

Assessing World Views

By Susan Sonnabend

Thomas Carlyle wrote in the Victorian period, a time of change and confusion. Society was marked by “half-ness,” torn between faith and science, institution and individuality. In *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, Carlyle addresses the innovation that books presented. He introduces the Hero as a Man of Letters, revolutionizing multiple aspects of Victorian England. Specifically, Carlyle claims that the art of writing and printing renders a new form of universities, the church, and parliament. He claims that books have revolutionized the institutions, even suggesting that such integral figures as professors are obsolete. In today’s world, however, one would stand to argue that his assertion is not fully accurate. Looking at today’s institutions, mere books and writing would not suffice to maintain societal harmony or productiveness.

Carlyle asserts that books “metamorphosed all Universities” (870). He lauds books as a vehicle for bringing knowledge to the people. Books are a viable means of bringing their contents to various regions of readers thirsty for intellectual stimulation. He praises the virtues of speech, while conversely discounting the value of professors who calculate lecture and discussion. Without professors to direct a class in their studies, how would schools have any semblance of productivity? Books and today’s technological advances certainly trivialize the dire need for an instructor, yet without an authority on a subject, floundering students would sink further in confusion. Pupils would have no direction in their studies. When Carlyle asserts that books are integral to the universities, he is certainly correct. However, he errs when he claims the “Professors have done their best for us.” Professors continue striving to do their best for students, helping them understand the art of writing and all that books have to offer.

Along with the universities, Carlyle addresses the renewal books bring to the church institutions. Worship changed with the introduction of the printing press; it granted liturgy materials. Church members discovered the delight of reading materials as well as hearing God's Word purely from the minister. Carlyle also mentions the correlation in a country between the media and the churches as he states, "I many a time say, the writers of Newspapers, Pamphlets, Poems, Books, these *are* the real working effective Church of a modern country." In this statement, Carlyle indicates his belief that the church's work spanned beyond the place of worship. Today, a church seeking new members or more zeal must look beyond books. A vast majority of churches within the WELS church body are seeking more human, one-on-one interactions as a means of attracting and keeping members. As in universities, the church utilizes books as a supplement to the human interaction necessary to reach members.

On the same terms, Carlyle contends that books impact Parliament. "Printing, which comes necessarily out of Writing, I say often, is equivalent to Democracy." Books serve the means of spreading ideas more widely, helping democracy become more fully visible. Prior to books, those brave and educated enough to speak and influence the people were the ones who held the power. Today, books and humans can interact to serve the greater needs of a nation. Written word helps inform the people, yet strong leadership is vital for peaceful relations among nations. Purely relying on books for democracy would result in mass chaos, each individual interpreting written material differently.

In *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, Thomas Carlyle firmly endorses the value of the written word as a work of heroes and a crucial introduction to society. However, he fails to present the ideas of human interaction as a means of helping to understand the material. While books are useful in education, students need professors to aid in learning.

Church bodies need ministers to reach out to people in need of questions about their faith.

Government needs leadership to complement the multitude of written laws and ideas about the way a nation should be managed. Furthermore, one must note that the wealthy, educated sector of the population is the first to receive the material and put it to use. By this virtue, books cannot stand alone as a means of “being” such institutions as universities, the church, or government.