

The Story of a Practical Novelist

THE TROLLOPES. The Chronicle of a Writing Family. By Lucy Poate Stebbins and Richard Poate Stebbins. 394 pp. New York: Columbia University Press. \$4.

By JOSEPH WOOD KRUTCH

ANTHONY TROLLOPE was a writer—some would say a great writer—but he was not in the slightest degree "literary." For him the novelist's trade was merely a means toward an end, and he was more eager to be able to keep a stable of hunters than he was to be recognized as any kind of artist. Perhaps the truculent frankness with which he confessed his philistinism may suggest that he was not quite so comfortable in it as he would have liked to be, but at least he never wavered. As the authors of the present book say, "Not cultivation but the production of millions of printed words became the ruling object of his life."

If then, he has in our time enjoyed a revival of popularity, it is certainly not because he cultivated any of that high artistic seriousness upon which the critics of our day are prone to lay great stress. Henry James, whose attitudes are at this moment being enthusiastically championed, poke with stern disapproval of the so-called novelists whose art was at best only the art of the improviser. Trollope, writing at top speed and feeling that if he struck out a few unnecessary sentences he was doing rather more in the way of revision than could reasonably be expected of him, was the improviser par excellence. Yet Trollope is, next to James, the most often discussed of the nineteenth-century novelists who wrote in English.

A book might be written in an attempt to explain this paradox. The present volume is, however, not that book, since its authors, though aware that the paradox exists, have preferred to let it speak for itself and to devote themselves to the task of chronicling pretty completely not only

the events of Anthony's busy life but also the activities of his blue-stocking mother and his historian brother. The result is a close-packed and well-ordered volume, which probably contains more information about the family than can be found in any other one place. The result is also as clear a picture of Anthony's personality as it is possible to get without going beyond the presentation of documented facts. If, nevertheless, the reader whose interest has been continuously held closes the book with some feeling that something is eluding him, that is because he seems to know everything except how the man he has learned so much about could possibly have written the novels we are told, somewhat casually, he did write.

YOUTH of typically upper-middle-class tastes and opinions is compelled to get a job as clerk in the postoffice because the family fortunes have not been able to survive the improvident instability of his mother or the pompous and rather pathetic incompetence of his father. He is dissatisfied, difficult, and not especially attractive. So far as we have been able to observe, he is also neither particularly intelligent, perceptive, nor even vivacious. Then one day he sits down at his desk and writes a story. A few years later the public is buying his books as fast as he can write them, and he has become one of the leading novelists of the nineteenth century. Meanwhile his tastes, opinions and personality seem to remain just what they were before. He can get into better clubs and live on a more expensive scale. But the change is not very different from what it would have been if he had inherited a brewery instead of becoming a writer.

In a sense the books are, of course, the books that such a man would write—if he could write them. They are, that is to say, stories about rather ordinary people whose motives and ambitions are quite ordinary. But ordinary people do not write excellent books even about people like themselves. Something not visible on the surface had been going on in the postal clerk and continued to go on in the successful novelist. One does not write as Trollope wrote simply by sitting down to a desk while murmuring that most Victorian of sentiments, "How pleasant it is to have money, heigh-ho, how pleasant it is to have money."

Possibly the secret is undiscussable. Possibly this is the only sort of book that could be written about Trollope. The fact remains, nevertheless, that there is little connection between the man whose life story is being told and the books he wrote. We see clearly enough that the limitations of the author necessitate the limitations of the novel, but we do not see how the excellencies of the novel could have been achieved by the man said to have written them. Did, by any chance, Francis Bacon toss them off between the composition of "Hamlet" and the composition of

"Othello"? Were they discovered in an old trunk? In any event, the Anthony Trollope revealed in "The Chronicle of a Writing Family" certainly did not compose them.

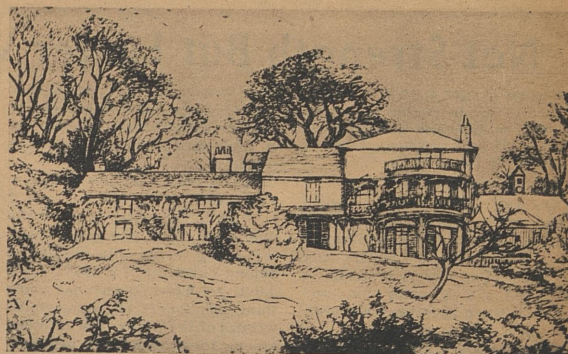
WHAT one does get from the Stebbins book is the richly documented story of a family group, and the interest is so largely historical or sociological rather than literary that it might, without being essentially different, have been the story of a political or professional family instead of a writing one. The opinions the various Trollopes held, the motives that governed them and the ambitions they cherished are characteristically Victorian rather than characteristic of the literary temperament, and the atmosphere they create is the



Trollope's Mother, Frances Trollope.

atmosphere of a Trollope novel. Anthony's father might have been an unsuccessful Bishop instead of an unsuccessful lawyer; Anthony himself might have risen in the law or in the Church instead of rising as a writer.

When the wife-to-be of the former was given three weeks to consider his businesslike proposal of marriage, she replied, as a sensible Trollope character would have done, by the hasty warning that her fortune was only £1,300 and that she received a dress allowance of £50 a year. Anthony himself, like the more admirable people in his books,



Orley Farm: Trollope's Home While He Was Attending Harrow School.

distrusted all high-flown sentiments, shied away from emotional women, worked hard to rise in the world, measured success in terms of income, wrote a passionate defense of fox hunting, and was cautiously liberal so long as liberalism did not even hint the possibility that anything of importance might be changed.

He concluded that the penny post would never succeed; that neither the Suez nor Panama Canal could ever be dug; and that, since the United States was obviously too big, first the Southern and then the Western States would achieve secession. He thought slavery evil in itself but was sure that the proposal to set the slaves free was fraught with dangers too great to be faced; and after coming to America for the purpose of correcting the errors of his mother's notorious "Domestic Manners of the Americans," he was all but converted to her opinions by two undeniable facts—Americans had very iniquitous laws concerning copyright, and they spit too frequently.

His parents had ruined their lives by persistently living beyond their income. Anthony reacted, not by doubting for a moment that to own good houses, belong to the right clubs, and frequent the proper set were the noblest ambitions a man could have, but simply by seeing to it that he wrote a sufficient number of words to pay for them all. By comparison his mother, who started out as some sort of to-

pian Socialist and then, because the common people were rude to her, ended up at the parties of Prince Metternich, seems rather engaging.

ALL this the Stebbins clearly and carefully set forth in an account which is not only interesting but appears to come out of a painstaking job of research which has led them to innumerable contemporary sources as well as through many modern studies of their period. Nevertheless, they make no attempt to analyze Anthony's novels; they draw no formal moral; and they pass no judgment upon Anthony except in so far as the record of his attitude toward his work implies such a judgment.

Perhaps a reviewer should not rush in where they have decided not to tread. But it is difficult to refrain from remarking that the contemplation of the life of even the more successful Victorians often leaves the modern reader somewhat depressed. They were so often strait-laced without being virtuous, narrow without being intense. They sacrificed ease and pleasure as well as nobility to what they called success, but even money did not mean to them the possibility of any kind of splendor—only heaviness and show. The weakness of Anthony's novels lies in the fact that they never ask a really searching question. Apparently he never asked any of himself either.



Anthony Trollope. By R. Birch.

The Labor Problem: A Gloomy View

LABOR TODAY AND TOMORROW. By Aaron Levenstein. 253 pp. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. \$2.75.

By A. H. RASKIN

THE seeker after an easy formula for labor peace will not find it within the covers of Mr. Levenstein's thoughtful book. It is a gloomy picture that he foresees of the post-war relationship between management and labor, but there is little reason to question the soundness of the premises on which he bases his fears for the future.

He feels that the conflicts bottled up in the war period are ready to burst forth with new fury, and that this strife will not abate until we have faced up squarely to the necessity for writing an economic bill of

rights in which the privileges and the responsibilities of the individual, of government, of management and of labor are redefined. He does not think that will happen soon.

The greater part of the book is devoted to a review of the revolutionary changes effected by the war in the relations between industry and labor and of the dominant role which government assumed in all phases of the industrial process. So pervasive did the influence of government become under the stress of war production needs and so invisibly was the scope of this influence extended that such a review is of great value in making clear the ultimate extent to which government compulsion replaced the free exercise of the

peacetime rights of employers and their organized employees.

The pattern of wartime labor developments is sketched against the background of Sewell Avery's defiance of the Government in the Montgomery Ward case. Although Mr. Levenstein uses considerable ingenuity in linking Mr. Avery with virtually every type of problem that arose in the conversion of our economy to a war basis, the device would have been more effective if Mr. Avery's attitude were more representative of the general attitude taken by American employers toward wartime restraints or if the mail order business he headed were more representative of the industries which were producing munitions for our

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Not Strength But Luster Was His Aim

WILLIAM ERNEST HENLEY: A Study in the "Counter-Decadence" of the 'Nineties. By Jerome Hamilton Buckley. 234 pp. Princeton: Princeton University Press. \$2.75.

By ALEXANDER COWIE

WHEN Oscar Wilde was asked if he cared for outdoor sports he replied: yes, he liked to play dominos at a sidewalk cafe in Paris. The mot is symbolic of a period, the 'Nineties (plus and minus), when literature was pretty much in the care of men of shallow respiration and feeble pulse. They were revolting from Victorianism—in a chaise longue. Some of them wrote of the joys of the open road, but they did precious little to get there. They sat around in scented drawing rooms, taking their own temperatures. Or they were hunched over a table in some airless cafe, attacking a bit of a cutlet and a fellow-writer's reputation.

They were governed not by large ideas or imperious passions but by itches, yens and animosities. Their subjects came from books, pictures, memories and sleepless nights. When they prepared to write they consulted their nerves instead of their imaginations. They put literature into small boxes, which they did up with ribbons. (Some of these boxes, to be sure, contained grisly items.) At their worst, these writers seemed like monkeys in a zoo, agile but vain, chattering and futile. At their best

they worshiped art with a capital A. They were fashioners of phrases rather than interpreters of life, word-smiths rather than creators.

No wonder Edmund Gosse wrote frankly to Stevenson: "I pitifully agree with you about the unimportance of the man of letters—only let us only whisper it among ourselves; for God's sake, don't go blowing on the whole thing in public." Of course some writers of the period, Oscar Wilde among them, succeeded brilliantly in this milieu: flowers will grow in a hot-house. Other writers—perhaps William Ernest Henley among them—might have done better with a broader margin to their lives.

HENLEY was such a complex, not to say confused, person that he is not easily typed. He was in many ways at one with his era. Yet he was not a perfect brother to the restless rhymsters and esthetes by whom he was so largely surrounded. In fact you can make out something of a case for Henley as a rectifier of the decadent tendencies of his time. That is what his biographer, Jerome H. Buckley, does. He calls his book "A Study in the 'Counter-Decadence' of the 'Nineties," with Oscar Wilde as the villain of the piece—mostly offstage. He calls Henley an "activist," a term which he nowhere defines satisfactorily but which seems meant

to signify a hearty person with a strong appetite for life. And this quality Henley had in considerable measure.

Physically he fits the role of "activist." Despite his maimed condition and recurrent ill health, he was a big, bushy, booming man, able to dominate a group by quasi-Johnsonian techniques. Friends called him the "Viking chieftain" and "the Pirate." Stevenson conceived his Long John Silver with Henley's loud, off-dreaded voice in mind. By conviction Henley, like the decadents, was vaguely anti-Victorian. He had no metaphysics (being essentially not a thinker at all), but he resisted the pious religiosity of many Victorians. His brave little pagan poem "Invictus," with its insistence on the individual's capacity to officer himself, irritated the orthodox.

Mr. Buckley makes much, too, of Henley's "masculine protest" against the "passivity" of the preceding era. Likewise Henley favored the repeal of reticence on the subject of sex. He was not one to capitalize sex grossly, but he deplored the fact that "the theory and practice of British art" were "subject to the influence of the British school girl." And he printed a chapter of Hardy's "Tess" which the editor of The Graphic had discreetly declined. Mr. Buckley notes, too, that Henley's taste in fiction was for virile writers: among novelists his favorite was Fielding. But most of all the biographer emphasizes a sort of Browning-like all's-right-with-the-world attitude that appears from time to time:

Life is good and joy runs high . . .

These data are to the point, but Henley was not quite so rug-



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ged or light-hearted or consistent a person as all this implies. His joyful salutations to a benign world were natural when he was emerging safely from a long and painful hospital experience. But his endless repetition of the chant throughout the years to come began to sound hollow and factitious. For to Henley the world finally was not all sweetness and light. The thought of death seems to have held a positive, even a slightly morbid, fascination for him. And his poems on this theme ring truer than his mechanized hurraing for the universe. There is even a Victorian suggestion in his welcoming of death:

Life—life—life! 'Tis the sole great thing This side of death.

THE epithet "activist" is too strong to be applied to a man whose mind was so divided as Henley's. In many ways he was irresolute. He sang much of individualism and freedom, but he stanchly supported a Tory position: "the unconquerable soul had significance only in a social context." Nor was he tenderly interested in the unconquerable souls of lesser breeds without the law. A kind of Pan-Englandism was much in his thoughts, and he talked glibly of

Sifting the nations . . . The waste and the weak

From the fit and the strong . . . Making death beautiful.

And yet, though an imperialist, he was shaken by the Boer War, and he said things that are startling apposite in 1945. He was shocked by "the appalling fact that a national crisis shaking the very roots of civilization could alone procure a national unity." And he fiercely warns the nation against another lapse into soft living. With military danger past,

the nation, in a dream Of money and love and sport, hangs at the paps Of well-being, and so Goes fattening, mellowing, dozing, rotting down Into a rich deliquium of decay.

Thoughts on a national or international scale are not the most characteristic of Henley. He was mainly a litterateur, a poet and an essayist. In his day many people regarded him as a major poet, an opinion in which Alfred Noyes concurred as late as 1922. He wrote scores of dainty, graceful poems, many of them showing how skillfully he had adapted French metrical forms. People were enraptured by the tone of his lyrics:

Sing to me, sing, and sing again, My glad, great-throated night-ingle.

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William E. Henley. A Portrait by Spy for Vanity Fair.

Dwarf's-Eye View of the Renaissance

THE DWARF. By Pär Lagerkvist. Translated by Alexandra Dick. 228 pp. New York: L. B. Fischer. \$2.

By THOMAS CALDECOT CHUBB

IN the great ducal palace of Mantua which rises somberly above the Mincio's paludine mists, there was in the old days—and there still is—a series of tiny rooms, complete in every respect and not much larger than those which you would find in a doll's house. When the Gonzagas ruled there in spacious magnificence, these little chambers were tastefully fitted out with small beds, small tables and chairs, and miniature *cassoni*, tapestries and paintings. In them dwelt the Mantuan dwarfs.

It is perhaps one of the most convincing evidences of the fundamental callousness and cruelty of the Italian Renaissance to realize that these rooms were so built and equipped—and so peopled—to satisfy the whims of Isabella d'Este. For although Isabella has been described rightly as "la prima donna del mondo," so gracious and alert of mind that she "charmed all hearts and whenever she asked a favor no one could refuse her," it was no more inconsistent to her character for her to collect these

minuscule human beings (as one might monkeys, camelopards or precious cameos) than to shelter the Urbino when they had been driven from their state—and then bargain with Cesare Borgia for the art treasures he had filched from them.

"The Dwarf," by the Swedish novelist, Pär Lagerkvist, is not the story of one of these Mantuan lilliputians, being laid in an entirely imaginary city, but the spirit of the worthy Isabella's "little rooms" pervades it. It is instead the autobiography of an anonymous Italian prince who has stepped straight from Machiavelli. As such, it is one of the bitterest books that this reviewer has ever read. Even Swift's baleful passages about the Houyhnhnms hardly surpass it. But it is much more than that. It is a dwarf's-eye view of the Renaissance. In a sense, it is also a dwarf's-eye view—seen from the vantage point of Sweden—of the whole story of human sham and greed.

IN its former capacity it marshals up all the conventional paraphernalia of cloak-and-dagger romance. It deals with love, lust

and the desire for power. It brings in war and treachery. There are poisonings and there is rape and slaughter. Among its characters are an innocent (for a while at least) daughter, a handsome stripping prince, a lewd and aging princess, a pock-marked captain of mercenaries, a kind of twisted Mercutio, and finally—and best drawn of all—an artist named Bernardo who is so obviously Leonardo da Vinci that one regrets that the author did not give him his right name.

As for the plot, it is drawn from the most violent of the Elizabethan dramas—and from "Romeo and Juliet." The moral tone is that of a warped Aretino. But it is not for its plot that one must recommend it. One recommends it rather for its unerring if one-sided psychological report upon a great era—for its penetrating if one-sided comments upon man himself.

This is a year of historical novels, but most of them are large books that overflow with episode and description. Fittingly—almost symbolically—"The Dwarf" is but 228 pages long. But there is an old saying that good things come in small packages. This is a very small package. If you can take it, it is also good.