

Trollope's Letters

N. John Hall (ed.) *The Letters of Anthony Trollope*, 2 vols. Stanford University Press, 1983.

Since the Second World War, modern scholarship has paid its tribute to most of the major novelists of early and mid-Victorian England by issuing carefully edited, copiously annotated, and (as far as possible) comprehensive collections of their letters. Gordon N. Ray's four-volume edition of Thackeray's letters (1945-6) led the way and set a standard of editorial thoroughness and scholarly pertinacity for later editors. The first seven volumes of the *George Eliot Letters* edited by Gordon S. Haight appeared in 1954-5, to be augmented by two volumes largely of addenda in 1978. Since 1965 a fittingly splendid collection of Dickens's letters, compiled by Madeline House, Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson, and Kenneth Fielding, has been abuilding, slowly and surely like a medieval cathedral—five volumes having appeared up to 1981. J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard's two-volume collection of Mrs Gaskell's letters was issued in 1966 and C. L. Cline's three-volume one of George Meredith's in 1970. Volumes of Hardy's letters, edited by R. L. Purdy and Michael Millgate, have been appearing at two-year intervals since 1978. Anthony Trollope, having proved his durability by attracting three biographies and two bibliographies in the space of a little over thirty years, and having in the same period had thirty-six of his forty-seven novels reissued in the Old World's Classics series, obviously could not be kept long waiting, and the first modern edition of his letters, compiled by Bradford Allen Booth and published by Oxford University Press, appeared as early as 1951, before those of all the others except Thackeray. Compared to theirs, however, it was a modest tribute, filling only a single volume, printing summaries rather than full texts of many of the letters, restricting itself to only a minute selection of relevant cross-correspondence (letters to or about Trollope), and hardly ever allowing editorial footnotes to peep above the ankle, or at most the shin, of the page.

The compilation and publication of Booth's collection coincided with the beginning of the Oxford Trollope and closely followed the inauguration of *The Trollopian*, under Booth's editorship. At the time it was widely believed that Trollope's star was about to come into the ascendant, largely because of the nostalgic refuge he was supposed to have offered during and after the war, as the "voice" of a stable and prosperous epoch in which no prime minister foresaw being asked to preside over the dissolution of the Empire. But in the event *The Trollopian* dropped its original title after only two years (becoming *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*); the Oxford Trollope was "truncated" after only eight novels and the *Autobiography* had been issued over a period of six years (1948-54); and although the influential studies of Trollope and his work by Sadleir and Booth—which had stressed his nostalgic appeal—were soon to be followed by A. O. J. Cockshut's *Anthony Trollope; a Critical Study* (1955)—the first book to argue that Trollope was, in all senses of the word, a "serious" novelist—all the indications are that popular and academic regard for Trollope declined or at any rate failed to rise during the 1950s and 1960s. It may even be that by the time Booth's edition of the letters went to press,

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the publishers (OUP) were already in a mood to cut their losses and to require a degree of post-war austerity in the undertaking.

In contrast, N. John Hall's new two-volume edition of *The Letters of Anthony Trollope* (Stanford University Press, 1983) comes at the end of a fifteen-year period during which there have been twenty-two (or more) new books on Trollope and new editions of almost all his own books, and television adaptations of a number of his novels (*The Eustace Diamonds*, *The Way We Live Now*, *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, the Palliser novels, and, most successfully, *The Warden* and *Barchester Towers*) have communicated something of the unique flavour of his fiction to mass audiences. Hall then has probably been as lucky in the timing of his edition as Booth was unlucky in his. And he has been lucky not only in the sense that no unpalatable economies appear to have been demanded of him or to have seemed to him appropriate—no summarizing of “unimportant” letters, no trimming of explanatory footnotes to the bare bones of fact, no omission of letters already published (for example as letters to the editors of newspapers), no restriction (self-imposed or otherwise) on the inclusion of interesting cross-correspondence. But in addition to these luxuries Hall has also been lucky in having had the advantages of both Booth's edition itself and the thirty intervening years which have seen the development of such aids to scholarship as photocopiers, the more systematic collection and cataloguing of manuscripts by libraries, the proliferation of scholars and scholarly journals, and the advent of computer databases. With these advantages it is not totally surprising, though without doubt highly impressive, that Hall's edition contains 1,826 items, including 1,725 Trollope letters, as compared to the 932 items in Booth's. As the leading Trollope scholar of our day, a skilled and experienced editor of Trollope texts (including, notably, *The New Zealander* and *Salmagundi*), and an American, close to the repositories of most of the manuscripts of the letters in the collection, Hall has been ideally placed to make the most of his advantages and he has done so to good effect, producing two volumes of meticulous, discreet, and expert editing.

The letters of an author can be interesting and valuable in a number of ways. They can augment the biographical record, either by bringing to light new “facts” about the author and his life or by revealing new facets of his personality and experience, creating new perspectives, which will modify the imaginary character that the reader and biographer have made of him. They can also enlarge or expand the biographical or social context of some of the author's novels, supply new “background” material which may seem to point the way towards new readings in the text of a particular novel or to corroborate existing ones. And not least they can themselves be noteworthy examples of the author's literary art, heightening and broadening our appreciation of it.

Given that Trollope also left a version of his own biography, his letters lose something of the importance they might otherwise have had as a source of biographical and background material, and it must be said that anyone expecting the “new” letters in Hall's collection to add significantly to the already available store of such material is likely to be disappointed: indeed, in this regard Hall's annotations—very much more generous and more researched than Booth's—are often noticeably more rewarding than the letters themselves. And while new biographical and critical insights,

and changed emphases, will nevertheless be suggested by the additional letters which Hall makes available, and by the full texts he gives of those which Booth contented himself with summarizing, the chief value of his collection may well be thought to lie in the intrinsic literary merit of many of the letters newly published.

This is a virtue which both Booth and Hall are anxious not to overstate. According to Hall, "The style of Trollope's letters will add little to his literary reputation", and he goes on to quote Booth's frank admission that many of them are "perforce strictly functional, often indeed perfunctory". Booth speculated that the reason for Trollope's interdiction against the publication of any of his letters—reported by his son Henry in his prefatory note to Anthony's autobiography—may have been that he feared that his letters were not good enough. And like Hall after him the most he is willing to allow them by way of literary merit is the "clean, simple objectivity . . . of the best in applied literature" and a "naturalness", an "honest homeliness" that contrast with Byron's breezy animation and lack of sincerity. For Hall, similarly, their preeminent virtues of style are simplicity, intelligibility, and effortlessness. Both editors contrast Trollope's personal letters with those which he frequently inserted in his novels—"marvelous letters" in Hall's opinion, and in Booth's "the best of their kind in English fiction". But whereas Hall seems to lament that Trollope did not take similar care with his personal letters—and certainly did not make them a "literary exercise"—Booth more guardedly, and I think more accurately, acknowledges only that Trollope "did not *always* put his literary best into his personal letters" (Booth's italics). One obvious riposte to this, however, is that the same might be said, and often has been said (though less frequently of late), of Trollope's *novels*: the writing in them, too, is always simple, lucid, seemingly effortless, but at times slapdash; and while, even in the least successful of them, one would not accuse Trollope of consciously giving less than his "best", it can certainly be argued that the quality of his writing depends on the degree of his imaginative engagement with his subject, and that this varies considerably according to the nature of the subject.

In the letters as in the novels, I would suggest that he writes best (and writes very well indeed) when the subject is closest to his heart and when the feeling to be expressed is within the rather limited range of his sensibility—a sensibility that is extraordinarily warm, sympathetic, and fair-minded in its responses to other people, but largely oblivious of, or at any rate resolute against delving into, the psychic or spiritual depths where words and understanding fail. Hall, in his introduction, quotes with justified admiration Trollope's letter to Annice Thackeray on the death of her sister Minnie (Mrs Leslie Stephen): "Dear Annie. I do not know how to write to you, or how to be silent. I will send one word to say that we have thought of your grief, and of his, with many tears. God bless you. Your affectionate friend Anthony Trollope." This of course is perfect in its simplicity and succinctness (as Hall points out); but, like any number of finely understated responses to death in Trollope's novels, it is by no means artless or uncalculated in its simplicity. Quite obviously, it says exactly what Trollope wants to say and all that he can say, no more and no less: his rhetorical "one word" is in fact several, but compared to the "many tears" which he and his wife have shed, and which are the real

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expression of their grief, the words hardly count at all; indeed, "tears" is in effect the one word that he sends, and even it does not have to be taken literally. Trollope, one assumes, knows that he is using a traditional rhetoric and knows that it will evoke the traditional response: if the letter is not a "literary exercise", it is the next best thing—as such letters almost inevitably are.

Another fine "occasional" letter—one that did not appear in Booth's collection—was written to Elizabeth Smith, daughter of one of Trollope's dearest friends, the publisher George Smith, to congratulate her on her engagement:

My dear Dolly.

I am delighted to hear of your happiness and congratulate you most sincerely. I will come and do so in person before long and then you must tell me a great deal more about it, what he is, and where you are to live, and when it is to be. I quite agree about your papa being an Archangel; but then he may be so much more than archangelic.

Of course I need not tell you of all the duties of your coming life. Your mother will have done that. How you must find out what he likes best to eat,—and never let him have it lest it should disagree. How you must remember always to sit up for him if he should ever go to the club. How you should always have your own way about everything inside the house because you are a woman, and take care that he never has his outside the house because he might go astray as a man. You have to be responsible for his morals, his dress, and his temper—all this I am sure you will remember and not think that as a bride you are merely to have a good time of it. But why should I give such hints to you when you have a mother so well able to tell you everything.

But, putting aside joking, dear Dolly, I congratulate you most heartily and most sincerely hope that you will be a happy wife. I am sure you will be a good wife.

Your affectionate old friend
Anthony Trollope

Here, even more than in the letter to Annie Thackeray, Trollope has the kind of subject that he lavishes his care and attention on in his novels: the happiest occasion (as he would see it) in a young woman's life. And for good measure it is again a young woman he is writing to and for—as he felt he was doing in his novels. As if in recognition of the resemblance he lightheartedly creates (in the middle paragraph) a fictitious marriage for the young couple. The tone, almost entirely devoid of sentimentality and moralizing, is exactly what a Trollopian young woman could be expected to respond to, and the style strikes a perfect balance between the conventional and the personal, the formal compliments required for a letter written on such an occasion and the desire to suggest feelings warmer than those formally expected.

The appearance of "effortlessness" which Hall notes ensures that these letters avoid any savour of the "literary exercise". But the effortlessness is very much that of the practised writer on his home ground, and reading such letters it is difficult to believe that any less care and literary calculation went into the writing of them than into that of many of the best passages in Trollope's novels.

Many other examples could be cited of letters which, if there is any aesthetics of the letter, must qualify as beautiful—at least in the sense that the language and the structure give the most pleasing expression imaginable to the message. My list would include the humorous letter to George Smith thanking him for his gift of a travelling bag (pp. 120-1), the well known letter to Thackeray defending the morality of his (Trollope's) story

"Mrs. General Talboys" (pp. 127-9), the open letter to J. R. Lowell (in the *Athenaeum*) on the need for an international copyright law (pp. 193-8), the letter to G. H. Lewes (pp. 459-60) beginning with the remark that "There never was an establishment so badly managed as the Post office since some one went out of it and some one went into it" (the two some-ones being Trollope himself and Lewes's son Charles), and the two fine letters to Henry Irving and Squire Bancroft on the difficulties of getting elected to the Garrick and the *Athenaeum* (pp. 587-8, 756)—the best of a whole series of tactful and elegant letters to successful or unsuccessful aspirants. More debatable inclusions would be the long series of letters to Trollope's Australian friend G. W. Rusden—most of which were not in Booth's collection—and the best known of all Trollope's letters, those written to Kate Field, the young American woman with whom he became friendly in the early 1860s. The letters to Rusden, as Hall notes in his introduction, possess a special biographical interest because in them Trollope speaks more openly about his state of mind and about his personal religious and ethical beliefs—at the time when his health had begun to deteriorate and he felt the end of his life approaching—than in most of his other correspondence or in his autobiography. But although there is an eloquent and honest simplicity about Trollope's self-revelation in these letters (as well as about the affection they express for Rusden), they tend to leave us with the uncomfortable feeling that the self revealed—a Roman stoic for whom death holds no fears and for whom God is a cosily compliant father, or brother, to be reasoned with in a heavenly morning-room—is almost as much a fiction, though no doubt unintentionally so, as most of the protagonists of his novels. (The second of the two paragraphs from his letter of 8 June 1876 which Hall quotes on p. xx of his introduction is the most startling example of Trollope's eschatological views.) In his autobiography Trollope projects a not dissimilar persona, but that is for public consumption.

The letters to Kate Field, the "American woman" described by Trollope in his autobiography as his "most chosen friend" during the period they span (1860-78), are certainly more deeply personal; and although one might wish to contest Hall's assertion that Trollope is "never on his guard, never watching his words" even when, in one of them, he sends Kate "a kiss that shall be semi-paternal—one third brotherly, and as regards the small remainder, as loving as you please", they evince none of the concern for rhetorical effect, for crafted self-projection, for precise formulation of his own opinions, or for diplomatic nicety of phrase which in varying degrees marks most of what I would class as his "best" letters. They are in fact the most intimate of his letters, with the exception of some of those to his elder son and his wife, and given his usual reticence about his private life, and its apparent uneventfulness, they have generally been felt to possess a unique biographical interest. No new letters (or new evidence about the relationship) have turned up since they were first published by Sadleir in his *Trollope, a Commentary* (1927). Nor have any subsequent biographers or either of the editors of Trollope's letters found any reason to dissent from Sadleir's conclusion, or rather assumption, that the relationship was "innocent", though certainly, on Trollope's side at least, based in part on sexual attraction. The conviction of Trollope's innocence no doubt derives from what is known and believed about his character and life

generally, as well as about Kate Field's: on their own, the letters provide no conclusive evidence either way. What they do point to—and it is in this, rather than in their “style” per se, that their claims to “literary” merit reside—is a complex, often difficult, and ambiguous relationship.

When it began, both parties were at what twentieth-century wisdom would regard as particularly susceptible ages, Trollope being 45 and Kate 22. In the epistolary salutations, “Miss Field” almost immediately became “Kate”—usually “My dear” but occasionally “My very dear” or “Dearest”. The warmest endearments occur in the letters of 1861-2, when Trollope and, for part of the time, his wife Rose were in America. After his wife's return to England, Trollope “presumes”, in two successive letters (pp. 169, 171), that Kate will have heard from her. But the only letter from Rose to Kate in Booth's and Hall's collections were written much later, on 3 December 1862, well after Anthony too had returned to England. It begins: “Why dont you write to me? We are both really unhappy—I because I still think you are offended with me—My husband because he does not know why” (p. 204). Rose's use of the word “still” implies that Rose had written something that offended Kate some time ago and had since apologized or explained; if so, however, Kate presumably did not keep the letter, as she kept this one. Could it be that the letter had referred to a previous expression of concern by Rose about the warmth of the relationship between Kate and her husband; or to an expression of concern by Kate that Anthony was becoming too warm? Certainly Anthony's most recent surviving letter to Kate (23 August 1862) had been very warm indeed. In both Booth's and Hall's collections, Rose's letter ends with an ellipsis after ten lines or so, but whereas Booth states that the rest of the letter deals with “politics, meeting Americans in London, and other generalities scarcely relevant” (p. 127n.), Hall says nothing: this implies, in terms of his editorial mood, that the rest of the letter, apart from Rose's signature, is missing from the manuscript in the Boston Public Library—perhaps having been cut away, like a couple of passages in Anthony's earliest letter to Kate. Following the truncated letter from Rose to Kate—which may or may not have touched further on the reason for Anthony's and Rose's “unhappiness”—there is a gap of over five years in the correspondence with Kate. After it resumes, Trollope's expressions of affection are more temperate and his salutations never warmer than “My dear Kate” or “Dear Kate”.

In highlighting one of the more ambiguous and puzzling phases of the correspondence with Kate, I do not for a moment suggest that any moral delinquency need be inferred. All that I question is how, on the available evidence, Sadleir's religious certainty as to the “innocence” of Trollope's friendship with Kate has come to be accepted as virtual dogma, as indisputable fact rather than as strongly held opinion, by all subsequent commentators on the matter, down to and including Professor Hall. Perhaps Hall's forthcoming biography will answer my question.

Although it sheds no new light directly on this major biographical crux, Hall's edition of the letters does provide some interesting new sidelights. In one of his letters to Kate, Trollope says that he thinks “nature intended me for an American rather than an Englishman” (p. 192), and he begins a letter to an American bookseller with the remark, “There is nothing I value more than greetings from your side of the water” (p. 686). His liking

for Americans, particularly American women, is borne out by a number of the "new" letters in Hall's collection, particularly the six written to Mrs Harriet Knowler and the four to Mrs Katherine Bronson. Trollope writes to both women with a warmth of affection and an informality that are not often paralleled in his letters to English women. Perhaps significantly, both had young, grown-up daughters whom he obviously enjoyed being able to refer to by their Christian names. All the indications are that he found in these women much of the vivacity, freedom, and intelligence which he conferred on his best known American heroines (Caroline Spaulding in *He Knew He Was Right* and Isabel Boncassen in *The Duke's Children*). In a tribute cited by Hall (p. 426n.), American womanhood, in the person of Annie Fields, returned the compliment in double measure but with unmistakable sincerity: "good whole-souled Mr. Trollope. A few such men redeemed Nineveh. He always seems the soul of honesty."

A number of minor biographical cruxes are solved by new letters in Hall's collection or by his researches prompted by previously published letters: the "W—A—" referred to in Trollope's autobiography (*World's Classics* edition, 1980, p. 54) is identified as Walter Awdrey, and another passage in the autobiography (pp. 200-1) which Sadleir took as referring to Lord Westbury is shown in fact to refer to W. D. Christie. Minor but useful additions to the biographical record can also be found in a number of other letters and notes. A previously unpublished letter to Henry Taylor (pp. 292-3) perhaps helps to explain Trollope's incorrigible adulation of that poet, which must probably bear some of the responsibility for one of Trollope's worst literary follies, the play called "The Noble Jilt". A complimentary letter from Bulwer Lytton, whom Trollope conspicuously did not admire, provokes an unwontedly fulsome and insincere reply (p. 319). In letters to John Dennis, subeditor of the *Fortnightly*, Trollope admits his distaste for the "style of work" of John Morley, who had just become the journal's editor (pp. 364-5, 381). There is a rather surprising letter to Lord Houghton asking him to present Trollope at court—evidently as some obscure form of blessing or accreditation before his departure for America to conduct postal negotiations (p. 419). A number of Trollope letters in the archives of the General Post Office—chiefly to Rowland and Frederic Hill—and some excerpts from Rowland Hill's diary (also in the GPO) amplify our knowledge of Trollope in the post office, complementing R. H. Super's recent book on this aspect of his life. Hall's collection also adds considerably to the correspondence, both public and private, concerning the quarrel between Trollope and Charles Reade over Reade's plagiarism of parts of the plot of *Ralph the Heir* for his play "Shilly Shally".

A noteworthy example of how Hall's detailed annotations bring out the biographical significance of letters which in Booth's edition appeared to have little or none is the note on John Burns (p. 782), which reveals that as well as being chairman of Cunard—virtually all that Booth's note disclosed—Burns was an old friend of Trollope (and of Norman Macleod who had rejected *Rachel Ray* for *Good Words*), all three having for many years hiked around Scotland together as members of the Gaiter Club. A little later, another note based on the records of the Royal Literary Fund shows why Trollope temporarily boycotted the committee of the fund and how he won the point that had led to his doing so, whereas in Booth's edition the significance of the three letters relating to the matter remained

quite obscure. Hall's edition also shows up the limitations of Booth's by printing in full the text of letters which Booth summarized or of which he printed only part. One example is a letter of 9 September 1863 to Frederic Chapman (pp. 230-1)—referred to by Hall in his introduction—which deals with plans for a new periodical to be published by Chapman and Hall with Trollope as editor. Booth by omitting practically a whole paragraph of the letter (perhaps through overlooking a page of the manuscript) effectively disguised the fact that this was what the letter was about. Another example, of a different kind, is offered by the contrast between the flavour of Booth's bald summary of a letter to John Blackwood: "Trollope welcomes the Blackwood's back to town and invites them to call", and that of the full text as given by Hall (p. 779), which includes the words, "I and my Missus will call"—words that surely speak volumes about the closeness of the friendship between the two men.

As I have said, the new letters in Hall's collection, and the new editorial matter, make only minor additions to our store of useful background material to Trollope's novels. Two letters to Mrs Henry Wood (May 1864, p. 264) express the detestation of charity bazaars which also comes out in *Miss Mackenzie*, the novel Trollope was about to begin writing. Another letter (p. 464) offers a perhaps revealing encapsulation of Trollope's view of *Sir Harry Hotspur of Humblethwaite*: "a common love story—but one that ends sadly". A third (pp. 491-2) reveals that just after beginning *The Eustace Diamonds*, perhaps his best novel, Trollope offered it to Blackwood, who declined it; Trollope sold it shortly afterwards to the *Fortnightly*, and it is interesting to speculate how far the intellectual prestige of the *Fortnightly*, and Trollope's personal connexion with it, may have influenced the writing of the novel. A fourth letter, to W. Lucas Collins (pp. 984-5), contains allusions to events in Ireland which, as Hall notes, closely resemble some of those in *The Landleaguers* and, in one instance, were actually incorporated into the novel.

Altogether, the editing and production of the new collection do Trollope proud. I noticed no typographical errors and found hardly anything to disagree with or even to question in the annotations: one might, perhaps, have expected in the note to the letter on Trollope's sister Emily's death (p. 2) some reference to the passage in *The Bertrams* which recalls her funeral; the inclusion in the Chronology to volume one of a trip to Florence in May 1853 seems surprising in the light of the detailed information Trollope sought from his brother before making a similar trip the following year (pp. 35-6), and it also contradicts Trollope's statement in the autobiography (p. 112) that his trip to Italy in 1857 was only his third; according to my reading of the manuscript of the first of two letters in which Trollope asks after the health of a horse he used in Australia, the horse's name was Broker, as it is in the second letter, not Smoker, as Hall reads it (pp. 560-1), and I believe it is a "Mr Kater", not "Mr Kate", whom Trollope's son Frederic mentions in one of his letters (p. 679). But these are all minor and debatable points. They in no way diminish one's sense of the timely service that Professor Hall and Stanford University Press have rendered to the memory of one of the major Victorian novelists only a few months after the centenary of his death.

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