In Carlyle’s Journal I find written, on the 10th of October, 1843, the following words:

One Horne writes last night about "notes for a biography" in some beggarly "spirit of the age" or other rubbish-basket he is about editing!—Re-jected, nem. con. What have I to do with their Spirits of the Age? To have my Life surveyed and commented upon by all men, even wisely, is no object with me, but rather the opposite; how much less to have it done unwisely. The world has no business with my Life; the world will never know my Life, if it should write and read a hundred "biographies" of me: the main facts of it even are known, and are like to be known, to myself alone of created men. The "goose-goddess" which they call "Fame" —ach Gott!

And again, December 29, 1848:

Darwin said to Jane, the other day, in his quizzing-serious manner, "Who will write Carlyle's Life?" The word, reported to me, set me thinking how impossible it was, and would forever remain, for any creature to write my "Life"; the chief elements of my little destiny have all along lain deep below view or surmise, and never will or can be known to any Son of Adam. I would say to my Biographer, if any fool undertook such a task, "Forbear, poor fool; let no Life of me be written; let me and my bewildered wrestlings lie buried here, and be forgotten swiftly of all the world. If thou write, it will be mere delusions and hallucinations. The confused world never understood, nor will understand, me and my poor affairs; not even the persons nearest me could guess at them; —nor was it found indispensable; nor is it now, for any but an idle purpose, profitable, were it even possible. Silence,—and go thy ways elsewhither!"
Reluctantly, and only when he found that his wishes would not and could not be respected, Carlyle requested me to undertake the task which he had thus described as hopeless; and placed materials in my hands which would make the creation of a true likeness of him, if still difficult, yet no longer as impossible as he had declared it to be. Higher confidence was never placed by any man in another. I had not sought it, but I did not refuse to accept it. I felt myself only more strictly bound than men in such circumstances usually are, to discharge the duty which I was undertaking with the fidelity which I knew to be expected from me. Had I considered my own comfort or my own interest, I should have sifted out or passed lightly over the delicate features in the story. It would have been as easy as it would have been agreeable for me to construct a picture, with every detail strictly accurate, of an almost perfect character. An account so written would have been read with immediate pleasure. Carlyle would have been admired and applauded, and the biographer, if he had not shared in the praise, would at least have escaped censure. He would have followed in the track marked out for him by a custom which is all but universal. When a popular statesman dies, or a popular soldier or clergyman, his faults are forgotten, his virtues only are remembered in his epitaph. Everyone has some frailties, but the merits and not the frailties are what interest the world; and with great men of the ordinary kind whose names and influence will not survive their own generation, to leave out the shadow, and record solely what is bright and attractive, is not only permissible, but is a right and honourable instinct. The good should be frankly acknowledged with no churlish qualifications. But the pleasure which we feel, and the honour which we seek to confer, are avenged, wherever truth is concealed, in the case of the exceptional few who are to become historical and belong to the immortals. The sharpest scrutiny is the condition of enduring fame. Every circumstance which can be ascertained about them is eventually dragged into light. If blank spaces are left, they are filled by rumour or conjecture. When the generation which knew them is gone, there is no more tenderness in dealing with them; and if their friends have been indiscreetly reserved, idle tales
which survive in tradition become stereotyped into facts. Thus the characters of many of our greatest men, as they stand in history, are left blackened by groundless calumnies, or credited with imaginary excellences, a prey to be torn in pieces by rival critics, with clear evidence wanting, and prepossessions fixed on one side or the other by dislike or sympathy.

Had I taken the course which the "natural man" would have recommended, I should have given no faithful account of Carlyle. I should have created "delusions and hallucinations" of the precise kind which he who was the truest of men most deprecated and dreaded; and I should have done it not innocently and in ignorance, but with deliberate insincerity, after my attention had been specially directed by his own generous openness to the points which I should have left unnoticed. I should have been unjust first to myself—for I should have failed in what I knew to be my duty as a biographer. I should have been unjust secondly to the public. Carlyle exerted for many years an almost unbounded influence on the mind of educated England. His writings are now spread over the whole English-speaking world. They are studied with eagerness and confidence by millions who have looked and look to him not for amusement, but for moral guidance, and those millions have a right to know what manner of man he really was. It may be, and I for one think it will be, that when time has levelled accidental distinctions, when the perspective has altered, and the foremost figures of this century are seen in their true proportions, Carlyle will tower far above all his contemporaries, and will then be the one person of them about whom the coming generations will care most to be informed. But whether I estimate his importance rightly or wrongly, he has played a part which entitles everyone to demand a complete account of his character. He has come forward as a teacher of mankind. He has claimed "he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes."² He has denounced as empty illusion the most favourite convictions of the age. No concealment is permissible about a man who could thus take on himself the character of a prophet and speak to it in so imperious a tone.

Lastly, I should have been unjust to Carlyle himself and
to everyone who believed and has believed in him. To have been reticent would have implied that there was something to hide, and, taking Carlyle all in all, there never was a man—I at least never knew of one—whose conduct in life would better bear the fiercest light which can be thrown upon it. In the grave matters of the law he walked for eighty-five years unblemished by a single moral spot. There are no “sins of youth” to be apologized for. In no instance did he ever deviate even for a moment from the strictest lines of integrity. He had his own way to make in life, and when he had chosen his profession, he had to depend on popularity for the bread which he was to eat. But although more than once he was within sight of starvation he would never do less than his very best. He never wrote an idle word, he never wrote or spoke any single sentence which he did not with his whole heart believe to be true. Conscious though he was that he had talents above those of common men, he sought neither rank nor fortune for himself. When he became famous and moved as an equal among the great of the land, he was content to earn the wages of an artisan, and kept to the simple habits in which he had been bred in his father’s house. He might have had a pension had he stooped to ask for it; but he chose to maintain himself by his own industry, and when a pension was offered him it was declined. He despised luxury; he was thrifty and even severe in the economy of his own household; but in the times of his greatest poverty he had always something to spare for those who were dear to him. When money came at last, and it came only when he was old and infirm, he added nothing to his own comforts, but was lavishly generous with it to others. Tender-hearted and affectionate he was beyond all men whom I have ever known. His faults, which in his late remorse he exaggerated, as men of noblest natures are most apt to do, his impatience, his irritability, his singular melancholy, which made him at times distressing as a companion, were the effects of temperament first, and of a peculiarly sensitive organisation; and secondly of absorption in his work and of his determination to do that work as well as it could possibly be done. Such faults as these were but as the vapours which hang about a mountain, inseparable from the nature of the man. They have to be told because without them his character cannot be
understood, and because they affected others as well as
himself. But they do not blemish the essential greatness
of his character, and when he is fully known he will
not be loved or admired the less because he had infirmities
like the rest of us. Carlyle's was not the imperious grandeur
which has risen superior to weakness and reigns cold and
impassive in distant majesty. The fire in his soul burnt red
to the end, and sparks flew from it which fell hot on those
about him, not always pleasant, not always hitting the right
spot or the right person; but it was pure fire notwithstanding,
fire of genuine and noble passion, of genuine love for
all that was good, and genuine indignation at what was
mean or base or contemptible. His life was not a happy one,
and there were features in it for which, as he looked back,
he bitterly reproached himself. But there are many, perhaps
the majority of us, who sin deeper every day of their lives
in these very points in which Carlyle sinned, and without
Carlyle's excuses, who do not know that they have anything
to repent of. The more completely it is understood, the
more his character will be seen to answer to his intellectual
teaching. The one is the counterpart of the other. There
was no falsehood and there was no concealment in him.
The same true nature showed itself in his life and in his
words. He acted as he spoke from his heart, and those who
have admired his writings will equally admire himself when
they see him in his actual likeness.

I, for myself, concluded, though not till after long hesi­
tation, that there should be no reserve, and therefore I have
practised none. I have published his own autobiographical
fragments. I have published an account of his early years
from his Letters and Journals. I have published the Letters
and Memorials of his wife which describe (from one as­
pect) his life in London as long as she remained with him.
I supposed for a time that if to these I added my personal
recollections of him, my task would be sufficiently ac­
complished; but I have thought it better on longer con­
sideration to complete his biography as I began it. He
himself quotes a saying of Goethe that on the lives of re­
markable men ink and paper should least be spared. I must
leave no materials unused to complete the portrait which
I attempt to draw.