Adventures in the Written Word, October, 2025

It all started when I was reading some Iris Murdoch novel, and the academic introduction said that "Murdoch has perhaps written more good novels in English than any writer except Anthony Trollope." So I read Trollope's novels—all forty-seven of them—and yeah, they're good.

Trollope wrote in the middle third of the 19th century, a time of exploding interest in reading. The justly maligned Industrial Revolution produced the happy side effect of expanding the urban middle-class population of England (and America), stimulating the exchange of ideas among neighbors and concentrating potential readers in targetable areas. Mechanization reduced the price of paper to about a quarter of what it had been a century earlier. The public developed a huge appetite for reading, and monthly journals sprang into existence to feed this hunger. Nearly all of Trollope's novels, like those of his contemporaries Charles Dickens, George Eliot, William Makepeace Thackeray, Wilkie Collins, and others, were published in monthly magazine installments. Trollope's father was absent, and his mother, Frances, supported her family quite well in this emergent literary economy as a nonfiction writer. (Check out her travelogue, *Domestic Manners of the Americans.*)

Trollope received a solid middle-class education, entered the civil service, and rose to increasingly responsible positions in the Postal Service. He took holidays in Scotland, dined and debated at gentlemen's clubs, attended the opera, "rode to hounds," as he termed equestrian foxhunting, and in general enjoyed a comfortable middle-class life. This was the world of most of his novels, the world of ordinary people doing their best to get by. In 47 Trollope novels, I recall one suicide, one murder, one *pro forma* duel between good friends with a disagreement, a forgery, a couple of thefts, and a broken bone from a hunting accident. No wealthy reclusive madmen, midnight meetings at a foggy crossroads, evil twins, child abuse, or ancient curses.

What's left to write about, then, is people like us, faced with situations we recognize beneath the dense layers of cultural and historical dissonance. The human capacity for self-deception, for instance, persists. A young cleric of modest means is posted to a wealthy parish. He persuades himself that a display of poverty would be an affront to his stylish flock, and spends beyond his means to maintain a handsome carriage and a fine pair of horses to pull it. (And the collective value of my musical instruments is far beyond the demands of my modest talent.) This could lead to disaster for the young priest and his wife, but don't worry, this is Anthony Trollope. He likes his people, generally protects them from the most dire consequences of their humanity, and looks on our frailties with warm-hearted ironic amusement.

Some young men are playing cards in London on a Sunday night. One of them must catch the last train to Oxford, or face expulsion for missing too many curfews. At the last minute for him to rush to the station, he tells himself and his buddies that there's time for one more hand, because that train is always late. He's expelled of course, but in Trollope's world—and ours—human frailty rarely ruins us. We make mistakes, and for most of us the embarrassment, hardship, and self-recrimination fade with time, and we get on with our lives.

Trollope offers other opportunities to smile at humanity. A village brewery produces notoriously bad-tasting beer. The brewers know it, the villagers know it, but it's been that way for so long that it's become a tradition, and the locals proudly hold their noses and drink the stuff. An outside investor's plan to buy the business and update the product divides the town into amusingly antagonistic camps.

But not all is rosy in our world, or in Trollope's. A few novels hinge on the eternal allure of financial speculation. The great temptation of the mid-nineteenth century was railroads.

Across the British Isles and in much of South America, investors were gathering resources, incorporating railroad companies, and competing for profitable routes. As ever, advisors with "inside information" were willing to share a "sure thing" with a few friends. For every investor who profited, several lost. Some of the losers recovered and some were ruined, and Trollope's commitment to faithfully depicting humanity led him to share some of these tragedies.

Trollope witnessed a far more tragic misery in the endemic poverty of Ireland, multiplied by the potato blight which ruined harvests year after year. Trollope's civil service duties took him there for some years, and the contrast he witnessed between the genteel and the desperate informs several of his works. In one especially poignant case, and young Anglican priest is posted to Ireland for what he and his wife expect will be the first step in a career culminating in some financially and socially comfortable position in an English city. But after seeing the truly pitiable plight of the people, the young pastor feels called by God to remain in Ireland and devote his life to ministry among the neediest of his brothers and sisters. His bride does not share in this vocation. In this and several other novels, Trollope and his readers face the tragedy of humans in situations with no easy answers or favorable outcomes.

Several of Trollope's plots rest on the vagaries and contradictions of the legal system and the strictures of the primogeniture law, which mandates that estates be inherited by the oldest male survivor, and can never be partitioned. A young nobleman gives his wife a precious antique necklace. After he dies, the man's family claims that the necklace was part of the estate, and so was not his to give. The legal maneuvering becomes a *cause celebre,* read about in every day's newspapers and talked about on the street and in the pubs. The widow is one of the few Trollope women to display resolve, and a devious mind. Another is the young widow of an older wealthy man. He rescues her from poverty, and she serves him well and faithfully. In his old age, he agrees to bequeath her the proceeds from a small farm, to support her in her widowhood. When he dies before executing the agreement, she plots a quite clever forgery. The ensuing machinations lay bare the potential conflict between what's just and what's legal. In another novel, a group of tradesmen share a meal at an inn, then fall into a dispute over dividing the bill. The resentment of one of them stirs a ripple which eventually tilts the balance of a complex legal battle far distant from the inn's dining room.

Especially in some of the earlier novels, Trollope offers inside views of ecclesiastical politics, which are intertwined with national politics where the monarch is also the head of the church. In a fact-based story, one well-connected cleric obtains the ministry of four profitable parishes. He hires four vicars, the lowest and poorest of Anglican pastors, and retires with his family to Italy on the excess pay.

The novels also explore political questions and social movements: the Corn Laws which supported farmers but raised food prices, the disestablishment movement advocating separation of church and state, discussion of extending voting rights to non-property owners. These elements invite readers to learn more about history if they're so inclined, or not.

When Trollope dwells long enough on one of his players, it's a portrait of a fully realized person. One of Trollope's most closely examined characters is Charles Palliser, who appears in all of the six loosely-connected "Palliser" novels of Trollope's late career. Palliser is heir to the Duke of Omnium, owner of a vast estate and practically unlimited wealth. Charles is a policy wonk, serving the government's monetary apparatus as Chancellor of the Exchequer, and for a time as Prime Minister. (Ironically, his elusive career quest is to work out the math of converting pounds, shillings, pence, farthings, and crowns into a decimal currency, a goal finally realized in 1971.) The easy assessment of Palliser is that he's a privileged snob, with a one-track mind and

no regard for others. In truth, he's dealing with life the best he knows how, and he's more complex than any one person can appreciate. Huntsmen petition him in vain to authorize changes to his vast woodland holdings to increase the fox and deer populations. They believe Palliser is deliberately thwarting their enjoyment of the chase, when in reality he simply has no concept of sport or recreation. To his (quite mildly) unconventional wife, Lady Glencora, he's a loving, indulgent partner, accepting with equanimity the fact that her personality overshadows his in the minds of their contemporaries—and Trollope's readers. His young sons experience him as the stereotypical absent noble father, stiffly acknowledging them during their visits home from elite boarding schools. He can't understand the ebullient rebelliousness of their university years. But late in life, after his labors for the government are over, he is able to truly bless his sons' unconventional marriages—even in one case to an American!

I don't know if I've piqued your interest, but I've surely put a charge into my own. Now I'll start revisiting some of the novels, and writing reviews to submit to Ms. Willis. If she approves them, you'll be able to read them on this site. It will be a carefully curated selection, consisting of whichever books I happen upon in my attic safari.

Something for nothing: Email me with a comment on this column, or any other literary-type topic, and I'll mail you one of Anthony Trollope's novels, along with some hastily handwritten comments on it. **editorwv@hotmail.com**

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Watch Your Language

"She kept on talking, but Chris either couldn't hear what she was saying or didn't care."

No doubt Artificial Intelligence will be, well, intelligent some day soon. For now, it says "either" in the above sentence ought to be "neither," because "words in a corresponding pair should work together.

News headline: WV Moves to Improve Internal Jail Probes

Maybe I'm the only one to whom this sounds wrong.

Picking on AI some more: AI says that A4 paper is 11 17/24 inches long. Probably somewhere there's an AI biscuit recipe calling for 4/7 teaspoon of baking powder.

All they needed was a period.

Not every font is suitable for every use.

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THAT'S What I Call Writing!

A monthly (or wheneverly) salute to the art of language.

In Congress, July 4, 1776

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America, When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

So many earth-shaking statements: It sometimes happens that people need to secede and start a new government. "Nature's God," not God's Nature. The king rules at the pleasure of the people, not by divine right. Recasting John Locke's "life, liberty, and property" with a human right never before proposed, the pursuit of happiness, and also using a rhetorical rhythm at least as old as Cato's speeches in the Roman Senate—one syllable, then three, then seven. And the whole declaration just sings.

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It's All About Me

Did anybody notice I didn't have an August or September issue of this whatever-it-is? That's what I figured. It's because I didn't get around to it. I'm calling this one "October, 2025," because that's the nasty surprise my calendar has pulled on me today. A hundred years hence, my biographer will search everywhere for the missing columns.

After 60 years of churning out non-fiction writing, I've somehow convinced myself that I can do fiction. (See the above on Trollope's treatment of the human capacity for self-deception.) A couple of matter-of-fact short stories came out okay, but now I'm trying to write something mysterious and atmospheric, and it's not going well. I opened with 1,500 words which sound like the minutes of last month's committee meeting. Cutting that stuff out is a start, but I'm kind of lost in a fog now, like the people I'm trying to write about. I know most of yinz are writers. Want to read my original mistake and my sputtering attempts at a restart, and maybe offer some advice? Email me. And I'd really like to see something you're working on, or hear about something you're planning on working on. I'll have some encouragement for sure, and maybe some comments intended to be helpful.

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