

# ANTHONY TROLLOPE

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P.D. Edwards

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THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY NOVEL



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Volume 12

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P.D. EDWARDS

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# ***Anthony Trollope***

*by P. D. Edwards*



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## ***Anthony Trollope—his life and works***

### *Life and reputation*

Though Anthony Trollope (1815-82) was born only four years after Thackeray, and three after Dickens, their fame was at its height long before his had even begun. His first novel, *The Macdermots of Ballycloran*, appeared in 1847, but it was another ten years before the early 'Barsetshire' novels and *The Three Clerks* (1858) began to make his name widely known. During his own lifetime, and for long afterwards, his reputation rested chiefly on the Barsetshire novels (1855-67), though it was enhanced by other works such as *Orley Farm* (1862), *Rachel Ray* (1863), and *Can You Forgive Her?* (1864). After the completion of the Barsetshire series his popularity gradually waned, but many of what are now thought his best novels had yet to appear (see Bibliography).

Until 1867 Trollope was an official in the Post Office, stationed for many years (1841-59) in Ireland, where several of his novels are set. He was also sent on Post Office business to the Middle East, the West Indies, and

North America, and later made private visits to Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. His accounts of *The West Indies and the Spanish Main* (1859), *North America* (1862), *Australia and New Zealand* (1873), and *South Africa* (1878) are all classics of their kind, and he also wrote novels or short stories about all the countries he visited, both in Europe and in other continents. Another classic of its kind is his *Autobiography*, written in 1876 and published in 1883, shortly after his death.

In his own lifetime, and ever since, he has generally been ranked just below his greatest contemporaries, Dickens and George Eliot. This is partly because he wrote too much and too quickly, or at any rate too carelessly: no fewer than forty-seven published novels (as well as many other works) in less than forty years. The very best of his novels, however, are among the masterpieces of the greatest age of English fiction.

### *Works*

Sending a copy of his *Rachel Ray* to George Eliot, Trollope remarked:

You know that my novels are not sensational. In *Rachel Ray* I have attempted to confine myself absolutely to the commonest details of commonplace life among the most ordinary people, allowing myself no incident that would be even remarkable in every day life. I have shorn my fiction of all romance.

(*Letters*, ed. Booth, p. 138)

At the time when these words were written, the so-called 'sensation novel'—the melodramatic tale of mystery, horror, and crime—was at the height of its vogue: its most noted exponents were Wilkie Collins (*The Woman in*

*White*, etc.), Mrs. Henry Wood (*East Lynne*), and Miss M. E. Braddon (*Lady Audley's Secret*), and its chief sources of inspiration—or so many critics felt at the time—were Dickens and the Brontës. *Rachel Ray* is an altogether different kind of novel and, although it is an extreme example, most readers probably thought, and still do think, of Trollope as a novelist who did, to an unusual extent, 'confine' himself to 'the commonest details of commonplace life' and 'shear' his fiction of 'all romance'; if he drew his inspiration from any contemporary novelist, it was from Dickens's great rival, Thackeray.

Even at this early stage of his career, however, Trollope had shown that he had no real aversion to 'romantic' or 'sensational' subjects. Though best known as the chronicler of uneventful lives in an imaginary county called Barsetshire—a citadel of traditional rural values always under threat from new ways, but always, in the end, holding its own against them—he had already written three 'Irish' novels (none of which lack exciting incident); one historical romance with a French setting; two novels about young men falling into misery, dissipation, and even crime in the sternly competitive arena of life in London; a modish but feeble satire on the latest methods of advertising; and a 'tragic' study of a lady in a typical 'sensational' situation—one in which she suffers the disgrace of having an early crime brought to light. In short, Trollope was, and remained, a restlessly experimental writer, constantly seeking fresh subjects and fresh settings.

Yet, however mistaken the widely-held view of him as essentially a 'domestic' novelist, one who largely restricts himself to 'every day life', it is true that his fiction is conspicuously unromantic and unsensational in its total effect. Despite their wide variety of subject-matter, their

frequent recourse to strange and remarkable happenings in exotic places, nearly all his novels have in common an unexcited, matter-of-fact quality. They take all 'sensations'—crimes, outbursts of violent passion, strange mental aberrations—in their stride. They delight in exposing the prosaic reality that so often underlies glamour and romance. Their big emotional moments are almost invariably succeeded by ironic letdown. They show little interest in what is inscrutable in human nature and in the workings of providence. Often, they make an ostentatious show of confiding in the reader to allay his anxiety about the future course of events. Trollope makes no bones about intruding into the novel in his own person, to praise or reprimand a character or even to share with the reader the problems that beset him in trying to tell his story clearly, fairly, and in chronological order. He likes to present himself to us as a man we can trust not to mislead us, a man whose one concern is to tell the truth with as little distortion as possible for 'artistic effect'. His novels, he would have us believe, are as true to life as novels can be—and to life as most of us know it.

Because of the very convincing illusion they produce of realism and ordinariness, their artfulness and artificiality are often overlooked. Even Trollope himself seems to have believed, part of the time at least, that their realism consisted mainly in the faithful reproduction of 'commonplace life', of what another critic called 'the familiar, the actual'. In his *Autobiography* (as well as in the novels themselves) he made much of his desire to create characters with whom the reader could identify himself, people who live as ordinary people do—'with not more of excellence, nor with exaggerated baseness'. Noble heroes and pitch-black villains would seem too