

# An Original Letter of Thomas Carlyle

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We print below the autograph letter of Thomas Carlyle, mentioned in our last volume—in it Carlyle discusses the relative interest for biographical study of the lives of George Fox and John (or Robert) Lilburne. Although both brothers are mentioned, it appears from the references that John was really the subject of the comparison.

Towers (*British Biography*) has a Life of R. Lilburne,—not worth very much,

Biographia Britannica (§ *Lilburne*) is considerably better as an introduction to farther researches.

Clarendon (*Rebellion*) gives various anecdotes and details ; which are to be regarded mostly as mere rumours, and false, or unworthy of belief without better proof.

Goodwin (*Commonwealth*) contains accurate notices of L.'s public quarrels, trials and pamphleteerings : this and *Biog. Britan.*, with *Cromwell's Letters and Speeches* (2d. edit<sup>n</sup>), and the assiduous study of L.'s own writings, will afford a sufficient introduction to the "50,000 unread Pamphlets" (King's Pamphlets) in the British Museum, where alone the more minute history of R. L. can be completely investigated.

Provided always it can be considered worthy of such loving labour as the investigation of it needs? A contentious, disloyal, commonplace man ; little distinguished save by his ill nature, his blindness to superior worth, and the dark internal fermentation of his own poor angry limited mind, does not seem to me an apt hero for a "Life and Times."—Provided also some Bookseller will undertake to publish such a work, when once after long toil it is got completed?—

I should consider George Fox himself, whose history could be inquired into with somewhat less labour, and which after several old and new Books on it, is still utterly dark, to be a much worthier subject.—Take his own huge monster of a *Journal* ; select with rigorous candid insight what is still interesting and alive to a man of the year 1848,—which will not probably equal the hundredth part, I should guess ;—

accurately date, specificate, and in every way illuminate, and bring vividly before the mind that hundredth part; strictly suppressing (knowing and *not* mentioning) the other 99 parts, that are *dead* to all intelligent men of the year 1848. Here, I think, were the basis of a really useful, honourable and important labour in the field of English History;—far superior to any that the poor capabilities of that Puritan Thersites,\* poor Freeborn John could ever yield.

T. CARLYLE

Chelsea,  
21 Feby, 1848.

\* “Thersites, a deformed and ill bred fellow in the Grecian army, a great enemy to Achilles and Ulysses.” See Ainsworth’s *Latin Dic.*

C. WISE. 8. 3 mo. 1883.

The footnote is added in pencil.

The envelope is addressed: “Mr. Thomas Wise, junr., 12, Portsea Place, Connaught Place”; the stamp is upside-down; on the back are the words: “Jno. Bright, 51, Wimpole St., Cavendish Square.” The letter is now in D (Port. 40, 109).

Robert Lilburne (1613-1665), brother of John, entered the army of Parliament and became M.P. for the East Riding of Yorkshire. *D.N.B.*

John Lilburne (“Freeborn John”) was born in or about 1614 and died in 1657. It was while in Dover Castle that he embraced the tenets of Quakerism, under the influence of Luke Howard.

See his *Resurrection of John Lilburne, now a Prisoner in Dover-Castle*, 1656; also Smith’s *Catalogue*; *D.N.B.*; *F.P.T.*; *Jnl. F.H.S.* ix.: etc.

“The mixture of old Friends and almost baby Friends at a meal often resulted in amusing episodes. It was at a Quarterly Meeting dinner that during the silence preceding the meal, an old Friend, having devoutly shut her eyes, the impressive stillness was broken by a youthful member of the family, who, gazing into the devout Friend’s face, said with loud reproof: ‘Wake up, lady, you mussunt go to sleep now!’ The Friend continued to keep her eyes shut, and no faintest smile passed across her lips.”

From *Some Little Quakers in their Nursery*, by the late M. Carta Sturge, new ed., 1929.