

Review

P. D. Edwards, *Anthony Trollope his Art and Scope*, University of Queensland Press, 1977. \$18.50.

This is one of the handsomest books of the many now launched by the University of Queensland Press, and one where judgement may begin with the cover. A glossy reproduction of Abraham Solomon's "The Return — First Class" (1854), one of a well known series of railway paintings, is so disposed that on the front we see an elderly gentleman engrossed in conversation with a young naval officer in some indistinguishable interior. The back frames a young lady, busy with crochet in the corner by the window: her dress, and the view, clearly identify the scene as in a carriage and not a house. Each "frame" hints at a story; the two together develop a quite different narrative from those inherent in the separate vignettes. For a study entitled *Anthony Trollope his Art and Scope*, the cover is suggestive: the restraint and decorum of the scenes depicted, the fulsome realistic detail of the portrayal, the quintessential Victorianness of both subject and style, conduce to an image of Trollope the tranquil. But judging only by the cover would lead to error, for Edwards's basic argument concerns the care with which one must proceed to accommodate each section of Trollope's picture to a single "reading": "My object in this study", he declares, "is partly to assess the range and quality of Trollope's attempts at what he thought of as 'fiction shorn of all romance', and partly to show how persistent and varied were his efforts, throughout his career, to 'deal adequately with tragic elements' above the 'mild walks of everyday life'." (p. 6)

In its broadest terms, then, Edwards's object is to propose a view of Trollope in relation both to the theory and practice of fiction in his time; in fact, to a large extent this assessment centres upon the relation of Trollope's fiction to the themes and concerns of the mid-Victorian sensation novel. Quite one of the most impressive features of the book is its illumination of Trollope's responsiveness to the doings of his times — his use of topical illusion in his work, his engaging in debate on matters both of literature and life (Mrs Oliphant and Mrs Linton being among his chief antagonists, especially on the scores of what is maidenly, what is womanly, and what is plain unseemly), the nature of his comment on his times in the real-life parallels of the Palliser series. At the most basic level, this emphasis corrects more fanciful or "updating" readings of Trollope, such as Polhemus's tends to be (*The Changing World of Anthony Trollope*, 1968), focuses more on Trollope's own fiction than Skilton's *Anthony Trollope and his contemporaries: a study in the theory and conventions of mid-Victorian fiction* (1972), and provides amplification of aspects of Ruth ap Roberts's *Trollope: Artist and Moralist* (1971). It is perhaps to be regretted that Edwards's text does not engage more directly with that batch of Trollope studies, in that a stronger sense of debate would inform *His Art and Scope* than the rather distant sparring with Sadleir, Booth and Cockshut which serves to locate a critical context. It is certainly to be regretted that a book as good as this one should appear in the same year as three others on Trollope (Halperin, Kincaid, Terry), so that while its claim for Trollope's significance is at once confirmed, an inevitable process of comparison and ranking begins (and I have to say that I think Kincaid's a very good book indeed).

Edwards's investigation of Trollope in his time most positively serves to establish the "art and scope" claimed for Trollope in the title—though I would in fact have preferred to see the book named so as to bring out the distinctive aspects of the "art and scope" delineated. One reason for my preference is that while Edwards's demonstration of Trollope's capacities within the range from domestic realism to melodrama is interesting and convincing, his examination of such aspects of Trollope's art as the detail of narrative technique tends to be cursory. For example, the opening claim that Trollope used basically the same narrative techniques for over forty years, while constantly experimenting with new subject-matter, might be more closely demonstrated and should certainly be qualified. James R. Kincaid, in *The Novels of Anthony Trollope* (Oxford University Press, 1977), much more successfully accounts for the experience of reading Trollope phrase by phrase, and persuasively argues that Trollope was continually experimenting with form. Edwards doesn't often go in for extended displays of close reading, which is by no means to imply a lack of attentiveness in his own reading. Rather, I suppose, it is a comment on the very scope of Trollope, who operated on an expansive scale denied to authors of critical studies nowadays.

Inevitably, given Trollope's bulk, there has to be a selection of works for particular emphasis. Professor Edwards's group of eleven "distinct failures" (p. 7) includes one surprise, *The Prime Minister*; the group of those eight which fall "little short of Trollope's best novels" includes, along with *The Warden* and *Phineas Finn*, lesser-known works such as *The Vicar of Bullhampton* and *Ralph the Heir*; and his selection of Trollope's best, "all of which seem to me among the major Victorian novels", again challenges the kind of ranking Sadleir initiated. Thus Sadleir gave three stars to *Doctor Thorne*, *The Claverings*, *The Way We Live Now*, *The Belton Estate* and *Dr Wortle's School*: Edwards agrees in acclaiming the first three, but adds *Barchester Towers*, and less predictably *He Knew He Was Right*, *The Eustace Diamonds* and *Mr Scarborough's Family*. This independence of judgement is by no means capricious. Appropriately, quite the best part in the book is the chapter on the three novels Edwards sees as Trollope's best, *The Eustace Diamonds*, *The Way We Live Now*, and *Mr Scarborough's Family*. "Both realistic and sensational" is the chapter heading, drawing on Trollope's own pronouncement in his *Autobiography* (chapter xii), that "A good novel should be both, and both in the highest degree". Edwards's discussion here achieves several things. One is to show that Trollope's own attitude to his art was neither as pragmatic nor as negligent as has been made out. Another, more significant, is that the similarities among the three novels are pointed up—the values of society are no longer those of an ordered world whose morality and hierarchy are both recognizable and recognized, and crime and violence in various guises are rife. The discrimination of aspects of unlikeness within this frame generates potent accounts of the novels, more potent perhaps in putting forward a relatively unknown book (*Mr Scarborough's Family*), and in arguing for the seriousness of one generally considered lightweight (*The Eustace Diamonds*), than in laying yet further claims for the greatness of *The Way We Live Now*.

Anthony Trollope his Art and Scope certainly shows why reading Trollope can become compulsive. More important, it shows how Trollope is both entertaining and earnest, demanding in his apparent undemandingness.

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