When drawn on a timeline each era of history seems relatively equal to the next. Each period contains events relevant to that time period and to society as a whole. Often these events are more of a physical nature. In drawing a timeline one ceases to acknowledge the occurrences of history as actual events that happened to genuine people who were able to think and breathe. Historians often neglect the basest of characteristics when defining of an event. Often one may cite a battle as a turning point in a war or an invention as a vital element of an economic turn but this, though not without merit, neglects the actual reason for any event. Those who have chosen to think, create history. The ability to reason is said to be what separates man from beast. How then can an accurate picture of a history of man be conveyed without a depiction of the thoughts of those who exist in the time one seeks to interpret?

To set out to trace the history of thoughts or the thoughts of history, a task akin to writing all of the works of Jesus\(^1\), one must acknowledge those that are aware of the gravity

\(^1\) In John’s Gospel he ends by saying, “And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that the world itself would not contain the books that would be written.” John 21:25 NASB
of thought are a pertinent source. In making an accurate interpretation of a time period it is necessary to assess those that have taken a didactic approach. A study of those that seek to teach and how they were interpreted can tell volumes about a people.

In seeking out a time when thought reached it’s peak a historian will wade through the Classical literature and on up through the Middle Ages until we see an explosion of sources of thought that historians call the Renaissance. This ‘renaissance’ and along with it the mechanical printing press began the steady incline of knowledge. Knowledge became cheap and attainable and in most cases stimulated thought amongst people who had, throughout history, had their thoughts told to them. Several volumes would be needed to discuss the aspects of thought and knowledge that changed at this time. The Victorians will be focused on in this work primarily because of the propagation of knowledge that takes place in this period.

The Victorian age was when, before mass media, the beginnings of a society of knowledgeable masses came to fruition. Literacy in London during the Victorian period was at all time highs but more than the ability to read it was what the masses were reading. Widely read among Victorians were the
Dorothy’s great novelists like Charles Dickens, poets like Robert Burns, and thinkers like Thomas Carlyle. Among these Dickens has remained in the pantheon of literature long after his death due to his extremely proficient prose and precise characterizations. Burns remains a Scottish hero while fellow Scotsman Carlyle remains relatively unknown to the layman. Yet Thomas Carlyle exemplifies the Victorians. Historian Carlisle Moore called Carlyle the most Victorian of Victorians. This can be seen through his influence on his peers, the opinions of historians and through his works.

Before one can judge a man they must know his perspective. To know truly where a man comes from and how he has come to stand where he stands one must know his past. Thomas Carlyle was born to humble Scottish parents just five years prior to the end of the 18th century. Carlyle’s birthplace, Ecclefechan, Dumfries and Galloway, Scotland, was a south centrally located town between Glasgow and the south on the English-Scottish border. Its location meant that most post would come through here and this provided for a more substantial town population of

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2 Schatz-Jakobsen, 183
nearly twelve hundred.\textsuperscript{3} The Carlyle’s were strict Calvinists, the remnants of which can be seen in some of Carlyle’s work.

Carlyle’s father, James, made his living as a stonemason. This type of work made his father a tough man that Thomas admired. His mother was Margaret Aitken, whom James had married after his first wife had died young. Thomas father pushed him to be educated, a fact he thanks him for later. His sometimes-meager salary building houses across the Scottish countryside made it difficult to pay for Thomas’ schooling but the family managed. To James his son’s education would lead to a preaching position in the church so it held great import for him. Thomas attended Annan Academy, though not without the grace of a local minister. John Johnstone liberated Thomas from the parish school because of the family’s close association with the church. He taught Thomas Latin and helped with tuition, without both of these charities Carlyle would not have been able to attend a public school and eventually Edinburgh University. At Annan, Thomas was miserable. His childhood was filled with the close-knit family and church lives he desired and public school offered none of the comforts he preferred. Despite this lack of comfort Thomas persevered and excelled in Mathematics and

\textsuperscript{3} Campbell, 1.
English though he was quite proficient in Latin and French as well. In the end Annan Academy accomplished its task, which was to prepare young mind for university.⁴

Carlyle’s time at Edinburgh University is punctuated by two factors. First, Carlyle begins to see life outside his own family. The City of Edinburgh and particularly the area near the university had fallen into disrepair when the upper class moved across the bridge from the Old Town to the New Town at the beginning of the 19th century. His living conditions contributed to how much time he spent on the campus and in the library. This is the second factor in Carlyle’s growth while at university. Carlyle had a library. The 70,000 books available in the Edinburgh University library, though not comprehensive, laid a substantial base for Carlyle. In his semi-autobiographical Sartor Resartus, Carlyle mentions what he learned from university. He gained the knowledge of how to read in various languages so that he could then form his own opinions of the works he read. His childhood encouragement in intellectual studies gave Carlyle a thirst for knowledge.

More important information about Carlyle’s formative years concerns his father. The amount of respect Carlyle had for his

⁴ Campbell, 4-6.
father was apparent always but became more evident upon the publishing of Reminiscences, a biographical collection of personal writings of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle. The first thing in this work that was pieced together by close friend, James Froude, was Thomas Carlyle’s reaction to news of the death of his father. Feelings of respect and pride, not sadness or regret, characterize his feelings concerning his father’s death, though we see later on that the death of his wife throws Carlyle into a deep depression. This quasi-memoir of his father contains in it the most eloquent and measured characterizations of his father.

Carlyle though he lost his faith at Edinburgh, saw his father’s commitment to God as commendable and as something he envied. It is probable that Carlyle’s deep respect for the ‘work’ of man comes from a deep respect of the work his father did as a stonemason. The emotive portrayal of his father was enough to bring a man to tears. He said of his father,

The force that had been lent my Father he honourably expended in manful welldoing: a portion of this planet bears beneficent traces of his strong Hand and strong Head; nothing that he undertook to do but he did it faithfully

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5 Symons, 516.
and like a true man...[he] made me whatever I am or may become. Let me not mourn for my Father; let me do worthily of him; so shall he still live, even Here, in me; and his worth plant itself honourably forth into new generations.  

A more eloquent eulogy could not have been given, though another one was. Carlyle only two days prior to his father’s funeral gained notice of his death. The railroad in their infancy could not carry him home on such short notice so he was unable to attend his father’s burial. This fact troubled Carlyle but he handled his father’s death well. In the case of another passing Carlyle did not fair as well.  

Jane Welsh and Thomas Carlyle were a somewhat typical Victorian married couple. They were very fond of each other but intimacy was awkward for them. Carlyle, as in the case of his father, showed his appreciation for his wife after her death in 1866. Thomas though took her death quite hard and expressed regret in not really getting to know his wife as well as he would have liked to. The second section of Reminiscences was, similar to the first, an ode to his passed wife. The prose of this second tribute was less professional and more emotional.  

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6 Symons, 516-7.

7 Campbell, 16.
One can see in Carlyle’s work from this point on that he has a more bleak and depressive outlook on life.\(^8\)

Carlyle’s life, as he might say, was a sum of his works. Carlyle’s friend and closest disciple, James Froude, published the Carlyles’ biographical work, Reminiscences under much scrutiny because of its candid nature. Carlyle thought the idea of a biography was ridiculous and his works would standalone but that perhaps his celebrity demanded it.\(^9\)

Thomas Carlyle has a definitive influence on so many people in the Victorian times. He has two distinct disciples. One is his controversial biographer, Froude, whose career is noted only through Carlyle. Also John Ruskin who, under the direction of Carlyle, switched from criticism of art to criticism of politics. Later Ruskin argued for more state involvement in economic affairs in his *Unto the Last*. Historian Benjamin Lippincott attributes Carlyle’s negative redaction of laissez faire economics as his most influential work besides his

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\(^8\) Campbell, 66.

\(^9\) Gurstein, 79.
doctrine of work. Froude and Ruskin owe a great debt to Carlyle and both acknowledge the influence he had on them.

Another instance of Carlyle’s influence is less realized but no less obvious. Fred Smith points to the realization of the connection between Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* and Carlyle’s first great work *Sartor Resartus*, literally ‘the tailor re-tailored’. Smith quite exhaustively draws some quite interesting parallels between the two works. The most significant insinuation of influence is the fact that in 1846 Whitman reviewed Carlyle’s four greatest works. This is the year Whitman it said to have begun his work on *Leaves of Grass*. Most scholarship of the time contends an Emersonian influence for *Leaves of Grass*, yet this only goes to show Carlyle’s influence more.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was not free from the influence of Carlyle. Having read Carlyle’s works in translating Goethe and his *Life of Schiller* Emerson was aware of Carlyle as early as 1833 though he did not know his name calling him “the Germanick new-light writer.” This anonymity changed upon Emerson’s return from his pilgrimage to Europe. Emerson became Carlyle’s

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10 Lippincott, 8.
unofficial agent in America. He promoted *Sartor Resartus* feverishly and introduced the American literary world to Carlyle as a whole. It is also safe to say that Carlyle’s work in translating the German Transcendentalist of the previous century would not have been accessible by Emerson. American Transcendentalism, though fundamentally different from the German variety, may have a very different face if it were not for the work of Carlyle.

Leo Tolstoy, perhaps the greatest novelist of the modern era, showed signs of having read and realized the importance of Carlyle’s work. Historian Ilia Stambler explores the oppositional approaches Carlyle and Tolstoy took in *On Heroes, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History* and *War and Peace* respectively. Each is influenced by the time in which they live yet they argue something that is timeless. The issue of power and its use among those in power is central in these two works. There is circumstantial evidence that Tolstoy could have intended this as a rebuttal to the growth in popularity that Carlyle’s idea had attained. The opinions of the hero put forth by Carlyle are diametrically opposed in Tolstoy’s works. ¹¹

¹¹ Stambler, 737-8.
There are specific instances where Tolstoy heaps insults on the “great man” theory of Carlyle. Stambler points out that though Tolstoy calls Carlyle’s ideas that of the universal historian he sees no merit in his theories. Exemplified through Tolstoy’s words we can see the contempt he holds for those he thinks have not though history through, stating, “the universal historians have stop half-way.”  

These parallels between Tolstoy and Carlyle are less tenuous than others have suggested. Though there is no direct evidence of his knowledge of Carlyle the facts seem to support this conclusion.

Herein lies the rub. Just because Carlyle is influential should means he is important. Yet some may say that he merely incited people by his somewhat obnoxious and boisterous though beautiful prose. This may be true and is wholly improvable. Many modern literary critics say Carlyle is unreadable and does not apply to any time but his own. This also may be true. But truly, does not, for this case at least, the ends justify the means? Men like Nietzsche and Edgar Allen Poe sought to discredit him specifically. Poe targeted his idea of heroism as idolatry and attacked Carlyle’s apparent narcissism in saying

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12 Ibid., 740.
that Carlyle equated his works to that of the Koran as being infallible. Nietzsche calls Carlyle’s life a farce and points out that his search for faith does not mean that he is faithful along with insinuating he is a blasphemer.\(^{13}\) If Carlyle had no merit what purpose would there be for such great men to even speak of him? Carlyle is mentioned by almost every author of his time as a source or at least as an author in their library. It does not matter if their opinion of him is bad or good; the fact that he is mentioned so often and thought of as someone who must be answered shows how large his sphere of influence was at the time. He was possibly the most famous and influential literary figure of his time and perhaps of the modern era.

A true assessment of Carlyle cannot be taken without asking what historians thought of him. Nearly all Victorians champion him as their prophet. Carlyle is mentioned first in almost every source on Victorian literature. He is praised by men like Darwin and Emerson and historians call him unequaled in modern times.\(^{14}\) The truth of why lies in biographer Ian Campbell’s assessment of Carlyle’s legacy. Campbell, writing in the early

\(^{13}\) Salmon, 1-3.

\(^{14}\) Lippincott, 6.
1970’s points out that Carlyle had almost no admirers, thus the outpouring of emotion on his death seems disproportionate.\(^{15}\) Campbell also posits that the presence of biographical work after his life moved interest from his works to his life and immaculately preserved correspondences with the great literary minds of the age.\(^{16}\) A study in Carlyle through historians shows a lack of interest in his works except to cite him as a possible influence. Amongst less studied circles Carlyle is unmentioned but any work on Victorian literature begins with a thorough examination of Carlyle.

*Sartor Resartus* serves to introduce Victorian thought while referencing romantic thought thus drawing its own line.\(^{17}\) Carlyle serves as the bridge between Romanticism and Victorianism.\(^{18}\) This distinction alone merits further investigation into Carlyle. The scholarship on Carlyle suggests that without him the transition from Romanticism would not have gone so smoothly.

The consciousness of Carlyle and the Romantics leads to an increase in self-consciousness, this increase in self-

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\(^{15}\) Campbell, xi.

\(^{16}\) Campbell, xii.

\(^{17}\) Jakobsen, 189.

\(^{18}\) Schatz-Jakobsen, 183-4.
consciousness reveals not the great men they hope to see but the limitations of man in nature and thus a transition to the Victorian era characterized by literature to fix mankind.¹⁹

Is Thomas Carlyle that important to Victorian literature? The answer is a resounding yes. Carlyle defines Victorian literature in every way. He is the original and everlasting ‘Sage of Chelsea’ whose influence can be seen and felt around the world since he began his work. One would find it a challenge to read some work of literature published since Carlyle that has not been influenced by him. He is the ultimate “man of letters” that he himself fondly calls the most heroic of heroes.

¹⁹ Ibid., 194.