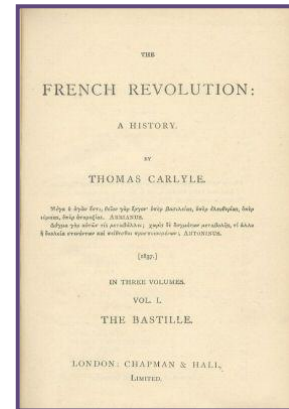


The Lost Manuscript

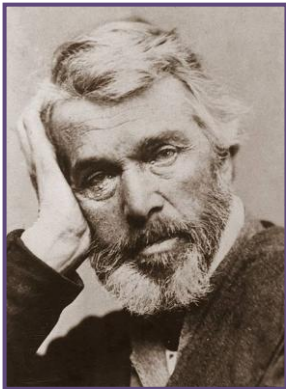
Alexander Humphreys Woollcott (1887 – 1943) was an American critic and commentator for *The New Yorker* magazine. He was the inspiration for Sheridan Whiteside, the main character in the play *The Man Who Came to Dinner* (1939) by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart.

He tells an interesting incident in the life of Thomas Carlyle (1795 – 1881), a Scottish satirical writer, essayist, historian and teacher during the Victorian era. He was the author of *The French Revolution: A History* – a three-volume work that became immensely popular.



Woollcott said when the first volume of *French Revolution* had been completed with tremendous effort and time expended, Carlyle entrusted the manuscript to John Stuart Mill for critical reading. It was a black night in Mill's life when – white-faced and trembling – he was obliged to return to Carlyle with the news that, except for a few stray sheets, the manuscript had gone up in smoke. The chambermaid had found it handy to start a fire.

When the door finally closed behind their distraught visitor, leaving them to the privacy of their despair, Carlyle said to his wife, “Well, Mill, poor fellow, is terribly cut up. We must endeavor to hide from him how serious this business is to us.”



It was serious, Woollcott explained, because the Carlyles were penniless. Above all, it was serious because he had written at white heat and, when each chapter was finished, had triumphantly torn up his notes as “toilsome things which he would never need or wish to see again.”

The next day, all the Scotch Presbyterian blood in his veins bade him order a fresh supply of paper and make in his diary this entry: “It is as if my invisible schoolmaster had torn my copybook when I showed it and said, ‘No, boy, thou must write it better.’”

Carlyle then wrote the second and third volumes before rewriting the first from scratch. The resulting work, critics said, was filled with a passionate intensity, hitherto unknown in historical writing.

Can you relate to setbacks in your life, such as that experienced by Carlyle? Maybe a house you built with creativity and energy was blown away by a storm. Perhaps an important document on your computer vanished due to a power failure before it was saved. It could have been a relationship that was lost before its promise was fulfilled.

Those are traumatic moments, to be sure. While we cannot relive the past, we can face the future with a determination to “do it better.”