

**THE LIFE OF JOHN
STERLING, 1851**

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The Life of John Sterling, 1851 by Thomas Carlyle

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THOMAS CARLYLE

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STERLING, 1851**

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OF
JOHN STERLING.

BY
THOMAS CARLYLE.

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LIFE OF JOHN STERLING.

PART FIRST.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY.

NEAR seven years ago, a short while before his death in 1844, John Sterling committed the care of his literary Character and printed Writings to two friends, Archdeacon Hare and myself. His estimate of the bequest was far from overweening; to few men could the small sum-total of his activities in this world seem more inconsiderable than, in those last solemn days, it did to him. He had burnt much; found much unworthy; looking steadfastly into the silent continents of Death and Eternity, a brave man's judgments about his own sorry work in the field of Time are not apt to be too lenient. But, in fine, here was some portion of his work which the world had already got hold of, and which he could not burn. This too, since it was not to be abolished and annihilated, but must still for some time live and act, he wished to be wisely settled, as the rest had been. And so it was left in charge to us, the survivors, to do for it what we judged fittest, if indeed doing nothing did not seem the fittest to us. This message, communicated after his decease, was naturally a sacred one to Mr. Hare and me.

After some consultation on it, and survey of the difficulties

and delicate considerations involved in it, Archdeacon Hare and I agreed that the whole task, of selecting what Writings were to be reprinted, and of drawing-up a Biography to introduce them, should be left to him alone; and done without interference of mine:—as accordingly it was,¹ in a manner surely far superior to the common, in every good quality of editing; and visibly everywhere bearing testimony to the friendliness, the piety, perspicacity and other gifts and virtues of that eminent and amiable man.

In one respect, however, if in one only, the arrangement had been unfortunate. Archdeacon Hare, both by natural tendency and by his position as a Churchman, had been led, in editing a Work not free from ecclesiastical heresies, and especially in writing a Life very full of such, to dwell with preponderating emphasis on that part of his subject; by no means extenuating the fact, nor yet passing lightly over it (which a layman could have done) as needing no extenuation; but carefully searching into it, with the view of excusing and explaining it; dwelling on it, presenting all the documents of it, and as it were spreading it over the whole field of his delineation; as if religious heterodoxy had been the grand fact of Sterling's life, which even to the Archdeacon's mind it could by no means seem to be. *Hinc illæ lachrymæ.* For the Religious Newspapers, and Periodical Heresy-hunters, getting very lively in those years, were prompt to seize the cue; and have prosecuted and perhaps still prosecute it, in their sad way, to all lengths and breadths. John Sterling's character and writings, which had little business to be spoken of in any Church-court, have hereby been carried thither as if for an exclusive trial; and the mournfulest set of pleadings, out of which nothing but a misjudgment *can* be formed, prevail there ever since. The noble Sterling, a radiant child of the empyrean, clad in bright auroral hues in the memory of all that knew him,—what is he doing here in inquisitorial *sanbenito*, with nothing but ghastly spectralities prowling round him, and inarticulately screeching and gibbering what they call their judgment on him!

'The sin of Hare's Book,' says one of my Correspondents in those years, 'is easily defined, and not very condemnable,

¹ *John Sterling's Essays and Tales, with Life* by Archdeacon Hare. Parker; London, 1848.

' but it is nevertheless ruinous to his task as Biographer. He
' takes up Sterling as a clergyman merely. Sterling, I find,
' was a curate for exactly eight months ; during eight months
' and no more had he any special relation to the Church. But
' he was a man, and had relation to the Universe, for eight-
' and-thirty years ; and it is in this latter character, to which
' all the others were but features and transitory hues, that we
' wish to know him. His battle with hereditary Church-form-
' ulas was severe ; but it was by no means his one battle
' with things inherited, nor indeed his chief battle ; neither,
' according to my observation of what it was, is it successfully
' delineated or summed-up in this Book. The truth is, nobody
' that had known Sterling would recognise a feature of him
' here ; you would never dream that this Book treated of *him*
' at all. A pale sickly shadow in torn surplice is presented to
' us here ; weltering bewildered amid heaps of what you call
' " Hebrew Old-clothes ;" wrestling, with impotent impetuosity,
' to free itself from the baleful imbroglio, as if that had been
' its one function in life ; who in this miserable figure would
' recognise the brilliant, beautiful and cheerful John Sterling,
' with his ever-flowing wealth of ideas, fancies, imaginations ;
' with his frank affections, inexhaustible hopes, audacities, ac-
' tivities, and general radiant vivacity of heart and intelligence,
' which made the presence of him an illumination and inspira-
' tion wherever he went ? It is too bad. Let a man be honestly
' forgotten when his life ends ; but let him not be misremem-
' bered in this way. To be hung-up as an ecclesiastical scare-
' crow, as a target for heterodox and orthodox to practise
' archery upon, is no fate that can be due to the memory of
' Sterling. It was not as a ghastly phantasm, choked in Thirty-
' nine-article controversies, or miserable Semitic, Anti-Semitic
' street-riots,—in scepticisms, agonised self-seekings, that this
' man appeared in life ; nor as such, if the world still wishes
' to look at him, should you suffer the world's memory of him
' now to be. Once for all, it is unjust ; emphatically untrue as
' an image of John Sterling : perhaps to few men that lived
' along with him could such an interpretation of their existence
' be more inapplicable.'

Whatever truth there might be in these rather passionate