

Westminster Abbey Trollope Bicentenary Wreath- Laying.

Now I stretch out my hand, and from the further shore I bid adieu to all who have cared to read any among the many words that I have written. Said Anthony Trollope in words set to music for this occasion by Alex Woolf.

Alex celebrates his twentieth birthday this year; Trollope his two hundredth. It is a symbol of how affection for Anthony Trollope has endured. As he mused on his posthumous reputation, Trollope concluded, "I do not think it probable that my name will remain among those who in the next century will be known as the writers of English prose fiction."

He was wrong and how proud we all are as Friends of Anthony Trollope that he has been so celebrated during this year and not least as a result of the exertions of the Trollope Society under the leadership of Michael Williamson.

As a loyal Trollopiean my heart swelled with pride at the spectacle of the recently affixed blue plaque on the pillar box in Pall Mall crediting our hero with the introduction of such a cherished part of our street furniture and one that has spread throughout the globe. The efficiency of the postal service during Trollope's time was astonishing and is illustrated by a detail from his novel *The Prime Minister* in which a letter is posted in Manchester Sq., Central London at 3 am and received in the depths of rural Herefordshire in the evening of the same day.

It is the fate of some authors to be honoured and hardly read but not so Anthony Trollope. Yesterday I went to visit a clergyman in the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital and there on the counterpane of the ward on the fourth floor was Trollope's great novel *The Way We Live Now*.

Although I love to wander the lanes of Barchester I must confess that *The Way We Live Now* is my personal favourite in which, “instigated by what I conceived to be the commercial profligacy of the age”, Trollope portrays the corruption of London’s intersecting financial, social and political worlds with savage indignation. The novel reflects the scandals of the 1870’s but it might have been written at the height of the recent banking and credit crisis. The central character is Augustus Melmotte the great railway promoter who draws most of the world into his web on his way to becoming MP for Westminster. The climax of his career is perhaps the banquet in honour of the Emperor of China, tickets for which change hands in a speculative frenzy. Trollope paints an unsparing picture of the degradation which comes from the abandonment traditional morality.

Some things of course have changed. We now have in the Church of England characters unknown to Trollope such as the Archdeacon’s husband and even a sprinkling of Mr Proudies. But what endures is his humanity. His treatment of Mrs Proudie is a case in point and illustrates a characteristic feature of his writing in that hardly anyone is depicted as entirely without redeeming qualities. Mrs Proudie was a “tyrant and a bully” ... “one who would send headlong to the nethermost pit all who disagreed with her:- but at the same time she was conscientious, by no means a hypocrite, really believing in the brimstone which she threatened and anxious to save the souls around her from its horrors.”

Although he is writing about a vanished social and political world, Trollope’s novels continue to have remarkable contemporary resonances. The appointment to the bishopric which is being earnestly discussed at the beginning of *Barchester Towers* depends on a change of Prime Minister. It was not so very long ago that the appointment to the Deanery of this Abbey Church of Westminster of the vegetarian, pacifist Edward Carpenter, a protégé of Clement

Atlee only became possible when the Heath Government fell in 1974 and the advent of Harold Wilson opened the door to the Deanery.

The hospitable Duchess and wife of the Premier, Lady Glencora says in Trollope's *The Prime Minister*, that she would "select sleek easy bishops who would not be troublesome". Such choices alas are no longer available of course to divert modern Prime Ministers or their wives from more serious business.

Trollope encourages scepticism about abstract notions, dogmas and anathemas. The humanistic and complex morality of Mr. Harding in *The Warden* with its constant need for interpretation in particular situations and in the light of experience acquired in the course of character formation is opposed by a supra-human, simplistic, and abstract code symbolized by the terrifying power of the moral Juggernaut, *The Jupiter*.

Mr. Scarborough's Family is one of Trollope's latest novels written during the last two years of his life when his health was failing. The book reflects on the displacement of the old by the young and the prospect of imminent death. Scarborough goes beyond Harding in a positive hatred of the law, "a perplexed entanglement of rules got together so that the few might live at the expense of the many". He decides that his own moral code is superior to "the conventionalities of the world" and believes that simple human sympathy should be the arbiter between what is right and wrong. Some scholars have seen a direct reference to the doctrine expounded by F.D. Maurice in his book *The Conscience*.

The trouble is that Mr Scarborough utterly fails to communicate his ethics of benevolence to the next generation. Both his sons, Mountjoy and Augustus exhibit the results of a moral philosophy which is dominated by their father's overriding concern for their gratification. He expresses his love by promoting their enjoyments. "I let my two boys do as they pleased, only wishing that they should

lead happy lives. I never made them listen to sermons or even to lectures.” The results can be seen in every part of contemporary England.

At the end of a long life marked by early friendlessness and misery and later esteem and prosperity Trollope teaches us about the complexity of moral judgements and the beauty and the worth of an intense respect for the moral autonomy of others. He portrays urbanity and courtesy as lovely virtues but in the end they cannot do without the scaffolding of simple and direct moral teaching largely dealing with the restraint of our appetites and our propensity to wickedness.

Rest Eternal grant unto him O Lord and let light perpetual shine upon him.

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