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The 1850s: Trollope and the Height of Civil Service Ambitions

Between when Trollope entered the Post Office as a clerk in 1834 and when he died as a renowned novelist in 1882 England buzzed with ideas about public service. These ideas were not just rational, aiming to systematise best practice, they were also imaginative. The basic premise in debates behind the extensive reforms of the mid-century, expressed in the influential report by Stafford Northcote and Sir Charles Trevelyan, which is still referred to by today’s civil service, is that administrative incisiveness is founded on visionary energy. The beau ideal of a bureaucrat is heroic, he is a utopian with a concrete sense of what to do to make things happen – and so rather more dangerously effective than most idealists or, indeed, office games players. Trollope’s own fictions of administration eschew both the utopia and the comedy of manners in favour of an epic narrative about this hero.

After sketching Trollope’s career in the Post Office from clerk to Surveyor, I survey 1850s debates about how flexible, original and morally sensitive civil servants should be. Northcote–Trevelyan’s recruitment mechanism, the literary and technical examination, has been discussed by historians of English literature in terms of its effects on our discipline. Reversing this, I look at a civil service that boasts of how it has been improved by its literary intake. The ‘big ideas’ that officials deal with, the time they get to think, and their managers’ encouragement of an individualist, even romantic, attitude to civil service benefit both their creative writing and their office work. Few of Trollope’s peers are surprised that he combines two careers – indeed, other novelists, from outside the civil service, also become involved with it as reformers or even prospective employees. Finally I turn to how this nationwide imaginative effort is registered in Trollope’s novels. Even his admirers could be depreciating on this point. Leslie Stephen (son of the Colonial office head) damned him with faint praise:

Trollope writes like a thorough man of business…To accept such writing…implies, no doubt, the confession that you are a bit of a
Philistine...I think, however, that at times one's state is the more gracious for accepting the position.¹

C. P. Snow, himself a Civil Service Commissioner, considered that Trollope was ‘one of those men to whom institutions are the plinths of society, and who feel unprotected when they are no longer inside their own’.² Trollopians focus on how his lawyers and clergymen negotiate between principle and instance, and on the career structures of law and the church. Some critics agree with Philip Collins, that Trollope’s extensive experience in a great national concern gave him an ingrained sense, valuable to him as a novelist, that a large and complex society took a lot of running – that ‘the business of life’ preoccupied most men’s lives and could be enjoyable and challenging, not just a chore.³

However, others take R. C. Terry’s line, that Trollope appeals to an audience of already ‘displaced’ persons, chained to the ritual of job, career, and advancement up the professional ladder, beginning to experience the pressures of the bureaucratic machine, [and] the split between work and home.⁴

I will look specifically at his civil servants, asking how they can serve both principle, here the ‘public good’, and its synecdoches, the particular members of the public before them.

**Impetus for reform**

A family friend got Trollope an introduction to the plum office of the Secretary to the Post Office, at St. Martin’s-le-Grand in London. At interview Trollope failed a handwriting test but his resubmission was never examined, nor a threatened mathematics test set.⁵ The job turned out to be equally unstressful. Office hours were only 10.00 a.m. to 4.00 p.m., and a regulation requiring clerks to use the first hour to enter up minute books rather than breakfasting suggests a certain languor. Even so, Trollope was not a success. In December 1838 he failed to copy and send off important letters about postal work to some railway companies (punishment: a period of suspension without pay). Four months later he overstayed weekend leave for half a day (threat of pay being docked). A month after that he was far behind with his work (overtime imposed, and loss of seniority). A year and a half went by and Trollope was one of a number of clerks remiss in reporting expenditure to the Accountant General (official reprimand). Three months later he omitted to use the correct procedure to handle an improperly posted banknote (official reprimand). To add to this dismal catalogue of bureaucratic failings,