Of Sanctified Bodies and Stuffed Rumps: Reading the Medieval Narrative of Carlyle's *Past and Present*

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In his 1843 polemic *Past and Present*, Thomas Carlyle thrusts a menagerie of economically and spiritually devastated characters at us to illustrate his view of the social deprivation of nineteenth-century England. One such image is a recent papal procession in Rome. He writes:

> The old Pope of Rome, finding it laborious to kneel so long while they cart him through the streets to bless the people on *Corpus Christi Day*, complains of rheumatism; whereupon his Cardinals consult; ~ construct him, after some study, a stuffed cloaked figure, of iron and wood, with wool or baked hair; and place it in a kneeling posture. Stuffed figure, or rump of a figure; to this stuffed rump he, sitting at his ease on a lower level, joins, by the aid of cloaks and drapery, his living head and outspread hands: the rump with its cloaks kneels, the Pope looks, and holds his hands spread; and so the two in concert bless the Roman population on *Corpus Christi Day*, as well as they can.[1]

Carlyle laments that this rolling phantasm must be the most remarkable Pontiff "that has darkened God's daylight" — the representative of Christ on Earth constructed through artifice rather than Nature and literally full of empty gestures. He sees this same hollowness of gesture in the English leadership, only he sees it in the secular Aristocracy that is "no longer able to do its work" and incapable of serving the needs of those whom it leads. The English Aristocracy, Carlyle complains, does not even make an effort at staging a "show" of leadership for the people, unlike the Papal effigy. "Is our poor English Existence wholly becoming a Nightmare; full of mere Phantasms?"[2]

As a remedy for Phantasm-leadership and its attendant Corn Laws and workhouses, Carlyle advocates not necessarily a return to the distant past but rather a return to the heroic qualities he admires in past leaders. In book two of *Past and Present*, he casts a hypnotic spell on his readers with a glowing narrative of a twelfth-century abbot of Bury St. Edmunds, a figure originally found in the *Chronicle of Jocelin of Brakelond*. Carlyle's representation of the past, constructed through his textual "hero-worship" of Abbot Samson, is juxtaposed with the morally bankrupt world of Victorian England so that Samson emerges as a great heroic leader who possesses qualities Carlyle's contemporaries should strive to emulate. By revisiting the original chronicle, along with the second book of *Past and Present*, this paper will argue that Carlyle himself constructs stuffed effigies for the sake of hero-worship. The point of this essay is not to

condemn Carlyle for hypocrisy, however, but rather to discover a fresh metaphoric model through which to reread the textual body of his medieval narration.

Carlyle claims that he was first inspired to write of the abbot of Bury St. Edmunds during a trip to Suffolk in search of materials for his historical work on Cromwell. It is on this trip that he toured the ruins of the abbey (admission costing one shilling, or 10% of the average laborer's weekly pay and witnessed the dismal and hopeless despair of the St. Ives workhouse. His visit to the town "thus fixed for good in his mind the stark antithesis of the beautiful and spacious past and the harsh and grinding present, ... juxtaposition of medieval abbey and modern workhouse."[3] Touring the ruins of the abbey may not have been the sole source of inspiration for Carlyle, however, for the *Chronicle of Jocelin of Brakelond* was not an obscure manuscript but rather one of the Camden Society's most successful medieval-document publications in this time of renewed interest in historical sources[4], and was readily accessible to anyone who possessed the basic Latin skills for reading this ancient "Monk or Dog Latin" (as Carlyle describes it .[5]

One of the more influential studies of "'The Ancient Monk" is Grace Calder's analysis of the known pre-publication manuscript fragments. After comparing Carlyle's translation of the chronicle passages in the manuscripts with the published edition of *Past and Present*, Calder concludes that Carlyle is true to his historical source, and although he adds "moral warnings" to the chronicle narrative, he does not alter Jocelin's historical text. She describes Carlyle as framing the chronicle, "fashioning around Book II a gesso border of his own composition," and asserts that Carlyle does not "distort the picture he impanels for his modern spectators; the panel is Jocelin's own document."[6] According to Calder, Carlyle remains faithful to the medieval chronicle, animating Jocelin's ancient Latin in order for his Victorian readers to lose themselves in their twelfth-century hero-ancestry and recognize the moral bankruptcy of their own contemporary culture. Unfortunately, Calder does not transcribe all of the chapters found in the manuscript fragments, nor does she identify the chapters in the manuscripts that she has chosen not to transcribe. Her omission makes it difficult to evaluate thoroughly her laudatory conclusions on Carlyle's faithfulness to Jocelin without turning to the original chronicle itself. Subsequent criticism of book two seems to accept Calder's conclusions at face value, even as newer critical and theoretical positions are established.[7]

It is difficult to concur with Calder that book two is "an unsurpassed record of the Middle Ages" or even the "most representative of Carlyle's histories,"[8] for Carlyle seems to be more interested in discerning overall patterns of greater human truths in his source materials than in

transcribing them verbatim. Carlyle shows great disdain for the Dryasdust-type historian because the strictly factual, document-derived analysis "could not discern the larger patterns of truth."[9] By examining other "historical" works by Carlyle, Beverly Taylor identifies his historical method to be a process of first reading the Dryasdust documents for which he shows such disdain, establishing a pattern of "human truth" in the documents, stripping away any materials that do not fit into this pattern of experience, and then supplying new details to "embody" the established human truth.[10] Using this model, Carlyle could have chosen to use the passages in Jocelin's chronicle that support his assessment of Samson as a hero-leader while omitting any passages that do not fit the pattern of "truth," opening up a number of theoretical possibilities when critically reading his narrative of Abbot Samson.

An excellent example of Carlyle's "patterning" of human truths through a conscious use of historical details is found in Alice Chandler's recent essay, "Carlyle and the Medievalism of the North."[11] Although Carlyle is usually considered a "neo-feudalist who looked to the paternalistic and hierarchical structures of the high Middle Ages for solutions to the 'Condition of England' problem," he is very much aware of the traditional reform ethos of freedom and independence associated with Anglo-Saxon medievalism,[12] especially considering his interests in German philosophers and literature. Even though these medieval traditions of nineteenth-century reform — the fierce and independent Teutonic Liberals, and the chivalrous and hierarchical Norman Tories — were seen as polar opposites,[13] Chandler argues that Carlyle is utilizing elements from both traditions in his depiction of Abbot Samson and his patron saint, Edmund.

While the setting for *Past and Present* may be the feudal Bury St. Edmunds — within the jurisdiction of the monarchy and papacy but clearly under the thumb of the abbot — the two key figures in the narrative have been crafted as heroes who are a part of both models of medievalism. Carlyle "borrow[s] from the iconography of the Saxonists" in his depiction of Edmund, emphasizing the king's role as a social leader, while his role as a fierce warrior is suppressed. For Carlyle, Edmund is a farmer and a landlord. "A faithful Christian and a figure of self-sacrifice, he dies under torture by the Danes fighting to protect his people," but Edmund's participation in battle is a reaction to violence originating outside of him.[14] By carefully editing "the facts of his life to emphasize his benevolence and his martyrdom, Carlyle avoids having to cope with the dilemma of reconciling violence with righteousness" that arises when advocating a return to the ethos of a pre-Conquest society.

On the other hand, Abbot Samson is said to be a rough and roguish man who can easily pass himself off as a brutish Northern Scotsman.

This is unusual considering his position and power as a figure who historically would be entrenched in the trappings of a traditional feudal society. Although he is a fiercely strong leader, Carlyle tempers the abbot's "terrible anger" by emphasizing his benevolent leadership and concern for the common good of his followers. "Like the traditional figures of chivalric medievalism, Samson is a figure of self-sacrifice; but he is also the violent 'hard primitive' of Carlyle's Norse vision."[15] In the end, Chandler discerns two different political ideals that Carlyle is advocating in his Samson narrative -- the neo-feudal idea that "security in an ordered society" is more important than political freedom for the poor, and the Liberal-Saxon idea that freely choosing one's leaders is ideal. According to Chandler,

> Abbot Samson's confreres knew how to elect a leader because they lived in an organic society that acknowledged the spiritual dimension. In an age of unbelief, Victorian society cannot select a leader. Democracy is the failed substitute for heroism — a destructive philosophy, Carlyle believes, that will itself have to be destroyed.[16]

Natural leaders will rise to the top and be elected by the members of a spiritually-centered community through a common trust in the "integrity and authenticity" of that leader's character truths. At the risk of offending Carlyle's critical sensibilities by engaging in Dryasdust practices of criticism, it will prove valuable to examine the authenticity of Abbot Samson himself and what other, larger character "truths" Carlyle may be suppressing in his translation of the chronicle.

Linda Georgianna is the only recent scholar who has thoroughly examined both *Past and Present* and the original chronicle together in an effort to verify the "truth" of Carlyle's Samson since Calder's 1949 study, and no one has followed Georgianna's lead since her 1980 essay.[17] According to Georgianna, a "medievalist's view of Carlyle's use and misuse of a monastic chronicle should help pave the way for a reconsideration by twentieth-century scholars of Carlyle's historical sense,"[18] but unfortunately only one critic has cited her work.[19] Unlike critics who take Calder's analysis at face value, Georgianna's essay challenges Calder's positive assessment of Carlyle's historical veracity.

Carlyle's representation of Abbot Samson differs greatly from Jocelin's chronicle, which records the political rise and *fall* of a new abbot, elected to restore his convent after the last abbot decimated its finances. Although Carlyle asserts that the chronicle is in "confused Paper-Masses," which he is magnanimously willing to sift through as our editor,[20] Jocelin's narrative structure is well organized with a clear "thread of a story concerning his innocent and high expectations of Samson, and the disillusionment which time and experience bring."[21] Upon Samson's

election, Jocelin records the hopes of the monastery that the abbot will lift the convent out of debt and restore its privileges and reputation. About halfway through the chronicle, though, he loses faith in Abbot Samson and we encounter scene after scene demonstrating the abbot's lust for power and political control. Samson would rage in anger, stage false emotions, and, oftentimes, excommunicate those who displeased or challenged him. By the end of Jocelin's chronicle, Samson is as humanly flawed and corrupted by power and money as his predecessor was. Jocelin leaves us with a picture of Samson as an ineffective and ill abbot who has further demoralized the monks and plunged the abbey deeper into debt. The original chronicle hardly supplies us with a picture of a great leader deserving of hero-worship.

Through misquotations, omissions, and re-arrangements, Carlyle successfully appropriates Jocelin's figure of Abbot Samson and translates him into the hero-leader the project of *Past and Present* requires. Georgianna points out that Carlyle must have been consciously revising the narrative of his source, for Calder's examination of the *Past and Present* manuscript "demonstrates that Carlyle kept his copy of the chronicle close at hand, returning to it frequently in order to check and improve his accuracy."[22] Carlyle has made seemingly minor but highly effective changes to the original chronicle materials, such as suppressing passages describing Samson rigging elections, selling off convent liberties; and taking as praise King Henry's criticism of the new abbot upon his election. Carlyle writes that once he is chosen by the king, Samson genuflects, turns to face the alter, and

> in a clear tenor-tone, the Fifty-first Psalm, *Miserere mei Deus*, . . . with firm voice, firm step and head, no change in his countenance whatever. "By God's eyes," said the king, "that one, I think, will govern the abbey well." By the same oath,, . . . I too am precisely of that opinion! It is some while since I fell in with a likelier man anywhere than his new Abbot Samson.[23]

Even though he follows the details of the chronicle very closely, in the original text, the king actually says, "this elect thinks himself worthy to be the guardian of his Abbey."[24] In addition, Carlyle downplays the true reasons Samson's monks revolted against him, an episode that first marks a descent of Samson's character in Jocelin's chronicle. Carlyle buries this mutiny in the middle of his narration well before Samson's dramatic inspection of the body of St. Edmund. In contrast, the original rebellion occurs immediately after the transference of the saint and tempers the glory of its miraculous incorruption.[25]

Carlyle has created a legend of the eternal Samson by dropping his "time-curtains" onto the chronicle immediately following St. Edmund's

transference, freezing our impression of Samson as forever standing at Edmund's side, Georgianna suggests. Carlyle implies that the chronicle is cut off and lacks a sufficient conclusion, for he writes that Samson "makes for departure, departs, and — And Jocelin's Boswellean narrative, suddenly shorn through by the scissors of Destiny, ends. There are no words more; but a black line, and leaves of blank paper."[26] Looking at the original text, however, we can see that it is not Destiny who cuts short the chronicle but Carlyle himself. The original chronicle ends on a rather low note, the last line being a quote from Ovid expressing Jocelin's doubt in Samson's last promise to help the monastery: "in promises there's none but may be rich."[27] Carlyle ignores this bitter reference to the abbot's reputation for making empty promises. By cutting short the narrative and discarding the remaining four years of history with which Jocelin concludes, Carlyle suspends Samson in history following his triumphant examination and verification of the sanctity and incorruptness of the abbey's patron saint and resident relic, St. Edmund.

Establishing the sanctity of St. Edmund's body was of great importance to Samson, for the financial health of the convent depended upon the incorruptible reputation of the saint. Jocelin describes in great detail, which Carlyle translates almost word for word, Samson opening the saint's tomb and displaying the incorrupt body of Edmund in an attempt to quell rumors that the supposed 300-year-old relic had been singed in a sanctuary fire.[28] The body was viewed in a secret nocturnal ceremony with only Samson, the physician, the sacrist, and a few others in attendance. Jocelin describes the body as being so large that "a needle could scarce be placed between the saint's head or feet and the wood" of the coffin. Samson removed the layers of linen and silk that shrouded the body until he reached the final layer of linen, stating that he "not dare go further to see the sacred flesh unclothed."[29] Jocelin describes the saint's nose as extremely large and his feet turned "stiffly upwards as of a man dead that self-same day." Once Samson himself touched all of the parts of the body through the linen covering, including putting his fingers between the holy digits and checking to make sure the head was securely attached, he allowed the other monks to come closer to view the body,[30] therefore successfully demonstrating to his followers that the body was in fact still whole. But was it the holy body?

According to Antonia Gransden, the details of this 1198 viewing suggest that the body in the coffin was not 300 years old because it appears to have been embalmed. Embalming practices were not perfected until the mid-seventeenth century, and the technique used in the Middle Ages had only temporary results. Gransden asserts that this embalmed body could not have been 300 years old, not even 100 years old (the previous viewing had been in 1098 , since the process used could preserve

a body for a week at most.[31] In addition, a very large nose and stiff upwards-pointed feet are typical of bodies that have been embalmed since dehydration is a part of the process.[32] It is also very likely that this was a different body than what the coffin was originally sized for considering how tightly it fit. The fact that Samson did not remove the final layer of linen to expose the "holy flesh," that he was the only one who touched the body, and that the viewing took place at night by candlelight further suggest that this was not the body of Edmund but perhaps of a recently deceased villager.[33] Jocelin does not mention any smells of aromatics when the coffin was opened, which is another clue that this is a new body since the accounts of the previous viewings of the body in 967 and 1098 record a very powerful odor of aromatics filling the church.[34] Finally, the account of Samson lifting the hands and putting his fingers in between the dead ones is unlikely to have occurred since the body would have been too stiff, especially considering the description of the stiff feet. Gransden suggests that "Samson may have conveyed to the monks an idealized image of the body, one reflecting his own perception of a perfect, incorrupt body," for chances are none of the other monks would have been able to see clearly Samson manipulating the body considering their distance from the coffin and the low level of light.[35] This viewing very well could have been a well-orchestrated staging and performance on Samson's part to strengthen the faith in Edmund's incorruptible holy body, just as the body itself may have been constructed and sanctified by Samson.[36]

Again, the purpose of this essay is not to debunk the legend that St. Edmund's body was uncorrupted, nor is it to "prove" that Carlyle was deceptive or unfaithful to his sources; neither of these conclusions is productive in examining the relationship between Carlyle and his medieval source. However, the possibility that Samson may have staged the viewing of St. Edmund's body does give us an interesting metaphoric model of Carlyle's literary technique. Just as Samson has staged an unveiling of the saint's body for his monks, Carlyle too has staged an unveiling of Samson to his readers. Carlyle has taken the figure of Samson as he was in the beginning of Jocelin's chronicle, emptied the body cavity to prevent change and decay, and embalmed the body — essentially constructing a "sanctified" body for reverence when the body was originally a corruptible human with flaws. Although the figurative body is too big for the textual coffin, Carlyle can still make his new holy Samson fit in the space originally intended for the flawed Samson (the context of Jocelin's chronicle being this coffin . Carlyle can still get the book lid closed — and his Victorian audience is never the wiser. Carlyle also leaves the last layer of linen on the body so that we too must accept his word that this is truly Samson. Although the original Samson is fallen and decayed, Carlyle has

successfully reconstructed an ideal and incorruptible Samson for his theatrical presentation of the medieval hero-leader. Similarly, just as the sanctity of Edmund's body may have been constructed by Abbot Samson, and the sanctity of Abbot Samson's body was constructed by Carlyle, the sanctity of book two of *Past and Present* has been constructed, preserved, and is continuously reasserted by the literary critics who base their discussions on the veracity and fidelity of Carlyle's transcription/ translation of the *Chronicle of Jocelin of Brakelond*.

It is perhaps ironic that Carlyle criticizes the parade of the stuffed pope — and the Catholics in the Roman streets venerating this constructed effigy of leadership — and yet he parades around his own Phantasm demanding veneration from his readers. In turn, we the readers and critics readily comply, continuing the long tradition of hero-worship of Abbot Samson (and of Carlyle himself without investigating the substance of the figure wrapped in cere-cloth. On the other hand, even though he ridicules the artifice of the dummy parade, Carlyle still sees positive aspects of the papacy: the pope is still a representative of charity and "gives loaves to the poor," and his Jesuits were essentially the only attendants to those dying of cholera in Italy.[37] In addition, the theatricality of the Mass and processions provides a spiritual focal point in this God-less society. The stage-mechanisms of the Church, which Carlyle refers to as a "scenic phantasmagory of wax-candles, organ-blasts, Gregorian Chants, mass-brayings, wool-and-iron rumps, artistically spread out"[38] — help maintain the faith and hope of the people. This is better than the alternative hollowness of skepticism, atheism, doubt -- in other words, the self-awareness of being soul-less. While this stuffed pope may not be quite the Saxon leader spiritually elected,[39] the effigy is certainly a more promising figurehead than England's seven foot high roaming hat. Carlyle writes:

> There is in this Pope, and his practice of the Scenic Theory of Worship, a frankness which I rather honour. Not half and half, but with undivided heart does he set about worshipping by stage-machinery; as if there were now, and could again be, in Nature no other.[40]

Could not this be said for Carlyle's effigy of an abbot as well? Almost as if taking his cue from this disparaged yet respected Pope, using his own Scenic Theory of Worship, Carlyle has both constructed and sanctified an ecclesiastic figure to save his nineteenth-century audience from emptiness and despair — planting a seed of hope in them that the soul of society can be recuperated without antiseptic salt. It is only fitting that he chose Abbot Samson who had himself mastered the Scenic Theory of Worship and stagecraft to maintain the faith of his own medieval

community — to be the sanctified representation of the long-lost golden era of the Middle Ages as Carlyle has constructed it.

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NOTES:

1. Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*, ed. Richard D. Altick, (New York: New York UP, 1965 , pp. 140-1.
2. *Ibid*., p. 143.
3. J. A. W. Bennett, "Carlyle and the Medieval Past," *Reading Medieval Studies* 4 (1978 : 3-18. p. 4.
4. Grace J. Calder. *The Writing of Past and Present: A Study of Carlyle's Manuscripts*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 1949 , p. 25-7. See also Rosemary Jann's discussion of the nineteenth century's fascination with the Middle Ages as indicative of a negative reaction to industrialism and the Enlightenment in "The Condition of England Past and Present: Thomas Carlyle and the Middle Ages," *Studies in Medievalism* 1.1 (1979 : 15-31.
5. Carlyle, p. 47. It should be noted that Carlyle may have first recognized the possibility of culling a hero-narrative from the Camden Society publication after reading a review of the chronicle in the January 29, 1841 edition of the *Athenæum*. Bennett draws attention to the review when he asserts that Carlyle must have been familiar with it since it includes "literal renderings of almost all the passages he was to translate." See Bennett, p. 6.
6. Calder, pp. 31-2.
7. Cf. Gordon Hirsch, "History Writing in Carlyle's *Past and Present*," *Prose Studies* 7.3 (1984 : 225-31; G. Robert Stange, "Refractions of *Past and Present*," *Carlyle Past and Present: A Collection of New Essays*, eds. K. J. Fielding and Rodger L. Tarr, (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1976 , 96-111; John D. Rosenberg, *Carlyle and the Burden of History*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985 , pp. 118-36; and Joseph W. Childers, "Carlyle's *Past and Present*, History, and a Question of Hermeneutics," *Clio* 13.3 (1984 : 247-58.
8. Calder, p. 21.
9. Beverly Taylor, "Carlyle's Historical Imagination: Untrue Facts and Unfactual Truth," *The Victorian Newsletter* 61 (1982 : 29-31, p. 30.
10. *Ibid*., p. 30.
11. In *Medievalism in the Modern World: Essays in Honour of Leslie J. Workman*, eds. Richard Utz and Tom Shippey. (Tumhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1998 : 173-91.
12. *Ibid.,* pp. 176-7. Chandler further summarizes Carlyle's growing interest in the Northern Saxon tradition of medievalism as evidenced in the *Nibelungen Lied*, the Odin Chapter of *Heroes and Hero Worship*, and *The Early Kings of Norway*. See pp. 178-85.
13. *Ibid*., p. 175.
14. *Ibid*., p. 187.
15. *Ibid*., p. 189.
16. *Ibid*., p. 190.
17. Linda Georgianna, "Carlyle and Jocelin of Brakelond: A Chronicle Rechronicled," *The Browning Institute Studies* 8 (1980 : 103-37.
18. *Ibid*., p. 104.
19. See Richard W. Schoch, "'We Do Nothing but Enact History': Thomas Carlyle Stages the Past," *Nineteenth Century Studies* 54 (1999 : 27-53.
20. Carlyle, p. 42.
21. Georgianna, p. 111.
22. *Ibid*., p. 107.
23. Carlyle, p. 86.
24. Jocelin de Brakelond, *Cronica Jocelini de Brakelonda de rebus gestis Samsonis abbatis monasterii sancti Edmundi*, Trans. and ed. H. E. Butler. (New York: Oxford UP, 1949 , p. 23: *"Iste*

electus videtur sibi dignus abbatie custodiende." Georgianna first brought this change to my attention, p. 108.

25. Jocelin, p. 117.
26. Carlyle, p. 127.
27. Jocelin, p. 137: *"Pollicitis dives quilibet esse potest."* Ironically, this phrase is from *Ars amatoria* (1.444 , as Ovid instructs his "pupils" in the art of manipulating maidens for personal gain.
28. *Ibid*., pp. 110-1.
29. *Ibid*., p. 114.
30. *Ibid*.
31. Antonia Gransden, "The Alleged Incorruption of the Body of St. Edmund, King and Martyr." *The Antiquaries Journal* 74 (1994 : 135-68, p. 136. See also Norman Scarfe, "The Body of St. Edmund: An Essay in Necrobiology," *Suffolk Institute of Archæology* 31 (1970 : 303-17.
32. Gransden, p. 154.
33. *Ibid*.
34. *Ibid*., pp. 139, 142.
35. *Ibid*., p. 154.
36. See Schoch, pp. 46-7, for a discussion of Samson's staging and sense of performance.
37. Carlyle, p. 141.
38. *Ibid*.
39. cf. Chandler, p. 190.
40. *Ibid*., p. 142.

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