

Anthony Trollope: Biography



Anthony Trollope, novelist, was the fourth son of Thomas Anthony Trollope, a barrister, and Frances (Milton) Trollope. Born at 6 Keppel Street, Bloomsbury, London, the infant was taken at the age of one year, to a house called Julians, near Harrow. The father was gloomy, ill-tempered, and improvident: his law practice gradually fell away; an expected inheritance was cut off; and the family fortunes sank lower and lower each year. In 1822 Anthony became a day-boy at Harrow School; in 1825 he was transferred to Arthur Drury's private school at Sunbury; and in 1827 he went to his father's old school, Winchester. Finally, in the spring of 1830, he went back to Harrow. Attempts at University scholarships were abortive. He was a large, awkward, uncouth boy, ill-clad and often dirty, and felt an unhappy outcast among the young aristocrats and plutocrats he met at these famous schools. At the end of 1827 his mother had gone to America with the bluestocking Frances Wright and the French painter Auguste Hervieu. Among the wildcat projects afoot at this time was the setting up of a bazaar in Cincinnati for the sale of English goods. The bazaar (a horrible architectural monstrosity) was actually built, but the enterprise failed dismally and precipitated the final ruin of the family. Sold up in April 1834, the Trollopes went to Bruges, and were now supported by the novel-writing of Frances, who had commenced authorship in 1832, with *Domestic Manners of the Americans*. Thomas Anthony Trollope died at the end of 1835.

In the summer of 1834 Anthony became an usher in a school at Brussels, hoping to learn enough French and German to enable him to take up a promised commission in an Austrian cavalry regiment. But in the autumn, by influence, he became a junior clerk in the General Post office, London. He had seven lonely years of dingy poverty in London, making few friends and earning a reputation for insubordination, until his transfer in 1841 to Banagher, Ireland, as a deputy postal surveyor, put him financially at ease and introduced him to a larger, freer, outdoor life. His awkwardness disappeared; he took up the sport of fox-hunting (which he followed enthusiastically until 1878); and in June 1844 he married Rose Heseltine, daughter of a Rotherham bank-manager.

Trollope set himself to discover the real reasons for Irish discontent. In the autumn of 1843 he began work on his first novel *The Macdermots of Ballycloran* (published 1847). This book and *The Kellys and the O'Kellys* (1848) were of a political cast, and are to be regarded as 'prentice work. After promotion in the Post Office and transfer to Mallow in 1845, Trollope was sent in the spring of 1851 to the west of England on a postal mission. Here in July 1852, he began *The Warden* (1855), in which he first found his métier as the delineator of clerical life in cathedral towns. He was in Belfast for a year from the autumn of 1853, then in Donnybrook, near Dublin. Further postal missions, to Egypt, Scotland, and the West Indies, followed in 1858-59, and in December of the latter year he settled at Waltham Cross, some twelve miles from London, as surveyor general in the Post Office at £800 a year.

He was now writing persistently. A comedy, *The Noble Jilt* (written in 1850), was set aside on the advice of an actor friend; but no less than ten new books were written or writing by the time he came to Waltham Cross. *Barchester Towers* (May 1857) showed him at the height of his powers, as the minute chronicler of events and ecclesiastical politics in the imaginary cathedral-city (founded on Winchester) and in the wider county area of Basset (Somerset) round about. The bishop's wife, Mrs. Proudie, one of the immortals of English fiction, the slimy Mr. Slope, showed him as a percipient and skilful master of characterization, and the whole scene and atmosphere of normal English mid-Victorian life in country towns was set out. *Framley Parsonage* which began serialization in the new *Cornhill Magazine* (edited by Thackeray) on January 1, 1860, consolidated his reputation and definitely made his name.

In October 1860, while visiting his mother's home in Florence, Trollope met the young American, Kate Field, who became one of his closest friends and to whom he wrote a series of delightful letters which show the gentler and more playful side of his nature. The next year he was in Boston with his wife, on a postal mission, and the two met Miss Field. In 1861, too, he was elected to the Garrick Club, which became a favorite place of resort. He was now prosperous, famous, and sought after by publishers and literary people. His friends included such figures as R. Monckton Milnes, W. E. Forster, George Eliot, and G. H. Lewes. He had business dealings with George Smith, founder of the *Dictionary of National Biography* and partner in Smith, Elder (for whom he wrote, in 1865, some hunting sketches in the new *Pall Mall Gazette*), and with Norman Macleod, editor of that somewhat sanctimonious magazine, *Good Words*, who had to pay him £500 for breach of contract over *Rachel Ray*, which Macleod found suspect for Evangelical readers. In 1865 he sank £1,250 in the *Fortnight Review* edited by G. H. Lewes, which went bankrupt and was bought out by Chapman and Hall. In 1866 he projected a history of English prose fiction, but abandoned it owing to the colossal labor involved. The same year occurred his first connection with *Blackwood's Magazine* in which *Nina Balatka* was serialized anonymously; and in the year following he published *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, in which he took leave of the famous imaginary county. An excursion into editorship of *St. Paul's Magazine* from October 1867, was soon given up, since Trollope felt unfitted for the duties. He had resigned from the Post Office in September 1867, partly from pique at the promotion of a subordinate and partly from pressure of work. From March to July 1868 he was again in the U.S.A. on postal and copyright missions; and in the autumn he stood unsuccessfully for Parliament in the Liberal interest. The novels *Phineas Finn* and *He Knew He Was Right* (both 1869) saw him at his commercial apogee; but neither repaid its cost, and he was compelled thenceforward to accept lower figures.

In May 1871 Trollope gave up Waltham House, and went on a long visit to a son in Australia. At sea as elsewhere he wrote indefatigably; on this occasion completing *Lady Anna* on the voyage out and *Australia and New Zealand* on the return journey, which he made via New Zealand and the United States. Back in England just before Christmas 1872, he settled at 39 Montagu Square, Bloomsbury, London. Here he worked, as was his habit, to a regular and rigorous schedule, assisted by his niece, Florence Bland, as secretary. Rising at 5 :30, he would write till 11; then, after breakfast, he would ride or drive. Between tea and dinner a favorite diversion was whist at the Garrick Club; and at night he would dine out or entertain some of his many friends at home. This routine was interrupted (though he never stopped writing) by journeys to Ceylon and Australia (1875), to South Africa (1877), and to Iceland (1878). The *Autobiography*—a model of

clear-headed modesty and frankness. It was written between October 1875 and April 1876, but not published until after his death.

Advancing age brought asthma with it, and even a suspicion of angina pectoris. So, in July 1880 for the benefit of better air, Trollope moved to Harting Grange, near Petersfield, Hampshire. Three more novels were written in 1881, in May 1882, moved by the Phoenix Park murders, he went to Ireland to collect material for *The Landleaguers*. In September he left Harting and took quarters -at Garland's Hotel, Suffolk Street, Pall Mall, London. Here, on November 3, while laughing at a family reading of F. Anstey's *Vice Versa*, he was struck down by a paralytic stroke; and on December 6, at a house in Welbeck Street, he died. His wife and two sons survived him.

Outwardly Trollope was a loud, heavy, booming man, partaking of the nature of British hunting squirearchy. Yet he had a reserve of sensitiveness inherited from his boyhood; he was often unacceptable to colleagues and superiors, but generosity and innate modesty made him beloved by the humble. "In personal appearance," writes Michael Sadleir, "Trollope was fresh-coloured, upright, and sturdy. Although not quite six feet in height his broad shoulders, fine head and vigorous power of gesture gave an impression of size beyond his actual inches. Everyone who met him remarked on the extraordinary brilliance of his black eyes, which, behind the strong lenses of his spectacles, shone (as one memorist records) 'with a certain genial fury of inspection'.... His voice was bass and resonant.... His laugh was, at its healthiest, a bellow. For so large a man, he was easy of movement and could sit a horse, if not with elegance at least with monumental certainty. He was a strong walker, a good eater, a connoisseur of wine, and an insatiable disputant.... Extreme short sight was, indeed, his only disability." A good description (dating from 1879) and assessment of character, too long to quote here, are given by Julian, son of Nathaniel Hawthorne, in his *Confessions and Criticisms* (Boston, 1887).

After his death Trollope's literary reputation sank low, and he was regarded as something of a journeyman of letters. This arose partly from the revelation in his *Autobiography* that he treated literature as a trade and wrote by the clock. No author has been more methodical. He worked out schemes, set himself time-schedules, and rigidly adhered to them. In our own day, under the enthusiastic sponsorship of men like Michael Sadleir and Hugh Walpole, there is some small danger of praise outrunning discrimination. Trollope is, in fact, supreme in his own field, but it is a narrow field—the ordinary life of upper middle-class England (and especially clerical England) of his time. Though there is a good deal of implied satire on worldly, place-hunting clerics, there is none of the burning social indignation of a Dickens, and in humor, too he is inferior to this master. Aphoristically, he might be described as the chronicler par excellence of storms in teacups. His characterization is finished but unsubtle. Mr. Sadleir speaks truly of "this queer sense of the absorbing interest of normal occupations." Trollope was not an agnostic, and was only an anti-clerical when clerics bowed to Mammon. What he attempted he did well; and his best creations are sure of immortality. A final judgment is given by Hawthorne in a letter of February 11, 1860 to his publisher Fields: "Have you ever read the novels of Anthony Trollope? They precisely suit my taste; solid, substantial, written on strength of beef and through inspiration of ale, and just as real as if some giant had hewn a great lump out of the earth and put it under a glass case, with all its inhabitants going about their daily business, and not suspecting that they were made a show of."

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