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Domestic Manners of the Americans

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Domestic Manners of the Americans

Domain: Literature. Genre: Treatise, Political, Travel Writing. Country: England, Britain, Europe.

Frances Trollope (1832)

Article contributed by

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By 1832 Britain was ripe for a book like *Domestic Manners of the Americans*. Two years earlier, Earl Grey, a Whig, became prime minister of England and by the time of Trollope's first book, the empire was at the apex of controversy over his proposed Reform Act. It would eliminate the rotten boroughs, those boroughs that had shrunk in size but still elected members to the House of Commons. Newton, once a thriving market town on the Isle of Wight, in 1830 consisted of only fourteen houses. Due to coastal erosion, Dunwich in Suffolk was left with only thirty-two people. Old Sarum, itself, believed to have been first settled 5,000 years before and was the site of the first Roman garrison in Britain, now had only three houses and a population of fifteen people. Yet Old Sarum still had two members in the House, the same number as had Yorkshire with its population of over a million. The booming industrial towns of Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, Sheffield, and Bradford had no representation at all. Also spurred by the recent revolutions in France and America, the disfranchised citizens of the lower and swelling middle classes demanded the vote.

This was the political climate that more than invited Trollope's assessment of that great experiment in democracy, America. Like so many before and since, Trollope left England for the promise land across the Atlantic, hoping to find a better world and to reap a fortune that would alleviate her family's debt. She set sail in November 1827, only to return a broken, disillusioned, and extremely impoverished woman, in August 1831.

Before Ann Douglas wrote her 1977 seminal work, *The Feminization of American Culture*, in which she observed that nineteenth-century American women found a pocket of socially accepted power in their participation in church, Fanny made the observation. In one way, church was the only place where all people were to be treated with equal and high importance; here was the one place in America in which Trollope found women in possession of more value than mules. In another way, it was the only place women could receive attention, from each other – thus building a community of support and power – from the clergy, and from the congregation in general whenever they sang, brought prophetic words, prayed or asked for prayer, were “slain by the spirit”, shared testimony or confession and the like. It was the one place where they could publicly display their gifts, talents, and needs, in a land, as Fanny put it, “where women are guarded by a seven-fold shield of habitual insignificance” (68). She had been shocked at how little freedom and dignity were afforded women in the land of the free. She more than understood the importance of church then to American women; however, she was even more shocked at the unchecked fanaticism of these women as well as their vulnerability at the hands of unscrupulous clergymen. Fanny painted an unforgettable portrait of women's desperation in revivals:

It was a frightful sight to behold innocent young creatures, in the gay morning of existence, thus seized upon, horror struck, and rendered feeble and enervated for ever. One young girl, apparently not more than fourteen, was supported in the arms of another, some years older; her face was pale as death; her eyes wide open, and perfectly devoid of meaning; her chin and bosom wet with slaver; she had every appearance of idiotism. (75)

She observed that the more they cried about their woes and sins, the more they were encouraged and caressed by the other church members. She also saw churchmen rob women of their money and land. The religious hysteria often gave way to sexual transgressions between the women and the revival leaders that they trusted. Trollope blamed American men for these consequences. This was her denunciation: "Did the men of America value their women as men ought to value their wives and daughters, would such scenes be permitted among them?" (75).

She was also sympathetic toward American women for how hard they had to work in order to eke out the meanest existence. The wives of cottagers, she said, were "slaves of the soil" (98) and worked from sun up to sun down. This life, in contrast to the Romantic notions that she had of country living in Britain, made women hard and heartless, with very little charity to the poor, coarse, and not only ignorant of the more refined virtues of culture, but hostile toward it. She noted the pressure that Americans forced on neighbors to belong to a religion (91). No, America did not have a state religion, but it was ruled by the tyranny of religion nonetheless. What was the single doctrine that she saw observed by Americans? One was not a Christian if one were not afflicted (92). It would have been better, Trollope surmised, if the government of the church(es) were run by the "venerated rather than every tinker" (93). She also found American religion to be fanatically legalistic. She cited a community persecuting a man who worked on Sunday. Another man who sold clothes to a sailor who had to set sail on a Sunday was fined and jailed. Billiards and cards were forbidden by law in Cincinnati, where Trollope lived for two years. When Trollope opened a ballroom, very few people attended the dances. The women stayed in one room, and the men stayed in another. Not only did either seem incapable of indulging in what seemed to Trollope be simple, civilized, social pleasure; both sexes were rigidly segregated beyond anything Trollope had ever seen in England.

Gender was not the only root of bias and discrimination in a country that professed freedom for all. Slavery and the treatment of slaves absolutely appalled Trollope. However, she did not spend much time elaborating upon this in *Domestic Manners*, although she would do so four years later in a caustic anti-slavery novel, *The Life and Adventures of Jonathan Jefferson Whitlaw*. She could not leave the subject, though, before assailing the most revered democrat in America at the time, Thomas Jefferson. She heard that he had fathered children to all of his female slaves and treated his offspring as lawful slaves. She lamented: "If I know any thing of right or wrong, if virtue and vice be indeed something more than words, then was this great American unprincipled tyrant, and most heartless libertine" (69).

All of this deeply distressed Trollope who had sincerely hoped to find a classless society in America where all were treated equally and were given the opportunity to the pursuit of happiness and well-being. What amazed her all the more was how oblivious most Americans were to the failure to achieve equality for most. They were proud of their democracy and contemptuous of Britain for its class division. In Cincinnati, she could not hire women to work as servants. They preferred to work in intolerable mills for one-half the salary than to be in a working position where they were expected to take their meals in the kitchen and be regarded as servants when they were free Americans (60).

She was more acerbic when describing the Americans' lack of manners. Throughout the book she disdained the tobacco spitting that she saw everywhere. Americans picked their teeth with a pocket knife. Trash was thrown out into the streets of Cincinnati to feed the pigs. Even if they were the main source of income for most of its citizens, Trollope did not appreciate the stench, noise, and austere lack of beauty in the town itself and in the surrounding countryside.

These, then, are just a few of her observations. *Domestic Manners* gives the twenty-first century reader a vivid account of what America must have been like in the early nineteenth century. Yes, the account is biased at times, but in the whole, fair and credible. Trollope does give credit where credit is due, such as her note that there were no beggars anywhere. Historians appreciate the snapshots they find in Trollope's accounting, and lovers of literature will enjoy her graphic delineation of American life as they fail to be recorded elsewhere, especially with her own brand of Trollopian droll.

Returning to England, Fanny was a sadder, but wiser woman. But all was not loss from her adventure to America. After all, it gave her the impetus and material to launch her literary career. First published on March 19, 1832 when Fanny was fifty-three years of age, she became an instant best-selling novelist. Ultimately America did fulfill her expectations to deliver her out of financial straits and grant her life anew with a promising future in which she could define herself as a woman, free to become all that she could envision for herself.

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