself; and when I was reluctant to undertake the sole responsibility, he said that, if I was in doubt when the time came, I might consult his brother John and his friend Mr. Forster.

The Preface is for the first two volumes of the biography (1882).
FROUDE'S PREFACE

Had he rested here, my duty would have been clear. The collection of letters, with the Memoir of Mrs. Carlyle which was to form part of the Introduction, would have been considered among us, and would have been either published or suppressed, as we might jointly determine. Mr. Carlyle's remaining papers would have been sealed up after his death, and by me at least no use would have been made of them.

Two years later, however, soon after he had made his will, Carlyle discovered that, whether he wished it or not, a life, or perhaps various lives, of himself would certainly appear when he was gone. When a man has exercised a large influence on the minds of his contemporaries, the world requires to know whether his own actions have corresponded with his teaching, and whether his moral and personal character entitles him to confidence. This is not idle curiosity; it is a legitimate demand. In proportion to a man's greatness is the scrutiny to which his conduct is submitted. Byron, Burns, Scott, Shelley, Rousseau, Voltaire, Goethe, Pope, Swift, are but instances, to which a hundred others might be added, showing that the public will not be satisfied without sifting the history of its men of genius to the last grain of fact which can be ascertained about them. The publicity of their private lives has been, is, and will be, either the reward or the penalty of their intellectual distinction. Carlyle knew that he could not escape. Since a "Life" of him there would certainly be, he wished it to be as authentic as possible. Besides the Memoir of Mrs. Carlyle, he had written several others, mainly autobiographical, not distinctly to be printed, but with no fixed purpose that they should not be printed. These, with his journals and the whole of his correspondence, he made over to me, with unfettered discretion to use in any way that I might think good.

In the papers thus in my possession, Carlyle's history, external and spiritual, lay out before me as in a map. By recasting the entire material, by selecting chosen passages out of his own and his wife's letters, by exhibiting the fair and beautiful side of the story only, it would have been easy, without suppressing a single material point, to draw a picture of a faultless character. When the Devil's advocate
has said his worst against Carlyle, he leaves a figure still of unblemished integrity, purity, loftiness of purpose, and inflexible resolution to do right, as of a man living consciously under his Maker's eye, and with his thoughts fixed on the account which he would have to render of his talents.

Of a person of whom malice must acknowledge so much as this, the prickly aspects might fairly be passed by in silence; and if I had studied my own comfort or the pleasure of my immediate readers, I should have produced a portrait as agreeable, and at least as faithful, as those of the favoured saints in the Catholic calendar. But it would have been a portrait without individuality—an ideal, or, in other words, an "idol," to be worshipped one day and thrown away the next. Least of all men could such idealising be ventured with Carlyle, to whom untruth of any kind was abominable. If he was to be known at all, he chose to be known as he was, with his angularities, his sharp speeches, his special peculiarities, meritorious or unmeritorious, precisely as they had actually been. He has himself laid down the conditions under which a biographer must do his work if he would do it honestly, without the fear of man before him; and in dealing with Carlyle's own memory I have felt myself bound to conform to his own rule. He shall speak for himself. I extract a passage from his review of Lockhart's Life of Scott.

One thing we hear greatly blamed in Mr. Lockhart: that he has been too communicative, indiscreet, and has recorded much that ought to have lain suppressed. Persons are mentioned, and circumstances, not always of an ornamental sort. It would appear there is far less reticence than was looked for! Various persons, name and surname, have "received pain": nay, the very Hero of the Biography is rendered unheroic; unornamental facts of him, and of those he had to do with, being set forth in plain English: hence "personality," "indiscretion," or worse, "sanctities of private life," etc. etc. How delicate, decent is English Biography, bless its mealy mouth! A Damocles' sword of Respectability hangs forever over the poor English Life-writer (as it does over poor English Life in general), and reduces him to the verge of paralysis. Thus it has been said "there are no English lives worth reading except those of Players, who, by the nature of the case have bidden Respectability good-day." The English biographer has long felt that if in writing his Man's Biography, he wrote down
anything that could by possibility offend any man, he had written wrong. The plain consequence was, that, properly speaking, no biography whatever could be produced. The poor biographer, having the fear not of God before his eyes, was obliged to retire as it were into vacuum; and write in the most melancholy, straitened manner, with only vacuum for a result. Vain that he wrote, and that we kept reading volume on volume: there was no biography, but some vague ghost of a biography, white, stainless; without feature or substance; vacuum, as we say, and wind and shadow. . . .

Of all the praises copiously bestowed on [Mr. Lockhart's] Work, there is none in reality so creditable to him as this same censure, which has also been pretty copious. It is a censure better than a good many praises. He is found guilty of having said this and that, calculated not to be entirely pleasant to this man and that; in other words, calculated to give him and the thing he worked in a living set of features, not leave him vague, in the white beatified-ghost condition. Several men, as we hear, cry out, "See, there is something written not entirely pleasant to me!" Good friend, it is pity; but who can help it? They that will crowd about bonfires may, sometimes very fairly, get their beards singed; it is the price they pay for such illumination; natural twilight is safe and free to all. For our part, we hope all manner of biographies that are written in England will henceforth be written so. If it is fit that they be written otherwise, then it is still fitter that they be not written at all: to produce not things, but ghosts of things can never be the duty of man.

The biographer has this problem set before him: to delineate a likeness of the earthly pilgrimage of a man. He will compute well what profit is in it, and what disprofit; under which latter head this of offending any of his fellow-creatures will surely not be forgotten. Nay, this may so swell the disprofit side of his account, that many an enterprise of biography, otherwise promising, shall require to be renounced. But once taken up, the rule before all rules is to do it, not to do the ghost of it. In speaking of the man and men he has to deal with, he will of course keep all his charities about him; but all his eyes open. Far be it from him to set down aught untrue; nay, not to abstain from, and leave in oblivion, much that is true. But having found a thing or things essential for his subject, and well computed the for and against, he will in very deed set down such thing or things, nothing doubting.—having, we may say, the fear of God before his eyes, and no other fear whatever. Censure the biographer's prudence; dissent from the computation he made, or agree with it; be all malice of his, be all falsehood, nay, be all offensive avoidable inaccuracy, condemned and consumed; but know that by this plan only, executed as was possible, could the biographer hope to make a biography; and blame him not that he did what it had been the worst fault not to do. . . .
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The other censure, of Scott being made unheroic, springs from the same stem; and is, perhaps, a still more wonderful flower of it. Your true hero must have no features, but be white, stainless, an impersonal ghost-hero! But connected with this, there is a hypothesis now current . . . that Mr. Lockhart at heart has a dislike to Scott, and has done his best in an underhand treacherous manner to dishero him! Such hypothesis is actually current: he that has ears may hear it now and then. On which astounding hypothesis, if a word must be said, it can only be an apology for silence. . . . For if Mr. Lockhart is fairly chargeable with any radical defect, if on any side his insight entirely fails him, it seems even to be in this, that Scott is altogether lovely to him; that Scott’s greatness spreads out for him on all hands beyond reach of eye; that his very faults become beautiful . . . ; and of his worth there is no measure. 

I will make no comment on this passage further than to say that I have considered the principles here laid down by Carlyle to be strictly obligatory upon myself in dealing with his own remains. The free judgements which he passed on men and things were part of himself, and I have not felt myself at liberty to suppress them. Remarks which could injure any man—and very few such ever fell from Carlyle’s lips—I omit, except where indispensable. Remarks which are merely legitimate expressions of opinion I leave for the most part as they stand. As an illustration of his own wishes on this subject, I may mention that I consulted him about a passage in one of Mrs. Carlyle’s letters describing an eminent living person. Her judgement was more just than flattering, and I doubted the prudence of printing it. Carlyle merely said, “It will do him no harm to know what a sensible woman thought of him.”

As to the biography generally, I found that I could not myself write a formal life of Carlyle within measurable compass without taking to pieces his own Memoirs and the collection of Mrs. Carlyle’s letters; and this I could not think it right to attempt. Mr. Forster and John Carlyle having both died, the responsibility was left entirely to myself. A few weeks before Mr. Carlyle’s death, he asked me what I meant to do. I told him that I proposed to publish the Memoirs as soon as he was gone—those which form the two volumes of the Reminiscences. Afterwards I said that I would publish the letters about which I knew him to be most anxious. He gave his full assent, merely adding that he
trusted everything to me. The Memoirs, he thought, had
tong better appear immediately on his departure. He expected
that people would then be talking about him, and that it
would be well for them to have something authentic to
guide them.\textsuperscript{6}

These points being determined, the remainder of my task
became simplified. Mrs. Carlyle's letters are a better his­
tory of the London life of herself and her husband than
could be written either by me or by anyone. The connect­
ing narrative is Carlyle's own, and to meddle with his work
would be to spoil it. It was thus left to me to supply an
account of his early life in Scotland, the greater part of
which I had written while he was alive, and which is contained
in the present volumes. The publication of the letters will
follow at no distant period. Afterwards, if I live to do it, I
shall add a brief account of his last years, when I was in
constant intercourse with him.\textsuperscript{7}

It may be said that I shall have thus produced no "Life,"
but only the materials for a "Life."\textsuperscript{8} That is true. But I be­
lieve that I shall have given, notwithstanding, a real picture
as far as it goes; and an adequate estimate of Carlyle's
work in this world is not at present possible. He was a
teacher and a prophet in the Jewish sense of the word. The
prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah have become a part of
the permanent spiritual inheritance of mankind, because
events proved that they had interpreted correctly the signs
of their own times, and their prophecies were fulfilled.
Carlyle, like them, believed that he had a special message
to deliver to the present age. Whether he was correct in
that belief, and whether his message was a true message,
remains to be seen. He has told us that our most cherished
ideas of political liberty, with their kindred corollaries, are
mere illusions, and that the progress which has seemed to
go along with them is a progress towards anarchy and so­
cial dissolution. If he was wrong, he has misused his pow­
ers. The principles of his teaching are false. He has of­
fered himself as a guide upon a road of which he had no
knowledge; and his own desire for himself would be the
speediest oblivion both of his person and his works. If, on
the other hand, he has been right; if, like his great predeces­sors, he has read truly the tendencies of this modern age of
ours, and his teaching is authenticated by facts, then Carlyle, too, will take his place among the inspired seers, and he will shine on, another fixed star in the intellectual sky. Time only can show how this will be:

Days to come are the wisest witnesses.