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It is to be feared that Trollope's books are dead.

Herbert Paul, The Nineteenth Century, May 1897

I have suggested that Trollope's career and character prove more complex than at first appear, and were partly responsible for the failure of a later generation to arrive at a wholly satisfying account of the man. This is particularly true of his reputation and views on writing, where once more myth and misunderstanding have obscured his achievement.

On the face of it there is little room for misinterpretation. The facts of his career, set out by Michael Sadleir and others, may be encompassed quite briefly. Trollope reached a pinnacle of fame with the valedictory Barsetshire novel published in 1867. After losing ground slightly, he recovered his public with The Eustace Diamonds in 1872. But, too obviously a star of an earlier epoch, as Sadleir said, he failed to win the restless younger generation of the seventies, and antagonised with The Way We Live Now (1875) those older readers still loyal to him.\(^1\) The Prime Minister (1876) encountered such criticism (that of the Spectator being particularly painful) that Trollope wondered if he should not give up novels altogether.\(^2\) But he did in fact produce, with still dwindling success, fifteen more, and a volume of short stories, a study of Cicero, two travel books, a monograph on Thackeray, and his Autobiography. Certainly he had to accept lower prices and less distinguished imprints, but was his decline in public esteem as sudden and drastic as Sadleir suggested, or as long-lasting as the headnote to this chapter implies?

Trollope's downfall has been much exaggerated, and it may be useful to review some of the facts, concentrating on Sadleir's monumental study on which so much subsequent research has been based, for it is largely from the pen of this ardent Trollopian that the unfortunate legend of Trollope's oblivion in the early part of this century has come. When he came to write his Trollope: A Commentary (1927),
Sadleir saw himself leading a crusade to re-establish the forgotten novelist with Thackeray, George Eliot and Dickens, adopting in the book what Paul Elmer More blamed as an unnecessarily apologetic tone. More was right. Much was explained about the artist’s background and his life, but modest claims were advanced for the books themselves, and Sadleir obviously saw himself as a lonely pioneer for a writer with fairly dubious claims on posterity. Perhaps, too, in an understandable spirit of pride in his own role as an explorer of dangerous literary territory, he made more than he need have done of the alleged disappearance of the novelist. It was not just that Trollope had suffered the inevitable fate of any writer who enjoys fame over many years—a gradual decline, followed by a period of hostility from a new generation—but that by some weird destiny Trollope’s reputation was snuffed out overnight with his death. Then came the Autobiography, with its damning revelations of his work methods which condemned him to oblivion.

Upon this reading of Trollope’s fate Sadleir continued to descant even as late as 1952, when he authorised reissue of the introduction (written in 1923) to the World’s Classics edition of the Autobiography. Although modern scholars have begun to disprove the attacks on Trollope which were most certainly reactions against the revelations in the Autobiography, no one has yet demolished the half-truths surrounding the novelist’s reputation which his first biographer perpetuated.

It is difficult to reassess the account of a man’s fame once it has got into the history books. Trollope has been particularly unfortunate, in comparison with Dickens or other major nineteenth-century writers, in the accretion of legend after his death. To begin with we must consider the scale of Trollope’s immense popular success in his lifetime, next try to get at some reliable information to measure Trollope’s fall from popularity and assess the eye-witness accounts on which Sadleir based his conclusions. This will inevitably mean a probing of Sadleir’s critical approach which I do without intending to derogate from his magnificent study.

Trollope died a happy, fulfilled and prosperous man. The result of his labours (to John Caldigate published in 1879), he regarded as ‘comfortable, but not splendid’, a mock-modest estimate of no mean fortune for a writer in his day: a sum of £70,000 (with more novels to come), which in our terms represents well over half a million pounds. Fine books were still to be written, and one has only to study reviews of several of these late works, Ayala’s Angel and Mr. Scarborough’s Family, for example, to realise that Trollope was still a force to be reckoned with. The Landleaguers, also, though unfinished at his death, was received with some warmth, and, as my later discussion of this