

On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History is a book by Thomas Carlyle, published by James Fraser, London, in 1841. It is a collection of six lectures given in May 1840 about prominent historical figures. It lays out Carlyle's belief in the importance of heroic leadership.

The book was based on a course of lectures Carlyle had given. *The French Revolution: A History* had brought Carlyle recognition, but little money, so friends organized courses of public lectures, drumming up an audience and selling one guinea tickets. Though Carlyle disliked lecturing, he discovered a facility for it; more importantly, it brought in much-needed income. Between 1837 and 1840, Carlyle delivered four such courses of lectures, the final of which was on "Heroes". His lecture notes were transformed into the book, with the effects of the spoken discourse still discernible in the prose.

Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* remains one of the best repositories in English of the development in late Romanticism called heroic vitalism. The book, a series of six lectures that Carlyle delivered to London audiences in 1840, represents not so much soundly based ideas about the making of history as it does Carlyle's view of how the world would be if powerful and inspired people were to have the power he thought they deserved. The book thus became England's contribution to the nineteenth century cult of the "great man," a dream that was most seductively attractive to intellectuals forced to put their ideas in the marketplace with all the other merchants, but closed off from the real power that was being exercised in the newly industrialized world by economic entrepreneurs.

This work has received mixed reviews from readers and critics. Some consider it inferior; even Carlyle made disparaging remarks about it in his later years. Others, however, find in the volume a clear sense of the values that Carlyle preached consistently in his writings from his earliest sustained social analysis, *Sartor Resartus* (1833-1834), to his later historical writings on Oliver Cromwell and Frederick the Great.

Like most nineteenth century historians and philosophers, Carlyle promotes the notion that progress is good and inevitable; unlike many of his contemporaries, however, he does not believe that the passage of time in and of itself assures progress. Only when persons of heroic temperament step forward to lead the masses can true progress for society occur. The persons featured in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* were just such people; their actions, and their willingness to live in accordance with the vision of society that motivated them, changed history for the better. Carlyle finds no one around him acting in a way to set his own age right; given to commercialism and self-gratification, the people of nineteenth century Europe lack the will or the leadership to make something worthwhile of their lives. If his work is not totally successful in conveying a portrait of heroism good for all times, it does succeed in showing Carlyle's disenchantment with the nineteenth century and its lack of heroes.

Carlyle's basic idea is that all history is the making of great persons, gifted with supreme power of vision or action. It thus becomes one's duty to "worship Heroes." We all of us reverence and must ever reverence Great Men: this is, to me, the living rock amid all the rushings-down whatsoever; the one fixed point in modern revolutionary history, otherwise as if bottomless and shoreless.

In the world of onrushing liberalism and industrialism, with the memory of God ever dimming through the growth of science and skepticism, Carlyle needs a faith and develops one based on the worship of great men.

This faith, dubious enough under restrictions of law and order, not to mention the existence of great women, becomes even more dubious as handled by Carlyle. As the six lectures progress, he moves from myth to history with no clear distinction. He offers leaders of religious movements, great poets, and military conquerors as equally great or heroic. Hero worship not only should be devout; it actually was. In Carlyle's estimation, love of God is virtually identical with loyalty to a leader. Despite his scorn for business activity and its operators, Carlyle's heroes are all men of practical intelligence. He values the same kind of industriousness, resoluteness, and obvious sincerity that could serve to build economic as well as political or clerical empires.

On May 12, 1840, Thomas Carlyle gave his third lecture in his series on Heroes. Titled "The Hero as Poet," it looked into the lives of Dante and Shakespeare. His previous lectures, he said, dealt with the production of older ages, "not to be repeated in the new." Divinity as hero and prophet as hero would never happen again, he said. Mankind had advanced to the point where he no longer stooped to such low intellectual things. Or, "if we do not now reckon a Great Man literally divine, it is that our notions of God, of the supreme unattainable Fountain of Splendor, Wisdom, and Heroism, are ever rising *higher....*"

Ah, but the poet! He believed we would always have poet-heroes. "...the hero...can be Poet, Prophet, King, Priest or what you will according to the kind of world he finds himself born into."

Shakespeare, Carlyle says, "has given us the Practice of body" whereas Dante "has given us the Faith or soul." Shakespeare worked as the Renaissance was unfolding, which gave him advantages Dante didn't have. Although, Macaulay said that the mark of a greater poet was a great work produced in a civilized age. Easy for a poet to produce a great work in a dark age, harder in a civilized age. How exactly a civilized age is supposed to hinder a poet is something I haven't quite figured out, but I'm not calling Macaulay wrong. Shakespeare clearly wrote in an age more civilized than the age of Dante's labors. Those more astute than I will have to figure out which had the greater environmental handicap.

Carlyle believes Shakespeare could have done so much more than he did, in terms of politics or public leadership. The greatness of his verse demonstrates this. In the end he says, "Yet I call Shakspeare [sic] greater than Dante, in that he fought truly, and did conquer."

As was his way, Carlyle did not confine himself to these two giants of the world of the poets. Goethe, aMirabeau, Tieck, and even Napoleon are all mentioned in almost the same breath as the hero as poet.

Questions:

1. Role of poet in society
2. Why Carlyle is calling poet a hero.
3. Shakespeare's role as a poet according to Carlyle