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Frances Trollope (1779-1863)

Novelist.

Born 1779; died 1863. Active 1832-1856 in England, Britain, Europe

Article contributed by

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Frances Trollope, without a doubt, was the most provocative writer of the early Victorian period. Since then, unfortunately and inappropriately, she has been relegated to a paltry footnote in literary history as simply the mother of Anthony Trollope. However, many of her forty-one books impelled significant social change and greatly influenced the writers who came after her. As several scholars have argued, *The Life and Adventures of Jonathan Jefferson Whitlaw: or Scenes on the Mississippi* (1836) was a major contributing influence on Harriet Beecher Stowe's writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), the book "that started this great war", so President Lincoln reportedly said. In Britain shortly after Trollope's novel appeared, the Jamaica Act was passed, setting free all slaves in the British colonies. *The Life and Adventures of Michael Armstrong, the Factory Boy* (1840), with its sympathetic and shocking portrayal of children in industry, provoked an outrage that led to the revision of the Factory Act. The new law forbade the hiring of children younger than eight years of age and their working more than six-and-a-half hours per day. To gain a maximum audience to read her message, Trollope had her book sold in monthly installments at one shilling each, which was very rare for women writers. Then *Jessie Phillips: A Tale of the Present Day* (1843) led to the retraction of the Bastardy Clause to the Poor Laws which had placed the sole responsibility of illegitimate children on the mother.

Fanny (as she liked to be called) was born in Bristol on March 10, 1779 to Mary Gresley and William Milton, a vicar at Heckfield, Hampshire. Her father was a somewhat eccentric inventor and engineer. One ingenious idea he had was a tidal bypass for Bristol, which would solve the problem of unloading cargo from ships only during high tide. Recognition and remuneration were given to someone else. The same kind of treatment was later experienced by Fanny herself – throughout life, publishers took advantage of her; and others stole her material, cheated her of royalties, and published inferior work under her name. Her own son Anthony was niggardly in acknowledging the talent and discipline that he inherited from her.

Mrs. Milton died when Fanny was only seven. Her father remarried fifteen years later. A strained relationship with her new stepmother resulted in Fanny and her sister Mary moving to London to keep house for their younger brother Henry. Fanny was full of élan and loved to socialize. She played cards, danced at every ball she could, and probably did her share of gossiping in every fashionable parlor in the city. However, extremely intelligent and well read, she seemed to pose a threat to most men. Even though she did not act it, by the time she met and fell in love with Thomas Anthony Trollope, she was a spinster of twenty-nine. Thomas Anthony was a thirty-five year old barrister, a neighbor, and a friend of her brother. Unlike Fanny, he was retiring and morose. They married, and over the course of nine years, had seven children: Emily (who died shortly after birth), Thomas Adolphus, Henry, Arthur, Anthony, Cecilia, and Emily.

Thomas Anthony suffered from severe headaches, bouts of depression, and extreme irritability exacerbated by the calomel he took for the migraines. He was so bilious that he lost most of his clients. Thinking that the countryside would improve his health, the Trollopes leased 160 acres in Harrow and built Julian Hill, named after the estate of a rich uncle from which Thomas Anthony expected to inherit. In his old age, the uncle married and acquired another heir, which shattered the Trollopes' hopes for the alleviation of their mounting debts. They had to move into a smaller house and lease Julian Hill. Their sorrows continued when, in 1824, their twelve-year-old son Arthur died of tuberculosis. He would be the first of five of their children to die young

In 1827 one of Fanny's friends, Frances Wright, invited her to participate in the building of a utopian community in America, Nashoba, where emancipated slaves were to be educated, given farmland, and allowed to cohabit with whites in peace. Fanny, who disdained slavery and cherished the American ideal for equality, was intrigued with the experiment. Another attraction of the scheme was the economic prospects in America; the cost of living being one-fourth of what it was in England, she saw emigration as an opportunity to resolve her family's financial crisis. It is possible, too, that Fanny was eager to escape her husband's irascibility and his perpetual mismanagement of their finances. Thomas Anthony would remain in England to oversee Tom and Anthony's education, while Henry (16), Cecilia (11), and Emily (9) would go with their mother to Tennessee. Their young drawing teacher Auguste Hervieu was to go too, intending to be hired as the drawing master of the Nashoba School.

They took the seven-week trip across the Atlantic, arriving in the Gulf of Mexico. After spending a couple of days in New Orleans, they went by river to Memphis and then overland to Nashoba. Once there, they were shocked by what they found – or rather, failed to find. Nashoba was little more than a mosquito-infested swamp, and Hervieu was expected to build the school himself before teaching in it. As soon as they could, the disheartened band relocated to Cincinnati, Ohio, the largest city in the northwest frontier, sometimes known as the “Athens of the West”. Fanny was appalled by what she deemed the uncouth manners of the residents of the city, and her snobbery and abruptness did not ingratiate her to them. Convinced that the natives needed culture, she built a bazaar where people could buy exotic goods, socialize, and be entertained. The design was a bizarre mix of Egyptian columns, Arabesque windows, Moorish pilasters, Gothic battlements, elegant saloon, theatre, ballroom, exhibition gallery, and rotunda crowned with a Turkish crescent. It was the first building in Cincinnati to be heated with gas pipes, but they emitted smoke and a horrific stench. Thomas Anthony joined his family and assumed the office of buyer. He purchased exotic goods for sale, the likes of which practical Yankees had no inclination to buy. In short, the venture turned into a financial disaster.

The Trollopes made haste eastward to Maryland where they witnessed the gross mistreatment of slaves. On to Philadelphia, back to Alexandria, and up to New York City and Niagara Falls, the ever keenly observant Fanny took notes of life in America. Desperate for funds and totally disillusioned with the idea of the New World as the land of the happy and free, at the age of 52, Fanny wrote a satire that became a sensation overnight. In fact, she once told her son Tom that she could say like Lord Byron that she woke up one morning finding herself famous. As would be the case from then on, Fanny's timing for writing on subjects of public interest was impeccable. *Domestic Manners of the Americans* came out just three days before the final reading of the Reform Bill of 1832. England was steeped in tremendous controversy and stress over reform. Most of the working class insisted upon labor reform, representation, and vote about political issues. Proponents for the Reform Bill pointed to the success of America, the beacon of democracy. However, Fanny's book “trolloped” America, delineating the ideal from the real. It was

Fanny's experience in America that equality was a mere myth, that racial, class, and gender lines were just as rigid, if not more so, in America than in Britain.

Domestic Manners was such a coup that it is the Trollope book that continues to be studied today as an invaluable snapshot of what life was really like in America during the early nineteenth century, of great interest to historians and literary scholars alike. Its success also made possible for the Trollopes to move back into their old home, Julian Hill, although despite this triumph Fanny had to continue to write and publish in order for the family to stay financially afloat. Further tragedy struck when in 1836, eighteen-year-old Emily died of tuberculosis, followed by twenty-three-year old Henry. Thomas Anthony died shortly thereafter, leaving Fanny a widow, and in 1849 Fanny's daughter Cecilia, who was thirty-three and a mother of five children, also died of consumption.

Fanny herself lived for another quarter of a century, and would write six travel books and thirty-five novels over the next twenty-five years. In 1843 she traveled with her son Thomas Adolphus and his wife Theodisa, both writers, to Italy when she became so enamored with the country (and its low cost of living), that seven years later, the three relocated permanently in Florence, in a house that they renamed Casa Trollope, where they lived together until her death at the age of 84. She was buried in the English Cemetery, the resting place of such other literary greats as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Arthur Hugh Clough, and later Walter Savage Landor.

Tom wrote his memoirs in 1887, and these included much about his mother insofar as they were very close. His second wife, Frances Eleanor Ternan Trollope, wrote the first biography of her mother-in-law. Anthony, Fanny's youngest son, was even more prolific than his mother, publishing seventy novels. His posthumous autobiography (1883) presented a rather unflattering account of his mother.

The critics of Fanny's day responded to her works with much scorn, accusing her of writing with unladylike sarcasm on subjects not befitting a woman. In fact, her satire was so caustic, the adjective "Trollopian" came back into use. Although the word today mostly refers to the style of Anthony Trollope or to the periodical dedicated to scholarship on his novels, nineteenth-century reviewers, drawing from the seventeenth-century meaning of "trollop" (a prostitute), applied it in order to describe Fanny as profligate and vulgar.

As well as the works that invoked widespread social change, most of Fanny's books considered the restrictions on women and the dangers of marrying the wrong mate. Having been plagued with a myriad of troubles because of her husband, it is no wonder that she urged women to regard romance and love with sobriety. She was unusual amongst Victorian writers in that many of her heroines were capable older women attempting to forge a life for themselves in a world that typically discarded or dismissed them. Her representations of these characters are imbued with dignity and realism.

Issues relating to religion were a grave concern as well. *The Vicar of Wrexhill* (1837) and *Uncle Walter* (1852) condemned the hypocrisy of evangelical clergy, something she had seen firsthand in both America and Britain. *The Abbess* (1833) and *Father Eustace* exposed the dangers of Catholic excesses; *Uncle Walter* explored the differences between the High Church and Puseyism; and *Second Love* (1851), between evangelicalism and the High Church. In many novels she warned her readers, especially women, to guard against unscrupulous religious leaders.

Fanny was a provocateur, breaking literary ground with every novel. *The Abbess*(1833), *Tremordyn Cliff* (1835), *The Attractive Man* (1846), and *Father Eustace* (1847) were four that borrowed eighteenth-century conventions from the Gothic but then drastically departed from it by depicting strong, victorious women with internal resources sufficient to triumph in and out of the spirit world, despite the tyranny of patriarchy. Thus she opened the door for similar Gothic novels and ghost stories by women to follow in both Britain and America. Similarly, *Hargrave; or the Adventures of a Man of Fashion* (1843), a story about high society crime and detective work, can be seen as having led the way for similar stories by Dickens, Collins, and Poe. She was the first writer to create sequels with her Widow Barnaby series. Space prohibits a thorough discussion of these and many more innovations that Fanny contributed to the world of letters, but an apt summation of the life and works of Frances Trollope can be borrowed from an 1839 article in *The New Monthly Magazine*: "No other author of the present day has been at once so much read, so much admired, and so much abused." Or perhaps another way to put it is that no other writer has been so trolloped as the great Trollope herself, Fanny.

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